



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 2: Life Is Sometimes Hard...

But God Is Always Good

James 1:2–12 | Tim Badal | Jan. 22, 2017

Last week we started our series, “Real Faith. Real Life.” We’re looking at the practical and wise words of James, who we learned is the little brother of Jesus Christ Himself.

James has a lot to teach us. Partly it’s because as Jesus’ brother he is able to give us some understanding of Jesus, but even more his wisdom comes through the dramatic change in his own life when he came face to face with the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, at which point his brother became his Savior. This gave him a new perspective on life—a new understanding of life—that brought him to the place where he was able to lead the early church well.

The letter we have is his counsel to believers in the time of great persecution. He is writing to a group of believers who were scattered all over the region. Because they had been driven from their homes, James knew they needed to be encouraged. He knew they were hurting and scared and filled with questions, and he desired to give them wisdom and direction in how they should live in a way that would honor God and make their own lives blessed and fruitful.

He opens his letter by immediately addressing the reality of their trials; then later in the letter he considers other questions they have. But I want you to know that all of his thoughts did not originate with him. The letter of James is incredibly similar to a sermon Jesus once preached, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, there are 17 specific similarities between James’ letter and his Brother’s sermon.

Today we’ll see the first one, which deals with the matter of trials. As we look at these similarities, we should remember that this letter isn’t just the result of one man’s thinking; it comes from the very heart of God. The book of James has been called “The New Testament Version of Proverbs.” It’s practical and brings wisdom that we can readily apply to our lives. So what will we be able to apply? As James starts his letter, we find in verses 2–12 a universal truth: life is hard.

Some of us right now are dealing with some really hard issues and struggles. We aren’t finding much to be joyful about. We don’t feel very blessed. At times we wonder if God is even for us. Our circumstances and troubles can even cause us to question Him. But as followers of Christ, we must make a choice. Either we try to make it through our hard life alone, dealing with troubles on our own as best we can, or we can choose to abandon our reliance on ourselves, focusing and relying on our Savior instead. We can deliberately choose to depend on God, trusting that He is good and that He cares for and loves us. It is through this trust that we are then given the strength to weather our storms.

What this requires, in one word, is “perspective.” If our perspective is right, then whatever storms come we’ll not only weather them, but we’ll be able to find joy in the midst of them. Even our sorrows will bring us to greater spiritual maturity and durability that only Christ Jesus can give.

So what is the perspective that James is trying to bring us to today? Our title answers that question: “Life is sometimes hard, but God is always good.” Do you believe this to be true? Most of us would quickly agree with the first part of that statement. If you



don't, I want to be you! I want your life. But if your life is good and easy, either you haven't lived very long, or you're living in la-la land. Everybody I know can at one point or another say, "Life isn't easy right now." That doesn't mean that life is always bad. But life is hard sometimes. As Christ followers, we need to acknowledge that life is hard.

There are some Christians who might say, "Life isn't hard—we have Jesus. So we must just smile our way through life." As we'll see, not even Jesus taught that. Rather, we agree: life is hard. Sometimes life breaks our hearts. Sometimes life doesn't make sense. Sometimes life brings us to our knees. But as Christians, we can also say, "While life is hard, God is always good." In the very middle of our hardships and trials, we can "count it all joy" because our God is good. Not sometimes good. God is always good. If we can hold on to that truth, we will find that even the greatest trials are something we can count as joy. That's James' goal in our reading today. It's the first thing he wanted to teach the people to whom he was writing, but as we read their mail, that's what we need to learn today as well.

Here's what he wrote:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

<sup>9</sup> Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

<sup>12</sup> Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

When our family watched television in my youth, our viewing would sometimes be interrupted by a loud, blaring sound that would jolt us out of our seats. It might go on for 10–15 seconds, and afterward there would be words on the screen, and a deep voice would inform us, "This is a test of the emergency broadcast system. This is only a test. If it had been a real emergency, information would have been provided by local authorities to tell you how to respond."

I remember it well, but I don't ever remember, here in the Chicago area, that it ever came on when it was not a test. The purpose was clearly that the federal, state and local authorities, in conjunction with the television company, wanted to make sure we would know how to respond in an actual emergency. All the information we might need to weather the catastrophe that had obviously taken place in our area or our country would be given to us.

Currently, our family has sought to train for the emergencies that might occur. Three times I have created a fire drill protocol, should a fire happen in the Badal house. When the boys were young, I would ask my boys, "What are you going to do in case of a fire?" We would talk about how we would get out of the house. Or in the chance they actually caught on fire, they were taught to "Stop, drop and roll."

