

Trials and Temptations

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[0 : 00] So James, it's a great book to look at and it fits in with our theme for the year, which is being doers of the word and not only hearers.

It's a really interesting book, James, and it's kind of like the New Testament version of Proverbs, but much shorter.

It's observational. It darts a lot of the time from one subject to another, but its whole foundation, similarly to the book of Proverbs, is based on wisdom and on the fear of the Lord, really.

And in the New Testament context, that is loving Christ and knowing Christ. Proverbs 12 talks about the importance of the promises that God has for those who love Him.

The whole foundation, the whole basis of the book is the relationship with Christ, although he doesn't speak much about the atonement itself. I think I mentioned that before.

[1 : 10] But it's really about how being a new creation in Christ, because we're different, because we've got a new heart, it changes how we live.

And it's really looking at that throughout its chapters. And tonight we're looking at trials, and we'll also ask the question, is it trials or temptations?

So thank you, but simple, based on these two areas. So the whole focus of these early verses is, what do we do as Christians with trials or testings or temptations?

I'll explain a little bit more about the differences, maybe, towards the end. And it's interesting, he doesn't define what these trials are specifically. He just says, whenever you meet trials, whenever they happen, and he leaves it quite deliberately general, because trials and difficulties will always come, and they come in all shapes and sizes.

It's simply part of life. Whenever they come, we all face that. And being a Christian doesn't change that. Sometimes we think it does, or it should.

[2 : 29] But it doesn't change that for us. And it really is challenging us to consider how the change of heart that we have, because we're Christians, because we're the Holy Spirit in us, because we've got life, how that changes our outlook and our response to trials and to difficulties in life.

And much of James is about that, about it kind of dips back into all these things. Sometimes it's riches. Yeah, riches can be a trial, you know, a trial to not be proud or not to be self-sufficient, or it could be poverty, or it could be how we speak, or it could be our attitudes, or our ambitions, or illness.

James deals with all these things and dips back into them and through the letter. And so how do we deal with difficulties that we face in our lives, as we all do?

Well, he asks us to do several things. They're really good principles for us to think about. The first is, we always use our mind in our lives as Christians.

He says, count it all joy, verse 2, count it all joy. That word, count it, it's considerate. It really means, I think that the word really means, put it to the forefront of your mind.

[3 : 54] May it be your leading thought. So he's really saying, be conscious and intentional and prayerful, but think about these things when they happen.

Look at life, look at life around you. Look back at your life. Not everything works out. Look around everyone else around you as well, that life doesn't work out the way we want and there's often difficulties.

And very often we see in life, and not just in Christian life, but you'll see it with other people, that often hardship produces great character and helps people to become mature and strong.

You know, in our own experience, whether it's in a job or in a relationship or in a sport, the overcoming, persevering, breaking the barrier of pain can be a good and a powerful, satisfying thing.

We learn about ourselves. We learn about our character and we become more character-ful people when we come through struggles and difficulties.

[5 : 09] And it makes us mature. That's true generally in life and we need to consider that that is going to be true as well in our Christian lives.

Otherwise, when suffering and difficulties come and we don't work through them, we stay immature and we don't grow up.

And you know there's nothing worse than an adult who is childish, is there? There's nothing more frustrating than a grown-up who refuses to grow up, who's spoiled and who throws tantrums and who needs to get their own way all the time.

We get frustrated when a grown person acts like a five or six or seven-year-old because they haven't matured. And the same is true spiritually.

If every time we hit difficulties and troubles and trials, we just, we throw a tantrum at God and we stomp about and we go in a huff with him.

[6 : 16] We never mature and we never grow our character spiritually. He uses trials to, as he says here, to make us perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

That is, he matures us. And we don't look for trials, but it reveals a lot about who we are and our hearts, our response to them.

So use our mind, that's the first thing. The second thing is we need to check our hearts because when he says consider it, and I mentioned this before, last day, consider it all joy.

And that's an emotion, a sense that comes from within us. And it is because we have a different attitude to our trials.

