

Trials

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- [0 : 0 0] I wonder if you heard what the Oxford 2022 word of the year is. The Oxford 2022 word, anyone know? It's actually two words.
- Goblin mode. Goblin mode. Heard of goblin mode before? Yeah, some people have, some people haven't. You can go into goblin mode. Apparently it's a kind of behavior.
- Goblin mode refers to, and here's the definition of the dictionary, a type of behavior which is unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations.
- That's goblin mode. One reporter said goblin mode embraces the comforts of depravity. Apparently goblin mode is the first time that the Oxford dictionary has put it to the public vote to choose the word of the year, and none of you know it, so I don't know who they asked to choose the word of the year, but there we are.
- Didn't ask me anyway, and it's two words, it's not one. But anyway, goblin mode is supposed to be a word for our times. It's supposed to represent the kind of world that we live in and the kind of laziness that people associate with just what they want to do and how they want to behave.
- [1 : 1 7] But this kind of self-indulgent behavior that represents this phrase, goblin mode, this word, it is nothing new. In fact, it is the kind of behavior that James warns against in his letter.
- And so this afternoon we're beginning a new series looking at the letter of James in our Bibles. And it is a really practical letter about what it means to live as a Christian.
- And that's why we've called our series in James, faith that works. Because real faith, genuine faith, is seen by what we do. It is seen in how we behave.
- And so much so that James' letter is so full of clear and direct commands, more so than any other New Testament letter. There's a relentless call to action in James.
- And so if studying James makes no difference to how I live my life and you live your life or how we operate as a church, then we've missed the point of James' letter.
- [2 : 1 9] James himself says, chapter 1, verse 22, Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. And so just some words of introduction as we get into the letter.
- Look at verse 1. James. Now, James is the author. Who is James? This is James, the brother of Jesus. He was one of the leaders in the early church in Jerusalem.
- And yet James is less concerned about giving us his credentials than he is about telling us that he is, verse 1, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Now, the word servant here means slave. And we know that a slave is owned by somebody else. And that's exactly how James sees his relationship with God.
- He's a slave of God. He is under the lordship of Jesus Christ. So that's James. Who is James writing to? We go on. He's writing to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.

[3 : 23] Now, the 12 tribes originally referred to the 12 tribes of Israel, suggesting that James is writing to a Jewish audience, but also that the true Israel are those who have faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

And so the 12 tribes can also refer to the church scattered throughout the world. And so James is essentially a circular letter that would make its way around the early churches.

And essentially, the message of James is to urge the early Christians to wholehearted commitment to Jesus Christ. And that is really what is at the heart of this letter, because as we read it, we see how the early believers were trying to follow the ways of the world and also follow God.

Trying to have a foot in both camps, if you like. And so James has a word that describes this kind of condition. They were being double-minded. You would have heard that in a reading from verse 8.

Comes up again in chapter 4, verse 8, double-minded. But he goes even further. He goes as far as to accuse his readers of being adulterers.

[4 : 36] Chapter 4, verse 4, he calls them, you adulterous people. And his language is strong because the problem is serious. He says anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

So it's one or the other, and we've got to choose. We can't have divided loyalties. And so even his use of the word adultery gives marriage as an example to help illustrate what he's saying, because it is impossible for a husband or for a wife to be loyal to their spouse if they are committing adultery.

And James is saying it is the same with God. We can't be faithful to God and seek to live out His values, whilst at the same time trying to live out the values of the world.

And so you can see how this letter isn't just limited to the early church. It addresses a problem in the contemporary church and for Christians today. Because we too can fail to have a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.

And so James is urging us to have a faith that works. A faith that works itself out in our perspective on life, that works itself out in what we say, that works itself out in what we do, and in the way that we treat other people.

[5 : 56] Where our profession of faith ought to be consistent with our behavior. Showing that we are wholly committed to God, not willing to compromise with worldly values and behavior.

So James is calling us to a kind of spiritual wholeness. And that really is the overarching theme of his letter. And it's highlighted here in our opening section this afternoon.

So every part of our lives is to be integrated into a wholehearted devotion to God. We're to give ourselves to God alone, committing ourselves to Him.

And we'll see that as we go through this letter. And so straight out of the block, what's the first thing James tackles? Well, he wants us to get the right perspective on our trials. And so that's where we begin.

Three things to see about trials. First of all, the joy in trials. Secondly, the wisdom for trials. And thirdly, the goal of trials. The joy in trials, the wisdom for trials, and the goal of trials.