I remember my own mother telling me, back in the day when the tensions between our country and the Soviet Union were heating up during the Cuban Missile Crisis, that they were taught to "Duck and cover," as if a thermo-nuclear bomb going off in our back yard would be held at bay by the plywood top of a school desk. But we did these things. In case of an emergency, we wanted to be prepared.

In a similar way, James is sounding an alarm to believers in his day, saying, "I want you to know this isn't just a test. It's real. These hardships are going to come our way." He tells them, "*Count it all joy, my brothers...when...*" Not if, but when. There was a certainty—an inevitability—about the trials that would come.

One of the men in the Bible who experienced more trials than most was Job. His trials were very real. As he put it in Job 5:7, "*Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.*" Have you ever looked at a fire? Sparks always go up into the air. Just as that truth is universal, so the truth that you and I are born to trouble is also universal.

Some of you might say, "Because I follow Christ, I am now exempted from trials. Because He is my Lord, I no longer have to worry about tribulations. The Savior of the universe is on my side and He will make sure no hardship befalls me." But here's the problem with that: In John 16:33 Jesus explicitly tells His very closest friends, *"In the world you will have tribulation."*

You're going to have trouble. Life is going to be hard. There will be situations that bring you to your knees. Because trials are inevitable, we have to know how we as Christ-followers should respond. Are we going to choose self-reliance or are we going to rely on our Savior? Are we going to trust our own power or His? Are we going to rely on our own wisdom or God's wisdom found in His Word?

## 1. When trials come, be glad God is in control.

Even now some of you are dealing with deep struggles, but James says, "I want you to rely on God, to see your troubles from His perspective." So knowing trials will come our way, James has a word for us. First, when trials come, we need to be glad knowing that God is in control. Verse two says, *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."*

### This will impact how we feel about trials.

Putting it at the top of his letter, James purposely addresses trials head-on. He tells the Christians, "When you meet trials of various kinds—and you will—I want you to count it as joy." James is not the first person to say this. In Matthew 5:11–12, his older Brother Jesus says:

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Jesus says, "When trials and tribulation come, rejoice and be glad." James says, "When trials and tribulation come, rejoice and be glad." In the New Testament we see examples of when trials and tribulations came, the Christians actually did rejoice.

Remember when Peter and John were before the Sanhedrin? They said, "Jesus is Lord."

The men in the Sanhedrin said, "No, He's not. Stop saying that."

They responded, "We'll never stop saying that."

"Want to bet?" And they beat Peter and John severely. But did Peter and John leave that place licking their wounds and saying, "Maybe we need to reconsider what we're saying"? No. It says in Acts 5:31 that they left rejoicing in their suffering.

In Acts 16 we are told that Paul and Silas are shackled in a Philippian jail after being beaten for their crime of preaching Christ. But what does it say in verse 25? Instead of lamenting and asking why God would allow this suffering, they are rejoicing and singing praises to God that everyone in the prison could hear.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians that even though at times we are beaten down and broken, we can rejoice in all our afflictions. The Bible makes it clear that in times of difficulty, the Christian has a different perspective. While the unbeliever can only ask, "Why is this terrible thing happening? I don't deserve it. I don't want it," the Christian can look at it and say with all joy, "I'm enduring this trial."

Now, in your natural body, every alarm should be going off, saying, "You've got to be kidding me. This is a joke, right? I mean, what were James, John, Jesus, Peter and Paul talking about? Are they just a masochistic group of people, saying, 'Lay it on me a little thicker. Hit me a little harder, life, so I'll have joy in my heart and a smile on my face?'"

To understand it, we must first look at what James means by *"Consider it all joy..."* What he isn't saying is that we need to hide the pain of our trials and pretend that what truly hurts us so much actually feels good. It doesn't! He doesn't want us clapping and applauding when our doctor tells us we have cancer. He doesn't want us singing "Hip, hip, hooray" when our spouse says, "I'm outta here." He doesn't want us to start high-fiving everybody when we're told we lost our job. That is not what James is saying. Rather, he wants us to consider it all joy.

Look at the word translated "count"—or "consider" in some translations. That word is important. The Greek word he uses literally means to evaluate. "Evaluate it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." The word is an accounting term that first-century people used when they were trying to balance the books. They would say, "Here are the withdrawals; here are the deposits. As we add and subtract, add and subtract, here is the end result."

Hopefully each month we evaluate when we balance our checkbooks. After the addition and subtraction, the numbers should be right. God wants us to do the same with our trials. We put them in and they add up to a negative number. But then God wants us to ask, "Is there anything good that comes from all these negative things? What are the 'deposits' that these trials are producing in us?"

