

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. ... Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (James 1:2-8,12)

Consider it Pure Joy to Face Trials

Today, we began our service with a baptism. A newborn baby was brought to the font. I wouldn't be surprised if after church today, many of ladies in our congregation want to get a closer look at that little girl. There's something special about a new life coming into the world, something even more special about a baby coming to the font and being washed in the waters of holy baptism and claimed by God for his own. It would be natural on a day like today to daydream for a moment about little Madelyn's future. I know I did that a lot with my children, not just on the day they were baptized, but throughout the years when they were small. I still engage in it occasionally today when they're teenagers. What kind of life will Madelyn have? What will she do? What will she be? If you parents are anything like me, when you engage in that sort of thing, you think of going to college and getting married. You think of them being beautiful and popular and happy. You think of good things. But life isn't always good. What kind of trials will Madelyn face? What things will hurt and frustrate her? How will she deal with those things? How will any of our children face the hardships of life? How will we, their parents, feel when we see tears in their eyes and we know that what's happening to them just isn't fair? We live in a sinful world. Every baby that we will ever baptize will face those trials. This morning, James tells us something shocking, something impossible for our sinful human hearts to do. He says: **consider it pure joy to face trials.**

I.

Of course, he wasn't just talking to babies being baptized. He says that to every one of us. Now, when I think of joy, I usually think of being happy. A Sunday teacher once told me that one of my kids was "a joy." She smiled when she said that. It's hard for us to smile when we talk about trials and pain. James' point is not that we should paint smiles on our faces when life hurts and pretend that we like it. Joy can also mean being glad at what God is doing, even when it hurts. James explains why trials of all kinds are a cause of a joy. He says, "**Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.**" To put it simply, **Consider it pure joy to face trials because God is growing your faith.**

Trials can be anything that hurts and causes us to wrestle with what God is doing in our lives. Those trials are the school for your faith. Did you like school? I didn't. I hated sitting in class and doing work that someone else was making me do. To this day, when I think about going back to the seminary for professional development or toy with the idea getting another degree, it sounds painful to do. I graduated so I wouldn't have to write papers and do assignments and sit in classes that I don't want to anymore.

But that pain has a purpose. Teachers demand things of students because that's how we learn. God has enrolled every one of us in a school for our faith. The trials that we face in this life are part of the core curriculum. They're required classes. What is a trial? The Greek word implies testing to prove that something is genuine. In school, teachers give tests. What's their purpose? It's not to develop self-esteem. The real purpose of a test is to find out if the students learned the material or not, if their knowledge is genuine. The test has to be hard, or the teacher won't be able to tell. Guess what? The more advanced the material, the harder the test. The harder the test, the harder it is on the person taking it. Doctors have to pass boards – tests – to prove that they're competent to practice medicine. I'm pretty sure that taking those tests is painful. But in the end, it demonstrates that they are genuine healers.

God tests our faith. He stretches it to the limit to see how strong it is. Then he pushes it farther to extend those limits, to make it even stronger. Every trial you face is something that he sends because he loves you. How does that work? Every trial in life forces you to see your limit. It forces you to see that you cannot stand on your own. When I visit people in crisis, I often hear them say, "I can't take any more." God is showing you your weakness in the trial. How is that love? He's showing you that you need Christ. When someone you love dies, when you go through physical pain and illness, when financial problems strike, or your job or your school is an agony to attend, in all those things, God is showing you that there is only one person who can get you through: him. Because he's testing your faith, not your unbelief, when you reach that limit to your strength, faith doesn't give up. It clings to Jesus. It finds comfort and new strength in him. Most important of all, it turns to his promises for power.

When life hurts, God drives us back to what he promised. He promised that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. He promised that in the waters of holy baptism, he made a covenant with us; he washed away our sins and claimed us as his own and he will keep us strong in the faith until we stand next to him. He promised that his body and blood are present in the bread and wine of communion and when we eat and drink, he personally tells us that we are loved and forgiven, no matter what we've been guilty of. He promised that he will use every trial and pain to keep us on the road to heaven. How do we know all those promises will come true? Because he promised to send a Savior to pay for our sin and weakness.

