

Faith Works: Testing Joy
James 1:1–4
January 15, 2023

I know how we all love catechisms, especially teaching our children with them. Recently one of mine was training for a race. With some help from a marine, I came up with a catechism–like question for when the running became hard—when his lungs were screaming or his feet were barking. It goes like this: Question: What is pain? Answer: Pain is weakness leaving the body.¹

That kind of thing usually helps for a quarter mile or so. And it helps because it reminds us that what we’re enduring is accomplishing something. This mindset shift is true of all kinds of things. If you’re teaching guitar, the first few lessons are key. If you can help the student see that the scales or chords you’re asking them to practice will enable them to play that song they love, you’ve got them. But if they’re just enduring warm–up exercises, they very well might not endure. This is also true of house projects. You want to be without a dishwasher for 3 months? You better be convinced something is being accomplished. You willing to stand in line at the pharmacy for that prescription? If you’re sick enough, and think it’ll help, you will.

In any of those cases, or the two dozen more we could name, do we *always* like the process, what it takes to accomplish the goal? Not necessarily. And yet, there are occasions where we can believe in what something is accomplishing to such a degree that we endure it better.

James begins his letter with the juxtaposition of joy in the midst of trials. If we’re honest, that’s just not something that comes natural to us. We know that. James knows that. The God that inspired James knows that. So, in this passage, after the instruction to consider it all joy when we encounter trials, James will tell us both *how* we can do that, and *why* we should. Note first,

1. Two introductions (v. 1)

First, James introduces himself in verse 1: **James, a bond–servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.** We did background last week, so I’ll be brief. But this is most likely James the brother of Jesus; he’s one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. In Galatians 1:19, Paul calls James an Apostle. Maybe if *you* were James, you’d put one of *those* descriptors in your online bio or email signature: Apostle/brother of Jesus. Yet, what does James call himself? A bond–servant, which could be translated “slave.” In the fourth century, Didymus the blind wrote, “Those who seek worldly glory display the qualifications which they think they have in their correspondence. But the apostles boast, at the beginning of their letters, that they were slaves of God and Christ.”²

That’s what James believed about himself. That’s how he introduces himself. He’s *also* introducing his Brother to us. But it’d be woefully inadequate to call Him that. James is a bond–servant of **the Lord Jesus Christ.** With his connection to the Jerusalem church, one wonders if James heard the sermon on the day of Pentecost, when Peter declared, **Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified** (Acts 2:36). Christ is Lord. James is His bond–servant. This is instructive for us: James sees himself—and describes himself—in light of who Christ is.

Who is James writing? Verse 1 goes on: **To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.** I made the case last week that these were the ones described in Acts 11:19: **those that were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their**

¹ As best I can tell, a marine named Chesty Puller came up with this.

² Gerald Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary*, vol. XI, 2.

way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.³ Being a leader of the Jerusalem church, James had both led and loved these scattered men and women. Of course he remained concerned for them. So, he writes them.

Like we might type, “Good afternoon,” on an email, the last word of verse 1 would’ve been James’s first word to his hearers: **Greetings**. If you’ll follow me to nerd corner, this is the only time this particular word is used in the epistles of the New Testament. It’s only used three times in the New Testament at all. Fascinatingly, one of those times is in Acts 15 *after* the Jerusalem Council when the church at Jerusalem wrote a letter detailing the decision they’d made. The first word of that letter is *this* word we translate, “Greetings.” And who was one of the main writers of that letter? James. The meticulous historian Luke makes sure to tell us that James used this word. Then James uses it in the book he wrote. Why tell you that? It’s a bit of an excursus, yes, but when we find good reasons to trust the inspiration of Scripture, they’re worth noticing.

While we’re still in nerd corner, that word for “greetings” —found in both letters—is the Greek word *χαίρειν* (chairein). You know what the Greek word for *joy* is? *Χαίρω* (chairō). James loves his wordplays.⁴ And he’s about to use that word. Of the many commands in this book, the first one comes in verse 2: **Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.**

2. Two commands (vv. 2–4a)

As I told you last week, James is full of instruction. In 108 verses, there are 59 imperatives.⁵ There are two in our text today. Yet, James isn’t aiming for an ethical beatdown, but to be pastoral. In fact, James addresses his readers as brothers and sisters 15 different times.⁶ So, before we hear the commands, note *that* in verse 2: **Consider it all joy, my brethren**. It can be argued that the most pervasive image of the church in the New Testament is family.⁷ In our day, many employ that kind of language. I’d add: they use it incorrectly. Just because I made some copies does not mean I’m part of the Kinkos “family.”

James knew what family was. Consider this passage from Matthew 12: **While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him.** (Parenthesis: Who is one of those brothers? James) **Someone told him (Jesus), “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”** (Matt. 12:46–50). In Luke 2, 12-year-old Jesus told Joseph and Mary that the Temple was His Father’s house. He looked in Joseph’s face and redefined family. In Matthew 12, He redefined it for his brother, James. James knew what family was.

