

# The Best of Times; The Worst of Times

*Epistle of James*  
By Ty Blackburn

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**Providence Church**  
2146 Buford Hwy  
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

**Website:** [www.providenceduluth.org](http://www.providenceduluth.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch](http://www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch)

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the first chapter of James, James 1. This morning we'll be looking at verses 9 to 11. James 1:9-11. I'm beginning to just have a new appreciation for just the beauty of God's word and James in particular, this epistle, how practical he is. His heart beats for practical Christian living. He wants us to learn how to live out what we believe and this morning we're going to be looking, verses 9 to 11, I think it's going to take us two weeks to work through these three verses and so we're really going to focus on verse 9 this morning, but the verses 9 to 11, really, I have one title for the message. So part 1, part 2 and the title is "The Best of Times and The Worst of Times." As I mentioned, James is dealing with practical Christian living and, in a sense, what he's doing in verses 9 to 11, I think we'll see, is he's helping us to learn how to live in the best of times and in the worst of times. When we find that life is hard and difficult, when we think that we are in the worst of times, we can find out that in reality we're in the best of times if we see it biblically, if we apply wisdom. Other times when we think we're in the best of times, it has the potential to be the worst of times and we're going to see that. This is what James deals with in these three verses. He wants us to learn how to live the Christian life. How do you deal with difficult times? How do you respond to wonderful times? How do you deal with the blessings? How do you deal with the challenges?

So let me read God's word. I want to begin reading at verse 1 to get the context and the feel for what's happening. James 1:1,

1 James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. 2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. 5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6 But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8 being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. 9 But the brother of humble

circumstances is to glory in his high position; 10 and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. 11 For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

Let's pray together.

*Father, we thank you for the preciousness of your word, the perfection of it, the sufficiency of it. Thank you that every passage is given so that the man of God may be equipped, thoroughly furnished for every good work. We pray this morning that your Spirit might apply this passage to all of our hearts that we might repent and believe more fully in our glorious Savior and that we might be made more like him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. It was the age of belief, it was the age incredulity. It was the spring of hope and the winter of despair." That's the way Charles Dickens begins his famous book, "A Tale of Two Cities," and what he's apparently doing there is talking about that for some it was the best of time, for others it was the worst of times and that just depending on how you looked at it and what your circumstances were, you could see that, and so it was paradoxically the best of times and the worst of times. I think we're going to see even more wondrously and more miraculously and more mysteriously that for the Christian to have the best of times and the worst of times at the same time is much more a wonderful opportunity and reality; that when we find ourselves in the most difficult circumstances, what James is telling us is to boast, to glory, to exalt because you are in the best times. You think you're in the low point of your life but in reality if you could see it rightly, you are at a mountaintop and he's going to turn around and say, "And for those of you brothers who find yourself rich, that is, blessed, that is apparently having the best of times, those times have the potential to be the very worst because you may fix your hope on the riches and it may devastate you spiritually."

So the best of times and the worst of times and the question really is how do we live, how then should we live when we find ourselves in the varying circumstances of life? Isn't it amazing how quickly you can go from worst to first or from first to worst? I remember still with great joy those of you who did not live in Atlanta before 1991, many of you have moved into Atlanta and we welcome you and we're glad you're here, those of us who were born here, like me, we lived with the Atlanta Braves all through the lean ugly years. I can remember when we actually made it to the World Series for the first time in 1991, Lewis Grizzard, a noted columnist here in Atlanta, wrote a funny humorous piece about the Braves. And if you remember, those of you that are old enough to remember that the Braves, we were terrible but we had the misfortune of being...it was actually a blessing I think in reality, but we sort of had this it was the best of times and the worst of times. We had Ted Turner as our owner and he was willing to spend money for the team, which was good, but he was also willing to publicize the Braves all over the country. The Super Station, remember that? TBS? So that everybody all over America watched the

Braves and how terrible they were and Lewis Grizzard made the joke about it in his article. He said, "When Turner made," and he called them America's team. I don't think America wanted that team. And he said, "You know, it's kind of like when you have an alcoholic uncle, you'd rather not make that known to everybody around." But here Ted Turner is taking them out and making it known.

