

James 1:1-8

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Mary's 35. She's married to Pete, and they have two wee ones, Joe and Amber. Mary loves swimming, and she loves teaching her Sunday school class. She just got back from the hospital with the news that her cancer is advancing, and the prognosis is not good.

Jonathan and his wife Patricia bought their dream house two years ago. They went over budget to make it happen, though it did help that Jonathan had just been given a promotion at work. The house is near their church, and they're really encouraged that one or two of their neighbors are showing an interest in the gospel. On Friday, Jonathan discovered out of the blue that he was losing his job.

Jim and Betty are long-standing members of their local Baptist church. Their three kids were all brought up in the church—Sunday school, teens, youth fellowship, you get the picture. Their middle son, Christopher, went off to uni last year to train as a primary teacher. On Wednesday, they got a phone call from the police. Christopher had OD'd on Tuesday. His flatmate called for an ambulance, but they were too late. The funeral's on Friday. Bad stuff happens to good people.

Bad stuff happens to good people. I think we all struggle with that reality. I think we all acknowledge that it is the reality. We may not wish it to be the reality, but simple observation confirms that that is the reality. And it just doesn't seem fair. Where is God in the midst of it all?

And I want to try and grapple with this reality with the help of what James has to say in the first few verses of his letter of the first chapter. Now, James doesn't give us all the answers. It's not his intention to give us all the answers, but he does give us some answers, some very significant answers.

[2 : 28] We're going to divide what James has to say under four headings. First of all, we're going to notice what we're going to call the harsh reality. But then we're also going to see what we're calling the called for response. James proposes to us how we are to respond to this harsh reality.

So, there's the harsh reality, but then there's also the called for response. But then there's a third element that I think James very explicitly highlights for us, and that is what we're calling the crucial resource. And when we get there, we'll indicate what that is. But then finally, in these verses, verses 2 to 8, there is what I'm calling the disturbing condition. So, at the moment, this may all seem a little bit cryptic, certainly maybe the third and the fourth one. But once we get there, hopefully it will all become clear. I certainly hope so. Well, let's begin with what I'm calling the harsh reality. And it's simply what I've already indicated. Bad stuff happens to good people.

This is what James says or takes as a given in verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. In these few words, we can draw out three aspects of what James is saying. First of all, we can draw out what we might call the inevitability of bad stuff.

Note the revealing little word there in verse 2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. James doesn't say, consider it pure joy, my brothers, if you face trials of many kinds, or in the unlikely and unwelcome circumstance that you face a trial of some kind. No, he doesn't say that. He says, whenever you face trials of many kinds. He takes it as a given that those to whom he writes are facing, will face, and will continue to face trials of many kinds. So, the inevitability of bad stuff.

But we also have identified in these words in verse 2 what we might call the victims of bad stuff. To whom, as James is speaking, consider it pure joy, my brothers, my brothers and sisters, my fellow believers, those who have put your faith in Christ. You will face trials of many kinds.

[5 : 06] Don't imagine for a moment that James is saying that because, you know, you're friends with God now, that life will be easy. No more trials, no more difficulties, no more pain, no more suffering.

No, James says that's not the reality. That's not your experience, and you ought not to expect it to be your experience. My brothers, we know we were thinking last Sunday morning of to whom James was writing to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, and we felt that it was legitimate to understand that as a very broad description of the church scattered around the world. And, of course, that's not only at the time that James was writing, but across generations. And so, the victims, if you wish, of bad stuff, that includes us. It includes you. And I don't need to tell you that. You know that from your own life experience. But I think also, just at the very beginning of what James says here, we can identify what we might call the nature of bad stuff. The word James uses is trials. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

But then, as I've just done by reading the verse, he explicitly broadens what he has in mind by adding these words of many kinds. Trials of many kinds. I think James here is being deliberately broad in his language. He wants to include in what he has in view and in what is understood by his readers this very broad perspective of the kind of trials, the nature of the trials that they are and will efface.

