

An Attested Faith

by J. Glyn Owen

James teaches that trials are a testing of our faith, which develops perseverance and makes our faith genuine, and that we should welcome trials with joy because they are a means of purifying and strengthening our faith.

Duration: 47:53

Scripture: James 1:2

Topics: "Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that God can enable us to be what he requires of us at every stage of our lives. He uses the analogy of a four-day-old child being perfect at their level to illustrate this point. The speaker also highlights the importance of facing trials that God sends us, as they can lead to growth and maturity. The passage in James 1:2-4 is referenced, which encourages believers to consider it pure joy when facing trials, as they develop perseverance and ultimately lead to blessings and joy.

Transcript

It may be that my memory is very short, but I don't actually remember coming to the beginning of the last month of the year in the knowledge of so many people passing through difficult times of one way, in one way or another. Now this may be purely my own experience, it may not be general, but I have a fear that it may be general, and that there are indeed more than we would care to know who are passing through times of severe trial of one kind or another. What has the Word of God to say to us when we are passing through times of difficulty? Has it anything? The answer to that, of course, is that it has so many things to say to us, things that possibly we will never hear until we get into times of difficulty, because we are too attuned to other voices.

But when under the burden that may be oppressing us, or in the face of the challenge that may be gigantic in proportions, when facing such issues, we realize that we are incapable of doing so on our own, and so we become perhaps a little more sensitive to the Word of God. So I am going to this evening to take a passage which is not an easy one to hear, and one which I feel encouraged to speak about, because we are going to meet at the Lord's table. And so what I am going to say needs to be seen under the shadow of Calvary, as it were.

When God utters these words to us, when he speaks these words to us through the mouth of his servant James, he is to be seen as the God who sent his Son, as the God who means well, and who, as Jeremiah puts it, is planning plans of love and of grace for his people. The plans that I devise for you are plans of

love, of grace, of kindness, and so forth. I am going to ask you to come look with me at the verses that open that first chapter in James's great book, looking particularly at verses two to four.

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 in anything. What a remarkable word, written by James, the brother of our Lord, this epistle has not always been appreciated as as it perhaps should.

It has not been highly appraised even by some of our great evangelical fathers, such as Martin Luther, who called it an epistle of straw for one reason or another. We won't go after Martin Luther tonight, but that is what he said. He can't be right in everything either, though to be fair we must interject that he was comparing this letter with the epistle to the Romans, but even so it is not for him thus to castigate a section of the written and inspired word of God, great man that he was.

Rightly understood, this massive Christological statement that we have right at the beginning places this book on a very high level to begin with. It is not given to many people to put continents of truth in a sentence. Most of us take a long time to say a little.

I'm very conscious that that is my own fault. But listen to what James says in just the compass of a couple of words. He's introducing himself and he says, James, a servant of God, or if you prefer, a slave of God, and.

And? Of God and? God and who? Who else has equal claims upon any man equal with God? Well listen, James, a slave of God and of the Lord, meaning Jehovah, Jesus Christ. I'm not going to pause with that, but that is the most gigantic statement, crystallized into few words, and the whole of this epistle, I believe, is to be seen under the canopy of this great Christological statement made by his brother according to the flesh, who at one time was no believer, was a skeptic, was a doubter, but in the process of time had been brought into that place where he had to acknowledge, jealous though he may have been a little earlier on in his life, that here indeed there had come into his own family by the interposition of the Holy Spirit, the very incarnate Lord. Now, having thus introduced this epistle, how is James going to begin? Well, this is what we are going to meditate upon tonight.

The passage begins with an exhortation. The second verse, consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Now, if he said, if he had said, now you people, there are some trials in life and you need to sort them out.

They rarely have a potential for bringing blessing and bringing joy with them. Well, we wouldn't have been so surprised. All of us know that there have been some difficult circumstances in our lives, in the midst of which, at the very heart of the storm, we have discovered something, and we have learned something, and we shall be eternally the better for what we've discovered and what we've learned.