Well, when we went from worst to first in 1991, we were in last place, the worst team in the National League in 1990, and we won the National League Pennant and went to the World Series in 1991. That's the true worst to first and we lost the World Series 4-3. So anyway. That was not in the message at all, just couldn't help bring that out. So it wasn't quite worst to first but it was pretty close.

But it's amazing how you can be in the worst of times and so quickly you can be in the best of times, or you can be in the best of times and suddenly find yourself with life falling apart around you. James is concerned to show us how to live no matter where we find ourselves. He's writing as a pastor to these people that he cares deeply about. Remember I mentioned that James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, the half-brother of our Lord, the pastor, essentially the lead pastor in the church of Jerusalem. He had a heart for the Jewish believers. Remember so many had come to Christ at Pentecost, 3,000 in a single day? Many of those were still in Jerusalem under his ministry. Many of them, of course, went back home to their homes. They were there for Passover. But he was shepherding the people of God, these Jewish believers, and then they experienced a period of persecution, they were dispersed, and as we saw in verse 1, he's writing to the 12 tribes who are dispersed abroad. That's kind of code word for he's writing to Jewish believers, the true Israel. The 12 tribes, the messianic allusion to the time when the Messiah brings back together the 12 tribes.

He's writing to these Jewish Christians who are finding their lives to be very difficult. They've been dispersed abroad. Many of them are experiencing poverty. Many of them have experienced persecution or will experience more persecution. You see, it was very tough to be a Christian in the first century. It was very tough to be a Jewish Christian in the first century, perhaps even more difficult to be a Jewish believer because of the antipathy of the Jewish unbelievers. One of the things we see happening in Acts as you read through the book of Acts and the Gospel makes its way from Jerusalem to Rome, the ministries of Peter and Paul. When we see Paul take his first missionary journey, we see him, though he's going to the Gentiles, every city he goes to, he goes first to the Jews. He goes to the synagogue and he will preach the Gospel in the synagogue and he will stay there until they throw him out, and usually there are some of the Jews in the synagogue who become believers but usually the majority, the picture we get is the majority of Jews in the synagogue do not believe and then begin persecuting Paul and the new believers. In fact, you'll see this as you read through Acts. He'll preach in Iconium and he preaches until they really are ready to persecute him, to attack him, and he slips away to Lystra and the Jews from Iconium come to Lystra to continue to pursue Paul. It happens again and again like this.

They are chasing down the believers, the believing Jews and so James is writing to Jewish believers and as the Gospel went forth, it initially made great impact among the Jews. Those 3,000 that were saved were Jews in Jerusalem for Pentecost, but as time went on, more and more the Jews began to harden to the Gospel and the church became more and more a Gentile body. And so for those Jewish believers, they were uniquely in a position of vulnerability and so James writes with his shepherd's heart to encourage these believers to persevere. He understands they are experiencing difficulty. That's why the first thing out of the gate in his letter is he says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." And I think, really, verses 2 to 17 are about bearing up in difficulty and trials.

I mean, the key word in this section is the word "trial." It's there in verse 2. It's again found in verse 12, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial." And it is found five times in verses 13 and 14 but it's translated, same Greek word that's translated "trial" in verse 2 and verse 12 is translated "tempt or temptation" in verses 13 and 14. So you see together that word occurs seven times between verse 2 and verse 14. Testing is the idea. Trial. The trial of your faith. James is concerned to help these believers deal with the trials that come to test their faith. He's dealing with people who are increasingly unpopular, many of whom have had their families reject them, their friends. They've been forced to flee to other places. They are not in a position of social privilege. They are on the outside looking in.

