

Dealing with Trials

"Faith Works" Series, June 8 & 9, 2024 | James 1:1-4

Rob O'Neal, Senior Pastor

Vacation season is starting soon.

Some people will be heading out on trips.

Sometimes our family trips have involved long road trips.

Other times our family has gotten on airplanes and headed farther afield.

When our kids were growing up, we took many camping trips with dear friends.

All of these trips involved packing, and I loathe packing.

I loathe packing even for short trips. I keep a bag of toiletries ready to go, just so I don't have to think about it when I'm packing. Just throw it in the suitcase.

Packing for a camping trip is particularly complicated. You need everything—gear, clothes, games, food, and ways to prepare the food. Thankfully, my wife is good at planning for camping trips.

Because I loathe packing, I frequently put it off until the last minute. And that means that the morning of a big trip usually involves a mad dash. And frustration. Lots of frustration.

My packing problems led to bigger problems on one of our family camping trips.

Our drive wasn't that long, so we didn't have to leave early in the morning.

We were reasonably well prepared, with everything set out ahead of time.

But loading the cars didn't go well. We had SO MUCH STUFF. And our cars were small. Stuff wouldn't fit. Tammi and I both wound up driving our cars loaded down with gear.

We left late, and we were meeting friends at the campsite, and I don't like to be late.

It was hot. I was tired. Our boys were in a mood. Our boys were tweenagers at the time, and one of the boys chose that day to have a major meltdown on the way to the campsite.

When we arrived, both of our boys refused to help set up. They didn't say "no." They just worked at the pace of human snails and wandered off every time I turned my back.

If that was a test, I failed.

What would it look like to pass the test? It would have looked like showing grace under pressure. You know, when squeezed, the fruit of God's Holy Spirit should ooze out.

But I didn't ooze Holy Spirit that day. I didn't show grace under pressure. I got angry.

I don't think my friends had ever seen me angry. One friend walked up to me, saw what came to be called my "angry eyes," and turned and walked away. If that was a test, I failed.

Does our faith work when we face trials?

Does our faith equip us to face trials?

Does our faith carry us when we face trials?
Do WE have faith and act faithfully when we face trials?
HOW does our faith work when we face trials?
That's what James addresses in our Scripture reading today.

Trials are certain.

We meet the author of this book in James 1:1:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

James identifies himself as the sender. We're left with the question, "Which James?" He doesn't say anything other than "James." He assumed that the recipients would know him. When I send a business email, I use a signature line that includes my full name, my title, and the name of our church. That helps the person receiving the email know who sent it. But when I send something to my family, I just sign off "Rob." They know me. James assumes his readers know who he is. In the New Testament, there are only two Jameses so famous that EVERYONE knew who they were—James son of Zebedee (one of the original twelve disciples) and James the brother of Jesus. James son of Zebedee was executed before this letter was written, so that leaves us with James, the brother of Jesus, who was a key leader of the Church in Jerusalem. This letter was likely sent by James, the brother of Jesus. James, the half-brother of Jesus, was not always a follower of Jesus. In fact, he came to faith in Jesus after Jesus' resurrection. Now he was a leader of the Church! Now James identifies himself as a servant or slave of God. He is also a servant of his brother, Jesus, and he professes that Jesus is Messiah or Christ and that he is Lord and in charge. That changes everything that follows.

James wrote to "the twelve tribes of the Dispersion."

Israel was originally composed of twelve tribes. During years of disobedience, the tribes had been scattered across the world. They were dispersed. The word is the "Diaspora." Like the twelve tribes, the Christians of the first century were scattered because of persecution. James is likely writing to largely Christian Jews who had been in Jerusalem and Judea, who had scattered across the ancient world.

In James 1:2 we discover that these scattered Christian Jews faced trials:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds ...