When the time was right, Jesus came. The Son of God made himself a real human being who lived our lives, who shared our hurt and our pain, who endured trial and persecution and loss in our place. He did it all perfectly so that his perfect life and perfect faith count for us. Then he went to the cross. On the cross God the Father poured hell itself out on him while he suffered the physical agonies of being nailed and suspended there. Then he died. In that sufferings and death, he paid all we owe. He paid just like God promised that he would. Then on third day, he rose and God proclaimed to all the world that we are forgiven and free. He defeated death for us, just like God promised in the Garden of Eden. He ascended into heaven to rule all things for our good. He decides when we face trial and when we have peace. He does it all to bring us home to heaven.

James says, "**Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**" God's goal is that we become mature, that our faith be complete and lack nothing, because God wants that faith to last all the decades from our baptism to our last breath in this life. He will do whatever we need for that to happen, no matter how hard it is for us to see or understand, because he loves us.

II.

But it takes wisdom to see all that. What do we see when we trials hit? We see how much it hurts. We see how much we want it to stop. Often when I'm sick, I joke that I wish God would either make me better or kill me. That "gallows humor" is one way that we deal with how hard trials to our faith are. James proposes another way of dealing with them. He tells us to pray for wisdom, so that we rejoice in what God is doing.

Consider it pure joy to face trials because God will answer your prayers.

James says, "**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.**" What a promise for us when we're struggling and hurting. But notice what he does and does not say. I often hear people saying, "I keep asking God what I'm supposed to be learning from this." When did God say that he had a specific lesson for each trial that we're supposed to learn? God tells us to ask for wisdom, not for information. The truth is, there are many things in our lives that we will never understand on this side of heaven. Why is it better for an elderly person to fall and break their hip? Why is it better to be unpopular and lonely? Why is it better to lose your house? God doesn't often answer those questions here. Sometimes, it's true that years down the road we can look back and see part of what God was doing. But quite often, we have to wait until we get to heaven to clearly understand all that he was doing.

The lesson of every trial and pain is simple: "Trust me!" That's what God is teaching. God is telling us to put all our lives in his hands because he alone can see what tomorrow brings and he is even more committed to getting us to heaven than we are. We have a sinful nature that wants to do other things. But God is zeroed in on getting us home and all that he does is part of his plan to do that. When we struggle to see that, we need to pray for the wisdom to trust that God really does know what he is doing. God gives generously without finding fault. Admitting to God that you're a sinner who can't see or understand and that you're struggling to get through today does not disqualify you from his mercy. God loves sinners. And he will give you that wisdom.

But James does include a very forceful warning against doubting when we pray. Prayer is finally coming to God in faith and saying, “God you have to deal with this. I can’t.” True prayer trusts absolutely that our God hears and answers. Doubt questions that. James says that when we doubt, we’re double minded and unstable in all we do. He’s making an important point about taking prayer seriously. If you put your trials in God’s hands, why are you questioning anymore? True prayer is an act of total trust.

The problem for us in what James say is that we all have a sinful nature that interferes with every one of our prayers. The unbeliever inside us doubts every time we come to Christ. But the believer doesn’t. The believer knows God’s grace and trusts all that God says. James is not saying that we have to somehow get rid of our sinful nature in order to pray. If that were the case, we could never pray here. He’s talking about being mature in our faith and equipping the new believer to triumph over that doubting unbeliever. He’s talking about actually believing God’s promises and taking comfort, rather than bouncing back and forth between trusting in God and worrying about the future. Trust in God and pray.

When you do doubt, remember God’s solution to that, too: Christ. Jesus was the only believer who never doubted. Jesus had the only perfect faith God will ever see on this side of heaven. He lived that perfect life and offered his perfect prayers in our place. God now sees our faith and our prayers as perfect because Jesus’ faith was. His blood washes away all the guilt that our doubt and our sinful nature bring us. His resurrection says that God has forgiven us and we are now holy in God’s sight. That promise strengthens our trust in all God’s other promises. Pray and trust in God in every trial.

James says, **“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”** This is what all this is really about. This’s why we baptized little Madeline this morning, and why every one of us parents brought every child that God gave us to the font. This’s why we parents were baptized. And it’s why we come to church and hear the word and come to communion. It’s even why God sends trials into our lives. We don’t go to heaven on the day we come to faith here. Most of us have years of struggling through life in a sinful world. And if it were up to us to figure out how to stay strong, not one of us would make it there. But God has given us the crown of life. He comes to us in the gospel in the word and sacrament to strengthen us in the faith to reach eternal life. He guides our lives and sends blessings and trials to keep on us on that road to heaven. Wisdom sees that all God does is for our good. It is pure joy to know that. Consider all that he does in your life, even the hard things, as pure joy. God loves you and will bring you home. Amen.