

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF YOUR TRIALS

James 1:1-4

The Epistle of James is the most practical book in the New Testament. It is the New Testament book of Proverbs. Some scholars take issue with James because it seems to be void of theology. Indeed, James is unique among the New Testament letters in that it does not directly address the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, or other major doctrines of Christ. But while James does not directly address Christian doctrine, it is rich with theological reflection. James draws heavily from Jesus' SERMON ON THE MOUNT in **Matthew 5-7**. If Paul's focus is on the death of Christ, James' focus is on the teachings of Christ. James teaches what it means to live out the teachings of Christ.

James 1:1 reads: *"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."* This salutation identifies James as the author of this letter. There are several men named James in the New Testament. But the general consensus is this letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus. During his earthly ministry, Jesus' family did not believe he was Israel's promised Messiah. On one occasion, they tried to take him home, thinking he had lost his mind. But after the crucifixion and resurrection, James changed his mind about Jesus. **1 Corinthians 15:7** reports Jesus appeared to James after the resurrection, which may have contributed to his conversion. **Acts 1:14** mentions James as one of the brothers of Jesus who was present in the Upper Room at the birth of the church. James later became the "senior pastor," if you will, of the church at Jerusalem. In **Galatians 2:9**, Paul calls James one of the pillars of the church.

James identifies himself in this letter in modest terms. Without mentioning his relationship to Jesus or his prominence in the church, James calls himself a *servant*. Literally, he calls himself a "slave." Most translations do not render the term this way because of the negative connotations associated with it –then and now. But the New Testament writers freely used this term as a picture of the believer's relationship to God. To be in Christ is to be a servant of God. But James claims to be *"a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."* This does not mean James had two masters. **Matthew 6:24a** says, *"No one can serve two masters."* This is a primitive affirmation of the Trinity. In **John 10:30**, Jesus says, *"I and the Father are one."*

James addresses this letter "to the twelve in the Dispersion." This ambiguous phrase has resulted in much debate. Most likely, James wrote this letter to Jewish Christians scattered outside of Palestine. Yet this letter is relevant for all Christians. While James does not directly state the purpose of this letter, the content of this letter clearly lays out multiple tests by which a professing Christian may test if his or her faith is real. In **Matthew 7:21**, Jesus warns, *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."* In **2 Corinthians 13:5**, Paul exhorts, *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."* James gives a series of tests to examine whether you are truly in the faith. **James 1:2-4** is the first of these tests.

Most New Testament letters move from salutation to thanksgiving and intercession for the readers. But after a simple greeting, James shifts to the first test

of genuine faith. It is how you respond to trials in your life. The text assumes believers will face trials. And it exhorts us to view our trials as a means to an end, not an end of our means. OSWALD CHAMBERS wrote: "Every humiliation, everything that tries and vexes us, is God's way of cutting a deeper channel in us through which the life of Christ can flow." This brief letter consists of 108 verses. Yet there are 53 direct commands in this letter, marking James as a call to live out an active, living, working faith. **James 1:2-4** give two radical but beneficial commands to obey in the midst of trouble.

I. BE JOYFUL IN TRIALS

Verse 2 says, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*" The Greek term translated "*trials*" refers to a testing. It can be an internal temptation or external trial, depending on the context. In **James 1:13-14**, the term clearly refers to temptation. The **KJV** also translates the term "temptations" in verse 2. But the context here is clearly about trials. This text is not about solicitations to sin. It is about what verse 3 calls "*the testing of your faith.*" **James 1:2-3** tells us three important facts about life's trials.

A. THE REALITY OF LIFE'S TRIALS

Verse 2 teaches that trials are a definite, unwelcome, and personal reality. **TRIALS ARE A DEFINITE REALITY.** James says, "*Count it all joy, when you meet trials of various kinds.*" It is inevitable that trials will come. If you have not experienced any trials yet, don't boast. They are coming. **Job 5:7** says: "*but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.*" **Job 14:1** says, "*Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.*" Being saved or obeying the word of God or exercising your faith will not exempt you from life's trials. **2 Timothy 3:12** says, "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Trials are not electives in God's curriculum that you are free to skip. They are required courses every Christian must take sooner or later.

TRIALS ARE AN UNWELCOME REALITY. Verse 2 says, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*" The term translated "*meet*" means to be surrounded. The **KJV** gets the sense of the term better when it speaks of "falling into" trials. It is the same term used in **Luke 10:30** where Jesus' parable of THE GOOD SAMARITAN describes a man who fell among robbers on the Jericho road. He was minding his own business, when he found himself surrounded by thugs who jumped him, robbed him, and left him for dead. The trials of life are like that. James is not speaking about trials you find yourself in because of things you have said and done. These are not trials that are the result of illicit desires, selfishness, negligence, partiality, worldliness, rebellion, or prayerlessness. These are trials that ambush your sojourn in this adventure of faith in Christ. You do not have to be doing wrong for trials come. Trials have a GPS system that can find you wherever you are.