So James's words to those Jewish believers in the first century I think are especially relevant to us. To those who truly love Jesus Christ today and who want to live according to his word, where do we find ourselves today? Not yet where they are but certainly getting nearer and nearer to that kind of experience, isn't it? The culture is increasing antipathy toward the things that we love. The culture increasing in its opposition to the Gospel. And so we find ourselves moving from more of maybe where Christianity had a welcome haven in America to now finding that we are feeling more and more like the outsider and like the enemy. But we have a word here for us. How do we deal with ourselves? How do we deal with when we find ourselves in difficult times? Well, James has encouragement for us. He's basically going to tell us that when we find ourselves in more and more difficulty, the reason that we could count it pure joy is because he said in verse 2 through 4, it's producing godly character and I think here in verse 9 he's picking up again on that same theme: what happens when we find ourselves in lowly circumstances? Brought low? We have the opportunity to see that in reality God is doing something wonderful.

I want us to consider this passage under three points and the first is that we're going to look at the best of times, the worst of times, how do you deal this week with the worst of times? That's the question. How do you deal with bad difficult circumstances? I think this passage calls us to do three things and the first is to deal with difficult times in a godly way, first of all, you must face your circumstances honestly. Face your circumstances honestly. He's going to teach us that when you're at the low point, you're actually at the high point, but James is not a Christian Scientist. You know that word has two meanings, right? A believer who is a scientist is a Christian scientist but you also have this heretical

godless cult named Christian Science which teaches that everything is basically a mindset; that reality is something you make in your own mind. So no matter what your circumstance is, if you just believe something different, you make that happen. They call it Christian because they try to use the Bible and twist and distort the Bible. I think that was Mary Baker Eddy, maybe, that was the founder of this. But anyway, it is a lie from the pit of hell. That's to make yourself God; that you think it and it comes to pass; that you speak it and it comes to pass. No. There is one that does that.

So he's not saying that when you're at the low point just pretend you're at the high point, just say you're at the high point, just claim you're at the high point. No, not at all. He's saying that in reality when you take everything into account you are at the high point. But to understand that, first of all, though, you have to face your circumstances honestly. Our first point: face your circumstances honestly. He says, "But the brother of humble circumstances." He phrases "humble circumstances, of humble circumstances." In the Greek, the adjective means "lowly." The lowly is a person who has been brought low. He doesn't use a word for poor. He could have used a word for poor that he uses a lot in chapter 2. He's talking about material blessings, yes, but he's not only talking about material blessings. That's why he uses this word "lowliness or humility." It's a broader word and it pictures one who has been brought low, one who has no longer found himself on a high point but he's been brought low in his life. As he looks at the circumstances of his life, he's been brought low. So for us, we have to face our circumstances honestly. We need to face the fact that when you've been brought low, face that. Don't pretend that you haven't.

You could be brought low in a number of ways. I mentioned that he is apparently making some application to financial circumstances so you can be brought low materially. This is the first sub point. Three sub points basically. You can be brought low three different ways. I mean, there are more ways than this but I'm just picking three. You can find yourself brought low materially, that is that you can find yourself suddenly with no money, or you can find yourself that you were born that way and you never have any money. You're brought low materially. The idea is that other people have more and relatively speaking you are low materially so that some are tempted to look down upon you, despise you. Others, maybe they have compassion on you or even pity you. You can find yourself in circumstances like that and God is sovereign over our financial well-being and sometimes he allows us to experience that being brought low, and some of us he's called to live a life of that. We're going to see that he's also called others in the body, though less in general, to a life of wealth, and certainly in America we tend to be on the wealthy side of history. So next week's message is going to apply to us directly too.

But to be materially brought low and when that happens, it's okay to be honest about it. Don't pretend, like I said last week, the teaching that you pull out your wallet and you just tell it that you have money and you believe it. No, that's foolishness. But you not only can be brought low materially, secondly, second sub point under this first point: face your circumstances honestly. How can you be brought low? First of all materially. Second sub point, physically. You can find yourself brought low physically, that is, you can be born with disabilities that bring you low relative to other people.

Remember what God said to Moses when Moses said, basically Moses said, didn't sound like Isaiah, remember Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me." Moses, someone who wrote a book, "Here am I. Send Aaron." He didn't think he could go. Why? Because he had a speech impediment. "I don't speak well, Lord. You must have made a mistake." God had told him, "Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go." Moses said, "Wait a minute, I don't speak well." Do you remember what God said to him? "Who made the deaf, the dumb and the blind? Did not I, the Lord? Do you not think I know how I made you?"