That's not what James said. Consider it pure joy, says James, sheer joy, whenever you face trials of many kinds. When you see a host of trials coming your way, and you can't distinguish the one from the other, even if you wanted to, and they're coming like a massive torrent, and you don't know what to do, consider it all joy, he says.

Now, look first at the naturally unwelcome experience which is here contemplated. It's expressed in those words, trials of many kinds, trials of many kinds, or according to the old King James Version, divers or

diverse, I think it's diverse temptations. Trials are universally unwelcome.

No normal being will say that he is fond of being tried or being tested. You wouldn't say that, would you? Apart from the grace of God anyway. And yet James bids Christians positively to consider it joy, pure joy, sheer joy, when they encounter various kinds of trials.

He's not saying, of course, that trials are in and of themselves joyous, intrinsically joyous, that's not what he's saying. But he's telling us to consider it joy that they're coming our way, for some reason or other. What does he mean by trials? Actually, the word used in the King James, the word temptation is a little bit misleading in this context, because it suggests seduction to do wrong.

Usually, when we speak of temptation, we mean we mean seduction, to do something that is untoward, that is contrary to the will of God and to the Word of God. That's not what James had in mind. Not when you're tempted to do sin, that's not what he has in mind.

The word that James used does not mean that, but rather a trial or a testing, as when a bird is testing his wings to see if it can fly. Its goal is not sin or suffering, but strength. Its aim is to prove the genuineness of something so that it can thereafter be labeled, attested.

And that's the point. We are tested in order thereafter to be known as attested, trustworthy, because we've passed the test. I wonder, my friends, how many of us in the sight of God tonight are labeled attested? How many of us have been tried and found wanting? How many of us have been tried and found worthy? How many of us are attested after the test? We are tested, this is the idea here, we are tested by various trials with a view to our thereafter being attested, known as men and women that can be trusted with whatever God requires of us, difficult, dangerous, though it may be.

Now the importance of faith, that which is to be tried, is such that we do well to welcome such trial or trials. If our faith is genuine, then we can only benefit by the assurance that trials will impart. If your faith is a genuine faith, reposed in the true God, then when you and I come out of our trials, our faith is confirmed, and it is thereby strengthened.

And so the difficulties of the morrow after, and every other tomorrow after that, will be correspondingly smaller and dwarfed. If our faith has been attested, we shall know that we can count upon God in any difficulty thereafter. But if my faith is not genuine, if my faith is proved to be wanting in the trial, that too is a blessing, albeit in disguise.

If our faith is proved to be wanting, proved to be other than genuine, then my dear friends, the sooner the better we know it. The sooner the better we know it in order that we may attend to it. And so however you look at it from the vantage point of God and of eternity and of eternal things, what James is saying has a very valid basis to it.

The naturally unwelcome experience nevertheless. But then look at the naturally unexpected command which we encounter here, when he says, consider it pure joy, sheer joy. By his clever use of words, you know, the apostle implies that we should greet every trial with the same greeting as he has used to greet the saints.

Now in verse one he says, James the servant of God or a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, greetings. Now you get that, don't you? Here is a man who is delighted to be addressing the saints and he says greetings. He's happy about it.

He wouldn't be writing if he were not happy. He's glad. He thinks about them scattered.

He thinks about their problems. He has sympathy with them. He has a fellow feeling with them and for them.

Now he uses exactly the same root, not the same form of the word, but the same root, meaning the same thing, to tell us that that's the way we should greet the multitude of our trials. Moreover such joyous acceptance of trials need to be wholehearted and not half-hearted. It must be with all joy or pure joy.

One has only to say all this in order to appreciate the totally unnatural expectations of the New Testament. The New Testament expects Christian people to behave differently from the natural and it does that of course because we have been given a supernatural birth, a spiritual birth, a new birth of God. He has become our Father.