If we can respond with a degree of joy in our sufferings because we recognize that we are new creations, we recognize that God is there and involving them and maturing us through them, then it keeps us from responding with bitterness or with covetousness or pride or self-sufficiency or blaming God or blaming others.

[7 : 27] We have a different worldview, therefore, and we can respond with joy, with a deep-seated sense of this is not just meaningless and hopeless because God is in our lives and because we have purpose and we have hope.

I might return to that briefly at the end. So it's important to use our mind and it's also important to check our hearts when we go through difficulties and trials.

Can I just say a little aside here, please be aware of or be aware of not using a verse like this to be a job's comforter for other people when they're going through difficulties.

I don't think this verse at all is meant to be the first step that we give to anyone in grief counseling or in struggles or battles.

When someone's going through deep difficulties as a Christian, I don't think the best thing to say is, hey, consider all pure joy, have a great time, God's maturing you, he's giving you a lesson in growing up.

[8 : 37] That's not really what's meant in this verse. You're more likely to get a Bible whacked across your head from someone going through troubles if that's how you respond with your counsel to them.

It's much more to be a general principle. This is not speaking about specific difficulties. It's a general principle whenever trials come to examine our own hearts.

It's not a sticking plaster text that we stick on someone else's trials to, because it's more about how we respond to ourselves and how we are able to examine our own hearts and be empathetic and be loving towards others.

So that's just an aside. In order to consider trials and tribulations joyful, which seems a very hard thing to do, I think we need to bear in mind two things that James says here that are also very significant and I hope helpful.

In order to recognise God's hand in all the various trials we face, we need two things.

[9 : 58] We need wisdom and we need faith. In verse 5, wisdom comes back to you again and again in his letter. If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all their approach.

So there's a recognition there, isn't there, that this conclusion of our hearts, this ability to consider it joy is an act of great wisdom.

We need God's wisdom. In other words, we need the clarity that comes from God. We need to recognise that his will is being done and we're to avoid being deceived by sufferings and trials and difficulties.

And that requires wisdom. It's easily told, but it's something that God alone can give.

God's wisdom is a great thing to enable us to take us through trials and it's his gift. Isn't that a great thing here? These two things are God's gift.

[11:08] God's gifts. And it's lovely what he says. Four reasons that we should be thankful that wisdom is God's gift because he says God is the giver.

God gives generously. God gives to all without reproach and he will give them his gift.

So he gives, he gives generously. He gives to all who ask and he gives without reproach, without rebuke.

So these are four really good reasons to be praying and to be praying specifically for wisdom. It enables us to have a mature response in trials.

And that should, I hope it motivates you to pray because you know what it's like if you're asking somebody for something and you think they're a miser, very difficult to ask them, isn't it?

[12:16] Because you think the answer is going to be no. But if they're really generous, it's much easier to ask them because you sense that they're, because they're generous, they're going to give you what you're asking.

And this is the giving generous without favourites and without reproach. God who gives to everyone who asks.

So you know, wisdom is his gift. This is not about intelligence. This is about wisdom and it's open and available to us all. So in order to have joy, we need wisdom through trials and also we need faith because it goes on to say, but let him ask in faith with no doubting for the one who doubts like the way they see.

The double minded person doesn't receive anything from the Lord. So we need faith. I was just to find that quite a discouraging verse because I thought, well, we all doubt and it's a bit of a struggle. But really, it's more about a fixed attitude of mind. It's not saying that we're not going to be doubters because we all have doubts, but it's what we do with them.

[13:31] And it's recognising that our responsibility is to take our doubts again before God in prayer and ask for greater faith to believe and to take away our doubts.

We take our doubts to God and we leave them there. It's different from grudgingly saying, well, I suppose I should pray about this.

I don't really believe God will answer. I don't believe he's interested in me and I don't really believe in prayer. But I'll pray anyway. You shrug your shoulders and you pray, but you don't really have any sense of trust or belief in the presence and the power of God.

And I think there's a difference. If you walk away saying, you shrug your shoulders, well, I tried praying and it didn't work. It's not like that. It's not some kind of one-off attempt to try and bribe or try and persuade God.

