

**Introduction**

Welcome back to those of you who are joining us after the Christmas break, and welcome to all our visitors and regular members. For those of you who do not know me, I am a Chemistry faculty member at VT and one of the elders of BCF.

This is the second message in a series on the book of James. James is a very practical down-to-earth book, and so the message series is titled “Faith that Works”.

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The practicality of James is clear in the first verses of the book, where after a few words of greeting James jumps right in with teaching on dealing with trials and temptations.

Today’s passage is James 1:4-8, but it is important to read this in context, so we will read the first 8 verses

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1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. 6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

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Prayer

In preparing this message I was greatly helped by a message on these verses by Alistair Begg, and he used the paraphrase by J.B. Phillips to shed light on this passage. For those of you who have not heard of him, J.B. Phillips was a Church of England pastor in London in the 1930’s and 1940’s, and he translated the New Testament for his youth group, who did not understand the KJV. Interestingly he was not from an evangelical background, but he found the experience of translating the New Testament letters to be life-changing. He wrote in his memoir “Ring of Truth; a Translator’s Testimony, pp 26-27”

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“Previously, although I had known something of the “comfort of the Scriptures” and had never thought them to be false, I must have been insulated from their reality simply because they were known as “scripture”. Now I was compelled to come to the closest possible terms with this writing and I was enormously impressed, and still am. On the one hand these letters were written over quite a period of years, but there is not the slightest discernible diminution of faith. And on the other hand it was borne in upon me with irresistible force that these letters could never have been written at all if there had been no Jesus Christ, no crucifixion and no resurrection. The more I thought about it, the more unthinkable it became that any of this new courageous, joyful life could have originated in any kind of concocted story or wishful thinking. There had been a stupendous event, and from that was flowing all this strength and utter conviction.”

Here is how he translated our passage

**James 1:1-8**

1 James, servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, sends greetings to the twelve dispersed tribes.

<sup>2-8</sup> When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character with the right sort of independence. And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem he has only to ask God—who gives generously to all men without making them feel foolish or guilty—and he may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given him. But he must ask in sincere faith without secret doubts as to whether he really wants God’s help or not. The man who trusts

God, but with inward reservations, is like a wave of the sea, carried forward by the wind one moment and driven back the next. That sort of man cannot hope to receive anything from God, and the life of a man of divided loyalty will reveal instability at every turn.

J. B. Phillips

Our aim this morning is to understand what God is teaching us through His word and then to apply this to our lives. We will do this by asking five questions.

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### **1. What will we face?**

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#### **a. Trials of many kinds**

This question is answered in verses 1-4, which is the passage Chris Faith preached on last week, who taught us that trials are part of life, and especially the Christian life. He told us trials are part of growing up, so that it is not *if*, but *when* we will encounter trials, that our faith is tested by fire, and that the trials we endure produce endurance.

So yes, we all are facing trials of various kinds or we will face them in the future. Some of the trials may be physical, such as cancer or other life-threatening diseases, or with physical disabilities. Other trials are mental, such as depression; J. B. Phillips struggled with depression, as did Winston Churchill. Others are financial, including the pain of job loss. Still others are emotional, such as the loss of a loved one, or a concern for children who are angry and rebellious, or maybe a boss who yells at you and harasses you. And let us not forget that these trials must seem trivial to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are living in countries like Northern Nigeria, China, the mainly Moslem countries of the Middle East, and other countries where Christians are persecuted in various ways, including being killed. Jesus warned of this level of persecution when he told his disciples

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Matt 10:17-22

17 "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. 18 On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. 19 But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, 20 for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. 22 All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

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#### **b. Pure joy**

But James also tells us that we should count it as "pure joy" when we face these trials, because God will use them to refine us to maturity as Christian believers. So as Chris reminded us, the joy is not in the trial itself, but in knowing that God is using it for our good.

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Over 35 years ago my wife Beverly and I were in Johannesburg, South Africa, where I was attending a conference, and we visited a gold mine. One of the demonstrations was of the process of gold refining. The man giving the demonstration took a huge gold ingot that must have been worth about \$500,000 at today's prices and put it into a furnace to melt it. When it came out it had a very slight scum on the surface, which he removed with a tool. He explained that every time he did this demonstration the gold got a little purer, until it got too pure for the demonstration and had to be replaced with a less pure ingot.

