

Marks of a Faith that Works

A Faith that Works... ***Grows through Difficulty*** James 1:2-12

For those students who are with us this morning, remember taking that final test as you finished the semester last Spring? Or for those of us who haven't been in school for some time, think back for a moment on that last dreaded exam. Do you remember the relief it was to be done...at least until the following semester?

I don't know about you, but I don't like tests. I remember well my final Hebrew exam while I was in seminary. It came at the end of two years of studying that language and the professor promised us that it would be unforgettable. Well, the test *was* unforgettable. The problem is that what I was supposed to know for the test became all too forgettable! Mary Alice can tell you what our night was like the eve of the exam. I was so disturbed that I had this weird dream. I became so agitated in my sleep that I accidentally hit Mary Alice in the face. Obviously, my wife doesn't like it when I go through those tests either.

A test at school shows us how much we know. A test in life shows us what we are. A test at school shows us how much we didn't learn. Tests in life show us all that we must learn and become.

By the way...have you ever hidden a key for a family member – under a mat or flower vase – so that, when they arrive, they can get into your house? I've done that before. I won't tell you where! But that is what James does in chapter 1. He “hides” the key to his letter that unlocks what his message is all about. And this “key” tells us some important things about the tests of life.

Notice what James says in verse 3: “... you know that the *testing* of your faith develops perseverance.” The “testing of your faith” in verse 3 is the key that James leaves right at the front door of his letter that enables us to unlock the very practical life truths in this book.

Throughout this letter James is laying out for us various “tests” of authentic faith.ⁱ We're calling this series “Marks of a Faith that Works.” But it could also be called “Tests of True Faith.” From this angle we have 13 “tests” that help us evaluate the authenticity of our faith.ⁱⁱ Do you want to know whether or not your faith is more than mere intellectual adherence to a set of established beliefs? Then run it by these 13 tests and see how it holds up.ⁱⁱⁱ

A Faith that Works...Grows through Difficulty

Today, we're looking at the first of these: A faith that works *grows through difficulty*. James tells how the stresses, tests, difficulties, and problems of our lives can be turned from foe to friend. However, before addressing the question of how to deal with the difficulties of our lives, let me give you four facts about difficulty where James gives us insight.

Four Facts about Difficulty

Fact #1: Difficulties are Inevitable.

James says in verse 2 “*whenever* you face trials of many kinds.” James doesn’t say “if” you face trials, but “when” you face trials. Trials in our earthly pilgrimage are unavoidable and to be expected. Problems are not an elective in life. They’re a required course.

Some have the crazy idea that, once you’re a Christian, difficulty disappears...particularly certain kinds of difficulty, like poverty and sickness. But this wealth, health and prosperity doctrine is not found in the pages of the New Testament. In fact, just the opposite.

Jesus: “You are those who stood with me in my trials.” (Luke 22:28)

Paul said: “We must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.” (Acts 14:22)

Peter said: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12-13)

We don’t *grow out* of trials. It’s not like difficulties are for the young Christian, but only great delights are for the mature Christian. In fact, many of the greatest biblical heroes faced some of their greatest trials later on in their journey of faith. Remember, the way you respond to testing today will in some way either strengthen you or weaken you for the task God has for you tomorrow.

Fact #2: Difficulties are Unpredictable.

While we can generally count of difficulty in life, we don’t always know when it is coming. And I’m glad we don’t, or we would often turn and run the other way!

James says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you *face* trials of many kinds” (1:2). The old KJV translation better brings out the sense here. It says, “Whenever you *fall* into various trials.” The same term is used in the story of the Good Samaritan who cared for the man who “fell” into the hands of robbers (Luke 10:30). He didn’t plan it! He didn’t expect it! It just happened. While it is true that trials are inevitable, they are also unpredictable. We often don’t know when they are coming. We “fall” into them...that unwelcome doctor’s report, the bitter news of the unexpected death of a family member, or the stress of a job loss.

Fact #3: Difficulties are Variable

James puts it this way: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of *many* kinds.” That word “many” literally means multi-colored. And that’s a pretty good description of the trials in life. They come in more than 31 flavors!

Our trials range from minor inconveniences to major crises. They range from the dirty-diaper type to the death and depression type. And they vary in duration and intensity.