James started this letter by addressing the trials that these Christian Jews were facing. Many of them were exiles—away from their homeland and communities—because of their faith. Their lives were filled with difficulty. Many of them were poor. Frequently, their poverty was the result of persecution because of their faith. These scattered Christian Jews faced trials.

What does James mean by “trials”?

This is a trial and not a temptation, even though the Greek word can mean either.

God does not tempt us, and God allows these trials to come into our lives.

These trials are more like tests in that they show and improve our faith.

James tells his readers that they will face trials.

Israel is facing trials right now.

Israel was attacked on October 7 by a terrorist organization dedicated to its destruction.

Hamas killed civilians in brutal fashion and took over 240 hostages back to the Gaza Strip.

Hezbollah, an armed terrorist group in Lebanon backed by Iran, has launched attack after attack on Israel from the north.

Israel declared war and invaded Gaza, seeking to destroy Hamas.

As the war has continued, international pressure has mounted on Israel to stop the war because of the casualties and damage in the Gaza Strip.

Across the world and in the United States there have been protests.

Protestors shout things like “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

That chant implies the destruction of Israel and the wiping out of the Jews.

Fresh waves of protest, hatred, and violence have been directed even at Jews here in the U.S.

Can you imagine hearing that directed at you? Can you imagine suffering through a Holocaust less than century ago and now hearing that chant again?

Trials come in all sizes. Some are as small as the inconvenience of packing. Some are as big as facing genocide.

James points out that trials are certain.

Notice what James says in verse 2. He says “... when you meet trials ...”

Notice what James didn't say. He didn't say “... if you meet trials ...”

We will meet trials. We will be tested. Trials are certain, but what value are they? And what will we do?

Those questions remain to be answered.

Testing produces endurance.

Testing is to face scrutiny.

It's important for us to remember that we stand before God.

We stand before God at the end of life and at the end of history.

James makes this explicit later in **James 1:12**:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

But what's revealed when we stand before God for judgment is what we've done all along the way.

Paul addresses this in **1 Corinthians 3:13**:

... each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

Testing reveals what we have done and to see who we are.

Testing yields results as we are reminded in James 1:3:

... for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

James is letting us know that what is being tested is our faith.

But having our faith tested produces something.

Testing yields results now.

Paul writes about this in **Romans 5:3-5**:

Not only that, but 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.

Testing yields the result of character right now.

Testing also yields eternal results.

1 Peter 1:6-7 says:

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.

Tests happen now. Tests reveal the quality of our faith, but they also build our faith.

That faith brings honor and glory to God and stands with value in eternity.

Faith that is tested and proven is faith that will matter when we stand before God.

Testing produces endurance.

The word that is translated here as endurance can also be translated as steadfastness.

The word literally means to be under something and yet to remain. Testing produces the strength of faith in us such that we can be put under a weight and yet remain standing.

Think of the weightlift known as the "squat."

There is nothing pretty about the "squat" lift.

But the squat is a fantastic, full-body lift. It activates loads of muscles.

You put the weighted bar on your shoulders and squat down under the weights.

Then you push back up.

You get under a weight and yet remain. You stand.

Testing produces that kind of endurance.

We come under the weight of testing and trial. We bear up. We remain through the help of the Holy Spirit. And we are stronger for it. Our faith is stronger for it.

Testing produces endurance, perseverance, and steadfastness. That's what James is saying.

Endurance perfects our faith.

James 1:4 says that steadfastness or endurance must do its "perfect" work:

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

There's a word play in Greek here that we can't see easily in English.

The New American Standard Bible captures the word play. **James 1:4 (NASB-U)** says:

And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Endurance has "perfect" work to do.

Endurance produces a "perfect" faith.

James 1:4 says that endurance does its "perfect" work so that we may be perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

It's not saying that we ourselves are perfect. It's closer to saying that our faith is perfect.

To say that endurance produces "perfect" faith doesn't mean that it is unstained.

James is not saying that we become morally perfect and sinless.

That's a different kind of perfect, and that perfection belongs only to God.