From a human standpoint, we don't care. Our trials are only negative—always bad. But God doesn't want us to use a "human calculator"; rather He wants us to do our math using His perspective. Now, God's calculator doesn't tell us, "Aw, you don't really have any trials or troubles." We've already seen over and over again that followers of Jesus Christ do have troubles. He doesn't want us to dismiss them as if Christians don't have any problems. We do have problems.

Rather, what He wants us to do is take all the trials, all the negatives—from within our families, our marriages, our finances, our relationships, our emotions—and list them all. Negative, negative, negative. These are painful. They not only don't bring us happiness, they bring us sorrow. But God tells us to put them on the account. From His perspective there are positives to add as well. Joy is being able to take the negatives, adding in the positives, and in the end coming up with a positive balance. So then, what are these positives?

### **Knowing God is not surprised by this trial**

Maybe tomorrow you'll go to work believing you'll be there for the next 30 years. Everything is going well. But then the boss comes in and tells you your division has been shut down. "Wait a minute? I haven't been looking for a job. How am I going to take care of my family? God, why would You allow this to happen? I didn't see this coming."

Remember, God did. There is not a single trial in your life or mine that has not "crossed God's desk." That medical issue, that relational struggle, that job loss, that problem with your teenager—none of these took God by surprise. God's not looking down at me and saying, "Oh, boy. Tim lost his job. How did that happen? We didn't see that coming." Not only did God see it coming, all our trials first cross his desk, and He's stamps them, "Approved."

You might ask me for chapter and verse on that. We see it in the life of Job. The devil comes to God and asks for permission to mess with Job's life. God says, "You can do one, two and three, but not four, five and six. You can do x, y and z, but not a, b, and c." He gives latitude for trials to be introduced into our lives, approving some and disapproving of others. God stamps some trials with His approval in order that some sort of good might come out of them.

### **Knowing God has allowed this trial in my life for my good**

"But wait a minute" you say, "It hurts! It breaks my heart. It has caused great angst and struggle in my life. God, how can You say it's for my good?" Well, James says it right here in black and white in verses three and four: *"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* So now you can think, "I surely don't want to lack in anything. I want to be complete. Those are good things."

### **Knowing this trial is unable to separate me from God's love**

Also, if we're going to use God's perspective in understanding our trials, we also need to remember that our trials—along with everything else in the world—can never separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:31–39). They can't ruin our relationship with Him, or take away our security as believers. God doesn't give up on us or not love us because trials come our way.

So if I add together these truths—that God is in control, that He isn't surprised by these things, that He has allowed them in my life for my good, and that they cannot separate me from His love—then no matter what the trial I'm facing is, even when I subtract the negatives, I will always come up with a positive number if I'm honest with myself. I will be able to count it as true joy.

We know this from Scripture. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us that Jesus is our greatest example of how to count our sufferings as joy. It says, *"For the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* When I read the New Testament, I don't find Jesus on the cross clapping and saying, "This is great!" He couldn't. His hands were nailed down. I don't see Him saying to the disciples, "I'm so excited. I get to die for people so they might come to know Me and My salvation."

What do we see with Jesus in His trials? We see Him in anguish in a garden (Matthew 26:36–46). We see Him perspiring blood. He's crying out to His Father, "If there's any way for Me not to have to go to the cross and endure its scorn and shame, if there's any way for Me not to be forsaken by You, if there's any way for Me not to be counted with sinners—if there's any way this cup can

pass, let it pass!" It was His humanity crying out to His Father, saying, "I really don't want to do this. This is going to bring Me pain and sorrow. I don't like this."

Yet it says for the joy set before Him, He endured. It doesn't say He enjoyed the cross. That's not what we're saying. He endured. Why? He endured so that He might be seated at the right hand of the Father (Colossians 3:1). Jesus had a perspective that God had something great in store for Him, but for a little while He might have to deal with many trials. In Good Friday's dark tunnel, there was a little beacon of light and hope that Easter Sunday was coming. So as we can see, how we feel about our trials is supposed to be different because of Christ. We don't have to allow our emotions or our human understanding to rule. You might argue, "You can't use Jesus as an example. He's not only man, He's God."

Let me use those of you who have experienced pregnancy as an example—you understand something we men don't. My wife has gone through 27 full months—nine times three—of her life being changed. Her schedule was sabotaged. Things about her body that were normal were thrown away, if you will, with someone else taking charge. It was difficult. And you would think at the end of nine months things would get better. No, it got worse. It's brutal—and I was just a spectator. I watched my wife as she went through those last hours of pregnancy writhing in pain. I heard her say to the nurses and doctors, "Come on. Let's get this over with!" I saw how hard it was for her to utter simple sentences because she could barely catch her breath through the labor pains.

