


JAMES 1:2-4

WHAT TRIALS MAY COME

“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.”¹

ne truth is undeniable—trials come into each life. When trials come into your life, for trials do come to each of us, how do you respond? What is your first response when disappointment grips your soul and threatens happiness? The letter James wrote is, if nothing else, practical. The brother of our Lord speaks pointedly to fellow believers who share in the trials of this world. Join me in exploring the teaching of the Word as we equip ourselves to respond to trials of various kinds.

TRIALS ARE INEVITABLE — James recognises that trials are inevitable. In the Greek language, “trials” [*peirasmós*] may refer either to external adversities or to internal temptations that come into the life of an individual. In **VERSES 13** and **14**, the word refers to temptations. Here in our text, and for our contemplation this day, the word speaks of those external events that try us, exhausting us and even threatening physical life.

Christians to whom James was writing were under extreme pressure because of their faith that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Among the trials we recognise were executions [**ACTS 7:57-60**], physical mistreatment and imprisonment [**ACTS 8:1; 22:4**], impoverishment and deprivation of the basic necessities for life [**JAMES 2:2-6; 5:1-4**], and sickness and attendant discouragement [**JAMES 5:13, 14**]. The author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians also writes of their trials. “Recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” [**HEBREWS 10:32-34**].

Other trials were less apparent as trials. James speaks of the temptation to become casual about the Faith of Jesus the Lord. He spoke of the temptation to be religious without being transformed—of going through the motions of worship without worshipping [**JAMES 1:22-25**]. He spoke of the temptation to show partiality toward fellow believers [**JAMES 2:1-6**]. He also spoke of the temptation to selectively do what the Lord commands—to apply faith in a selective fashion [**JAMES 2:14-17**], to say what you are really thinking without thought of the consequences of your speech [**JAMES 3:1-12**], and to exercise worldly wisdom without recognising heavenly wisdom [**JAMES 3:13-18**]. The ever present danger of becoming worldly in one’s thinking and in one’s actions [**JAMES 4:1-12**], and boasting in our own strength [**JAMES 4:13-17**], are temptations that James recognises as dangerous for those who would honour the Lord Jesus. He also warns against depending upon what one has, instead of depending upon the Master [**JAMES 5:1-6**].

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What should be evident as we review this letter is that the Christians to whom James wrote were tested and tempted by essentially the same things that test and try us. Certainly, trials and hurt come to all of us, and temptations abound for each Christian. James is not merely telling that this will happen, but he equips us to grow through trials.

I am not suggesting that Christians in Canada are imprisoned because of their Faith. Certainly, they are not being murdered because they are Christians at the present time, nor are they debarred from work because they believe in the Lord Jesus. However, such things have happened in the recent past, and the threat is always there. Baptists were imprisoned in Quebec during the 50s and 60s for the high crime of preaching the message of life in Jesus the Lord. I have personally known people blackballed by their union because they would not deny their Faith.

The current political climate, with the multiplication of “hate laws,” certainly threatens those who wish to speak of biblical morality. Indeed, people have been haled before “human rights tribunals in several provinces. Even a Roman Catholic Bishop has been threatened both by a provincial human rights tribunal and threatened through condemnation by parliamentarians and federal politicians. Physical and fiscal opposition is a very real possibility for the conscientious Christian in modern Canada.

If Christians in Malaysia, Indonesia, Iraq and Iran, India, Viet Nam and Mexico live under constant and intense threat of death and loss of property today, should we be surprised at the potential for such injury even in Canada? However, it seems to me that the pressure to conform to this present, dying world is far greater than is the threat of physical opposition. Paul urges Christians, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” **ROMANS 12:1, 2**].

It is compromise with the thinking of this world that threatens the life of the Faith in our nation. I am always astonished when I witness Christians justifying lying because they “had to do it,” or showing favouritism toward wealth or social status within the churches of our Lord. It has become commonplace for professing Christians to selectively apply the instruction of the Word, choosing what Word of the Saviour they will obey while ignoring other portions of the Word that they consider difficult. Harsh vituperation that passes as “honest speech” is a disgrace among Christians, and the constant application of the “best thoughts” of this dying world dishonours the Lord whom we profess to follow. In addition to these real and present dangers is the threat to the advance of the Faith because we trust in what we have and depend upon our own strength instead of relying upon the Spirit whom God has given.

I often tell new believers to avoid at all costs those self-confident charlatans that insist that a Christian should never experience difficulty. The Word is replete with warnings to anticipate trials. Peter wrote, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” [**1 PETER 4:12-16**].