To say that endurance produces "perfect" faith means that we are lacking in nothing.

James piles on three parallel terms. Endurance leaves our faith perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

James doesn't pile on those three terms to ADD to one another as if he were saying that endurance produces perfect faith, and complete faith (which is better than perfect), and faith that lacks nothing (which is different from perfect and complete faith).

Instead, these three terms explain and clarify one another.

Endurance gives us a faith that is perfect. As in complete. As in lacking nothing.

Endurance gives us faith that is everything faith is supposed to be. It's everything we need.

Endurance gives us that which means that we are lacking nothing that we need for today or eternity. Instead, we have everything we need for today and for eternity.

It's like the trunk is packed for the camping trip and we didn't leave anything behind.

Have you ever pulled away from your home, headed out on vacation after you've packed, only to realize fifteen minutes into the trip that you forgot something? You turn around.

Have you ever gotten to a campsite—miles into the woods—only to realize that you didn't put the cooler in the back? You're missing something you need! There's nothing you can do.

This is the opposite of that.

James is saying that testing gives us endurance, perseverance, and steadfastness, which produce a perfect faith that is like a car packed with absolutely everything you need for the great adventure God has placed you on through life.

There is value in endurance. Endurance perfects our faith.

Count it all joy when YOU face trials.

James tells us to “count it.”

We come now back to where we started.

In **James 1:2** we read,

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds ...

Some translations say “consider.” James is implying that we have a decision to make.

Trials of various kinds are coming our way.

We have a decision to make about those trials. We get to decide how we look at them. It’s our choice. In that, James is incredibly and divinely insightful.

We all face trials, and we all make decisions about how we view those trials.

We can look at the trials and tests we face in life as random, chaotic events. We can look at them as destructive, harmful evil coming at us. Or we can look at them as tests with purpose.

James reminds us that we have a decision to make, a calculation to go through.

“Count it.” “Consider it.” You get to make up your mind how you see it.

James tells us to “count it ALL joy.”

James isn’t saying that everything we face is easy or good.

But as we make decisions about how to count or consider what we see, James tells us that we have a decision to make about how we count, number, or consider those events.

James is telling us to be a little bit like color-blind people counting marbles or pebbles.

One of the most common forms of color-blindness is red-green color blindness. People with it have a difficulty differentiating between red and green.

If you have red-green color blindness, then you are looking at a slide filled with marbles.

If you don’t have red-green color blindness, then you can easily see the number “7”.

In a sense, James is telling us to exercise a certain kind of color blindness.

He’s saying that if we could think of the trials and tests in our lives as being like the marbles or pebbles in this picture, then we should look at them all as the same—opportunities for God to shape our character, to build our faith, to show his goodness, and to prepare us for eternity. We should count them ALL as joy.

James isn’t telling us to “count it all joy” for the sake of the trials themselves.

To do so would be dishonest. We can’t honestly say that some of the trials we face in life are good. If by good you mean easy. Or if by good you mean things we want to go through.

There are chapters of my life that have been difficult. And scary.

But, as James reminds me, I can count even those chapters as joy.

Not because I had fun. But because of the outcome.

Jesus is the example here. Jesus was clear that he did not want to go to the cross. It wasn't going to be easy. It wasn't going to be fun. But the end was worth it. **Hebrews 12:2** tells us to look 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.

Jesus saw that the end of HIS trials was worth the journey.

The end of OUR trials is worth the journey.

Because the end of OUR trials is steadfast faith now and eternity with Jesus face to face.

That's joy. Count it all joy!

James reorients our entire thinking about the highest goals and aspirations in our lives.

James is clear that we are not to live for ourselves, for our own ends, or for our own comfort.

Instead, we live for Jesus and his purposes in our lives here and now.

And we live for eternity with him instead of apart from him.

Trials are certain. Testing produces endurance. Endurance perfects our faith now and forever.

Count it all joy.

James is right. Faith works.