

James 1:1-12.

The first 300 years of Christianity was filled with much persecution. Sometimes the Roman government turned a blind eye to churches; other times it pursued them. As the waves of suffering rose and fell, churches felt the pain of loss. In some cities, believers gathered for worship in the dark catacombs to avoid being seen. Often carved in the walls were vivid reminders of heaven. The early church found hope for living today in a glorious tomorrow.

James' epistle isn't about Heaven but practical Christianity. All of us experience trials. We get sick. We lose loved ones. We feel the sting of rejection, see our finances rise and fall, or experience other losses in life. If we're captivated by this life alone, then trials will seem as intruders. Pain will seem entirely out of place. The early church endured because believers viewed their sufferings through the lens of eternity. What they believed about God and His faithfulness had a tremendous impact upon their lives from day to day.

**“WHEN A MAN DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HARBOR HE IS
MAKING FOR, NO WIND IS THE RIGHT WIND” — SENECA.**

For a believer in Christ to experience tragedy and to see nothing more than the tragedy itself is tragic. Why? Because God wastes nothing. He uses all to sanctify His child and works to prepare him for the enjoyment of an eternal home (2 Cor 4:16-18).

James opens His epistle by calling his readers to have a heavenly view. *See the big picture of your trials.* Heaven is Christian's harbor, not earth; and The Lord uses the headwinds of this life to drive His people towards a glorious shore.

JAMES AND HIS AUDIENCE (JAMES 1:1)

The Lord's siblings rejected Him throughout His earthly ministry (Matt 13:55; John 7:3-5). It seemed ridiculous that their older brother could be the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. Yet, when Jesus rose from the dead, that all changed. James, the half-brother of Jesus, believed (1 Cor 15:6).

He wasn't one of the apostles, but in the decade that followed, James pastored the church in Jerusalem. Sometime between 44-49AD, he wrote a letter to Jewish Christians. It became the first of the 27 New Testament books in writing.

Most Jews didn't live in Jerusalem or nearby. They had been scattered due to exile and persecution. To reach as many Jewish Christians as possible, James wanted his letter copied and sent on to one church after the next. He wanted as many as possible to be encouraged, challenged, and comforted by his words.

WISDOM AND TRIALS (JAMES 1:2-4)

Strength in numbers lay within Judaea and Galilee—these were Jewish strongholds in the Roman Empire. The Jews refused to worship Roman deities, and Rome tolerated it. Yet, outside of these areas, Jewish numbers were less concentrated. They were more likely to experience contempt and persecution. It was hard enough being Jewish in a Gentile world; harder to be a Jewish Christian.

Christians wouldn't worship the State deities or even the emperor as god. They were persecuted for this, but much more for worshipping a man who died on a cross. They worshipped Jesus, said He rose from the grave, and was coming back for them. To be Jewish brought contempt from society; to be Christian only made it worse. Not only did Gentiles persecute you, so did your own family and friends.

James understood the struggle. Life-threatening trials aren't a joy for anyone, but he encouraged his audience that they don't have to live as victims. “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (Jas 1:2). It's an accounting term that James used (*hegeomai*). He saying that trials never feel like joy—they must be counted, considered or reckoned as joy (Jas 1:2). Add them up and keep adding them up in your mind until you're able to see your trials as God does. Contrary to all we might feel, hardships in the life of a believer are actually one of God's good gifts (Jas 1:17).

Remember that James wasn't an armchair theologian. He wrote these words in the midst of his own suffering. In fact, it wasn't long after this epistle was sent that Herod Agrippa had James run through with the sword (Acts 12:2). He died following Christ.

It's common to feel sadness in a world filled with pain and hardships, but James says that circumstances need not undermine joy. If you know Christ as your Lord and Savior, you know that God is both good and sovereign over all that happens. Anchor your thoughts in these truths. Remind yourself of them many times over. Keeping trials in the right perspective is the way to walk through life with joy.

Enduring Trials

James says that trials are God's means of teaching His people endurance (Jas 1:3). He's at work, and His goal is that believers would look more and more Christ-like in their behavior—that they would be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29).

So, if your goal is comfort and ease, while God's goal for you is Christ-likeness, there's a problem. You won't view your trials as God does, you won't walk through them at rest in His goodness, and you certainly won't have joy.

SEEING WITH NEW EYES

(JAMES 1:5-8)

It has been said that, “our values determine our evaluations.” If we value the temporal more than the eternal, then the possibility of joy during a trial is lost. James argues that we must have the wisdom to value what God values.

Wisdom values the eternal and rejoices in what makes us more fit for eternity. If joy is lacking, it's a sign that you lack God's wisdom.

James never said it's easy, but as a man who has suffered he knows the nature of joy in his own trials. Jesus also understood suffering as did Paul and Peter (Luke 6:22-23; Heb 12:2; Phil 4:4; 1 Pet 1:6-7). Christ offers a life of great joy to the Christian, but quite often it's joy mixed with pain.

Sometimes I think of Noah's endurance. He spent 120 years building an ark as the world around mocked him for it. Why didn't he just give up? Hebrews 11:27 says of Noah and many other saints that they endured their trials “as seeing Him who is invisible.” The thought of God, the emptiness of this world, the glory of Heaven—all of these thoughts radically affected their view of life (Heb 11:10, 15-16, 27). They kept God ever in mind and determined to trust Him.

There's a connection between joy and wisdom. If you're lacking wisdom to see your trials rightly, you're lacking joy. James says to ask God for the wisdom to see things as He does (Jas 1:5). A believer who doesn't will become as a man who's “driven and tossed by the wind” (Jas 1:5-6).

He's like a vessel lost at sea in the midst of a storm. Without an anchor planted in God's good nature, the highs and lows of emotion will batter him senseless. James even says such a Christian is divided between faith and doubt (Jas 1:8; 1 Kings 8:21). He knows he should trust God, but fails to in this particular test.

True wisdom is biblical knowledge rightly applied even when it hurts. This is what opens the door for joy to flourish in any circumstance.

A TEST CASE

(JAMES 1:9-12)

The early church was poor with very few who had great means. It was a hard life, and James says that the poor should remind themselves of all they have in Heaven. Though humiliated in this life, the one who is poor and knows Christ is quite rich. To the wealthy Christian, James says to remember life's transience (Jas 1:9-10). In the blink of an eye this life will end—plan accordingly. As Jesus taught, store up treasure in Heaven (Luke 12:15-21).

James point is that finances are a trial (one common among his readers). He encourages them to view money with wisdom. What you have today has no value in the life to come. It isn't wrong to be wealthy, nor is it shameful to be poor. James urges his readers to quit thinking in these terms. Quit boasting of what you have right now; quit obsessing over what you lack—exalt in the hope of all that's yours in Christ after this life is through (Jas 1:9-11).

To have a faith that is “steadfast under trial” is to have an anchor that's set deep in God's character. This is evidence of true faith and will receive the crown of life (Jas 1:12).

But is anyone's faith always steadfast? Of course not. Christian faith is far from perfect in this life. We fail to see our trials rightly at times; we waver without wisdom; we lack joy. The theme of James isn't that true faith is perfect, but that true faith shows itself. It affects how we go through trials.