Well, the Lord sovereignly makes some of us to have more challenges than others, even from birth. Then we have circumstances that happen that can bring us low physically: injuries, illnesses. We can find ourselves brought very low physically. When you find yourself in those circumstances, what are you to do? That's the question here. Think about the challenges of ongoing pain and some of you know what it's like to live with persistent pain. When you find yourself in that, you are relatively speaking, you're being brought low by the Lord. You know, you go to a doctor, you go to a pain specialist, right? Take appropriate pain medication but sometimes it doesn't work. When that happens, James is saying when you find yourself and you are a brother of humble circumstances, a brother of lowly circumstances, what are you to do?

So you can be brought low materially, you can be brought low physically, but to continue to face our circumstances honestly. You can also be brought low relationally. You can be brought low by relationships with other people and your standing in relation to other people. So many ways this could happen. We can find ourselves suddenly brought low. Maybe you wanted that promotion and you didn't get it and you deserve it and you know you deserved it, but it just didn't happen. You're brought low. Or maybe you've been let go, when you think you should have been elevated, actually removed from the company.

Beyond that, think about what it is just in living life. Sometimes it's our own sin but a lot of times it's the fact that we love Christ, we find ourselves rejected by people. Think about your relationships with your friends, friends that used to be close to you but now are not; who when they look at you, no longer esteem you but there seems to be a sense in which they look down upon you. What's happened? You've been brought low because you love Jesus.

Your family can find it that way. Those, flesh and blood, the bonds of family are so strong and yet the bond spiritually is deeper and so when someone loves Christ, very often they find themselves rejected by those they love. You can be brought low relationally in that way. You can be brought low in profound ways in the loss of loved ones: the death of a spouse; the death of a child; or the rejection, perhaps more painful than even death is to be rejected in a decisive way by a spouse; rebellion of children.

You can find yourself brought low in a number of ways to where you feel on the verge of despair and when you find yourself in those lowly circumstances, brought low, what are you to do? Well, the first thing is don't pretend that you've not been brought low. Face the reality. Don't try to paint and airbrush reality. Materially things are what they are.

Physically things are what they are. Relationally, things are what they are. You can try your best to address them but face them honestly. But how does the worst of times become the best of times? Secondly, the second major point: after you face your circumstances honestly, our first point, secondly, interpret your circumstances biblically. Interpret your circumstances biblically.

He says, "But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position." Here the prepositional phrase, in his high position. The brother of lowliness who's been brought low is to glory, or to boast, or to take pride in, or to rejoice in, his high position. The reality the Scripture says is that you're not in a low position. You think you are. And here's the paradox of the Christian life, the difference between the seen and the unseen. The passage Jess read earlier from 2 Corinthians 4 when Paul talks about the suffering that he's undergoing, he says we have this treasure in earthen vessels, remember? The treasure is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ; the fact that we know the living God. We have this treasure in earthen vessels and he says then we're beaten down by life. We're persecuted but we're not despairing. Knocked down but we keep getting up, basically. Always bearing in our body the death of Christ that the life of Christ might be also made known in our body. Then he says though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day, and that we look at the things not which are temporal but the things which are eternal. The things which are temporal are seen, the things which are eternal are unseen. What you and I, our natural inclination is to look only or mostly at the things which are seen.

So when we look at our circumstances, it's not that we don't pay attention at all. We should take stock of our temporal circumstances, but that's only half of the picture and it's really the lesser half of the picture. To interpret your circumstances biblically, we must look at what's unseen, what God says about his word, what God says about our circumstances in his word. He says that when you're brought low, you're really brought high if you respond with wisdom to his word.

There are four ways that this is true. Being brought low actually blesses me and makes me higher in four ways, four sub points here under number 2: interpret your circumstances biblically. How is it that you're at a height when you find yourself brought low? First, being brought low brings me nearer to God. This is something that's just clear in the Scriptures.