We can maybe divide these trials into two broad but distinct categories that are, of course, and I'm sure James did have in mind trials or suffering for the faith. That suffering that is peculiar to those who are believers, the suffering because we're believers, opposition or persecution or being marginalized in one way or another. Indeed, in this letter, there will be examples of that that James highlights. We won't spend time looking at them this morning. That's one kind of trial or suffering.

But when James speaks of trials of many kinds, he surely wants us to see it beyond that. He's thinking of trials or suffering caused by any painful circumstance. We might want to notice that in this very letter, James makes reference to Job. We read the third chapter of Job. Well, if we turn to chapter 5 of James and verses 10 and 11, listen to what he says as he picks up on this theme of suffering again. Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. And so he gives this very concrete example of a man who suffered all manner of pain and suffering, the death of loved ones, financial chaos, tragedies of one kind or another. You have a picture of all that Job endured. Trials of many kinds. For us, it might be the death of a loved one, perhaps in tragic, untimely circumstances, certainly as we see things. It might be illness that we're enduring or that a loved one is enduring. It might be a problem in our relationships. We may be the victims of infidelity.

[8 : 59] There may simply be a breakdown in a friendship and the pain that that causes and brings to us. It might be problems with our children. It might be the matter of finances and difficulties there, frustrations, failures, and we could go on, you name it. And then, of course, there are also, and I think James's language of trials of many kinds allows us to broaden even further and speak about those irritating trials. They're not big league trials, but they still get you down. You know, the boiler breaking down, a flat battery, you know, missing a connection when you're traveling. And sometimes the problem is you've got these little trials, but you get lots of them at the same time. You know, how's that?

You know, same day, you get five or six of them, and they almost seem to be conspiring against you. And James is saying, that's life. That is what happens. Bad stuff happens to good people.

That's the harsh reality. But then also we have, and we particularly want to focus in on this, is what we're calling the called-for response. What does James say is to be our response in the face of these trials? Well, he says it in simple English, even if it's difficult for us to grasp what is being called for. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

James demands the first of his 50-plus imperatives in the letter that we respond to these trials, whatever they are, these trials of many kinds, that we respond with pure joy. It's almost as if when James is choosing the words that he's going to use, he's conscious that this is a big ask, but instead of diluting the demand, he intensifies it by this expression, consider it pure joy.

It would be difficult enough for him to have said, well, rejoice in the face of affliction, but he says, no, consider it pure joy. Consider it all joy. Now, what is our instinctive response to this called-for response? Well, if we employ polite English, and maybe you in your own mind, you've already formulated a response, but let me suggest a couple of possibilities. If we employ polite English, we might call this called-for response, consider it pure joy. We might call it counterintuitive. That's a nice big word we could use because it's counterintuitive.

[11 : 37] But if we prefer plain English, we could call it pure crazy. Pure joy? Yeah, right, pure crazy. How can James possibly demand this of us? How can he possibly make such an outrageous proposal?

You're facing trials of many kinds. You're suffering. You're in pain. Consider it pure joy. You're the man's on another planet. How can he demand this of us? It just doesn't make sense.

So, what do we need to do? What we need to do is we need to think it through, which, surprise, surprise, is precisely what James instructs us to do. Notice the language he uses there in verse 2, consider it pure joy. And I think we rightly can put a lot of weight on that very first word, that verb, consider it pure joy. This is not principally about how you feel, but about how you think. Now, we can't divide these two things because how we think will impact on how we feel.

But nonetheless, the principal emphasis here is on thinking, on considering, on pondering on what is going on. And what do we need to consider? I think there are two things we need to consider. We need to consider the nature and the outcome of trials in the life of the believer. First of all, the nature of our trials. What are they? Well, James goes on to explain what they are. They are the testing of our faith. Notice in what goes on in the passage here. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. So, what are these trials? Well, they are a means whereby your faith is tested. Trials are tests. The testing is with a view to refining and strengthening our faith. Our faith, our trust in God is a bit like our muscles. They grow and develop under strain. Now, on a number of occasions, I've already used this Fitbit to illustrate things. It's actually not charged. I don't even know what time it is. So, I'm sorry about that, but we could be here a while. But anyway, I'm still waiting. Now, this Fitbit encourages me to walk 10,000 steps every day. What I've discovered, it won't happen today because it's not charged, but in preaching a sermon, I do about 3,000 steps, which seems like it's cheating, really. But anyway, that's another matter. The thing is, those 10,000 steps, it's purely arbitrary.

