

Introduction:

A. A few months ago we took a little survey on a Sunday morning, asking people in what ways they felt “harassed and helpless.” We got about 80 responses, all different. One thing was painfully clear: each Sunday you come carrying a lot of troubles! I won’t quote those recent responses, lest we violate someone’s confidentiality, but we asked the same question several years ago and here are just a few of the responses:

- Depression
- Constant pressure of deadlines
- Our marriage needs strengthening; I feel hurt and frustrated
- I feel it is difficult to live up to God’s perfect standards
- Feel burdened by financial debt
- My ability to parent.
- I feel helpless in my battle with anxiety
- I struggle with feeling like I am always a disappointment
- Fear

We can safely say that we “face trials of many kinds.”

- B. That’s why the book of James is for us. This is a letter written to Christians under pressure—all kinds of pressure. The theme of the book is set forth right from the beginning: **vv.1-3...** Here is James’ version of the “Ice Bucket Challenge.” We’re like our friend Dave, sitting on the deck reading. James says, “*Just sit here while I teach you about the Christian life.*” And then he hits us with a bucket of ice water. Ice water trials. Enough to make you jump out of your skin. And James smiles and says, “*Consider it pure joy*”—nothing but joy! You got troubles? You’re livin’ large!! Let’s sing another round of “*Praise God from whom all blessings flow!*” James has our attention!
- C. Conventional wisdom says, “*Tough times make you stronger.*” But James is saying something much richer than that—and something that is *only* true for Christians. Let me show you.

I. THERE IS NO DOWNSIDE WHEN CHRISTIANS FACE TRIALS (1:2-4)

A. The thing that redeems trials for us is not just that we get tougher or more resilient, but that “the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” So for us, trials are a test of faith. How so? Well, they certainly test whether we will abandon God when we’re under pressure, or whether we will believe that God is both strong and loving. Illus.: Recently I was reminded of the story of Martin and Gracia Burnham, missionaries kidnapped and held for over a year in the jungles of the Philippines. Martin was killed in the rescue attempt. Later Gracia said, *“I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life’s supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I learned I don’t know as much about God as I thought I did. I don’t have him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God—and I’m not. The world’s in a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations.”* [Corrie Cutrer, "Soul Survivor," *Today's Christian Woman* (July/Aug 2003), p. 50]

B. But that said, it doesn’t seem to be James’ main point in this book. James doesn’t focus on whether we will cling to faith in God but whether we will *act* like we believe God. Our faith is revealed by how we behave under pressure. How will we handle the temptations that troubles bring on? Are you at your best or worst when you’re under pressure? Do you ever get angry when you’re stressed? Ever say really damaging things? Ever quarrel and fight. Does stress ever seem to set you up for escapist sins or for being especially judgmental of others? That’s what James is talking about in this book. Those are the tests of our faith that trials bring on.

About a week ago James and I went over to the Botanic Gardens to spend a little quality time together. So we’re sitting there, enjoying the beauty of Evening Island and you know what he did? He chewed me out! Up one side and down the other. All kidding aside, I got to the end of the book and I was just devastated by my sin. Specific, ugly

things that he called me out on. I was so convicted. And James seemed to say, “*Well, it is about time!*” Listen to **Jas 4:4-10... Face your sin and repent deeply. God meets you there with his grace and favor, and by his help and his Word we really do better next time.** In other words, we actually persevere in our faith. We gradually become more Christlike.

Then pressure comes again. In some ways, we’re behave better. But also our still-lurking sinfulness pushes through and erupts, and we’re brought to our knees again. *Wash. Rinse. Repeat.*

- C. **V.4** says, “*Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*” In other words, don’t begrudge God this process. Don’t stop repenting and obeying. Keep after humility and goodness, through God’s wisdom and grace. Don’t throw in the towel, because little by little we are becoming like Jesus. And that’s where the joy comes in. There’s nothing better than becoming more and more like Jesus.

Let me give you a couple barely hypothetical situations: Things are pretty good in Carla’s office except for one person who has is out for her. No reason. Maybe he’s jealous, or maybe it’s just a power trip. But his backstabbing has pushed her to the breaking point and she is this close to letting J.B. have a piece of her mind!

Here’s another: Life has been so hard for Arnie. Nothing ever goes his way. And then he has to endure Christmas with his brother—the golden boy, with his new promotion and the vacation to Scotland, and mom fawning all over him. Why is it always him? Arnie says to himself, “*I don’t need this! I’m not coming back.*”

If Carla and Arnie are Christians what should they do? **V.5...**

II. WE ARE ALWAYS WELCOME TO ASK GOD FOR WISDOM TO BEHAVE WELL UNDER PRESSURE (1:5-8)

- A. We often quote v.5 for all the different times we need God’s wisdom, and that’s a good idea. **But the context here is when we need wisdom to handle ourselves under pressure.** “*Lord Jesus, we’re quarreling all the time. I don’t know how to handle it?*” “*Lord, my body always*

hurts and I'm becoming such a grouch. I don't know how to be a good Christian when I feel so lousy."

Look at **Jas 3:17**, "*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*" Note first, that the wisdom to handle pressure "comes from heaven." We can't generate it ourselves, and we dare not trust our instincts. That's why we **ask for it**.