Then the baby arrived. Despite her recent and intense pain, instead of violent outbursts of anguish or anger, when they put that baby in her arms, she was all smiles. How could she do that? She had just gone to hell and back. How could she feel joy in the middle of that? Because the end result was worth all the pain required by the process.

Here's what's crazy. It wasn't long after our first son was born that she said, "Let's have another child." I was stunned and asked, "You really want to do that again?? Do you want to go through all that again?" "Yeah. Because seeing my child only gives me a hunger for another one. I'm willing to go through the struggle because I know the net result will be awesome."

That's what God wants us to understand through the words of James. He wants us to realize that how we feel about trials is important. What is our perspective?

### **This will impact how we face various trials.**

Second, James gives us some wisdom on how to face our various trials. "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*" Underline that word "various." We're going to see that trials come in all shapes and sizes and colors. But before we talk about the various kinds of trials, notice the word "meet." That word is only used a couple of times in all of the New Testament. The clearer place where it's used is in Luke 10, in the story of the Good Samaritan.

There we read how a man went on a journey and he "met" some thieves. Now, does it say that this man went on the journey to meet those thieves? Was he expecting to be robbed and beaten and left for dead? No. He didn't see it coming. Literally, the man "fell upon" the thieves. So the better translation in James would be, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various kinds of trials." You don't see them coming. You're walking along, enjoying a beautiful day in the park, and as you're looking at the trees, suddenly you fall into a pit.

As a side note, I was watching a video on Facebook the other day. A young lady was walking through a mall, looking at her phone and not paying attention to where she was going—and the poor lady walked right into a major fountain. I felt bad for her. Of course, nobody helped her out. She face-planted into the water and there she was. That's kind of the picture (minus the texting and all that) we have here in James. You're going on your merry way, and you fall face-first into something you didn't see coming. That's what trials are. They hit us as random acts on a random Tuesday that shake the very foundations of who we are.

The Bible offers us some great examples of these various trials. We read of financial trials—some of you are struggling right now because the ends aren't meeting in your bank account. You're trying to figure out how you're going to pay your mortgage and your other bills, and it causes you great consternation. Your kids need things. Your spouse needs things. And those bills keep coming. You're stressed. How are you going to pay for it all? Financial trials are real.

What about relationship struggles? I love meeting you in the parking lot. It's nice to see your smiling faces—and in the first service, your sleepy faces. But today as people were walking in, someone came up to me. I said, "Hey, good morning. How's your week going?" The person said, "Not very good. My spouse and I had issues today. And it's not the first time—our struggles are ongoing. It really brought me down and I don't know what to do." That's a real trial. Some of us are dealing with some relational issues that are breaking our hearts. In some ways these trials can be the most difficult, because it's amazing what some people can do to us; how one person can cut us so deeply.

Or what about physical trials? Some of us are dealing with physical trials, which can be brutal. We've only got one body, one life. And when we're told our body is falling apart, or even literally attacking itself, it can bring us to our knees. Amanda and I experienced a physical trial a couple years ago. A random medical test indicated that something was wrong, and that something wrong turned into something bigger. It became a trial for us for an entire year, with the prospect that this trial—Amanda's cancer—can always come back. We live under its threat, because every time she goes for another scan or doctor's appointment, we could get the same news again. "We thought we got all the cancer, but it's showing up here."

Other people have still other kinds of trials. What about emotional trials? These are hard, partly because we can mask them. Statistics tell us that one-third of us are masking emotional trials through a fake smile. "How are you doing?" "I'm good!" Yet deep down inside you're breaking. Your heart is filled with sorrow. For some, it's fear and anxiety. For others, it's deep depression. Oh, you want to have a bright outlook on life, but your dark anxieties about the future—or your circumstances themselves—cripple your ability to view life positively. These are real trials.

Then think about spiritual trials. The devil attacks us. He tempts us and causes anguish and struggle. Some of us doubt whether God loves us or whether we're even saved. Some of us are concerned about the spiritual wellbeing of our family and friends. Spiritual trials come.

As James says, trials come in multi-colored, variegated ways. So let's consider a couple challenges.

**Be careful when all kinds of trials come that you don't compare your trials to someone else's.**

We might say, "I have a lot of trials, and that person is complaining about their trials? Really? That's a trial? Come on." Do you know who does this really well? Parents. Our kids come and tell us they had a bad day in school. Our response is, "Are you kidding? So-and-so didn't sit with you at the lunch table—that's your problem?" And then we start unloading on our poor kids that our trials are far worse.