What the science tells us, I'm assured, is that if I spend three times a day, 10 minutes of power walking where I'm sweating, where I'm sweating and it's really tough, that is way better than 10,000 leisurely steps. And it's like that with our faith. You know, if we have it easy, if life is easy, if life is relaxed and there's no problems and there's no stress and we're just ambling through life, then our faith becomes flabby. But when it is put under strain, when it is put under stress, that is when it matures and grows and develops in the measure that we respond as God would have us respond.

[15:10] So, the nature of our trials, they are to test our faith. But then James also identifies the outcome of our trials. What do these trials produce? And James identifies as two sequential outcomes that we could call perseverance and perfection. First of all, perseverance. There we have it very clearly, James says, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Now, the word that James uses is variously translated as perseverance, endurance, steadfastness, staying power. And this perseverance, this endurance, is not a meek, passive submission to our circumstances, but a strong, active, challenging response grounded in our faith in God. In the face of many trials, we doggedly cling all the tighter to our God and stand our ground. This is the perseverance that is to be developed by these trials. But this perseverance, in turn, results in perfection. Now, I'm using the word perfection to capture what is said there in verse 4 where we read, perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The same Greek word that is used and translated finish in perseverance must finish its work, that's the same word that is translated mature, that we may be mature and complete.

So, the idea is that the finished work of perseverance is a finished believer, as in the finished article, not as in, you know, laid down low. The finished work of perseverance is that we might be the finished article, mature, complete, not lacking anything.

Now, let's just pause for a moment and consider what James is saying concerning this outcome of our many trials. Trials make us cling tighter to Jesus. Well, they don't always do that, but that is one way in which we respond to which we respond to them, and that's good, and that's true. But James is saying something much more remarkable. He is saying that trials make us more like Jesus. Not just make us cling tighter to Jesus, but they actually make us more like Jesus. They make us or contribute to us becoming mature and complete, just like Jesus. And of course, we know this is the Father's great work in us, to transform us into the image of His Son. And trials are used by God to secure this outcome, that we might be mature and complete, not lacking anything. The Apostle Paul speaks of the same process an outcome in similar terms. In Romans chapter 5 from verse 3, we read, not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings. Why? Because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He has given us.

Now, do we experience this maturity, this completeness, this perfection in the here and now? Well, no, we don't. But we are progressing towards that perfection, that maturity, aided by the trials that we endure.

[19 : 08] And that is why we are to consider trials pure joy. What James is saying is this, believer, consider the end game. Consider what God is doing in and for you. Consider the exciting prospect and promise of maturity and completeness in Christ and like Christ. And all of that is being made possible. All of that is being progressed. All of that is being accelerated, if you wish, by these trials of many kinds that you are facing.

Which takes us to the third heading that I want to think about, and that is what I'm calling the crucial resource. Notice what James immediately goes on to say in verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God. And then he goes on. And sometimes we imagine that James is moving on to another subject. And in this letter, he kind of does that quite a lot.

He'll be speaking about one thing, and then he seems to just jump to something else. And it's difficult to find the connections. And we might think that that's what's happening here. But I don't think that is what's happening here. I think James is still speaking about the same matter of considering pure joy. And what he's saying is that there is a crucial resource you need if you're going to be successful in considering trials in this way. And this crucial resource is wisdom.

See, James is acknowledging that there is a day coming when we will be matured and complete, not lacking anything. And clearly that would also include not lacking wisdom. That day is coming.