We have relational difficulties and financial difficulties. We have domestic and professional difficulties. The trials of old age and the tests of young age. Problems at school and problems at work.

But remember, just as your trials are varied, so is the grace of God! This same word, “multi-colored,” is also used by Peter to describe God’s sufficiency of grace in our lives (1 Pet 4:10). He speaks of God’s *manifold* grace, or God’s grace in its various forms.^{iv}

Fact #4: Difficulties are Profitable.

Trials are inevitable, unpredictable, and variable. And for the Christian, they are also *purposeful* or *profitable*.

There are basically two kinds of trials that come into our lives as believers.^v First of all, there are trials of *correction*. The writer to the Hebrew Christian says this: “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Hebrews 12:7-8). Does that mean that the difficulties of our lives are the result of sin and that God is simply disciplining us?^{vi} Not at all. But the context of this verse is clear: God does correct his children and he uses hardship to do that.

But you and I also face trials of *perfection*.^{vii} James says that the “testing” of our faith produces perseverance and ultimately “perfection” (or as we saw last week, “maturity”).

That word “testing” of verse 3 is used only two times in the New Testament (James 1:3; 1 Peter 1:7). The word emphasizes the desired outcome of the difficulty. The word was used at one time to refer to the process of testing coinage to determine if it was genuine. The metallurgist would pass the metal through the fire to show whether or not it contained any foreign substances. If so, these would be removed so that the metal would be pure. That is the purpose of spiritual testing. God desires to remove the dross and purge the impurities from our lives and make us more Christlike.

Whether through trials of correction or trails of perfection, God has one purpose in it all: *to make you and me like His Son, Jesus Christ*. Job said, “When he has tested me, I will come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). And Paul says in the well-known but often misunderstood verse: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God” (Romans 8:28). You see, God is good to all in some ways, but to some (His children) he is good in all ways.^{viii} He will take the harsh circumstances of life and weave them into a beautiful tapestry, making you and me more like Jesus. That’s why Paul continues: “All things work together for good to those who love God...*to those called according to his purpose*.” And what is His purpose in your life? To make you like Jesus Christ.

There are so many who just don’t get this. The Christian life is not about making us comfortable, but about making us Christlike. And God, as only a good and wise Father can do, will relentlessly pursue his grand purpose in our lives of making us more like his Son. And that can never take place apart from difficulty.

How can I grow through the difficulties of life?

1. Adopt the right *attitude* (1:2-4).

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

At the very outset James says, “*Consider it pure joy*, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials...” (James 1:2a). How would you like to get a letter like that? “You got problems? Well, be happy!” And you say: “What do you mean, ‘Be happy!’ You don’t have a clue as to what I’m going through right now!”

James emphasized the attitude we should have in difficulty by describing this attitude in the first two words of verse 2. In James’ Greek text, the first two words of verse 2 are “pure joy.” James literally says, “Pure joy...consider it, my brothers...”^x He goes out of this way to contrast joy in trial with despondency in trial.

What amazing advice for a society that is obsessed with eliminating all difficulty, danger and discomfort. Most of us consider trials to be hell, not joy! Have you ever heard of someone else’s severe trial and breathed a sigh of relief, “Whew, so glad that’s not me!”

It is often said that difficulty can make you bitter or better. And the difference between the two is just one letter, “i.” *I* make the difference, i.e. my attitude. Life is really 10% circumstances and 90% my *attitude* toward those circumstances.

It’s our attitude in difficulty that James is addressing here. He says, “*Consider it pure joy...*” That means to take a deliberate look at something. James doesn’t say that trials *are* all joy. But we are to stand back and look at them as being turned to our highest good.^x I can’t control the circumstances of my life, but I can – with God’s grace – control my perspective on those circumstances. Remember, the way you respond to testing today is in some way strengthening or weakening you for the task God has for you tomorrow.

How do I handle difficulty in my life? First, adopt the right attitude. But second...

2. Ask God for *wisdom* (1:5-11).

That’s what James says in verse 5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, *he should ask God...*”^{xi} When you have a crisis, what is your first reaction? Do you order the pills, call the doctor, go to the counselor, buy the latest self-help book? Or do you pray? Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given you.” James says later in this letter, “You do not have because you do not ask.”