He has given us the Holy Spirit. He has implanted his word in us, but because of that he's expecting things of us he doesn't expect of his creatures generally. God has not promised to save his people from trials, from tribulations, but he has covenanted to be with his people when they pass through the fire and through the floods and ultimately Psalm 34 19 even to deliver us out of our afflictions into the glory that he has prepared for us.

But in the meantime he has promised to be with us and to make it possible for us to welcome the unwelcomed. Now the next thing I want you to notice is the accompanying explanation. And we need an explanation, don't we? Why should we welcome diverse trials or trials of many kinds? Why should we welcome them with pure joy? Well says James for this reason, because you know.

Now you see he's talking to believers here who are taught in the word of God, who have the word of God, who have received it, who believe it. He's taking it for granted. Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Now there is so much wrapped up in that. Let's come to grips with it just a little. James's exhortation is not unreasonable.

It is based upon something which every true Christian should know, namely that faith becomes productive in and through such trials as God permits for us in this earthly sphere of life. Not until faith has been tested can it be attested and can it bring forth the kind of fruit that it is capable of. It has to be tested.

Until it is attested, it is not capable of making us persevere or maintain our Christian calling with the steadfastness and perseverance which God requires of us and which honors God in this world. We only have the boldness to persevere when we know the genuineness of our own faith and when we know that the God in whom our faith is reposed is a God who cannot fail us. And we go forwards in life believing that.

Now mark the implication of that statement as far as Christian evangelism and follow-up is concerned. James takes it for granted that every Christian is alerted to the fact that saving faith in Jesus Christ only produces its perfect fruit facing trials. Let me repeat that.

James takes it for granted that every Christian is alerted to the fact that saving faith in Jesus Christ only produces its perfect fruit when faced with trials. Trials are necessary to bring out of faith what is inherent, what is possible within it, what God has capacitated it by his grace to do. And we need the trials to bring out what is latent, to express what is involved in the Christian faith.

Faith in God. Knowing this, every true Christian should learn to welcome trials with what James calls this pure joy. For someone to rejoice thus in face of trials was not as monstrous as it might at first appear.

It is based on knowledge. Knowledge that should belong to every Christian and which the verse happily explains in terms of a three-pointed elaboration. First of all, Christians should know that the trials of many kinds, verse two, look at it, trials of many kinds, they are actually the testing of your faith, verse three.

Now let me put that in a sentence. What should Christians know? What does James take for granted here that we know? He takes for granted that we know that our trials are a testing. By our trials God is testing us in this particular sense.

That we have already considered but to which we may again refer. The significance of that statement really will become evident by reference to the precise word employed for testing in verse three. It is dochinion.

And the word, it's the word for sterling coinage. We sometimes speak of sterling coinage. Money which is genuine, money which is unalloyed, money which is real money, it's been tested.

And in the passage it attributes to trials that God permits or plans a purging, purifying quality. That is what they are meant to do. They are meant to purge us, they are meant to prune us, they are meant to cleanse us from things in our lives which only hinder our perseverance and hinder the full expression of faith in God.

Now it's remarkable how similar a passage to this we find in the first epistle of Peter. Let me read to you verses six and seven in chapter one. And you have the two sets of words exactly the same as we have in James.

In this salvation, says Peter, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may be, sorry, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials, all kinds of trials, exactly the same as James. These have come so that your faith of greater worth than gold which perishes, even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine. Now that word genuine is the same word as we have in James.

Tested, proved genuine, attested, affirmed, authenticated, set apart as unalloyed and genuine silver or gold. Trials then are a testing and a purging of our faith. We need to know that as we daily face the problems of life, if we are to have this joy and welcome our trials as God expects us and has grace for us to do.

We need to know that for one thing. Secondly, the trials which are a testing of our faith do not only purge and purify faith itself, but they produce something beyond faith. Now our trials would be well worth bearing if they only purified our faith, purged our faith.

But, says James, they do something more than that. Look at verse 3. You know, he says, that the testing of your faith, and the word in the version that I'm using, the NIV tonight, is develops, and it's a very suggestive one. The testing of your faith develops something.