In words that echo the struggles of Job [JOB 23:10], the considerations of the Psalmists [PSALM 66:10], the wisdom of Solomon [PROVERBS 17:3], and Isaiah [ISAIAH 48:10], Peter writes to encourage believers who are “grieved by various trials” [1 PETER 1:6, 7]. Together with John, Peter faced the enraged Jewish Council, and when the two disciples left the chambers, they left “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name” [ACTS 5:41].

I cannot read the words that the Apostle wrote when he reviewed his life before and after meeting Christ without being humbled. “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” [PHILIPPIANS 3:4-11].

All this focus on suffering and on opposition is but an iteration of the teaching Jesus provided in His Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps you will recall that He said, “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” [MATTHEW 5:11, 12]. Jesus did not say *if* you are reviled and persecuted, rejoice; He commanded His followers to rejoice “*when* others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [His] account.” In other words, Jesus anticipates that those who follow Him will experience opposition and rejection.

His cautionary statement to the disciples was repeated and emphasised as He prepared for the Cross. Jesus said, “You will be hated by all men for my Name’s sake” [LUKE 21:17]. These specific words were a theme throughout the training of the Twelve. Jesus repeatedly taught them, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household” [MATTHEW 10:16-25].

It is perhaps significant to contrast the message of the first missionaries with the message of many contemporary religious leaders. The message to the early Christians was that “through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God” [ACTS 14:22]. What a message! “Come join us! You will suffer and people will hate you and reject you. Your own family will perhaps refuse to accept you any longer. This is the Faith. Here is where you belong.” If all you are looking for is a fire insurance policy, buy one. However, if you will follow the Master, know that there is no room for cowards or those who seek an easy life in the Kingdom of God.

Today, we have created a wimpy, flaccid, effeminate religion that we too often sell to unsuspecting people as Christianity. What we often peddle as the Faith is at best a pale reflection of reality. The Christian Faith demands the best of those who will follow the Master. The life to which Christ calls us does not exempt us from trials and temptations. Rather, we can anticipate opposition, and the most disheartening opposition we will experience will be that from our own fellow Christians. Nevertheless, because we serve the Risen Son of God, the Living King of Glory, we accept the call to be manly, to stand firm, to be stalwart as we resist the call to conformity.

A GODLY RESPONSE TO TRIALS — At issue is not the question of whether you will face trials of various kinds as a Christian. What concerns us is that we *will* face trials of various kinds as Christians. Because this is true, we need to determine what the appropriate response is to be when we do face trials. If we will honour Christ the Lord, we must prepare beforehand in order to react wisely and courageously.

I suppose that the most natural and most immediate response any of us have to any given trial is to question why it is happening. I am not suggesting that we never question what is happening in our lives, but I am stating that we should know that God is at work even during our times of trial, working out His purpose, equipping us to share in His glory. Because we are convinced that our times are in His hands, and because we know that He is always at work bringing good out of the trials of life, we realise that even our testings have purpose and will work for our good and for His glory.

“Count it all joy” is the godly response to trials. It is important to note that James does not tell us to rejoice *because of* trials, but rather he urges us to be joyful *in* trials. James is not telling us that we cannot feel astonishment or react in any way other than with joy. Frankly, it is impossible not to be saddened by some trials we may encounter. James is saying, however, that we must put our theology into practise; we must realise that ultimately God will deliver us from the trials of this life. Joy reveals the confidence of an individual who cannot be defeated. As His beloved children, we are not destined for this moment only; we live in the light of eternity, knowing that Christ is coming again and that we will be transformed into His image. We are destined to share His glory!

Also, as we endure the trials associated with this life, we must put into practise the knowledge that we are not deserted, but that we are always the objects of the Master’s love. The trials we experience are permitted in our lives in order to bring glory to His Name and for our benefit. We need to remember the promises that we will not be forsaken. God has promised, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” [HEBREWS 13:5]. This is but a repetition of Jesus’ promise appended to the Great Commission. He promised, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:20].

In the First Corinthian letter, Paul writes of the trials [*peirasmós*] we face as Christians. “No trial [*peirasmós*] has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful: He will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it” [1 CORINTHIANS 10:13]. Whatever trial you may face, you serve a God who is too wise to make a mistake, and too good to needlessly hurt His child. Whether facing a temptation to succumb to the spirit of the age or whether facing overt opposition, God stands with His child.