We're getting there. But that day is not today. Hence the advice in verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, wisdom. What is wisdom? Wisdom is about how we live or how to live. It is a practically oriented virtue or resource that gives direction in the life of the believer. And in context, in the context here in our passage, the principal sense or need for wisdom that James has in mind is wisdom that will help us consider pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds. Of course, the advice can be taken and applied more broadly in terms of our need for wisdom. But particularly, we need wisdom in order to do this, to consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds. And we know that's the case. We know that it's not easy to think clearly or wisely in the eye of the storm. You know that. You know that when you're facing a trial, when you're suffering, where even physical pain makes it difficult to think straight. You've been there. You know, you've voiced those words. You've thought those thoughts.

[22 : 02] I can't think straight. My head's all over the place. Hence the need for wisdom. Now, how do we get wisdom? Well, James tells us. We ask for it and we receive it. We ask. Who do we ask? We ask God. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God. And we ask God confidently where that confidence is grounded in two realities.

It's grounded in the reality of God's character. This God, who James tells us, who gives generously. Now, you're in a big trial. It's all darkness. There's no sense in any of it. And you think, well, what possible wisdom, what store of wisdom would be sufficient? And James says, God will give generously.

He'll give you all the wisdom you need. However much you need, he will give you because he gives generously. He won't give you the bare minimum because he gives generously. That's the kind of God he is. And not only that, but he gives generously to all. So maybe you're thinking this morning, well, not to me. I won't get that wisdom. Not me. And James says, hang on a moment. This God of whom we're speaking is the God who gives generously to all. And he does so without finding fault. He's not going to give you that wisdom grudgingly. He's not going to respond to your request for wisdom and say, well, not you again. You know, how many times? This is, what, is this number 10, number 20, number 200? No, he doesn't find fault. He doesn't respond to your request for wisdom by saying, well, surely you can handle this one by yourself. It's not such a big trial. You know, deal with it by yourself. You know, we sometimes do that maybe as, even as parents, as our kids grow older. Say, well, you know, just deal with it. You know, how many times have you said that? Just deal with it. God doesn't do that. God doesn't say, oh, just deal with it. No, he gives generously without reproach, without finding fault.

So the confidence with which we ask will be grounded in our convictions concerning the truth about God's character that James identifies here. But also it will be grounded in our experience of God. The description of God in verse 5, that he gives generously to all without finding fault.

It's interesting, we can actually see that that language as the gospel in a nutshell. The good news of a God who gives generously, who gives to all, and who gives without finding fault.

[24 : 46] Isn't that the gospel? Isn't that the heart of the gospel? Is that not the gospel that you have experienced? Is this not the God that you have experienced? Well, this is the same God to whom you will be requesting wisdom of. We ask, but then also, of course, we receive. This is the promise.

Ask and you will receive. But take careful note of this crucial and practical distinction. So listen, listen carefully, because this, I think, is really important.

There is a difference between receiving wisdom and feeling wise. Does that make sense? There's a difference between receiving wisdom and feeling wise. When you ask for wisdom, you may well feel none the wiser. But you can be assured that you have received wisdom, and you can proceed to consider and respond to your trials in that confidence. But let me just quickly move on to the final heading that I've got, and that is what I've called the disturbing condition. Verse 6, but when he asks, so this man, this woman who is asking God for wisdom in order to enable them to consider their trials as pure joy, 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. And it goes on.

I'm calling this a disturbing condition because it is disturbing. Now, I've read these verses, these first few verses of James, dozens of times. And each time, I kind of wish James had admitted verses 6 to 8. Now, that's a silly thing to say, but I'm being honest. I say it would be so much nicer if those verses weren't there. That's what I've often thought. Because it seems to discourage us.

You know, there's this wonderful promise that God was going to give you wisdom, and then he says, ah, yes, but you better have some pretty serious faith, because if you don't, forget it. That's kind of what it sounds like. And you think, well, I don't have that faith, so woe is me.

[26 : 54] At first sight, these words seem quite disheartening. God's giving of wisdom, we have to acknowledge, is conditioned by the manner in which we ask. He states it very clearly. How are we to understand this? Well, I think the key is to identify who is being described in verses 6 to 8. Is this a depiction of a tentative believer with sincere doubts, which I suspect kind of would describe pretty much all of us? Is this the person who is being described? By no means. James identifies the man or woman who will not receive wisdom as a double-minded man. Let's just jump ahead to that language that James uses to describe this person. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man. Now, it would seem that James has coined this word.