Look with me at chapter 4 here of James, James 4:6, "But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, 'God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" God resists the proud but he gives grace to the humble. The humble, that word "humble" is the word "lowly," the same Greek word that we find, humble circumstances, in chapter 1 and verse 9. So, you see, God resists those who exalt themselves. He draws near to those who are low.

One of my favorite verses is Isaiah 57:15, and Isaiah, remember Isaiah, his call to ministry. I mentioned earlier, "Here am I. Send me." Remember he didn't say, "Here am I. Send Aaron." He said, "Here am I. Send me." Remember what happened in his calling

that he records in Isaiah 6 when he goes to the temple one day, like every other time he'd gone to the temple expecting just to worship the Lord, offer his sacrifice, do what he's called to do? But on this particular day he sees the Lord. God opens his eyes and he sees the train of the robe of Yahweh filling the temple. The foundations, the thresholds are shaken. The temple fills with smoke. And he can see all of this happening. The invisible world becomes visible to him and in that moment of seeing the greatness of God, he sees the angels crying out to one another, the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." They had six wings: with two wings they flew; with two wings they covered their feet; and with two wings they covered their faces. These seraphim greater by far than we, are unable to look upon the Lord because of his great holiness and Isaiah then says, "Woe is me! I'm a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips!" He wasn't lamenting the fact that he had a tendency to say off-color words, what he was saying is, "I have spoken wrongly about God in such an unbelievable way. I have spoken of him in such small ways, a great and holy God, that my lips have been completely unclean. Everything I've said. And I live among a people who say foolish things about this great King." And then the Lord says, "Who will go for us?" And Isaiah says, "Here am I. Send me."

Isaiah's whole ministry and you read his book, was marked by that vision of God, the greatness of God, the exalted, transcendence of God, the righteousness and purity of God. For Isaiah, the Lord is the holy one of Israel. Over and over, over 40 times he uses that phrase, "the Holy One." In Isaiah 57:15, and "holy" means "transcendent; separate; far above us; distant from us." In Isaiah 57:15, he says this, "thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place.'" That part is all expected there. "Thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.'" The God of glory who is transcendent far above our ability to conceive is a God who draws near to the lowly. He makes his dwelling with the lowly.

In Isaiah 66:2, he says, in verse 1 he says, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?" Where am I going to dwell? Look what he says in verse 2, Isaiah 66, "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being." I don't need a house. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." God says, "Do you want to know where I'm going to dwell? I will dwell with anyone who is humble and contrite and who trembles at my word. I will dwell with the lowly. Though I am exalted above your ability to conceive it, I dwell with those who are lowly, who know they are nothing."

So being brought low brings me near to God because it shows me that I'm nothing. In fact, we could say the second point: interpret your circumstances biblically, being brought low removes me from the things of this world. I couldn't think of a better way to say that. I'm trying to say it makes you farther away from the things of this world. It brings you near to God, it brings God near to you, secondly, it brings the things of this world farther from you. When you're brought low, the deceitfulness of sin loses its



deceitfulness. When your heart is broken, sin has the real possibility of losing all of its appeal to the one who truly loves God.

Now sometimes we can pick up sin as a way to numb the pain and that's just foolishness. But in reality when you're really brought low, you see that this world is not what it's cracked up to be; that the things that I thought would make me happy are worthless, have no appeal. So the world loses its appeal, the lies of the world suddenly ring hollow. The power of the flesh is broken down, our sin nature is beaten down and crucified in times of pain and agony and sin's deceit and Satan's deceitfulness is unmasked.

So when we find ourselves in low points, we're brought nearer to God and we're also brought farther, pushed farther away from the world. Thirdly, being brought low, the reason it's really a height, the third sub point is being brought low places me on the path of greater usefulness. To be brought low means being prepared for something great. As I let go of the things of this world, it becomes clear that I'm to become more of a useful and fit tool in the hand of God. Our holiness makes a huge difference in how effective we can be for the Lord.