So, hear the first imperative of this book in that familial light: **Consider it all joy, my brethren** (brothers and sisters) **when you encounter various trials**. To begin at the end of that clause, note that James says “when” not “if.”⁸ This is yet *another* way James saw the world the way Paul did. Consider Acts 14:22 when Paul asserted, **Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God**. And if we want to see yet another way James and Paul saw the world the way their Lord did, consider John 15: **because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the**

³ “The Diaspora” was probably a technical term for the nations where displaced Jewish people now lived. See Doug Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC, 69–70.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, 416.

⁵ Witherington, 388.

⁶ Moo, 8.

⁷ John Hammett says this.

⁸ See Chris Vlachos, *James*, EGGNT, 16.

world, because of this the world hates you (Jn. 15:19). Though there are various human authors, there's a compelling unity to the message of the New Testament, more than suggesting a single Author. And nowhere does He inspire a message of ease.

It's "when," not "if" you encounter various trials. So, what exactly are these trials James refers to? It seems to be clear from the balance of the letter that these dispersed believers, living in some form of exile, would've been alienated and persecuted by those that surrounded them. For example, they were being dragged into court unjustly, it seems (2:6). Some of them had been affected by poverty. Those are a couple possible explanations of what the trials *could've* been. But James uses an adjective to describe these trials. And it's broad. He calls them **various trials**. In this way, he casts the net widely. It could be translated diverse trials, manifold trials. Quite literally, the word means multicolored.⁹

So, "when" you encounter trials means they'll come at various times. And because James describes the trials themselves as "various" trials, that means they'll come in different forms. I think we do a disservice to the Scriptures, and to one another, when we decide for another person what constitutes a trial. If mom is sick, no, that's not religious persecution, but it *is* a trial. If your children are struggling in adulthood, no, that's not religious persecution, but if you love your son or daughter, yes, that's a trial. If financial needs are tight because eggs are 19 dollars a carton,¹⁰ if you haven't slept well in weeks because of crippling anxiety, if your boss is asking you to do things that are puzzling, yes, that's a trial. And, of course, I've left out some of the hardest things, like death, abuse, or broken relationships. On this fallen earth, where every leaf and letter of creation has been subjected to futility, our lives are marked by trials.

And now for James's juxtaposition, *when* you encounter these various trials, **Consider it all joy**. First, the word for "consider" is within the thinking realm. The idea of mental calculation or "reckoning" is here.¹¹ It's something of a value judgment.¹² As we'll see in verse 3, James is instructing us to *think* a certain way about trials.

Secondly, when James writes **all** joy, does this mean I'm to "only" consider it joy? That is, is he saying I'm not to think or feel *anything else* other than joy when I encounter trials? The language doesn't dictate that. When he says "all," he seems to be pointing to the *intensity* of the joy, not it's *exclusivity*.¹³ He's not saying, nor did His brother model, a detached stoic response to pain or trials. I read in Matthew 9 this week that Jesus **felt compassion** for people, **because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd** (Mt. 9:36). When Lazarus died, we know He felt things other than joy.

Yet this verse implores us to consider it joy when we encounter various trials. That's a tall order. Is this even possible? What's the first step to get there? *How* do we consider it joy? Verse 3: **knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance**. Joy enters the equation in knowing this, that something is being accomplished.

James isn't saying, in this context, that trials *determine* whether we have faith or not. That could be argued from other passages, certainly. But what he's saying *here* is that trials purify the faith that exists within us.¹⁴ It's not unlike the process of refining silver or gold.¹⁵ Trials test our faith. The testing refines us. And the testing/refining produces something: endurance.

⁹ Vlachos, 17.

¹⁰ That's an "inflated" number.

¹¹ Witherington, 421.

¹² Vlachos, 16.

¹³ Moo, 72.

¹⁴ Moo, 74.

¹⁵ Moo, 74.

Sometimes we might combine words to express an idea. We can't *always* do this, of course. A butterfly has nothing to do with butter, for example. But sometimes the combination is right. I don't know if Webster's includes this word, but if I say that so and so is marked by "stick-to-itiveness," you know what I mean. He or she sticks to it. They're dogged in perseverance. This approach to words is true in the New Testament, as well. It's not always true, but when the construction of the word is confirmed by the context, we can assume some things.¹⁶ Well, the word for endurance is the combination of two words, "remain" and "under."¹⁷ It's a staying power. And trials produce this, like a muscle that is strengthened as it's trained or faces resistance.¹⁸

Trials produce in us the increasing ability to remain under something—to endure it—rather than the instinct to immediately throw in the towel. Though I didn't crunch the numbers, it wouldn't be hard to make the argument that when things get difficult, quitting is the instinct of many of the people that surround us. That's what the world does in all kinds of areas. That's the context we live in. It might be worth asking this question: Is it possible that the culture's coddling, and the absence of pressure to do hard things, has also made us give up spiritually more quickly? In our avoidance of certain things, or in our avoidance of thinking *rightly* about certain things, have we lost spiritual endurance?