What are we to ask? We are to ask God for *wisdom*. We don’t ask God to get out of the trial, but for wisdom to get through the trial. Through our difficulties, God wants us to grow to maturity, without glaring character deficiencies. That’s verse 4. *But...* in the process of growth, as you lack wisdom, ask God for it! He will give the wisdom to see the testing from His perspective and to move through it.

Wisdom in James is not intellectual knowledge or philosophic speculation. For James, wisdom is practical insight for living. Wisdom says that what the world calls an obstacle is actually an opportunity for growth.^{xii} Wisdom is (as a good friend of mine, Dick Pearson has said) “to live above ‘see’ level.”

In the day in which we live, we are long on knowledge, but short on wisdom. While on information overload, we are lacking in wisdom for living life. We need to be like Solomon, at least in the early part of his reign. He chose the best – wisdom – and God threw in the rest!

We are the ones who ask, but *it is God who gives*. And I love how he gives. Notice verse 5 again, “...who gives generously to all without finding fault...” God never tells us in our difficulty: “Oh look at you. What a mess you’ve made. You’ve made your bed, now lie in it.” He doesn’t say, “I told you so.”

But there is one thing He looks for....faith. James adds in verse 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. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. James 1:6-8

Does God give only to those who have no doubts? And yet James says that he gives “generously and without finding fault.” Does God find fault with my lack of faith or with my doubts?

Doubt is a very real part of our life as believers.^{xiii} David doubted (Ps 96:1; Ps 6). Our faith is to have what one has called an “earthy honesty”^{xiv} about it. James here does not condemn doubt, but duplicity. The doubter in this case asks for one thing (wisdom to handle his trial), but then changes his mind and is not willing to follow through on the wisdom that God gives.

That’s why James describes him as the wind-tossed sea. He is called a “double-minded” person. Behind this description is the idea of being double-faced, or saying one thing and doing another (Psalm 11:2; James 3:9-12). An old African proverb says, “The man who tries to take two paths will split his pants.” That is the double-minded person. He asks God for wisdom in the difficulty, but is not serious about follow-through once that wisdom is given.^{xv}

To the one who asks in faith for wisdom, God gives it. And part of the wisdom He gives is already found for us in verses 9-11.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. James 1:9-11

Testing has an awesome “leveling” effect in our lives. It comes to both the rich and the poor, and to all people in-between. The ancient world had almost no middle-class. You were either poor or rich, and nearly 90% of the population was poor. Many of the believers to whom James is writing are on the poor end of the scale. We know from verse 2 that these are believers who have been scattered among the nations, probably during the persecution mentioned by Luke in Acts 8.

James' words of encouragement to the poor are the same as in verse 2: "Rejoice!" Why? Because, in reality, your difficult circumstances have given you a very high position. God has a special care for the poor and through your poverty God is building a humble, obedient faith in your life.^{xvi}

But while the poor have a "high position," the rich are described as having a "low position." The readers of James' day would easily grasp the agricultural picture of these verses. In the wilderness area of Palestine, a rain shower would produce many green shoots in an otherwise parched and arid land. But the heat of the sun and the desert winds would quickly kill the new plants. This is the stark picture of the brevity of life that James leaves us with (cf. James 4:14)..

We do know that many families at this time in the Roman world drove themselves into bankruptcy in their attempt to pay for public works. The idea was that, by doing so, their names would live on in antiquity, being mentioned as having paid for such and such building or public square.^{xvii} But James tells us that, even as the rich person "goes about his business," trying to make his mark and establish a name for himself, his life will fade away...just like that plant.

Interestingly, on the same day Jesus and his disciples met two different men in the city of Jericho. One was the blind, poverty-stricken Bartimaeus lying by the roadside. To him, Jesus said "Arise" (Mark 10:49). But to Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector who was up a limb in a tree, Jesus said, "Come down" (Luke 19:5).^{xviii} Our difficulties are the great "leveler" in our lives. None of us are immune. To the degree that your circumstances are difficult and trying, rejoice! For God will lift you up. To the degree that you are relatively comfortable and content, beware. For God may need to "stir up your nest" and humble you.