Remember Robert Murray M'Cheyne's counsel to a young minister. M'Cheyne was one of the great ministers in Scottish church history. He died at age 30 and it was said that when M'Cheyne died at age 30, that young, all of Scotland mourned. Such a powerful man of God. He wrote a letter to one of the young men that he had sent to study abroad, study theology, and he said to this young man, "Attend carefully to your studies. Work hard at Greek and Hebrew. Study hard but attend most carefully to the matters of the heart. Make sure that you seek God first above everything else because," he said, "it's not so much great giftedness or great knowledge that God blesses as it is likeness to Jesus." That's the sword that God wants to yield, a man who is like Jesus.

So being brought low puts you on the path of greater usefulness because it is purifying, it's purging. Think about how God does this over and over again in the Scriptures. It's just amazing. You look at the ways of God, the perfect wisdom of God, but so different than our way of thinking. Remember Joseph, the story of Joseph in Genesis 37 to 50. Remember Joseph has the dream. He has a coat of many colors and he has the dreams, remember? He has the dreams of how he's going to have an exalted role in his family's future. He has the dream where his stalk, his sheaf stands up and all the other 11 sheaves bow down, remember? And the dream was apparently so compelling that he didn't even have time, he couldn't even think about how it was going to be received when he said something to his brothers about it because he just goes out and he blurts it out to them. He said, "I had this dream. It is a great dream. My sheaf stood up and all the other 11 bowed down." And they understood what it meant, "So the 11, we're all going to bow down to you?" and they really got mad about it. Okay, understandable.

The second dream, though. He has another dream, remember, where he sees that the stars and 11 stars bow and the sun and the moon also bow down to his star. And he goes to his brothers and he tells them and they get upset again. Then his dad comes and he even tells his dad the dream. And they're thinking, "We're all going to bow down to you?" Now, I'm

convinced that he was so compelled that God had spoken to him that he couldn't, it was like a burning in his bones because it was just so stupid. When you're reading that and you put yourself in the place, "Joseph, just keep it to yourself. This is not going to work out well." And it didn't but he couldn't help it.

He just told them and, of course, their enmity and hatred grew and they wanted to kill him and they planned to kill him but, of course, they sent him into slavery, and the next thing you know, this vision of greatness. What is followed by that vision of greatness? Slavery. Thirteen years he toils in Egypt as a slave and then as a prisoner until finally God puts him up to the second in Egypt and his brothers come and what do they do? They bow down before him and he remembered his dream.

So what is God's path to usefulness? It's the way up is actually the way down, or I mean, really the way down is the way up. Think about David. The same thing with David. The Lord anoints David. Samuel anoints him too early. I mean, you read it and you really think about it, "Why did you anoint him, Samuel?" "The Lord told me to." That's a good reason. But David is anointed king and it's years before he becomes king and he spends many of those years running for his life from Saul. "So you tell me I'm going to be something special and then you send me down." That's the school of adversity that prepares greatness in the sight of God.

So being brought low places me in the path of greater usefulness. The Lord does not change and because of our sin, we need this kind of preparation. The most useful, the thing that makes me most useful is the thing that hurts the most. Suffering is necessary. That's what he's essentially said. James said in chapter 1, verse 2 when he said, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." He's basically now elaborating on that theme. To be low is to be made high.

Okay, so interpret your circumstances biblically. You're actually at a high place, you're on a mountaintop if you really saw it correctly because being brought low brings you nearer to God, being brought low increases the distance from the world, being brought low places you on the path of greater usefulness, and fourthly, being brought low brings you nearer to Jesus. When we suffer, when we find ourselves in low points, moments of humiliation, moments of humility, we find that we are very near to Jesus.

This is what Paul understood. He says in Philippians 3:10 that what he wants is to "know Him," know Christ, "and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death." That there is something about being brought low that brings about this process of dying to self and fellowship with Jesus.

In Colossians 1, he talks about he rejoices in his suffering in his flesh because he's filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions; that when we suffer as believers for the cause of Christ, we're filling up what is lacking in Jesus' afflictions. We are experiencing the sufferings that he experienced, the rejection that he experienced, and in that you find a Savior who is right there beside you who will support you.