If I am focused on loss, I will be incapable of rejoicing. However, if my focus is on eternity and all that God has promised to do for me, I will rejoice in every situation, knowing that nothing can come into my life that has not been permitted by a wise and gracious Father who designs all things for my good and for His glory. This is the reason Paul reviews what is happening about Him during his final imprisonment, and concludes that God is overruling all and therefore ruling over all [see PHILIPPIANS 1:15-18].

The Apostle testified that the Christians in Macedonia were severely tested, and yet they had joy. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” [2 CORINTHIANS 8:1, 2].

Paul’s assessment was to see that his own particular trials brought evidence of the Lord’s work. For instance, when he struggled against his “thorn in the flesh,” he saw God at work even in his pain. “To keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” [2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10].

Therefore, he would urge Timothy not to be so focused on the transient that he failed to see the eternal. “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” [2 TIMOTHY 1:8-12].

Again, he encouraged his young theologian, “You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” [2 TIMOTHY 2:1-4].

So, trials provide opportunity to know the power of God at work in our lives. Times of testing refocus our gaze on eternity, teaching us to hold the things of this life lightly. But above all else, trials are preparing us for eternity.

Throughout the verses of our text, one truth stands out—to respond in a manner that honours the Master requires rigorous training for the Christian. Training for service as a Marine was arduous and demanding. Were a candidate selected for service in Force Recon, the training would have been more strenuous still. The gruelling nature of the training was not because drill instructors were sadistic. Rather, at the time of my own training, the drill instructors were combat veterans selected and taught to prepare young men for service as Marines. These men were intent on preparing us to function under adverse conditions and under fire.

Marines are a strange breed in that they are trained to run to the fire. One singular truth was drilled into recruits repeatedly—face the enemy. Good Marines must steel themselves not to turn their backs to the fire. Such discipline requires constant, strenuous training in order to enable the warrior to stand without giving way to natural emotions. Just so, the Christian life demands that the child of God constantly train to stand firm in the vicissitudes of life.

When trials come, as they must come, look for the hand of the Master at work equipping you for His glory and for your good. Some great mark of godliness that will rest upon your life, blessing others and honouring the Lord Jesus, is the inevitable and anticipated result of the trials you are now experiencing.

Among the great preachers I have heard was a man named Jerry Vines. After hearing his messages throughout a number of years, I heard him tell of a great heartache that came into his life. The crushing blow of the loss of a child hurt more than most of us could ever know. However, the Master was at work even then, preparing that man to be one of the great preachers of his era. It is doubtful that God will ever use greatly one who has not been hurt deeply. I do not say that you must welcome trials, but welcome the knowledge that the Master will work through your trials to glorify His Name.

PURPOSE IN OUR TRIALS — “You know,” wrote James, “that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” Christians should know, as did James’ readers, that God allows trials so that our faith will become mature and complete. Steadfastness is faith’s first product, and it is elemental to the fortitude of the soldier who braves all in his life-or-death struggle on the field of combat. Steadfastness is a mark of the godly individual who knows God. However, this steadfastness is not granted simply because we are born from above; it is acquired only through great effort—effort that is often painful.

James shifts our attention to the purpose of the trials; and if we understand what God is doing, we will be able to rejoice in the midst of our trials. **VERSES 3 AND 4** inform us, “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.” The goal of our training is perfection. We are training for eternity, but the perfection in view is a present potential reality. James is not teaching us to reach for something that is unattainable; he is urging us to equip ourselves for glory. The child of God can rejoice in trials because he or she can see that God is at work preparing them for even greater service and working to prepare them for eternity.

Steadfastness is not the goal of trials; steadfastness is but a benchmark on the road to maturity. To speak of a Christian as perfect and complete is in effect acknowledging maturity. Maturity is the ability to live in a godly manner, not permitting oneself to be swayed by the winds of life. Maturity is a rare commodity among Christians today.

In most churches, there are more babies in the pews than there are in the nursery. The difference between the babies in the nursery and those in the pews is that the ones in the nursery are beautiful. Watch the response of most Christians to disappointment and you will be convinced of the veracity of that statement. When testing comes, the baby Christians politicise the situation to get their way instead of asking what the will of the Lord is. They depend upon their own strength and their own resources instead of drawing upon the unseen power of the indwelling Spirit of God. They clamour and complain, elevating tension, and they exhibit rage because they want their way.