It is like this with us; God uses our trials, as long as we take them as coming from Him, to refine us, and I can testify to this. Probably the most severe trial I have faced is when I was denied tenure at my first university position in the US, at a time when university chemistry jobs were as scarce as hen's teeth. In His grace, the Lord opened up a position at Virginia Tech a year after I got the bad news, and I look back on that experience as a wonderful demonstration of God's love for me.

**Sidebar**

As a sidebar, this teaching from James and our Lord and many other scriptures reminds us that the so-called prosperity gospel is wrong. A very basic definition of the prosperity gospel can be described as this: God's plan is for you to live your best life now. Health, wealth, and happiness are guaranteed on Earth for all who follow Jesus. Heaven is simply the eternal extension of your temporal blessings. In addition, since these ministries teach that it is always God's will for you to be rich and healthy, then it must follow that if you are not rich and healthy it is because of sin in your life. This teaching may sell well in the USA, with megachurches and TV ministries led by megapastors with megasalaries living in megamansions, it does not agree with our Lord's teaching or with the experience of millions of Christians who are suffering for their faith. Paul suffered enormously for his faith; was this because of his sin? I don't think so!! So be careful what you watch on TV, and avoid these teachings like the plague!

But this then leads on to the \$1000 question, which is

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## **2. What do we need to face these trials?**

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The simple answer is wisdom. Verse 5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." This however is not an isolated verse promising wisdom to all, even though it has been misused that way. I remember with embarrassment giving my testimony as a teenager, when I described how I had prayed for wisdom based on James 1:5 and had then passed an important exam. But wisdom is not the same as knowledge, and knowledge is not the same as information, although these are often confused. The poet T. S. Eliot famously said in his poem "The Rock"

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

But the wisdom described here is not this kind of wisdom. If you want an example of the world's wisdom, look at America's universities, which have largely abandoned the concept of truth and embraced post-modern relativism. If that is too abstract, consider the words of Bertrand Russell, the brilliant atheistic philosopher of the last century, who wrote in his book "A Free Man's Worship"

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"That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the débris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. *Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.*"

Or hear human wisdom described by the apostle Paul:

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1 Cor 1:20-25

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 *but we preach Christ crucified*: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

So what is this wisdom that we are to ask for?

Listen again to the Phillips translation

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“When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character with the right sort of independence. *And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem he has only to ask God—who gives generously to all men without making them feel foolish or guilty—and he may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given him.*”

In other words, the wisdom that is promised here is the wisdom to view our trials as God’s testing of us to enable us to grow to maturity. It is the ability to see God’s hand in our lives as the hand of a loving father who wants the best for us.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount described the wise man and the foolish man. The wise man built his house on a firm foundation, and it withstood the rains and the floods. The foolish man built his house on sand, and it was washed away in the rains and floods. And then comes the punch line (Matt 7:24, 26)

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man. So wisdom is the *right behavior* which accompanies *right belief*, as we will learn in the second chapter of James.

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### **3. What should we do?**

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We should ask for wisdom

*And if, in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem he has only to ask God—who gives generously to all men without making them feel foolish or guilty—and he may be quite sure that the necessary wisdom will be given him.*”

This is very simple; we simply need to ask God for the wisdom to see our trials as being from His hand and to count them as “pure joy”, knowing that they are for our good.

And this is difficult; it is not our natural inclination to shout for joy when trials hit; we are more likely to respond “why me?”

Pastor and writer Warren Wiersbe (Be Mature [Victor Books], p. 29) tells about a secretary of his who was going through difficult trials. She had had a stroke, her husband had gone blind, and then he had to be taken to the hospital where, as far as they knew, he would die. Wiersbe saw this woman in church one Sunday and assured her that he was praying for her.

She startled him by asking, “What are you asking God to do?” He replied, “I’m asking God to help you and strengthen you.” “I appreciate that,” she said, “but pray about one more thing. Pray that I’ll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!” Wiersbe observed, “She knew the meaning of James 1:5.”