So when you interpret your circumstances biblically, when you find yourself brought low and you face it honestly, whether materially, physically, relationally, in reality it is a height, not a depth. It's an opportunity and if you apply wisdom to the circumstances and you interpret your circumstances biblically, then you have the opportunity to experience what God has promised. And thirdly and final point: face your circumstances honestly, interpret your circumstances biblically, respond to your circumstances logically. The command here is to glory. That, when all facts are considered, is the logical thing to do. Glory. When you find yourself in low circumstances, glory. It's translated in the ESV, "boast." The NIV, "take pride in." The King James, "rejoice." It's hard to convey the essential meaning of this word but one of the ways it's translated in other places in the New Testament is "exult." Exult in your high position. "Exult" means "to be delighted; to be thrilled; to be so joyful and delighted that you're just ecstatic; rapturous joy."

Now it's a command. It's not something you naturally feel but it's a command. It's an imperative here, "the brother of humble circumstances is to glory." It doesn't come through in the English the way it does in the Greek. It's actually a present tense imperative command. Remember, present tense means ongoing action. You are to glory, to boast, to exult.

And it's a middle voice verb. I mentioned the middle voice last week. Remember the active voice, passive voice. Voice determines the relationship of the subject to the action of the verb. An active voice verb, the subject is doing the action of the verb. A passive voice verb, the subject is receiving the action of the verb. Remember, I hit the ball, active. I was hit by the ball, passive. Middle voice, the subject is doing the action and receiving the action. And it's a middle voice verb so the idea is that you're commanded to act and then to be acted on by your action. You're commanded to exult, to boast, to glory in your high position, and as you do it, it becomes more real to you. It actually begins to, you begin to feel it. You start off by faith, "Lord, you said that when I find myself in low positions I'm actually to glory and boast in my height, so I'm going to, by faith I'm going to take what you say and I've faced my circumstances honestly, but I'm interpreting my circumstances biblically. You said this. Add it all together, the only logical response is to glory in it, to boast in it, to exult in it, and I'm going to do that by faith. And I'm going to keep doing it by faith until it begins to impact my heart."

That's what he's saying. This is what Paul did. 2 Corinthians 12. I mentioned this passage briefly last week where he has the thorn in the flesh, this messenger of Satan sent to torment him to keep him from exalting himself. You see that even in the purpose of the messenger of Satan was to keep Paul lowly, this is 2 Corinthians 12:7. "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." That this thorn in the flesh might leave me. That this messenger of Satan that is tormenting me might leave me. Three times I implored the Lord that it might leave me. "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.'" That's what Jesus said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." And then this is Paul's response, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Paul is working this out and exemplifying what James is talking about means. "I will boast about my weaknesses because when I am

weak, then I am strong. When I am low, then I am high." Because when I'm broken down by the circumstances of my life, what happens is the things of this world, like the song says, the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. There is something about suffering that makes the things of this world begin to become less and less dominant in our vision and we begin to see what is real behind it, the things which are eternal.

I've seen this in the life of saints that have gone on to be with the Lord. I remember one elderly lady that, Mildred McAdams. There was a dear saint in this church for a number of years and passed away about 15 years ago, going to visit her and seeing her and then she would talk to me about her grandchildren. She basically was calling all of her grandchildren and she had a number of grandchildren, the last week of her life, she was calling all of her grandchildren in and she was challenging them to follow Jesus and essentially this was her message, "I now know that all that matters is Jesus." As she neared death and she had lived this way but as she neared death, it was as if she could see so much more clearly and with a heart of faith, she was saying to her grandchildren, "No matter what you think you see, I can see what you can't. All that matters is Jesus and if you put your eyes upon him, you will see the same thing."

So when we're weak, then we're strong, and we learn to boast and glory in those moments of weakness, it's not that we delight in the pain. No, we don't delight in the suffering. No, we're to mourn with those that mourn. Mourning is real but in the midst of mourning there is a joy that the Christian has, "God is doing something good in this. God is making me more useful for him. God is making me long for Jesus more."