Secondly, the wisdom God gives is character driven. God's wisdom isn't just what to think or say; he changes the kind of person we are, even under pressure. It doesn't usually just happen. It is a process of struggle, repentance, obedience, and patience. But with God's Word and Spirit we do become thoroughly wise.

- B. God welcomes our prayers for wisdom any time but especially when we don't know how to be good and godly under pressure. James emphasizes that **God won't find fault** because we come admitting just how sinful we're tempted to be. You pray, "*Lord, I feel like punching his lights out but I know I shouldn't.*" And God *doesn't* say, "*Punching his lights out!? What's wrong with you? I don't want anything to do with angry people like you!*" Instead, God says, "*I'm so glad you asked for help! Let's look at Scripture together. In fact, why don't we read James?*"
- C. But there's a condition: v.6-7... So let's pretend that you're under a ton of pressure at home and you ask God for wisdom in handling it. And on this day he points you to **Jas. 1:19-21...** That's some hard spiritual work. God might not change *the other person* at all. You look at those verses and you see yourself in that mirror, but then you walk into the kitchen and let your spouse have it. And God says, in effect, "*So why did you ask me for wisdom if you aren't going to do what I tell you?*" You say you have faith in God? So prove it by your deeds.
- D. The dangerous doubt is not when we ask hard questions of God. The dangerous doubt is when we refuse God's help and disobey God's Word. That kind of doubt leaves you without rudder or anchor in life. There comes a point where

God will not give us the wisdom to do right under pressure when we've proven that we won't obey what he says nor lay hold of the help he offers.

V.8... Of two minds: *I believe in God but I don't believe in God.* "Unstable in **all** he does," whether under pressure or not. At home, work—everywhere. Never a trustworthy Christian no matter what you say you believe.

It seems that in **v.9** James completely changes the subject: **vv.9-11...** If Christians should "count it all joy when you face trials" then...

III. CHRISTIANS BROUGHT LOW BY TRIALS ARE AT A DISTINCT ADVANTAGE OVER THOSE ON TOP (1:9-11)

James talks several times about poor and rich Christians and about the envy and favoritism that arise.

A. What does **v.9** mean: "*Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position*"? Humble, or lowly, circumstances refer to the pressures of poverty—a particular array of trials. Christians whose faith is proven under pressure are the real heroes among us. *Illus.:* There's this commercial which opens with us looking down into an airport. People coming and going. You see people waiting for their planes—listening to music, chatting, talking on the phone. A plane is deboarding. And you hear, coming from somewhere, one person... clapping. People look around. They see the woman who is clapping. She stands and looks toward the gate. They all look, and start clapping, one at a time, as a whole group of soldiers come off the plane. Pretty soon the whole place is standing and applauding to the surprise and smiles of the deplaning soldiers. Here are our heroes. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwt4RggTEew>

And that is how James pictures "believers in humble circumstances." Here are the brothers and sisters who are fighting the real battles, who have been humbled by their sinfulness, and who have cried out for God's wisdom and then lived it; who are persevering and whose faith is being perfected. They *feel* like the least of us. They *feel* powerless and weak and often like spiritual failures, but they are the

nearest to joy; they are those whose crown of life is being polished.

- B. Illus.: Imagine that they let the cameras keep running after all those soldiers got off the plane. Here come the first class passengers. Self-assured, well-dressed, some of them at the top of their game—movers and shakers. And they come out into the terminal and the clapping stops and no one pays any attention. **V.10-11...** I think James is talking about rich Christians in the church. Later he criticizes believers who kowtow to the rich among them. Here I think the point is something like this: If you're rich—and your trials are minimal—you should be the first in the church to recognize how fleeting it all is. Take pride in knowing that God will not forget about you. Sooner or later, by the grace of God, you will be in very humble circumstances, too!

CONCLUSION

So James concludes his thought in **v.12**, *“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”*

“Blessed” equals “Consider it pure joy.” In v.2 the joy is that our faith is becoming mature and complete. Here it’s that we “*will receive the crown of life.*”

This speaks, of course, of those who do not give up on God when the going got rough. What’s more, it speaks of believers who didn’t just *get through* trials without abandoning their faith, but who came through trials *wisely*—who have, through obedience to God’s Word and with the help of God’s Spirit, grown to become more “*pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*”

If there is any Christian whom you admire it is because they have persevered through the trials of their faith. I’ve mentioned to you that one of my favorite lines in the book I wrote, *Pastoral Graces*, is, “*This side of the cloud of witnesses, pastors have the best seat in the house for seeing God work among His people.*” A few paragraphs later I wrote another part that moved me:

From my place in the front row I see quiet and astonishing generosity, dogged daily service, and love blanketing a multitude of sins. I watch through the dark shadows as brothers and sisters wrestle with the Lord till they limp into the light. I've watched saints straighten their shoulders and go out to face death. Again and again, I have seen God's people trust Him and I've only rarely seen people turn away. "Didn't you ever get angry with God?" I asked a friend who had suffered a crushing loss. "No, I never did," he said, "I grieved but I knew God was good." [p.137]

As we prepare for Communion, we come to the place where our humility—our sober realization of our sin under pressure—is met by the grace of God. Here we remember how great the grace of Jesus is. But we are also renewed in our resolve to live as the people of God.