James is saying that there's a process to this. The occasion-by-occasion testing of your faith produces endurance in your life. That can mean that extra years reveals extra endurance. So, younger men and women, seek out those that have endured. They might be able to tell you, "Yeah, that season of life was tough, but it produced *this* in me."

You strengthen a muscle not *only* by lifting heavy things, but also by using that muscle regularly. The fact that James uses the language of repeated occasion, that is, **when you encounter various trials**, means that the trials will happen more than once. If that's true, and if the command to **consider it all joy** occurs somewhat in the mental realm, we might think about this in terms of muscle memory. When Nancy plays the piano, if you watch her, she's not looking at her fingers. Her fingers instinctively know the precise distance between a C and an A-flat. Her left hand knows almost perfectly the distance of an octave. She sees the interval between the notes on the paper and her muscle responds. It's the same way with a skilled basketball player. When they dribble, they don't look down at the ball. Their head is up, eyes looking around, and—in the best case—what they're thinking through aligns with muscle memory and instinct. Hundreds of thousands of dribbles have accomplished something. So, as we encounter trials, will we respond rightly? Have we trained our instincts, that mental muscle to say, "I don't know what it is, but He's doing something. He's Sovereign over all."

Now for the second command, in the first clause of verse 4: **And let endurance have its perfect result.** James isn't saying, "create trials for the sake of creating trials." This isn't self-flagellation sanctification. But he's also not saying that we need to run from every difficulty. Would obeying Christ mean you have to step out of your comfort zone? Would obeying Christ mean that there might be cost to you?

Trials produce endurance. And endurance is producing something too. We saw *how* we might have joy in trials. Now he tells us *why* we might have joy in trials.

¹⁶ See Moo, 74; Vlachos, 19, and <https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/when-trust-word%E2%80%99s-etymology-1-tim-1-3>

¹⁷ υπομονη is υπο (meaning, under) + μονη (a form of remain)

¹⁸ Moo, 74.

3. One goal (v. 4b)

Verse 4 gives us the purpose of it all. James has been crescendo–ing to this: **And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** The end goal isn't endurance; it's maturity.¹⁹ The process of testing is how God makes you whole, or complete. It's how He builds us.

Of course, we're not there yet. We're double–minded. Our affections are divided. Yet, He aims to refine and strengthen us. Deuteronomy 6 isn't null and void. **Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!** He's undivided. And what does He long for in us? What is His design for us? He declared it right after that in Deuteronomy 6: **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might** (Deut. 6:4–5). James's brother said there's nothing more important than this.

Of course, He's the One that fulfilled this for us. For the *joy* set before Him, He *endured* the cross (Heb. 12:2). And He endured knowing what it would accomplish. He “remained under” the wrath of God to pay for our sin, to redeem us, and to make us whole. Because of that, though our joy might be dismal and our faith weak, He's the Author and Perfector of it.

The One God loves oneness within us.²⁰ That's the sense of perfect and complete. Are we there right now? No. How do we get there? We must be refined, whittled, tested. And *how* does He refine us? Not always, but often it's through trials. And if **perfect and complete** wasn't enough, James further describes the goal of **lacking nothing**. He's working to actively take away each and every imperfection.

Conclusion

I had a particular trial I was going to share this morning. To explain it probably would've been difficult; the twists and turns might've obscured the point. So, I decided against it. But as I sought to apply this passage to my own life this week, I thought of that particular trial from about 15 years ago. If I told you the details, you'd think, “That had to be hard.” And it was. But fifteen years later I can reflect on it with nearly no pain. I used to get upset, or anxious, thinking about it. But this week, as I reflected on James 1 and applied it to that particular season, I was able to conclude, “I wouldn't be close to the person I am today without the refining of that particular trial.”

Can I say that I have no pain or anxiety in the things I've faced more recently? Not always. In some cases, I'm too close to it. In other cases, my heart is too divided.

What is it in your own *past* that's produced Christ–like fruit in you? What are those things that have refined and tested your faith? And what is it that *now* is bringing you consternation? Is it possible that God is using *that* to shape you? James would say, “absolutely.”

Does that mean we *always* like the process, what it takes to accomplish the goal? Not necessarily. But there are occasions where we can believe in what something is accomplishing to such a degree that we can endure it better. He's forming us. Where there are impurities, He's refining us. Where we're divided within, He's uniting us. And if we know that, we can work toward considering it all joy.

¹⁹ Moo, 75.

²⁰ See David Gibson, *Radically Whole*, 45.