Listen, a trial is a trial. If you're in anguish, it's a trial—admit it. You might ask, "How should we decide if a trial is really a trial?" As I like to tell my boys sometimes, some of what seems to be trials are really first-world problems. We have food and drink and housing and clothes. We have transportation and health care. For the most part, these aren't things we are worried about. So then what we do is "catastrophize." A trial will come and we'll think it's the biggest thing in the world. Yes, we all have troubles. But not all trials are created equal.

As I look back over my life, I've experienced four major trials. I don't have time to go through them, but I will tell you they were all life-changing situations. However, I've had a lot of trouble in my life, weeks that haven't gone well. And when something doesn't go right, I tend to make it something massive. Maybe Sunday morning didn't go the way I'd planned—"The sky is falling!"

I'm reminded that in the hallway next to our kitchen is a smoke alarm. Every time we open the oven door, because of its positioning, the smoke detector doesn't have any idea that the heat it's feeling is from an open oven and not a five-alarm fire. It just starts blaring—beep, beep, beep! It's a nuisance. Why? Because I know deep down inside what the fire alarm doesn't know: "It's just the roast in the oven. Settle down."

We start screaming when little trials come our way, as if an atomic bomb has gone off. James says, "Be careful that your feelings don't lead you. Let God's Word lead you." So if you're a "catastrophizer"—I know, I just made a new word out of a very seldom used word—take a step back. Ask, "Is this really as life-altering as it seems?"

One way to do that is to go to a friend and say, "Listen. I've got this problem that's freaking me out. Talk me down." Usually someone who's not in the fire will be able to tell you, "This is bad," or, "I think you may be making this a bigger issue than it really is." Let them be honest with you.

We see this in our news reporting. Every time I turn on the news, I feel like I'll have to tune in the next day because the world is coming to an end. You're like, "Oh, man! If this bill gets passed, if this thing takes place, then chaos will ensue." Our media loves this reaction. They create trials and troubles, because people will come back to hear the next thing. If all they say is, "Have a great night. Sleep well. All is good," do you think folks will tune in to their program tomorrow? No. They're going to enjoy life without further knowledge of this news bulletin.

## 2. When trials come, see the growth they can produce.

Let's ask why we should find joy in trials. Because we need to see the growth they can produce in us. Look at James 1:2–4:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James says in order to find joy in trials, we need to look for the reason God is allowing them in our lives—how He intends them to work for our good. Underline the phrase, "...for you know that..." He's saying, "Guys, you know this in your head. You know God uses trials for good. You've seen the lives of the Old Testament saints who have watched bad things happen to good people, yet those people rose above their circumstances by the power of God's Spirit in them."

We just finished an entire series that taught us how God used trials for the good in Joseph's life. We heard him say, "What man intended for harm, God used for the good" (Genesis 50:20). His life was a string of bad things after bad things. Trial upon trial happened to Joseph. But he was faithful to obey and trust God, because he knew that what man intended for harm God intended for good. The trials that seek to destroy us God uses for our good.

So what good can come from trials?

### **Trials produce durability.**

James uses the word "steadfastness," which in the Greek is *hupomeno*. It literally means a heart that is willing to stand under a heavy weight. Some of you like to work out. God bless you—do some for me, when you get the opportunity. With some level of joy in your heart—because you're not doing it under compulsion—you put weights on a bar. You willingly lift that weight, knowing it's going to be heavy and might even hurt. You may even realize you're literally tearing strands of your muscles in the process. You are willing to allow these heavy weights to strain you and you don't try to wiggle out of it.

That doesn't sound like fun. But you do it willingly. You allow that weight to come down on you, trusting in your knowledge that it won't kill you (hopefully). Instead, you believe you're going to be able to do what the gym instructor said, which is to push against that weight. This is followed by the abnormal thought, "I'm going to do it again." So you push it back up. "Let's do it again."

You do this because you are proving to your body that you can do it and also you're creating in yourself a new level of durability. So you'll continue to do that with ten pounds on each side of the bar, until at some point your body gets used to that weight, and you'll add ten more pounds. Then you'll get used to that, and add another ten pounds...and before you know it you'll be lifting hundreds of pounds because your body has learned how to have resistance against it.

James is saying, "Allow the weight to come down on you. Trust God that you're going to be able to push it up."