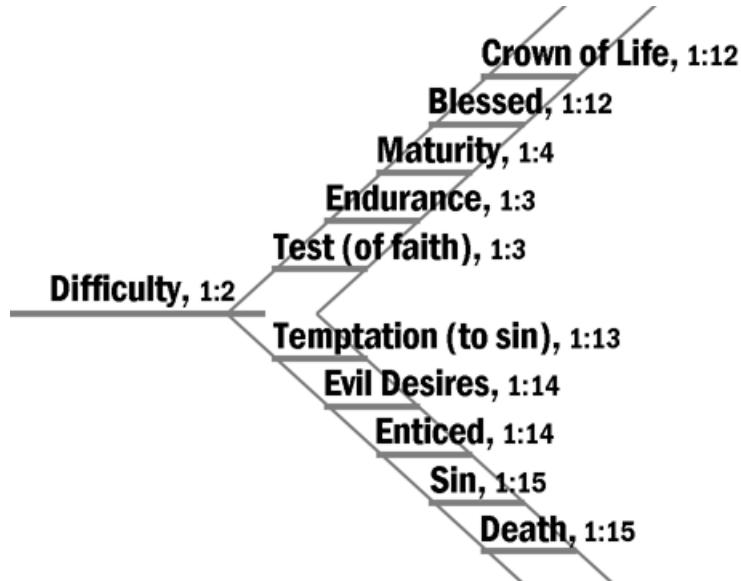
3. Persevere knowing that you will be rewarded (1:12).

James ends this section on difficulties with a final word of advice. How do we handle our difficulties? First, adopt the right attitude. Second, ask God for wisdom. But third, *persevere, knowing that you will be rewarded.*

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 1:12

As we will see next week, every difficulty in our life can either be a testing that ultimately refines us, making us more like Christ. Or it can be the context of temptation, leading us down the slippery slope to sin and ultimately to death.

(see chart on next page)



There is a high cost to following our Commander-in-chief, Jesus Christ, himself known as the “man of sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5; Isaiah 53:3). But there is even a higher cost to choosing sin and its devastating consequences in our lives. Will you choose the high road that leads to maturity and blessing in this life and eternal reward in the next?

ⁱ The theme of faith is obviously very important for James. The word “faith” appears 16 times (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5, 14 (twice), 17, 18 (three times), 20, 22 (twice), 24, 26; 5:15) and the verb “believe” appears three times (2:19 (twice), 23).

ⁱⁱ Some feel that James has no particular order or theme to it. It has been described as “just a handful of pearls, dropped one by one into the hearer’s mind” or “an ethical scrapbook.” Hunter remarks that “it is so disconnected, as it stands, that it is the despair of the analyst.” (Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament* and A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* as cited by D. Edmond Hiebert “The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 1978), 222.

ⁱⁱⁱ A faith that works...

- ...Grows through Difficulty (1:2-12)
- ...Turns from Temptation (1:13-18)
- ...Obeys God’s Word (1:19-27)
- ...Shows no Favoritism (2:1-13)
- ...Behaves like it Believes (2:14-16)
- ...Manages the Mouth (3:1-18)
- ...Humbly Submits to God (4:1-10)
- ...Leaves Judgment with God (4:11-12)
- ...Plans Wisely, Not Presumptuously (4:13-17)
- ...Handles Wealth Wisely (5:1-6)
- ...Patiently Endures Suffering (5:7-12)
- ...Prays about Problems (5:13-18)
- ...Confronts Sin (5:19-20)

In James there are what one has called observable “pinch points” of our faith where the disconnect between belief and behavior often shows up: 1. In times of trial and persecution; 2. Whenever we open our mouths and speak; 3. In all of our daily relationships with people; 4. In the area of stewardship of material possessions.

^{iv} Our trials also vary in their *source*. For example, the word “trial” (Gk: *peirasmos*) is related to *peirates* meaning “attacker, pirate.” It can mean both external testings *and* internal temptations. It is the end or goal of the testing that

determines its moral nature. James also reminds us that testing can easily be transformed into temptation. In fact, that's the subtle shift that James makes in chapter one. He starts out by talking about testing in verses 2-12. But then in verse 13 he moves us from our response to testing to our response to temptation. Actually, the Greek word for both testing and temptation is the same. When we blame God or blame others for our suffering, we fail the test and our circumstantial testing becomes for us a source of temptation to sin. The difference is the *attitude* of the one undergoing the trial. The question can be asked: Where do these testings come from? Here the Bible gives us several answers. Testing can come from (1) *Satan* (Job 1-2; Zech 3; Matt 4:3; 1 Cor. 7:5; 10:13; 1 Thess 3:5; 1 Tim 6:9); (2) *human desire* (James 1:13ff); (3) *the consequences of living in a fallen world* (Romans 8); or (4) allowed by God or even sent by God. The world teaches that trials are to be avoided at all costs! But this is not the viewpoint of the Bible. We are never to seek after testing, but God does bring testing into our lives..