Certainly, it's a word that's not found in any parallel Greek literature. It may have been a word, but it's possible that James made it up for his purposes. Double-minded or double-souled.

And he's using this word to describe a man or woman who refuses to commit wholeheartedly to Christ. A man or woman with split loyalties attempting to do the impossible, have one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world, hoping to gain the benefits of being in the kingdom, but unwilling to commit to that life. And it can't be done. It simply can't be done. Now, many, many moons ago, I would travel in dugout canoes along tributaries of the Amazon. I can't imagine trying to do that now, but in a past life, I did that a few times. And one of the key skills was boarding the vessel that would be sitting on the river's edge. And the more tentative would-be passengers tended to struggle with this first step. You see, they would place one foot in the boat, and the boat, it wasn't a big boat, it would begin to sway with the weight of that one foot being placed in the boat. And at that point, those who were hesitant would begin to fear. They would fear that they were going to fall. And at this point, they might try and retreat to the shore and then fail to get into the boat, which is what they were trying to do. Or worst case scenario, they would begin to perform an involuntary splits as the canoe drifted away from the shore.

And really, it was a case of get in or get out. And James is saying, a man who isn't sure if he's in or out, a man of split loyalties, a man who refuses to commit to Christ, well, don't imagine that such a man will receive what he asks of God. A double-minded man, a man of split loyalties, will not receive an answer from God, not only to this request, but indeed to other requests that he may see fit to choose.

This is who James is describing, somebody who was not fully committed to the Lord. They're trying to hedge their bets and, as a result, remain outside God's family. For such folks, there is no promise that God will give wisdom or indeed answer their prayers at all.

[30 : 33] Now, let me just pause and ask a solemn question. Does this describe you? And if it is, or if it does, then it's time to get into the boat. Well, let's just consolidate what we've been learning.

And I'll close with this. And I want you to try and ground what we've been learning in your present struggles and trials. So, what trials are you facing today? What are you trying to endure?

I'm going to give you 10 seconds to identify one concrete trial in your life. Just one. There's maybe many. Choose one. So, have you done that? One trial that you're facing today.

Okay. God is calling on you to consider that trial pure joy. Now, even though we've already preached a sermon on that, I know you're already thinking, well, that's not going to happen.

In order to consider it pure joy, you need to do three things. Okay? So, take a mental note. These three things you need to do. We're just recapping on what we've already discovered. You need to consciously acknowledge that this trial that you're facing is intended to test you, to produce perseverance or endurance. It's intended to test your faith, to strengthen it, to make it purer and stronger and richer. So, consciously acknowledge that. But what you also need to do is you need to endure that trial. You need to hang on and cling on to God in the midst of your trial. The third thing you need to do is you need to look forward to the prize or the outcome. Mature and complete, not lacking anything like Jesus. So, I've given you three things that you need to do. And maybe if you're being honest with yourself, you're thinking, yeah, okay, but that's still difficult. That's still a big ask.

[32 : 46] Okay, there's another thing you need to do. You need to ask for wisdom. Grounded in your convictions concerning the goodness of God, ask for wisdom and receive the wisdom that God has promised He will give you. And you can ask God for wisdom right now. You don't need to wait till you get home. You don't need to have your Sunday lunch and ponder on it. Right now, you can ask God for wisdom in the face of that trial that you would be enabled to consider it pure joy. You need wisdom to do that. Ask God now for that wisdom. Bad stuff does happen to good people. Bad stuff happens to you. What to do? 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. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You for the great wisdom that it contains. And we pray that we would eat of that wisdom, that we would drink of that wisdom, that we would seek that wisdom, that we would ask You for that wisdom, and that we would receive that wisdom. And we pray very especially in the face of the trials that we're all facing of different kinds, some huge, some indescribable, and others maybe just irritating and they're getting us down. Whatever they might be, help us to take seriously

Your Word and the instruction and counsel that it grants to us, that it gives to us in this matter. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.