And there is a joy that comes out of that and when that happens, it's amazing what you can do. I love this story of Joni Eareckson Tada. Many of you are aware of her unique testimony. When she was 17 years old, she was diving into a swimming pool and she somehow dove, miscalculated the bottom of the pool. She hits the bottom of the pool. Her neck is broken and she becomes a quadriplegic instantly. She can't move her hands, her feet. At 17 years old just before she turned 18. She spent two years, she was a believer, she spent two years trying to get healed, going to places where they had the faith healers and being challenged by some ill-informed Christians that if she just believed strongly enough, she could be healed. And after a couple of years of wrestling with that, she came to understand what the Scripture teaches, that it is God who brings low. It is God who lifts up. "Who made the deaf, the dumb and the blind? Did not I, the Lord?" God didn't make Moses' mouth work right then. It wasn't because Moses didn't have enough faith, it was because God's purpose was not to make Moses' mouth work right.

So Joni Eareckson learned to live life without the use of her arms and legs. She paints beautiful pictures with her mouth. She has written more than 40 books and she uses her mouth to write.

I heard her testimony and she was talking about how, this was probably 8 or 10 years ago, you know, one of the things that the Lord has done is he's put believers around her. She got married and has a wonderful husband and they have a great testimony, but put

believers around her in her church. There were ladies who come over every day to help her get dressed. She couldn't do anything by herself and so she would be lying there in the morning, imagine that, lying there in the bed not able to do anything. Not able to move. Someone forgets it's their turn, just waiting helplessly.

Rather than rail at her circumstances, she embraced it and she gloried in it and she boasted that she's been brought low and she has one of those beautiful and precious witnesses for Christ. And when you hear her talk about Jesus, there is something powerful about it. In fact, she has a ministry now, Joni and Friends. I was talking to somebody a while back, a pastor, whose son had some disabilities and they'd gone to a Joni and Friends camp and spent a week together with other people with families with children with disabilities and they all come together and there Joni is leading them. He said there's nothing like watching and experiencing worship with all of those broken people praising Jesus and giving him glory in spite of their weakness and truly because of their weakness, even more giving him glory. He said you haven't worshiped. I felt I hadn't worshiped until I worshiped with those people.

She tells a story, I heard Joni tell this story. She went to Ghana. She went to Ghana on a mission trip. Ghana is one of the poorest places in the world and she went to Ghana and she began to have a ministry there and she talked about going back and seeing one of the pastors there who works with and ministers to people who basically are people who hide during the day like under buildings and other places because they're disabled and they're despised by the people and so they are undesirables. And here's a man who preaches the Gospel to them, disciples them. They love Christ.

So she goes with another Westerner, an American pastor, and the pastor greets her and greets this American pastor with these words, "Welcome to Ghana where our God is bigger because we need him more." There is some truth in that. God is not really bigger but when you need him more, when you open wide your mouth, he will fill it.

The Lord puts us in circumstances and breaks us down so that we see our weakness, we see our insufficiency and we see that Jesus is everything. That's how you get saved. You get saved, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The first step in salvation is to see your poverty before God spiritually. We have nothing to commend ourselves to God. Our righteousness is as filthy rags. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." At the moment you truly embrace that and you reach out to Jesus, that's salvation, and that continues to be the way that God works mightily in his people. As our outer man decays, our inner man is being renewed all for the glory of Christ. And so he says when you see it, when you face your circumstances honestly and you put them in context of the Scripture, the only logical response is to boast, to glory in our weakness because Jesus is going to show himself strong.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Father, how grateful we are for the glory of the Gospel, that the good news comes to those who cannot help themselves but are completely helpless before you. You wash us,*

*you cleanse us, you clothe us with the righteousness which is given to us freely by your Son and you delight to lead us in paths of lowliness, letting us experience sometimes good circumstances that we would see good, but oftentimes what we first think are bad circumstances, painful circumstances, things that show us this world is not what we were created to experience. Help us, Lord, to embrace your ways. Help us, O Lord, to embrace the cross and to realize that when we are brought low, Jesus is lifted high. And help us encourage one another as we walk together. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*