It's much more that we say, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Overcome my unbelief. Give me more faith. I do believe. Help me to believe more and give me that faith and that wisdom that enables me to see trials the way that you see them.

[14:55] Okay, that's the first thing. And briefly and secondly, the second section really from verse 12 to 18 or maybe verse, maybe 13 to 18, actually, he changes the word and he uses the word temptation.

And that's quite a difficult change and it's quite a difficult word. A lot of people struggle with the Lord's prayer. Matthew 6 verse 18, Lord, lead us not into temptation, especially in the light of this verse which says, you know, that God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one. So why do we pray, don't lead us into temptation if he doesn't tempt us anyway and can't tempt us? It seems like a bit of a contradiction and it's quite a difficult concept in many ways.

But in reality, the words are the same. The same words that are used for trials, for testing and temptation.

And really it's the context that we find them that determines the meaning of these words. And in many ways, the Lord's prayer, you could say, you could rephrase, you could paraphrase that Lord's prayer about, lead me not into temptation.

[16:20] As Lord, you know, give me the faith that will keep this trial that I am in from becoming a temptation or keep me from trials that I'm likely to be tempted to sin through.

And there's a nuance there and there's a closeness there so that there is a link between testing and temptation in many ways.

Because with faith, testing makes us stronger. But without faith, testing becomes temptation and can lead us into sin.

If you can see that nuance there between the two, we are to allow testing to strengthen our faith rather than to allow testing to lead us into temptation, to unbelief and to turn away from God.

So it's in a sense, it's the difference between turning to God and testing and turning away from God, allowing it to become a temptation maybe to curse God and die or whatever it might be.

[17:29] Can I give you an example quickly? I hope this might be or maybe not helpful. Take the example of Joseph with Potiphar's wife.

And you know, he had gone to this position of trust and God had honoured him, taken him from into that position in Egypt.

And Potiphar's wife almost demanded that he stay with her and sleep with her.

Now she might have been very beautiful, we don't know. And as a beautiful woman, that beauty was a gift to her from God, God who created beauty.

And it was a test of Joseph's faith. He'd been brought to this place, God had protected and kept him. And there was a test as to whether he would continue to obey God or whether he would be tempted to say, well, God's kind of given me a raw deal over this last well.

[18:44] All these dreams that had none of them have come true. I think I'll just make the most of it and just have a bit of a fling here with Potiphar's wife and enjoy myself.

And you can see the two differences, can you? There was a test for his faith because and his faith was strengthened because he ran away and in effect, as it were, he ran into God's arms.

And he said, you know, I can't, I can't, this would be the God who is, you know, who's my Lord and my King at this time. And so he didn't allow this testing to become a temptation which he dwell on, which he considered, which he was enticed by, and which he gave into.

And so it became something that strengthened his faith because he turned to God in it rather than a temptation which weakened his faith because he turned away from God or he allowed sin to drag him away from God.

Is that interesting phrase about sin there? No one tempted in verse 13, let no one say when he's tempted, I'm being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil.

[20:04] He himself tempts no one, but each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own evil desire. So we're either drawn to God to make our faith strong in trials or we can be lured away from him and dragged away by our own desires and our own sins to allow temptation to break our faith in him.

And you see that again and again in the, actually in the Old Testament, the word I think is used over 50 times testing, temptation in the Old Testament about exposing whether the faith of the Old Testament people of God was genuine or whether their hearts were hard.

And very often we find that trials and testings, temptations, they expose where our heart is and whether we're going to run to God or whether we're going to allow these testings to become temptations and become doorways and pathways towards sin and further away from God.

So I think we recognize the complexity of our heart and the reality of remaining sin that we resist and deal with in our lives and that we become mature and we become strong when we resist temptation and when we overcome testings by relying on God, by praying for wisdom and for faith to see him in and through these things because we will all be tested, we will all face temptations every day in different ways.

And can I just finish and conclude with two opposites as it were, to remind all ourselves that unchecked sin is a killer in our lives.