TRIALS ARE A PERSONAL REALITY. Verse 2 calls them *“trials of various kinds.”* The term *“various kinds”* translates a Greek word that means “multicolored.” It is the word used in the Greek translation of **Genesis 37:3** to describe Joseph’s coat of many colors. James uses it here to describe the diverse, various, and multifaceted trials we will face in life. In **Matthew 7:24-27**, Jesus tells of two men who built two houses on two different foundations – one on the rock and the other on the sand. The rock represents the one who lives by the teachings of Christ; the sand represents the one who does not. Both house were assaulted by a fierce storm. Jesus describes the storm as heavy rains blanketing the roof, howling winds attacking the structure, and rising floodwaters testing the foundation. Likewise, trials come in many different forms. The trials may affect your health, family, friendships, education, career, finances, or possessions. As is most often the case, the trial may affect multiple areas of your life at the same time. So do not let your guard down if you can carry a particular burden with ease. Trials of various kinds will eventually surround you at a place where you are personally vulnerable.

B. THE RESPONSE TO LIFE’S TRIALS

How should we respond when we meet trials of various kinds? James says, *“Count it all joy.”* This is not a natural response to trials. We rejoice when we avoid or escape trials. We respond to trials with fear, anger, grief, self-pity, and envy, rather than joy. Yet James says, *“Count it all joy.”* This is an imperative, not a suggestion. God commands you to rejoice when you are surrounded by many trials.

As you hear this, you may be thinking, “I cannot do that.” You may be right. This radical command is not meant for everyone. Verse 2 says, *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.”* Throughout this letter, James addresses his readers as *“brothers.”* When this term is used as a form of address in the New Testament, it is GENDER NEUTRAL. It acknowledges the readers – both male and female – as fellow members of the family of faith. When James refers to his readers as *“brothers”* in verse 2, it indicates those who are spiritually qualified to obey this command to *“count it all joy.”* Only Christians can count it all joy when they meet various trials.

1 Corinthians 2:14 says, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”* It does no good to tell an unbeliever to count it all joy. Before you can take advantage of your trials, you must first be born again and adopted into the family of God through faith in Christ. God created us to glorify him and enjoy him forever. But all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are guilty sinners on death row awaiting the final judgment of God’s holy wrath. But God in love sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross to pay for your sins and raised him from the dead to be your Savior and Lord. Your only hope of salvation is to confess your sins to God and receive his forgiveness by trusting the blood of Jesus’ sacrificial death to make atonement for your sins before God.

When you have been saved from the penalty of sin, you can meet any trial with joy. In fact, God commands you to respond to your trials with joy. This does not mean you should ignore your pain, laugh at sorrow, or be happy for loss. Something is wrong with you if you can do that. Your trials are not joyful. But you can “*count it all joy... when you meet trials.*” The word “*count*” means to carefully and deliberately consider a thing. It is a logical conclusion, not an emotional response. We are to consider our trials to be occasions for joy, even when we do not feel joyful. You cannot be happy when you experience trials. But you can respond to trials with a sense of deep satisfaction that comes from knowing that God is in control even when your circumstances seem to be out of control. That’s joy. When James says, “*Count it all joy,*” he does not mean you should disregard the pain, grief, anger, fear, and anxiety that come with trials. He means you should respond to your trials with a joy that is so real and pure and deep that it is untouched by the assault of trials. Joy is a choice. No matter the trial, you can choose to rejoice.

C. THE REASON FOR LIFE’S TRIAL

Why should we count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds? Verse 3 answers: “*for you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*” We do not count it all joy because of what we feel or think or see. We count it all joy because of what we know. We have a know-so salvation. This is how we rejoice in suffering, sing as we weep, trust in the dark, love those who hate us, and bless when we are cursed. FREDRICK BUECHNER is right: “A Christian isn’t necessarily any nicer than anybody else. Just better informed.” We count it all joy because of what we know. **Romans 8:28** says: “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” In *He’s God And We’re Not*, RAY PRITCHARD writes of a man who occasionally throws “Count It All Joy” parties. The invited guests ask, “Why are you having this party? Is it your birthday? Your anniversary? Did you get a raise?” He responds, “No, I’m having this party because I’m going through a hard time right now and I want to celebrate because I know God has something good planned for me in the end.”

James says, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*” The phrase “*the testing of your faith*” further explains the word “*trials*” in verse 2. A trial is more than a problem to solve or unpleasant experience or stressful situation. It is a test of your faith that causes you to ask God why? Why me? Why this? Why now? The word “*testing*” is used twice in the New Testament. It refers to the result of testing in **1 Peter 1:6-7**: “*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” But it is used here to refer to the process of testing. God uses trials to test our faith. Precious metals are put in the fire to prove them to be genuine and purify them from dirt and dross. Likewise, God uses trials to prove and purify our faith. But as you go through the

fiery trial, God has his eye on the clock and his hand on the stop button. He knows how much you can bear. When you come through the test of faith, it produces steadfastness.