Well, what does it develop? It develops perseverance. The one of the versions says, produces steadfastness. Well, all right.

The word produce is like producing fruit or working something out. You've started with the ingredients and you're going to cook a cake, and you're bringing it into existence. You're going through the process.

You're producing something. I want to focus attention upon the action of the verb develops, or produces, or, King James, worketh for us certain things. Two typical illustrations of its usage may help to bring out its meaning.

Let me refer you to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 17. Again in the NIV. Paul there says this.

He says, our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Now you've heard that many, many times before. Maybe not in this version, but here it is, and I think it brings out the truth very well.

Our light and momentary troubles, these trials that we're having, what do they do? Well, says Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 17, they are achieving for us something well beyond themselves. What are they achieving? An eternal glory that far outweighs them all. Now it's exactly the same word.

They are achieving. They are producing. The point made is, of course, that our light momentary affliction is in the hand of Almighty God, producing something and achieving something outside and beyond the pain and the anguish of the moment.

We tend to think there's nothing to our trials other than the pain, other than the anguish, other than the difficulty, and we see ourselves hedged in as in a prison. No, no, says Paul. No, no, says James.

There's something going on. God is producing something. You're in his hands.

You may be in the fire. You may be in the fire and in the flame, but you're in his hands, in the fire, in the flame. It is not a meaningless experience through which we pass.

It is productive of something that is infinitely precious. You have the same word again in 2 Corinthians 7 and verse 10. Godly sorrow brings, that's the word translated here, brings repentance.

That leads to salvation and leaves no regret. But worldly sorrow brings death. Now the idea is of bringing forth or again of producing.

It's the same word, you see. The same word, and it's talking of the same kind of thing, producing something. Repentance may be the gift of the ascended Lord according to Acts 5.31 or of God the Father according to Acts 11.18, but this is how it is actually developed in terms of our experience, says the apostle.

It is produced by godly sorrow. So do the problems of life, says Peter and Paul in unison. So do the problems of life which God uses for the trial, for the testing and thus the attesting of the saints.

These testings of ours, these trials of ours, need not be in vain. They may be fruitful and profitable if, in the words of Hebrews 12.11, we are trained by them or, according to the King James, exercised thereby. If we go through the exercise they call upon us to go through, then we can be the better on account of them.

They produce something beyond and outside of themselves, even the glory of which the apostle Paul speaks. Then thirdly, that which such trials as God uses to test our faith ultimately produces, is here described as perseverance or steadfastness. Paul speaks of glory, the glory at the end, the glory that will

be ours when our Lord Jesus returns.

James speaks of the perseverance that brings us to that point of glory, the capacity to carry on, the determination to move with God, the setting of the heart on the doing of the will of God as our Lord Jesus himself had done when he said, my meat is to do the will of him that sent me and to finish his work. This is something vitally important to understand. Saving faith sets us out, it gets us going.

That same faith, when it has been tested and purged, produces steadfastness, it produces perseverance. Faith, albeit as minuscule as a grain of mustard seed, is saving if it is reposed in God as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. You don't need a great faith to be saved, but you need a great God to trust.

And the one true great God has come to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, and however weak your faith, if you come to him and you rest on him and trust in him, he'll save you with a very little faith. As a grain of mustard seed, you rest in him, but you look to him, and that's the point. You trust in him, that's the point, and out of his grace he saves you.

Saving faith becomes daily and hourly relevant and fruitful, however, only insofar as its genuineness has been proved and its faults corrected. Insofar as the trials of life result in an attested faith, an accredited faith, then our life can begin to assume the character of fortitude. Men whose faith has been thus strengthened are men that can look into the face of demons and devils and trust God.