And closer to home, David Lyons, a former BCFer who now leads the International ministry of the Navigators, wrote the book “Don’t waste the pain” with his sister Linda as they dealt with the death of David’s 12-year old son from cancer and his sister Linda’s battle with incurable ovarian cancer. They show that faith and spiritual growth can come out of brokenness, pain, and grief.

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### **4. Who should we ask?**

Well, you say, we have already answered that one! Doesn’t James say that “*he has only to ask God?* And of course that is absolutely true; he is the only one who can give us the wisdom that we need. But there is more to say. In the first place, God is

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#### **A generous God**

because James tells us that God is a “God—who gives generously to all men without making them feel foolish or guilty—“. In other words, God is not like us. He does not dole out His favors carefully and stingily, making sure that no one gets more than his or her fair share. He is not like parents who can get tired of their children asking for something again and again. He is a God of infinite and beautiful generosity. He made seas and mountains and rivers. He made 750,000 species of insects, 400,000 species of flowers, 200,000 species of

edible plants, 10,000 species of birds, and stars too numerous to count. Every good thing a person (Christian or non-Christian) enjoys in life is a gift from God.

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**A suffering God**

This is the most amazing thing of all. The God who gives us wisdom for our trials, and does so generously, is also a God who has suffered for us. God in Christ stretched out his arms to us on the cross, and showed his love for us as he died in agony and desolation, bearing our sins in his body on the tree. But in God's grace, it shows us that death itself is not the end. "*Why have you forsaken me?*" gives way to "*It is finished*" which gives way to "*He has risen.*" And so in our trials, we can be assured that however much we suffer, God in Christ has been there before us and has suffered so much more than we are suffering, and is now with us through his Spirit in our suffering. We can sing, as we did a few minutes ago

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I turn to Wisdom not my own  
For every battle You have known  
My confidence will rest in You  
Your love endures Your ways are good

When I am weary with the cost  
I see the triumph of the cross  
So in its shadow I shall run  
Till He completes the work begun

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**5. How should we ask?**

We must ask sincerely, in faith that God will answer us.

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James 1:6-8

"But he must ask in sincere faith without secret doubts as to whether he really wants God's help or not. The man who trusts God, but with inward reservations, is like a wave of the sea, carried forward by the wind one moment and driven back the next. That sort of man cannot hope to receive anything from God, and the life of a man of divided loyalty will reveal instability at every turn."

This is where the rubber meets the road! The key question is "Do we really want God to give us the wisdom to grow from our trials, or do we just want an end to the trials?" Now don't misunderstand me here. There is nothing wrong in praying for relief from our suffering; for healing from sickness, for example. In fact in chapter 5 James is going to tell us how to pray for the sick. But we also know that some trials have to be endured, and that God allows them into our lives to develop perseverance and maturity.

The apostle Paul knew what it was to pray in faith for healing and not to receive the answer he wanted:

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2 Cor 12:7-9

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Are we willing to hear God's wisdom for these sorts of situations and obey it, like Paul, or do we want to find out what it is and then decide to obey it if it suits our fancy? As Phillips puts it, are we willing to pray "without secret doubts as to whether we really want God's help or not."

Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian theologians of the early church, did not become a Christian until he was about 30 years old. In his youth he prayed "O Lord, give me chastity, but do not give it yet", and so he is an example of the sort of man that James says "cannot hope to receive anything from God, and the life of a man of divided loyalty will reveal instability at every turn."

**Conclusion**

So when we face trials, as many of us are doing now and all of us will do in the future, let us remember that we have a great and generous God who delights to hear our prayers, and who also suffered for us in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. As we pray to Him He will either remove the trial or He will give us the wisdom and the grace to endure the trial and to grow in faith and in maturity. And it is because of this that we can sing

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Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art  
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word  
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord  
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son  
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one

May the Lord grant us the grace to seek His wisdom with undivided hearts, willing to follow Him at all times and in all places.

Amen

“Oh, God, to know you is life. To serve You is freedom. To praise you is the soul's joy and delight. Guard me with the power of Your grace here and in all places. Now and at all times, forever. Amen.”