“Perfect” translates the Greek term *téleios*. “Complete” is the translation of the Greek word *holóκληρος*. “Both terms were applied to the *initiated*, the fully instructed, as opposed to novices in the ancient mysteries.”² In 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6, 7, the word *téleios* is used of the Christian who no longer needs rudimentary teaching.³ The word was used of grown men as contrasted with children. The word *holóκληρος* was used of an individual who was sound in every part of his life and body. It seems likely that James is urging his readers toward maturity. The maturity will achieve perfection at the return of the Saviour, but that does not excuse us from understanding that all that is taking place in our lives at the present time is preparing us for eternity.

The use of these two terms in conjunction with one another implies a gradual process as God works through our several trials to accomplish His purpose in each life. Trials are seldom limited to one great cataclysmic event, but they seem often to hammer our lives as becomes apparent when we survey the scope of past trials. God was not testing us to discover whether we were truly believers or not, but He was permitting trials to round out our preparation for glory, to remove the dross from our lives, with the ultimate goal of presenting us complete before His throne.

The testing God allows into each life is working a perfection and wholeness that is seen as maturity. Therefore, James is urging Christians not to run from trials, but to see that God is at work preparing us for eternity. If the prospect of perfection and completeness, maturity and wholeness, is somehow insufficient to encourage us to rejoice in the knowledge of God’s effective work, then we see that James applies the work to an immediate goal. He wants his readers to be lacking in nothing.

James’ overwhelming and unrelenting desire for Christian readers to be mature is witnessed through his forceful statements throughout the letter. Consider, for instance, his confrontational statement in just a few verses after our text. “[The person who asks for wisdom while doubting God] must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” [JAMES 1:7, 8].

Or, again, think of his stout challenge to those flirting with turning from the difficult tasks of staying true to the Word that is recorded in JAMES 4:4, 5. “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?’”

² H. D. M. Spence-Jones, **The Pulpit Commentary: James** (Logos Research Systems, Bellingham, WA 2004) pg. 1

³ “Among the mature [*téleios*] we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.”

Mature, wholesome believers are not easily stampeded. Too many wishing to be known as mature Christians prove to be as fickle as a gust of wind. I sometimes refer to them as gopher Christians. They spend their time in their subterranean cathedrals, poking their heads above ground from time-to-time to see which way the wind is blowing before they make their august pronouncements in stentorian tones, and again disappear into the caverns they feign call home. However, maturity is seen through steadfastness even in the face of disappointment. Maturity is not seen through hiding from life. Maturity is seen as the steadfast child of God faces life and deals with the trials that come.

Paul wrote the Romans, “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” [ROMANS 5:3, 4]. There will be no rejoicing if we do not recognise the reason for our suffering. Child of God, know that Christ is at work making you into a prize worthy of His Name. Peter expands on this encouragement Paul has provided when early in his first letter he writes, “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 honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ” [1 PETER 1:6, 7].

Jesus, speaking about the conclusion of the age, warned His disciples of difficult days. Jesus said, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives” [LUKE 21:10-19].

Notice especially the final assertion, “By your endurance you will gain your lives.” Saving faith does not renounce Jesus. It is manifest in steadfastness. Saving faith is not secured through steadfastness, but steadfastness reveals saving faith. There is a spectrum of maturity, to be certain. However, those who are truly born from above and into the Kingdom of God will reveal the new birth by lives that are changed. To cease to trust Jesus is never to have trusted Him. Frankly, those who use the Faith for their own ends, who owe allegiance to institutions even when it means tacit denial of the Master, are in danger of revealing more of their character and lack of the second birth than they might otherwise imagine.

Usually, I conclude each message with an appeal to outsiders to consider the Faith presented. Today, however, I want to encourage believers to grow up. We can go to church, or we can be the church. We can say that we meet on Sunday, or we can serve Christ each day. We can run each time the winds blow and threaten our little barque on the sea of life, or we can manfully face the challenges that come into our lives as individuals and as a congregation. As a servant of the Living Son of God, I call on the people of God to determine that they will so live that they are equipped to “count it all joy” when they “face trials of various kinds.”

The communities about us need to see Christians that face life boldly, living godly and holy lives. Will this be the church that encourages others? It will if we each determine that we will accept the instruction of the Word and so live. Will we be the people who transform our world through righteous lives that glorify the Saviour? The answer to that question lies within our own hearts.

Perhaps it is time for us to make a decision. I call on the people of God to accept the challenge to grow toward maturity. Come; accept the call of the Saviour to live boldly as we face life. May God give us courage and grace to fulfil His will, even as we seek His glory through our lives. Amen.