They can look into the face of life and of death and carry on with God's business. See, like the growing child, when once a man discovers, or let me let me refer to the child first, when once a child discovers that its legs can hold it up and carry it along, the kid's not going to crawl anymore. The kid starts crawling, of course, and he's going on crawling, but one day he's going to make the big discovery that these two prongs going down here, call them legs, whatever you like, he can stand on them, he can jump on them, he can walk on them, he can run on them.

You think he's going to crawl anymore? Not when he can stand and leap on his two legs. Men and women, when you have found your spiritual legs, you and I'll begin to run How do we find our spiritual legs? In the trials of faith, when we put faith to the test and let God purge it and purify it, and when we come out from the struggle, we look back upon it and we see, my, that was not me, that was God. He gave me strength for the hour.

I can look into the face of the next problem before it arrives, and if it comes in his goodwill, my God is able. Thus, the exhortation to face all kinds of trials with joy or with pure joy is not as irrational or meaningless as it may have appeared at first. A false faith will only flourish, as the gospel says, until tribulation and persecution arises because of the Word.

Now, did you notice that? That's Mark 4, 16. A false faith, it's not a genuine faith, it seems to grow like the seed sown, it'll grow until, until tribulations and persecution arises, but it'll kill it, that'll kill it, because it's not genuine. But the real faith, true faith, becomes stronger in the face of persecution and is purified in the fire and in the flame to face further trials, and thus to glorify God as it moves from strength to strength, by grace upon grace, and moves from faith to faith.

That's the progress of the spiritual man in Scripture. An exhortation, an explanation, one other word. The kind of expectation which those who obey this exhortation should always entertain.

Verse 4, perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything, not lacking anything. Now, really, in principle, what James is telling us there is this, this is the way God is going to finish the work in you, in all of us. This is the school.

We shall become complete, we shall become whole, we shall enter into the wholeness of our salvation, into the fullness of our salvation. Along this route, we too shall be perfected through sufferings. Just two things I want to say about it.

First of all, the condition that is held out here is an attractive prospect. Look at the trials of our faith with all joy. Why should we? First of all, because such trials accepted in that spirit hold out the prospect of maturity and completeness, lacking in nothing.

Let me just spell those three things out very briefly. Maturity, that you may be mature. Sometimes the word is translated perfect.

Well, in a sense, that is helpful. In a sense, it isn't. It's helpful in this sense.

The moment you see that perfection is used in different senses in Scripture, it's helpful. For example, there is a perfection of God, which is absolute perfection. Well, we'll know nothing of that until we come to the end of our day, and we shall be conformed into his image.

But there is a perfection that is relative. For example, the perfection of a child a few days born may be said to be perfect. But of course, the child two days old is only perfect as a child.

He's not perfect as a youth, see? And he's certainly not perfect as a middle-aged man or woman. His perfection is the perfection of a child. But when that child grows out to be a boy of twelve, he may conceivably be physically perfect at that age too.

That's a different kind of perfection from the perfection of a two-year-old. His muscles are beginning to develop and so forth. I don't need to bore you with this.

But then as he becomes a young man of twenty-one or whatever, or a young woman, if he or she is perfect at that stage, that's something different again, you see. Now, what James is saying here is this, that if we walk this way, we can be, in one sense, perfect at every stage. We can be what God expects of us to be.

As a two-day-old child, somebody said to me this morning, I said, are you trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior? She said, yes. Well, I said, how did it happen? She said, words to this effect, I'm not good at literally reproducing. I'm four days old or something, she said.

Well, all right, that's lovely, isn't it? A four-day-old child can be perfect at that level. But the point here is this. God can enable us to be what he requires of us to be, not only as a four-day-old, but as a four-year-old and a 40-year-old, and if you're going to live 400 years, at that stage too.

And this is the way towards maturity at every stage. It is by facing the trials that God sends us in this way. And then he adds to that word maturity.

He wants to cover every possible exigency here, any question that may come, complete, holo-kleros. This word especially describes in the Old Testament the unblemished animal that was brought for the sacrifice. You remember how when someone brought a sacrifice in the Old Testament, there were specialists

among the priests to discover blemishes, because animals were not allowed to be brought blemished.