[22:01] Verse 15, you know, then desire when it is conceived gives birth to sin and sin when it's fully grown gives forth death. You see the mixed images, there's a few mixed images or other images here, he's talking about either becoming a mature believer, growing up and not staying immature in a childish behavior, Christian, but if we don't, we become a grown up in terms of sin.

You know, sin, this whole conception and then is born and then fully becomes fully grown and leads to death.

So there's a negative growth as opposed to growth in grace. There's a growth in sinful death and unchecked, that's what it does for us.

I don't think, I certainly know, I don't, I'm sure probably all of us don't appreciate the depth and the deceitfulness of sin. It promises so much to us and it delivers nothing but death.

That's all it does. It doesn't bring us the joy we're looking for or the maturity or the fulfillment or the life that we hoped for. It's a deceiver and it's a killer.

[23 : 14] And I think it's important to bear that in mind when we're tempted, sweet in the mouth, to travel in the stomach. There's always that regret that goes with it and there's that destructiveness that is part of sin in our lives.

When we relegate God to being a bit player in these issues, then we're running away from Him at the time when we need to run to Him.

Think of it in our unbelieving friends and neighbors, the people we love, the people we're closest to that don't know you, that don't know Jesus.

It leads to death. There's nothing good about it and it's the killer, it is the killer that we face and the gospel is serious and it's serious for us.

Of course it is joyful as well but there's a seriousness to dealing with the battle of sin. The only answer is prayer, the only answer is turning to God.

[24 : 19] Even when we feel like running a million miles away, the only place to find the wisdom and the faith to grow is by going to Him.

So unchecked, sin is a killer but it's important to let God's light and truth guide us flicking back to Psalm 43 which we looked at on Sunday, that great end to that prayer.

It's the same here in many ways. Do not be deceived, verse 16, every good gift, every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights. I assume there is no variation or shadow due to it.

Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be the kind of first fruits of His creation. Now the birth image is there again. The birth image is there again that He brought us forth, we are new creations, we're born again by the living God.

And so He wants us to finish this, I'm finishing this section with this great knowledge that He's the giver of good things, not Satan, not sin, however good they sometimes feel.

[25 : 30] He's the giver and He is the one who's the source of all goodness. And He's the one that's brought us to life. The word of truth is just a gospel, isn't it?

And as we mature, we can look forward to having that crown of life that He speaks about earlier in the chapter that awaits us.

And that gospel is a great place always to be because when we do doubt and when we do give an temptation and when we do struggle and when we do fail, He's not there with a stick, He's the open arms of the Brodical Father ready to take us back in mercy and truth.

Even when we fail again and again and again, He still just wants us to go back to Him and receive mercy and grace in time of our need because we are His first fruits.

We are His first fruits and that's great because the first fruits in the Old Testament were a reminder that all we have belongs to God, that it's the very best that we can give and that the first fruits were celebrated every year because He is faithful, seed time and harvest.

[26 : 47] And we recognize that as His first fruits. We are His best. We are His best. We are the best because of Jesus. We are Jesus first fruits and we're God's best because we are the first fruits of the resurrection of Jesus and He will be faithful to us, seed time and harvest.

Whatever happens in this life, He will never give up on us and we belong to Him and we return our praise to Him as those who are His first fruits.

So I hope that encourages you when life is a battle and a struggle and when we face trials and temptations, there's one place where we're asked to go for, to be mature and perfect, complete, not lacking anything.

Then we are people who just go back to Him for wisdom that we need and who of us don't and for the faith that we need that enables us to live out being new creations.

It makes a difference therefore in all the trials and temptations and struggles that we face. And James wants, I think always to emphasize as being doers of the word and not just hearers.

[28 : 07] So that's our first look at that and we will hopefully then also have some questions. And further discussion, I really want the city groups to be follow on discussing His word and learning

more and applying it and helping each other to apply it in our lives and what that means, what we struggle with and how we can help one another so that these times become really meaningful as we learn them and become doers of the word and not only hearers.