“Steadfastness” translates a word that means, “to remain under.” The KJV translates it “patience.” But it does not refer to passive resignation in difficult circumstances. It is constancy or endurance or perseverance. Picture a man on a journey up a high mountain. The difficult trek up the rugged terrain is made the more difficult by an unwanted burden that is placed on his shoulders. Yet he does not quit the journey. He keeps going forward, even though he is carrying a heavy burden. It is God’s will for you to live with that kind of staying power. The sad indictment is that many of us live with a cut-and-run mentality. We quit our jobs when we are mistreated. We end friendships when we are disappointed. We divorce our mates when we are unsatisfied. We leave the church when we are offended. We change cities when we are unhappy. **Proverbs 28:1** says, *“The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.”* This is how righteous people live. **Hebrews 12:1-2** says, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who 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.”*

II. BE SUBMISSIVE IN TRIALS

James 1:2-3 says: *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”* But steadfastness is not the ultimate goal of God’s work in your life. Some ancient people viewed steadfastness as the queen of virtues. But that is not what the Bible teaches. You can have staying power and still be self-centered, worldly, and hard to get along with. Steadfastness without the development of other Christian virtues is just prideful stubbornness. God tests your faith to produce steadfastness. But steadfastness is just a holding pattern to get you safely to the final destination. The ultimate goal of God’s work in your life is stated in verse 4: *“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* This verse calls us to submit to God’s process and purpose of growth through trials.

A. EMBRACE GOD’S PROCESS OF GROWTH THROUGH TRIALS.

Verse 4 says, *“And let steadfastness have its full effect.”* The reason why steadfastness is not the ultimate goal of God’s work in your life is because you can be steadfast without being steadfast. Steadfastness involves your actions and your attitudes. It involves your choices and your disposition. It involves what you do and how you do it. You can stay in your marriage and be cold. You can remain at your job and be critical. You can stay in the church and be a troublemaker. Little Johnny starts jumping around in the backseat. His father looks in the rearview mirror and

tells him to sit down. Johnny says no. Dad briefly looks over his shoulder and repeats himself. Again, Johnny says no. Mom then turns around and sits him down by his ear and says either you do what your father says or you are in big trouble. As Johnny obeys, he mutters under his breath, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside."

God is not honored by contrary steadfastness. So he commands, "*And let steadfastness have its full effect.*" Don't fight the process. Don't take any shortcuts. Don't cheat on the test. Give God time to finish what he has begun in you, for you, and through you. **James 5:7-11** says, "*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*" If you let steadfastness have its full effect, you will see that the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

My little sister and I were wrestling around the house one day when we were kids. When she darted out the front door, I followed her, without any shoes on. After chasing one another around, my sister noticed blood on my foot. Something cut a huge gash under my big toe. My mom took me to the hospital. And the doctor stitched up my toe. It was the worst pain I had ever experienced. I kept jumping up, until my mom held me down. I pleaded with her to let me up. But her love made me stay on the surgeon's table until the process was over. I can now thank God for it. Are you on the table? Is some trial doing painful surgery on your faith? Have you pleaded with God to let you up? Know that God loves you. And his love requires that you be stitched up! Let him do it.

B. EMBRACE GOD'S PURPOSE OF GROWTH THROUGH TRIALS.

Verse 4 says, "*And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*" If you do not obey this command, you short-circuit the process of spiritual development in your life. But if you do your part and let steadfastness have its full effect, God will make you perfect, complete, lacking nothing. This is God's purpose for the trials in your life – that you grow up! **Romans 5:3-5** says, "*More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*" These are the ABC's of spiritual growth: adversity builds character. God uses trials to make you *perfect*. This does not refer to sinless perfection. It means to be mature. It is the picture of a fully-grown adult, in contrast to a little child. God wants you to be "*complete*," meaning you have a well-rounded character with no virtues mission. God wants you

to be *"lacking nothing,"* meaning you do not fall short of any standard that should be reached. God's purpose in your trials is that you grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

As I was going through pictures on my computer, my daughter Hailey climbed on the bed. I happened to be scrolling through pictures of Crystal when she was pregnant with Hailey. Hailey identified everyone in the pictures. I asked, "Where's Hailey?" I pointed to Crystal's stomach. Hailey said, No. But then we got to the delivery day and early baby pictures in the hospital. She asked what was wrong. I told her she was coming out of mommy's stomach. She replied, "I'm sorry, mommy." I tried to explain to her that mommy was happy. But she did not understand. She kept saying, "I'm sorry, mommy." She could not understand that mommy was happy because there was life growing on the inside.

**THROUGH IT ALL, THROUGH IT ALL
I'VE LEARNED TO TRUST IN JESUS. I'VE LEARNED TO TRUST IN GOD
THROUGH IT ALL, THROUGH IT ALL
I'VE LEARN TO DEPEND UPON HIS WORD**