You must not present a blemished animal as a sacrifice to the Lord your God. And they had special eyes, and they knew exactly where to look, and they knew the symptoms, and they knew all about these animals, the sheep and the goats and the cattle, whatever they were. Oh, how they found out the flaws.

But this word means without a flaw. You know, does God really mean this? My friend, God means much more for you and for me than we've ever dreamt. Lacking nothing.

This completeness is not merely apparent but actual, not artificial but real. The simple fact is that God-sent trials rob us of nothing that is valuable, but they can supply the most precious things for time and eternity. That's what he's saying.

Oh, gracious prospect, so much for that. And then the last thought, the action that guarantees all this. Perseverance must finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

This kind of perfection and completeness is not the work of a day, it's the work of a lifetime. And God knows how long you and I need for this task. It is the fruit of prolonged perseverance, of a settled way of life and living, of steadfastness.

The condition of achieving the perfection held before us here is that we let such continued perseverance work itself through, give it time. And as we give God his time with us, and respond in terms of an ever-developing faith in him, and learn to persevere, then we shall discover that God is working in us, that which Paul speaks of as glory, but which James speaks of as the capacity to move all the way into glory. Don't therefore doubt God's goodness or wisdom when he puts you in the fire of testing.

My good people, I'm saying this to you, and I know myself, though I've not been greatly harassed or tested or tried, but I do know how difficult it is. But this is the word of God that we must live by. This is the word of God by which we must live by, for this is the word of life.

We must trust him, and we must learn increasingly. We must encourage one another to welcome these many, these multitudinous trials that come our way, seeing beyond the superficial that which God says is possible through them. And we must treat God as one who is truthful and whose veracity is unquestioned, and move forward.

And it's a wonderful discovery. Have you made it? Are you making it? Deep in unfathomable minds of never-failing skill, he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will. He fearful saints, says William Cowper, fresh courage take.

The clouds you so much dread are big with mercy, but we can only see clouds. That's true of us, you know. Our eyes are not wide open yet.

How big with mercy, says the man of faith, and shall break in blessings on your head. His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour. The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.

Oh men and women of faith, I know you have tried. We're all tried. So was our blessed Lord.

But who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the Father upon the high. That's the principle he lived and died by. And he tells you and tells me, practice the same.

I want you to see the joy beyond the sorrow. I want you to see the Easter morning beyond the Good Friday. I want you to see the eternal glory beyond the temporal, ephemeral, passing sorrows of the hour.

Oh I of faith, learn to look at the unseen. A man of the world can't do that. And Solzhenitsyn found in prison that this is the way to beat the most militant atheist into his corner.

Be sure of the eternities. Be sure of the unseen. Be firm in your assurance of God and of his grace and of eternity and of heaven.

And if you're ready to die with God, the sting is taken out of life and of death. It is the way to live. It is the way to die.

Let's pray for one another. I don't know what hearts may be aching in our service tonight. I don't know.

But I'm sure this is a day when we should be thinking more of one another in these terms than ever before, even from my knowledge of what's going on. And my knowledge is very fallible and perhaps inadequate. And I suggest to you that we should pray more for those living in our districts, in our areas.

Look over the list of members, starting with the same letter of the alphabet as your own. Pray for them every week. Then move into another area.

Let's pray for one another. Let's encourage one another. Let's be at the throne of grace and bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the laws of Christ and pray that as we all face our triumphs, faith may be purged and perseverance be manifest, and one day glory will crown our pilgrim perseverance.

Let us pray. O Lord, our God, in these moments ere we move from the word you have spoken to the table you have spread, please confirm within us the impressions you desire us to have. Write deeply into our spirits the message you would have us believe and act upon, and may it be further inscribed upon our souls as we handle the broken bread of Christ and drink of the cup of blessing, remembering the broken body and shared blood of our Lord.

We ask it in his holy name. Amen.

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