Here's an example of how that works. Let's move from the weight room to the TV ads. Remember the last time you watched a pickup truck advertisement where it says, "Built Ford Tough," and you see this big truck with knobby tires looking angry as it's driving down the road. Nowhere do you ever see it driving on a straight little road with a person behind the wheel going, "This is great." No. You hear "Built Ford Tough"—always with a Texas accent. Then you hear, "We're going to take this Ford truck and we're going to put boulders in the back of it. Look at how it holds up under three tons of rock." But that's not good enough. "We're going to hook up the Titanic behind it." And if that's not good enough, they ask, "You wonder how strong your truck is? We're going to take it to the top of Mt. Everest. Not the smooth side of Mt. Everest. The rocky side." They show you up-close pictures of the contorting tires, going up and down over the rocks. It's not zooming—it's chugging, struggling over the road.

In fact—and I'm going to date myself here—some of you might remember a Ford truck advertisement where they put a Chevy truck in the back end of the Ford while it pulled a Dodge Ram. Talk about great marketing, right? "We can take our competitors for a ride and still get up the hill." Why do the auto makers show that? Because they want you to know that when you purchase their truck, you can take over the world. This thing was built for trouble. It wasn't built to go down some easy country road, enjoying the view. Instead, you can really put it to the test. You can go up the mountain—with all those boulders, with the Titanic in tow—and you'll make it to the top.

If you walk away with a truth today, it's this: Please don't miss it. God has built the Christian to last. He has built you with factory defaults in your being—through the gift of the Holy Spirit—and you will be able to survive carrying the boulders of trials. "When I hook you up to the Titanic, you will be able, slowly but surely, to rise above any rocky hill or cliff that comes your way."

All you have to do is trust God, saying, “You’ve built me for this. This boulder of cancer in my life, this boulder of divorce, this boulder of financial struggle—yeah, it hurts. It doesn’t feel good. But I know that my frame, through my ability in Christ Jesus alone, will be able to weather the storms.”

And when we show ourselves to be durable through trials because of our faith, it becomes our greatest outreach tool. People are watching and they know that no one in this world escapes trouble. Unbelievers won’t fight you when you ask them if you can tell them about the Bible. “Sure. Tell me about the Bible.” You say, “The Bible says we all have trouble.” They’re not going to push that away. They’ll say, “Yeah, I already know that.” Then the question is: how do we respond to trouble? When they watch you endure trials, they’ll want to know, “How big is your God?” Will they view us to be like them, throwing up our hands in disbelief? “I can’t believe this is happening. This is the worst thing in the world.” Or will they see us “considering it pure joy that we have a God Who will never leave us or forsake us; Who makes us more than conquerors in Christ Jesus”? Will they see our conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of our God?

They’re watching and they want to know how we’ll respond. Will we be like Job’s wife, who said, “Curse God and die”? Or will we face trials of many kinds with the durability that God has given us?

### **Trials produce maturity.**

Second, through our trials God brings forth maturity in us. Verse four, “*Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” Now, perfect doesn’t mean we’re sinless. The idea is that we have stood toe-to-toe with our trials and through faith we have risen above them. We have come to understand that the completeness—the “lacking in nothing” that James is describing—means our faith is so strong and resolute that we know we can weather the storms.

Every year in my catering company we buy pallet-loads of charcoal. I take my trailer to a local home improvement store, and we load it up with charcoal. I’ve put as many as ten pallets at a time on that trailer, which is a lot of weight. As the guy with the forklift sets down the pallets carrying hundreds of bags of charcoal, I never worry about my trailer or my van. Why don’t I? Because he’s done it before. I know they can handle it. Now, it seems they always assign a new guy to load the trailer. And each time the new guy asks, “Do you think it can handle the load?” I say, “Yes! Put it on there. It can handle ten pallets. It could probably handle 12.” But we only have to put ten on it.

Being “complete and lacking in nothing” is this deep sense of peace that whatever comes my way, I have nothing to fear. Because I’ve seen God work in other people’s lives, or seen it in the Scriptures or in my own life, I know He is faithful. When you gain that understanding about the trials you face, it will revolutionize the way you think.

I learned it at the age of 14. The biggest trial I’ve ever experienced in my life was the death of my brother. Everything else pales in comparison to that. Even though I was going through that trial too, I remember watching my parents and I could see that it had a far deeper effect on them. I lost a brother and that was big. But many would say losing a child is horrific. On September 17, 1990, I watched the weight of it weighing them down. To be honest, I wondered if they would break. I watched as my mom fell apart and it worried me. I was afraid that what would give might be her faith in God. I was afraid my dad’s faith in God would finally snap. They had been so faithful and still God allowed this horrific trial, this massive boulder, in their life. Their firstborn son—gone because of a car accident.

I began to think to myself, “This is where they’re going to curse God and die.” But then as I watched, the presence and power of God in them caused them to rise up, little by little. As he was reeling that afternoon under the loss of his son, I remember my dad saying to God, “Your grace is sufficient” (2 Corinthians 12:9). He growled those words in my presence. “God, Your grace is sufficient.” And little by little his legs stopped wobbling and became secure.