[7 : 01] So first of all, the joy in trials. Let's read verse 2 to 4 again. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything. So James begins with the assumption that we're all going to have trials in life.

No matter who we are, we can expect to face many kinds of trials. So don't ever think that because you're a Christian believer, that you are somehow immune to trials in this life, immune to difficulties and to pain.

And this is a common misunderstanding that people have when it comes to Christianity. Many wrongly assume that faith in God somehow entitles you to a trouble-free life.

But we'll all meet various kinds of trials. So it's not a case of if trials come, it is actually when trials come. And some of us here this afternoon may feel we're in the thick of trials right now, where life is difficult, it's painful, we're feeling hurt.

[8 : 19] So what kind of trials is James talking about? Well, he says we will face trials of many kinds. Many kinds.

So the trial may be the death of a loved one, physical illness, a health scare, difficult marriage, unfulfilled sexual longing, the needs of a child, a financial challenge, a boring job, unemployment, confusion over sexuality, depression, disappointment, loneliness.

In fact, anything could come under that umbrella term, many kinds of trials that James talks about here. And so trials shouldn't be a shock to the system when they come.

Anything that can happen may happen. Now that doesn't mean that God doesn't care about us or love us as we'll see. And that's why we need to get the right perspective on our trials.

And that's what James is offering us here, because what James says sounds so outrageous. Did you hear his words? Consider it pure joy, he says, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

[9 : 30] Did you hear him right? Pure joy? Or all joy when you face trials? Doesn't seem right, does it? Because joy is not really our instinctive response when trials come.

Rather than consider it pure joy, we are probably wondering why. Why is this happening to me? Why is this happening now? Why is this happening to my family?

Why is this happening in my career? Why is this happening to my health? And so James is concerned that when the trials come, we respond to these trials in the right way.

Because our response to them will determine the impact they have on our lives. But we shouldn't get James wrong, because James is not some kind of masochist telling us to enjoy suffering.

We're not supposed to go looking for trials. We're not supposed to take pleasure in pain. And he's not telling us to put on a brave face and pretend we don't feel hurt or we don't feel sadness.

[10 : 32] He's not saying the trials themselves are to be counted as pure joy. Because trials aren't joy. But he's saying we should consider it joy when we face them.

So why is that? He says, verse 3, because the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

So when faith is tested, it's in order to produce perseverance or steadfastness. Now the word here has the sense of patiently enduring under something, of taking the strain, of withstanding the pressure, like lifting weights in the gym, for example.

If you will lift weights in the gym, you are supposed to be able to take the strain, or else the weights will fall on you and you'll hurt yourself. But just picture the scene, taking the strain, remaining under the weight successfully.

And what happens when you do? Well, the muscles get stronger. That's the kind of image James wants to leave with us here. So just as muscles get stronger under the strain of a weight, so faith grows stronger under trials.

[11 : 43] That's what he's saying. Where the ultimate goal of all of this, he says, is perfection or wholeness. Verse 4, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.

Now I suggest that this is where James highlights the theme that weaves all the way through his whole letter here in verse 4. Because one particular Greek word appears twice in verse 4, and it's paired with another word to give the sense of perfection, wholeness, or completeness.

One commentator, Richard Baucom, he points out that the word group used actually occurs seven times throughout the letter of James, which is surely deliberate on James' part.

It's significant because the perfect number of wholeness or completeness in the Bible is the number seven. And so this perfection, this wholeness, this completeness, describes essentially what God wants for his people, for you and for me.

And it's our trials that move us forward in this direction. This is what he's saying. So our trials shouldn't crush us, but should produce perseverance in us.

[12 : 57] They're not meant to knock us down, they're meant to build us up. Now, of course, they won't be comfortable, but we can consider them joy because of what God does through them.

Our trials make us into the people that God wants us to be. One of my favorite children's stories is *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Marjorie Williams.

I don't know if you've ever read *The Velveteen Rabbit*, but let me read a bit to you. It's basically about a stuffed rabbit and his quest to become real. So here is some of the narrative.

What is real? Asked the rabbit one day when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came to tidy the room. Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?

Real isn't how you're made, said the skin horse. It's a thing that happens to you when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you.

[13 : 58] Then you become real. Does it hurt? Asked the rabbit. Sometimes, said the skin horse, for he was always truthful, when you're real, you don't mind being hurt.

Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, he asked, or bit by bit? It doesn't happen all at once, said the skin horse. You become. It takes a long time.

That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily or who have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you're real, most of your hair has been loved off and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby.

But these things don't matter at all because once you're real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand. So what is your perspective on the trials that you face in life?

