



## Sermon "Trials Produce Perfection"

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*James 1:1-8; 12-15*

### I. Introduction

In 2019, a young missionary in China who was preparing to leave the country was cleaning up his apartment. He found some Christian material in his apartment that he wouldn't be able to bring with him to the airport. He was nervous to bring the material to the airport because he feared they would be discovered by immigration. He knew it was illegal to have these materials on him.

So, he gathered the material together and had a plan to throw them out into the rubbish cans at the front of his apartment complex. He waited until night to place the bagged materials in the rubbish cans. What he didn't know was that the area in which the cans were located was constantly surveyed by CCT cameras.

His movements were noticed, and officials were sent to look through the rubbish cans. The materials were found, and this young missionary was picked up and questioned. This was the start of a large number of missionaries being kicked out of China. All of the belongings of the young missionary were searched: luggage, phones and computers. Missionary connections were uncovered and soon more young families were being questioned in police stations.

In Thailand, I got the opportunity to talk to a missionary leader about this case. After they relayed the story to me, I thought they would be discouraged about the loss of missionaries on the field. I thought they would talk about new strategies for reaching the Chinese with the Gospel. That wasn't what they focused on. They were discouraged that young families were being harassed and displaced. They were optimistic about being open to new opportunities to reach the Chinese with the Gospel. But they focused on one thing.

They said that this new push by the government to remove Christianity would have the opposite affect that the government hoped. By testing the faith of the underground Chinese church, the church would only grow stronger. What did they mean? They meant that the more the church is tested the stronger and more vibrant it becomes.

Their proof? The entire history of the church. Church history is filled with accounts where governments sought to extinguish the light of Jesus only for the church to cling more closely to their Lord and shine His light more brightly to others around them. This missionary leader was saying that Church history would repeat itself. Testing of the faith of the Church would produce a more perfected faith and a greater proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus.

Today marks the beginning of a new series in the book of James. In James 1:1-15, we will be looking at the first biblical evidence of a Christian leader's encouragement to those who will suffer persecution. His message will be, "the trials you face will be used to perfect your faith. You will be walking more in the strength of the Lord, and you will see more clearly the joy set before you.

But let's first look at the possible context of James' letter. We know that at Pentecost, the Spirit of God filled all who came to faith in Jesus. God performed miraculous signs through these new believers regardless of their social status or education. Jesus' life was manifest through individuals who put their trust in him.

There was a man named Stephen who was "full of grace and power...(doing) great wonders and signs among the people." Leaders from a specific synagogue who could not "withstand the wisdom and Spirit with which (Stephen) was speaking" secretly instigated others against Stephen. They instigated others to falsely testify that Stephen had blasphemed Moses and God. When Stephen is questioned about this, he testifies to God's faithfulness in Israel's history. But when Stephen rebukes those listening and tells them that they are stubborn and resisting God, they stone him to death. They could listen to a history of God's faithfulness, but they would not listen to a critique on their response to God.

Saul, who becomes known as Paul, is there and approving of this brutal execution. This cruel act against Stephen triggers a "great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." And it is difficult to know when the letter from James is written, but it starts with a possible clue. It may have been written quite early in church history. In fact, it might have been written just shortly after Stephen was murdered.

James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." It's possible that James is sending a letter of encouragement to the Israelites who have come to faith in Jesus after Peter's first sermon and have been scattered throughout the surrounding regions because of the persecution of the religious and political leaders affiliated with local synagogues.

While the apostles did not scatter from persecution, these early believers did. So, James seeks to mentor, to shepherd these new believers on what walking with Jesus and his Spirit means. He will try to focus their hearts and minds on Jesus and to calm their fears. He will say three things: 1.) Joy awaits you; 2.) ask for wisdom if you are confused; and 3.) cling tenaciously to God and Jesus' resurrected life will be made perfect within them.

### **1.) Be Joyful**

In James 1:1-4, James seeks to help the new believers dispersed abroad by having them focus on Jesus and not their troubles. This isn't to say that James wants them to ignore the truth or gravity of their trials. He isn't telling them to be like an ostrich and bury their heads in the ground. He isn't telling them to create a "happy place" that they can escape to, ignoring hostility directed at them.

James freely acknowledges the reality and pain of trials. Jesus went through trials and told his followers that if they truly followed him, they would experience the same thing. Why? If the world hated what Jesus said, they would surely hate his followers because they would speak the exact same words! They are followers of Jesus, not creators of their own religion or philosophy, able to pick and choose what to keep or ignore from Jesus.

James says that trials are normal! They shouldn't stick their heads in the ground and imagine that there are no trials. These real trials have a real purpose. These trials are caused by love for neighbour. Followers of Jesus love their neighbours and seek to tell them about God's gift in His Son. Salvation and escape from judgement. Escape from the Great Trial, Great Tribulation that will come.

James says that these real trials these new followers of Jesus are experiencing reveal Jesus. The trials reveal the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to love even His enemies. Loving their neighbour even as they suffer various trials from others will produce in their new followers of Jesus their ultimate goal: a greater experience of their oneness with Jesus! And getting closer to this goal brings...joy!