I remember in the morgue, as we stood around my brother’s lifeless body, my dad didn’t say, “Why would God let this happen?” Instead, before it even became a praise song, my dad uttered these words of Scripture: “You give, and You take away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). His legs grew tighter and stronger. Even now, the loss is no less, but Dad is able to look back and say, “God, You have used this great trial to grow our family, to bring character and perseverance in our lives.” Does he hate the day he said goodbye to his son? You bet. But he has seen the faithfulness of God, and my dad is no longer weak-kneed and wobbly. Instead, he stands up strong and says, “What do I have to fear? If God is for me, who can be against me?” (Romans 8:31).

Does that make sense? Do we understand that this is what James wants to tell us? He’s not saying trials are easy. He’s saying they are really hard. But when we trust and honor God, durability comes. When we trust and honor God, maturity comes.



James uses the word “testing.” That image comes from the blacksmith shop of his day, men who would shape iron. One day recently I read an article about the shaping of iron or steel. A blacksmith was asked, “How do you know when the iron is ready to come out of the fire?” He says, “You take it out to test it. You know it’s ready when you can hold it close to your face and see your reflection.” In a similar way God leaves us in the fire until when He pulls us out, He can see His reflection in our lives. Then he can say, “Okay. The trial is done. You’ve become more like My Son Jesus Christ.”

### **3. When trials come, ask for God’s help.**

Sometimes our trials don’t end in the here and now. Sometimes God keeps us in the fire throughout our lives. But as our trials come, we should ask God for His help. Verses five through eight say this:

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

I remember going to my father once, saying, “Dad, I need advice.” He gave me advice and it was good advice. Then he asked, “Son, what are you going to do?” I told him, “I’m going to do my own thing.” He responded, “Here’s another piece of advice: don’t come back to me. Why ask me for advice and then go your own way? What good is that?”

A double-minded man hears good, godly, wise advice, and then does his own thing. We need to ask ourselves: do we see God as a magic eight-ball that we go to for advice when we run into trouble? That’s not what James is talking about. He’s not talking about wisdom for a particular problem. He’s talking about the overarching question of how to find joy in the middle of our trials. How do we gain God’s perspective?

#### **When we ask, we cannot doubt His promises.**

First of all, we get God’s perspective by not doubting His promises. There are three promises in our text about God, but first, you need to recognize what doubt sounds like. Many of you would say, “I don’t doubt God.” I know you’re perfect and I’m not, but at least you’ll know what your pastor is dealing with through these statements:

#### **When a trial comes, my first thought is God is abusing me.**

“God, why are You doing this? Do You like it that I’m filled with pain? That I’m hurting? Have I somehow missed Your commands and now You’re taking a pound of flesh from me?” That’s what comes into my mind when trials come and I start to doubt. I doubt whether or not God loves me.

#### **When a trial comes, I think God hasn’t lived up to His end of the deal.**

I do this all the time, people. I remember when I was by myself for the first time after Amanda’s diagnosis of cancer. I thought, “Listen, God. Can we just have a *mano-a-mano* talk here?” [Note: you can never have a *mano-a-mano* talk with God. You’ll lose every time.]

But here’s what I said: “I’ve served You. I’ve given You my time and energy. I give of my money. I make sure my family follows you. I do all these things. And You bring this into my life? Come on. What are You doing here? I’ve kept my end of the bargain. I’m serving You. And You allow this to happen?”

Let me tell you something. God never says just because you serve Him, you won’t have trials. In fact, in the “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11, we see person after person—wise, godly people—endure hardship and trials for a lifetime. There are no guarantees.

#### **When a trial comes, I think God has left me.**

Sometimes I think—and I’m with David on this—“God, You have left me. I’m living for You, God, and You’ve abandoned me. I’ve devoted my life to You, but like a wayward spouse, You can’t be found when the going gets tough. You’re not hearing my cries. You’re not concerned about my problems.” I’m lying to myself when I say that, because I know God is there with me and that He loves me.

#### **When a trial comes, I think God is supposed to make things better.**

A lot of us will think, “God, I’m okay with the trial, as long as at the end of it, You make everything perfect again.” Now, I’m going to bad-mouth a Christian movie for you, and you can evaluate whether I’m right or wrong in this. I call this “Facing the Giants” theology.

Remember the movie? Wife can't have a baby. Football team doing terrible. No money in the bank account. No promotion at work. And the trials go on in this movie. The main characters think, "Woe is us, woe is us, woe is us. But we trust God. We believe in God." And what does God do? God lets the wife get pregnant; He gives them money, a new truck and a promotion. And by the way, the football team wins the state championship.