Because what James is saying here is the very things that we spend most of our lives trying to avoid are actually the very things that do us the most good.

[15 : 04] And many believers can testify to this as they look back on the trials that they've faced in their lives. Of course, the trials were never pleasant at the time, but they were certainly purposeful.

They were part of the process of a person becoming more real as a follower of Jesus, becoming more perfect, mature, complete, whole.

And that's why trials can be considered pure joy. And that's the first thing we need to see, the joy in trials. Secondly, let's think about the wisdom for trials in verse 5 to 11.

We need wisdom to respond to our trials in the right way. And so James tells us to pray and ask God for this wisdom. Verse 5, If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

So when we're struggling to make sense of what's happening in our lives, then we need God's help. We can wallow in self-absorbed pity, ourselves, or, James says, we can ask God for wisdom.

[16 : 13] Now, wisdom is knowing how to think and how to behave in life. And it's something that God longs to give us. So God is not frustrated when we find things difficult or when we don't understand.

God generously gives wisdom to us. That's what James is saying. And that's the encouragement he gives. And yet there's also a warning, verse 6 to verse 8.

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. So he's saying you've got to ask with the right attitude by believing and not doubting.

Because the doubt here is not the kind of innocent doubt that we may have when we're trying to understand things or question things or work things out. No, the kind of doubt here is a kind of rebellious doubt that doesn't fully trust God or his good purposes or want his wisdom.

[17 : 19] Because we can't ask God to give us wisdom and then at the same time refuse it because we don't like his wisdom and we think we know better ourselves.

And that's why James uses the illustration of the sea here because he's saying this kind of person who lacks wisdom is blown and tossed about completely confused and unstable.

Not really sure whether they want to live God's way or whether they want to live the world's way. Or not really sure what values they will hold on to and base their lives upon.

James says this kind of person won't receive anything from the Lord because they doubt that God is God and that God knows best. And so this is what James calls double-mindedness.

Such a person, he says, is double-minded and unstable in all they do. Now the Greek word for double-minded here literally means double-souled.

[18 : 18] Apparently it's a word that James coined to describe the problem. It's one of the only places, if not the only place, in Greek literature where this term is used. And it's serious because such a person, James is saying, is half-hearted rather than whole-hearted in their commitment to God.

And so the Old Testament describes the need for people to seek God with their whole heart. Psalm 119, verse 2. And in the Old Testament, we see that people are condemned if their hearts are divided.

Psalm 12, verse 2, and Hosea 10, verse 2. And I remember what Jesus said about the greatest commandment when he was asked. He said, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

And so what God demands and what God deserves from his people is a wholeheartedness in love and in commitment to him. Not some kind of split loyalty.

And so James is concerned here about a division, about a double-mindedness, about a half-heartedness. Because that's what will lead to speaking and living and thinking in a way that is inconsistent with the faith that we profess.

[19 : 37] And so James recognizes that people are torn between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. And it's almost like a spiritual schizophrenia. And so it's no wonder this double-mindedness will make us unstable in all that we do.

And then James seems to have a crunching gear change here in verse 9 to 11 because then he goes on after talking about wholeheartedness and double-mindedness to then speak about the rich and the poor.

And it seems disconnected from what he's just been saying. But he's actually giving an illustration of the trial of money and how God's wisdom should be applied to it.

So let's read verse 9 to 11. Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position but the rich should take pride in their humiliation since they will pass away like a wild flower.

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant. Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed in the same way the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

[20 : 41] So as we read James we'll see that he often speaks about the rich and the poor. And so it seems that both wealth and poverty were trials that were faced by his readers.

And so he's saying we need wisdom to respond rightly to each. Both the trial of poverty and the trial of wealth. So let's think about poverty first. Because it's not difficult to see how a lack of money or poverty of any kind is a trial in life.

Poverty and humble circumstances make life difficult. And there's no denying it. But he's saying with wisdom even without wealth a believer knows that they have a high position because of their status in Christ.

So if you have nothing but Jesus you have everything. Simple Christian maths. And so he's saying here boast in the fact that in God's eyes you are exalted.

No matter what you have by way of material possessions in this world. That's a trial of poverty. It's a trial so wealth is a trial too. And yet we never think of wealth as being a trial, do we?

[21 : 55] Or that rich people have got it so tough in life. We're probably thinking well if wealth and money and riches is a trial it's a trial I'd be quite happy to have.

And willing to persevere under for a long time too. And yet James spends longer on wealth here than he does on poverty. Why?