^v I speak here of two purposes in difficulty in the Christian life. But there are also two primary means that God uses to correct and perfect us. The first is the Word of God. Jesus said, "Sanctify them through your truth. Your Word is truth." (John 17:17). The second is the difficult circumstances of life. (Romans 8:28-29). This second means is the primary emphasis of James 1.

^{vi} We should remember that difficulty is *not* always the result of our own sin. The account of John 9:1-2 dismisses the commonly held belief in Jesus' day that one's misfortune is always the direct result of sin in one's life

^{vii} There is in these verses a progression towards "perfection" or maturity that James develops. It looks like this: problems → perseverance → prayer → perspective → perfection. James is not talking here about absolute perfection. He speaks rather of the maturing process in view of being whom God wants us to be and doing what he wants us to do. Through your difficulty God is preparing you for "works of service" (Ephesians 2:10). In the OT, the underlying Hebrew word described Noah: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time." "Blameless," "perfect" or "mature" is a key word for James. There is no other New Testament author who uses it more frequently. It has to do with being imitators of God (Eph 5:1). Behind this idea is the Jewish idea of being the "son of..." someone. "But love your enemies, do good to them... and so you will be *sons of the Most High...*" (Luke 6:35-36). The child of someone often reflects the father's character. We are God's children, and He wisely allows trials into our lives so that we can more and more reflect His character. (cf. James and John who were "sons of Thunder" because of their anger; Mark 3:17).

^{viii} Romans 8:28, 29 is a promise for "family members." That is, God is good to all people in some ways (providing rain, sunshine, harvest, food, etc.), but his is good to some (i.e. believer) in all ways. Through all the circumstance of life he works to accomplish ultimate goal of conforming us to Jesus' likeness. And so James picks up on this principle, speaking to those who are "brothers." In other words, the encouragements of James 1 are for believers, members of God's family. We are "sons" who are to resemble our heavenly Father.

^{ix} "Pure joy" has the idea of unmixed joy (cf. Phil 2:29; Acts 17:11). In Acts 17:11 some "...received the Word with all (great) eagerness." James is speaking here of a high degree of joy, such as "sheer joy," "utter joy." This joy is not to be mixed with other sentiments that could detract from its purity. It should be "unmixed."

^x See also 1 Peter 4:12-14 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

^{xi} The tense James uses here implies continuous action: we are to keep on asking.

^{xii} In Luke 11 Jesus promises to give the Spirit to those who ask, but here James promises that God will give wisdom to those who ask. We just finished a series on *The Holy Spirit and You*. The Spirit lives in us as believers and teaches us. The Spirit gives us this wisdom to view our trials from God's perspective. James seems to build off the wisdom motif of Proverbs and indirectly compare it to the work of God's Spirit in the life of the believer.

^{xiii} In Mark 9:14-32 Jesus heals a boy with an evil spirit. And yet the father says, "I believe, help me overcome my unbelief."

^{xiv} Kathleen Norris, "Why the Psalms Scare Us," *Christianity Today* (July 15, 1996), 21. Cited by Nystrom, 62.

^{xv} Cf. rich young ruler who asked but did not receive. Why? He was not willing to obey! In John 14:13-15 Jesus says, "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." But then he adds, "If you love me, you will *obey* what I command."

^{xvi} Exodus 23:3, 11; Deut. 15:11; 1 Sam. 2:8; Ps. 74:21; Prov. 14:31.

^{xvii} Nystrom, *NIV Application Commentary*, 54, note 20.

^{xviii} O.S.Hawkins, *Getting Down to Brass Tacks, Advice from James for the Real World* (New Jersey: Loizeaux, 1993), 29-30.