We say, "Well God, I can endure trials if that's what's going to happen." Listen, here's the problem: that doesn't happen in real life! Right? There are a lot of people who get nothing in the end. We've got to be careful that we don't Hallmark-ize—there's another new word—what the Bible says about trials.

This is really hard for me to say, but for some of you who are experiencing incredible anguish and trials, that may not change for the rest of your life. There's no guarantee. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Okay, after ten years your trial will get better." Your life may be filled with trials, but God says suffer hardship like a good soldier. While this life may not ever be all it was cracked up to be, one day you will stand in glory—and it will be worth every second of suffering. Don't take your cues from Hollywood, whether Christian or non-Christian.

### **When a trial comes, I think God is supposed to help me make sense of it.**

As I said earlier, I have had four major trials in the course of my 40 years—and I can't make sense of any of them. God hasn't given me an answer this side of heaven as to why these events took place or why He would alter my life as He has, and I don't think He's going to give me those answers. I just have to trust, to know His ways are higher than my ways. I have to recognize that His ways are better than my ways (Isaiah 55:8–9). I have to believe that God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose—even when it doesn't make sense (Romans 8:28–30).

Here are three promises He does give us:

#### When we go through trials, God is good.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God." We have a God Who wants us to run to Him. As a father, I can't tell you how great it is when my children come and say, "Dad, can we talk? I've got a problem." I love that. And God does too. He wants you to draw near to Him. He wants you to come close to Him. And if trials cause you to draw near to your God, He says, "I love it."

#### When we go through trials, God is generous.

James says God *"...gives generously to all..."* He lavishes His gifts upon us. *"Every good and perfect gift is from above"* (James 1:17). He wants to pour out His riches and mercy upon us. He lavishes it, not on some, but "to all." He wants to give to you.

#### When we go through trials, God is gracious.

God is good, He's generous and He's gracious. It says He *"...gives generously to all without reproach."* Another translation says, "without finding fault." You come to God and say, "God, I'm scared. I'm confused. I don't know what to do." God doesn't respond, "You're such a dummy. How could you think that way?" No, God doesn't do what your parents may sometimes have done. God doesn't do what your boss may sometimes do. He doesn't even do what sometimes your pastor does. God says, "Listen. Come. I do not find fault. I want to give you My wisdom. I want to give you My perspective on this trial."

### **When we ask, we cannot depend on our possessions.**

In verses 9–11, James gives us one other thing that can cause us doubt. He says, "Be careful, because your doubt can cause you to depend on your possessions." He goes on to describe two kinds of people who have trials: a rich man and a poor man. He tells us the rich man will be brought low and the poor man brought up.

Here's why. The poor man has nowhere else to go in his trials except to God. The rich man has VISA. The rich man has home equity. The rich man has a 401(k). The rich man has stock options. The rich man has annuities. The rich man has all kinds of cash hoardings that he can turn to for help.

So when trials come, do we look to our checking account and portfolio as our god instead of God Himself? James says, "Be careful that you don't allow your possessions to be your savior. Only Jesus can be that." So instead of doubting and depending on your possessions, trust God.

## 4. Keep the goal in sight.

What happens when we keep God's goal in sight? When we follow God's way? James says in verse 12, *"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."* What's the end result? A crown.

This is an eschatological promise. That means it's a promise to be fulfilled in the age to come. The trials you're struggling with right now? There is no guarantee that they will be resolved on this earth. But the day will come when we stand before God and He will wipe away every tear (Revelation 7:17). He'll take away every pain and sorrow and issue and struggle. He'll wipe it all away. He will make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

He will look at you and me—we who have endured trials in our lives—and He will say, "Well, done, good and faithful servants" (Matthew 25:14–30). Our heads will be bowed and He'll put on our heads a victor's wreath like that of a Greek Olympic champion. Then He'll say, "You have run the race. You've fought the fight—and you're done. You should be commended." At that moment, the times in this life when we felt our legs giving out, when we felt we couldn't go on, will all be worth it after all. Peter said, "In light of the great joys that will come, we can look back at our trials—as big as they were—and call them light and momentary" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

So I know many of you think, "It's dark. Will it ever be over?" But through faith we see a little glimpse of hope, a little light at the end of the tunnel—and that is the crown of life that will be there for us if we will only trust and obey. How are you going to withstand trials? Are you going to do it on your own—or are you going to trust God? Are you going to see them from your perspective or His? God says, "When you trust and obey Me, when you hold to My perspective, maybe in this life but surely in the life to come, you will experience a crown that will make this all pass away."

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