Because wealth or riches can give us the wrong estimation of ourselves. Wealth in the eyes of the world is a sign that you're important that you matter even that you're safe or you're secure.

But James says the rich will pass away like a wild flower. So riches do nothing for you at the end of the day. And that's why James tells the rich to take pride in their low position.

Because if you have everything without Jesus you have nothing. And so if you're rich he's saying boast not in your wealth but boast in the gospel of Jesus Christ because it brings down the rich and it raises up the poor and it puts everybody on the same level.

[23 : 03] And it reminds us that ultimate security comes in life not through what you have but it comes through Jesus Christ alone. And so poverty and wealth are trials that can both test our faith in God.

And I think you just have to compare Christianity across the globe to see this played out. Because in the prosperous West where we live the quality of our Christian commitment is often so weak in comparison to the commitment you see in other countries where they're often materially poor but they're spiritually rich whereas we are materially wealthy and yet can be so spiritually poor.

I wonder if you've noticed that. And so the trial of not having enough money or by contrast the trial of having too much money will be a challenge to our wholehearted commitment to God.

After all didn't Jesus say you cannot serve both God and money because money the desire for more money the things that money can buy or the status that money can give can cause us to worship and serve money instead of God.

And so we need wisdom in knowing how to handle what we have. And so that's the joy of trials that James speaks of and this wisdom for trials but thirdly let's think about the goal of trials as we finish off these verses because verse 12 essentially rounds off the theme of trials that James began with in verse 2.

[24 : 40] So he says blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because having stood the test that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

So he's saying this is the goal of the trials that we face and so we can never consider it pure joy when we face them unless we know what God's ultimate purpose is through them.

Because if we view our trials with a short-sighted worldly vision then we're going to want to avoid any kind of trial at all costs. But if we view our trials with a long-sighted eternal vision then we'll see they have a purpose.

The goal as James says is that we may be perfect mature and complete not lacking anything so that eventually we will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised.

Now crown of life James is possibly alluding here to the laurel wreath that an athlete would receive when they win in the games the crown would go on the athlete who had persevered through the tough training on their way towards victory.

[25 : 52] No pain no gain but of course James doesn't mean here that it is only some special people who will be rewarded for doing better than other people.

No the reward here that is promised is to all who love the Lord. It is what God gives those who persevere through a life full of struggles tears pain hardship and are faithful right to the end.

And that is why James' letter is supposed to encourage us to keep going whatever we face. And so if you are here this afternoon and you are a Christian believer then whatever you are going through whatever trial you face then you need to know that your trials are not outside of the control of God.

And even though we don't know why we need to understand that they are part of God's loving care as he works in our lives to make us what we should be.

Because his ultimate goal through the many kinds of trials that we face is our full and final salvation. And so we need wisdom from God to persevere under trials because of the glorious future that God has in store for his people.

[27 : 12] And that's the kind of vision we need to have isn't it in the midst of our trials. There's a great poem I think it's called The Tapestry Poem by Corrie Ten Boom or maybe Corrie Ten Boom who was a survivor from the Second World War concentration camps maybe it's something she quotes but this is what it says the tapestry poem not till the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly will God unroll the canvas and reveal the reason why the dark threads are as needful in the weaver's skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.

It's a good reminder isn't it that life will be full of trials whether you call yourself a Christian or not and so the question is well how will we cope? will we cope without faith in God?

Because if there is no faith in God in the midst of trials then you've just got to grin and bear it and hope for the best whereas what Christianity offers is a far better hope because faith in God enables us to adopt a different perspective on our trials to see how they can be productive right now as we face them but also see how they lead to a promised reward in the future so how can we consider it pure joy when we face trials?

Well it's by remembering that Jesus Christ faced the ultimate trial before us at the cross Jesus suffered the most extreme trial by dying for us Jesus was God forsaken on the cross as he took the punishment for our sin and so if Jesus Christ was willing to go through the worst possible trial for us to save us from the worst possible fate then when we face trials and suffering in this life and wonder why well we know what the reason can't be it can't be because God doesn't love us because God has already displayed the full extent of his love for us at the cross so Jesus didn't suffer so that we would never suffer but he suffered so that when we suffer we become like him perfect whole complete and so faith in God doesn't guarantee you an easy life but it does guarantee a better life with purpose now and with reward to come and so we need to persevere knowing that not one ounce of pain or suffering is wasted and even if it doesn't feel like it right now one day we'll be able to look back on all of our trials and see they were worth it because God is the loving

God who knows exactly what he's doing with our lives so let's trust him