## 2.) Ask for Wisdom

In James 1:5–8, James provides more guidance for those that might find it difficult to see how they might know joy through great suffering. James tells them to always, every day, at all times, ask for wisdom from God. They are never to suffer alone. They are never to walk alone and think they are supposed to do things FOR God. God is calling them to walk WITH Him, not to do things FOR Him. James tells them to always ask God for wisdom on the events that unfold upon their lives.

Why is it important to ask for wisdom? Because these new followers of Jesus will make choices that will wind up making matters worse. If they think their lives are difficult now under specific trials, it will be much worse if they make decisions on their own without seeking God's council.

Joshua found this out when he entered the Promised Land. He was told to be an instrument of God's judgment against the peoples inhabiting the land. The Gibeonites, seeing God's power move through the Israelites, sought to deceive Joshua in order to escape their judgment. The Gibeonites were deceptive and pretended that they were from a different land. They then asked if the Israelites would enter into a covenant of peace with them.

The account then states that Joshua "did not ask counsel from the Lord...(but that he)...made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them." Because Israel did not seek God's wisdom, they made their own decision and they chose badly. Why? God punishes justly and quickly. He doesn't torture or prolong punishment. He states that the punishment should exactly match the offense. By not punishing the Gibeonites, they become throughout the history of Israel "barbs in (their) eyes and thorns in (their) sides."

James is saying to the new followers of Jesus spread out into the neighbouring regions to be careful. He is telling them to seek God's counsel each day. They may be suffering temporarily, but in seeking God's wisdom they will not make matters much worse. James points to the rich. Those suffering trials may look at the rich and think they should follow the rich instead! "If I follow the rich then I will be safe from persecution. I will be respected by the crowds." James reminds the new followers of Jesus that the rich will face a permanent and shameful end. It is much better to be righteous and face trials than to be shameful and be at ease.

## 3.) Cling to God

James has told the new followers of Jesus that they will know deep joy if they continue to walk in righteousness. They will continue to know joy if they continually seek God's counsel and wisdom. In James 1:12–15, James teaches the new believers that God will always give His strength to ensure they can remain walking with Him. God will never put a barrier or obstacle in their way to prohibit them from walking with Him. The only obstacles or barriers they will face will be put up by themselves! James says, "...each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then this desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

James is pleading with the new followers of Jesus to cling to God and not to their own fleshly desires. God is the one beacon of light and righteousness that can lead them daily to joy, power and glory. Barriers to their oneness with the source of joy and life will come from within themselves. So they must cling to God! They must throw all of the hope and trust in God, His Son and His Spirit. If they don't cling to Him, they will be lost just as the rich are.

In a way, James is trying to help these new believers better investors. They can spend their lives on temporary pleasures, pleasures which are only shadows of greater gifts. They can let go of righteousness in Christ and pursue a righteousness of their times. Or they can spend their lives for that which has eternal value and glory. A “crown of life” whose glory they can share in, an eternal glory that will never fade.

In our passage today, James tells the new followers of Jesus to be joyful in the midst of trials because their “crown of life” will be more readily seen by others. He tells them to seek God’s counsel each day to ensure they experience greater oneness with God. He finally tells them to cling to God alone.

What is our application today?

### **1.) How do we view trials?**

We tend to avoid trials, don’t we? We tend to consider carefully what we will say or do so that we will avoid trouble. Part of me thinks that our goals aren’t to experience great joy. We don’t want joy or it’s opposite, sadness. We want an emotion that is somewhere in between these two extremes. We want safety. Because we often want safety, we avoid trials.

But trials are a means for others to see God’s faithfulness. It’s love that acts even while being persecuted that testifies in a greater way to God’s love. Our love can sometimes be described as a transactional love. We love those that make us feel good or who return the good we share with them. But God’s love is different. He is the Divine Father. He loves that which He has created, and He suffers trials, He suffers opposition gladly because He sets His eyes on joy. He sees the joy of restoration as His goal.

The greatest lesson I ever received from God was through a trial. I was in Osaka helping a church with an English School outreach and we were sharing God’s Word with many who had never been taught about Jesus. Our number of classes and students were growing. Some connected with the school had become followers of Jesus. They were even baptized in the church where the English school was located. I was thrilled to serve there.

But I needed to grow as a servant to others. I needed to address areas in my character that I had ignored. I ignored those areas thinking that our successes made development in those areas less important. It wasn’t until I went through a trial, granted this one more caused by me and those around me, that I really learned a deeper obedience to Jesus. I would have never learned the lessons I did if it weren’t for the trials that I went through.

Interestingly how we all develop through trials, but then we never test those under our care with trials so that they may grow as well! Unfortunately, we tend to think that the only way to develop people is to be nice to them. We think we just have to be supportive. But when we do that, what is the goal we have for them? Maybe our goal is to have others like us. But is that a sufficient goal?

God’s goal for us, is His image in us through His Son and the provision of His Spirit. He molds us through kindness but also through trials. And his goal is our joy in the freedom of His glory and in His kingdom.

May we be a family that goes through trials with joy knowing that God is working in us the salvation He set in His Son. Let us ask Him for wisdom and counsel as we go through trials and let us cling tenaciously to Him every step of the way. And may the way He treats us, be the way we serve each other. May we allow trials to have their affect in others. May we be like James and shepherd them through trial and into joy.