

Consider It Pure Joy

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[0 : 00] What a shocking statement verse 2 is. One of the most extraordinary instructions in the Bible. Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials.

Instantly questions arise, don't they, in your mind? What kind of person is it who sees trials and thinks joy? And what kind of discipleship is being encouraged here?

Something that pretends things are good when they're not good? Well, with that in mind, we're going to pray for God's help as we study this passage. So let's pray together.

Our gracious Heavenly Father, we pray that you would please help us to understand the words that you've said. We pray for the work of your Holy Spirit in our lives this morning.

That we might not merely grasp with our heads what these things mean, but find ourselves deeply convinced of them in every area of life.

[1 : 04] Hear us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, welcome to James chapter 1. A startling beginning to a very challenging book.

It is not normal to associate the ideas of trials and joy. It's not normal. It is not normal to start a letter like this either. Imagine writing a letter to somebody in great difficulty.

Dear X, if difficult things are happening in your life, think joy. Seems almost guaranteed to perplex somebody having a difficult time, don't you think? And it's an especially surprising introduction, given what this letter is about.

When you start to read the letter of James, it's not immediately clear why exactly the letter's been written. But as you work your way through the chapters, a picture begins to emerge. In the background of the picture, we find that James' readers seem to be under pressure from outside. There are suggestions of suffering, of persecution through legal action, of financial insecurity, various kinds of hardship. But those are very much in the background, in the foreground of the picture.

[2 : 17] And increasingly in focus as we work our way through, we find that this is a letter stuffed full of bad behavior. Christian believers behaving sometimes disgracefully towards one another.

Now, if you were writing a letter to people that you knew were behaving really badly to one another, how would you start? Well, you might well start.

I've heard about you lot and all you're doing. Stop doing it right away and start doing something better. Back of yourselves. But not James. Why does he start this way?

Well, we'll keep that question floating around in mind as we work our way through and come back to it at the end. Why does he start this way when the issue in the letter is bad behavior, not so much trials?

What we're going to do before we get there is to dive into the detail, which, let me say, at first sight looks a bit perplexing. Okay. Verses 2 to 4, he deals with trials and perseverance.

[3 : 22] Verse 5 to 7, wisdom and double-mindedness. Verse 9 to 11, poverty and riches. And verse 12, we're back to trials again. Is this the product of a wandering mind, somebody whose attention is not on the job, or somebody who's got rather inadequate word processing skills and can't put the right thing after the right thing?

I don't think that's the issue. There are three main parts to this section. And in each case, we're presented with a contrasting pair of things. So let's look at the first of these three and the contrasting pair.

Do you notice how the start and the end of this little section are very similar? Look at verse 2.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Now look at verse 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. So verses 1 to 12 are held together by these bookends, very similar. Verses 2 to 4, present trials and future completeness.

[4 : 50] Verse 12, present trials and a future crown of glory. These are the contrasts then in this first section. A difficult present and a wonderful future.

That tops and tails this section. Two important realities that the godly person needs to keep in mind. A difficult present and a glorious future.

Let's just think about those for a moment. The first reality of the Christian life is that the Christian person meets trials of many kinds.

Things are going to come your way, says James. And when they do, verse 2, consider it pure joy. Is he a grossly insensitive person? Is he one of those super spiritual people who just pretends that everything is okay when it isn't really okay?

[5 : 52] Well, no, he's not. What he's doing here is giving full weight to the other important reality. If present difficulty is a reality in life, the future is no less real.

And James says the future is a good one. Verse 12, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

See, James is a proper realist, a biblical one. Just as real as the various trials that come to us in life, says James. Just as real is a great future beyond this age that God has promised to those who love him.

It's just as real. Two important realities then. Present trials in life, things that really test our confidence in God, and a future crown of life, promised by God to those who love him.

Now, let's just pause to reflect on those realities for a moment. This is incredibly important. Let me say it as strongly as I can. Christians are immune to none of those hardships that come anyone's way in this life.

[7 : 16] Anything that can happen in the world might happen to you. Anything. There will be many things in life, in your life, that will make you wonder if God is really there, and if his love can really be counted on.

If they haven't happened to you yet in life, they will happen to you. It is ever so important to be firm about that because if you're a Christian, you'll meet those things.

If you're not a Christian and just looking into the Christian life, you need to know that that's true. For you will often hear that in one way or another, being a Christian will deliver you from all the difficulties of life.

No. Anything that can happen in life could happen to you. So let me say, don't let it take you by surprise theologically when that happens.

It doesn't mean that God isn't there, and it doesn't mean that he doesn't care. Look at verse 12 again. Verse 12, a crown of life. That is the ultimate fulfillment of his enormous care for all his people.

[8 : 29] That is the ultimate result of the work of Jesus for you and me, a crown of life in the future when the Lord Jesus returns. God has promised that, and he's thoroughly dependable.

And that should be a cause for genuine optimism for us. And that's why James speaks, as he does, about joy. It doesn't mean being happy all the time.

It means facing not just present, but ultimate reality. By a long way, the scariest exam I ever did was a postgraduate medical exam.

I drove to the hospital. I got out of my car. I stood there in my suit in the car park for a few minutes, feeling physically ill.

In the end, I said to myself, well, in three hours, it will all be over. No matter how bad it is, it will be over, the bad thing will be finished, and I will still probably be alive.

[9 : 33] Now, that is a slightly hopeless way of facing up to present difficulty. James is not doing that. He's saying, God has promised, not just that the difficult bit will be over one day.

God has promised that the future will be brilliant. A crown of life. So keep going, and don't lose heart.

But it's even more positive than that. Look at verse two again. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith

produces perseverance, and let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

He's not saying that bad things are good things, so be happy about them. He is saying that the good God will in the end use even the worst things in life for the eternal good of his children.

You see, every time I face a difficulty in life, there is the possibility that I will not keep going through it, that I'll stop trusting the God who's made these great promises.

[10 : 49] I need to know that keeping going is worth keeping going. One of the things that will keep me going is knowing that the end is worth it. But James is saying more than that.

He's saying it's worth keeping going, not just because God is in control and it'll be okay in the end, but because God is actively using what is happening to me now in his work of bringing me to that end in the future.

That does not mean that I will be able now to see what he is doing through everything, but it does mean that he's using the present difficulty to bring the end about.

Now, that is an amazing idea. There will be people all around this room going through great difficulties in life right now.

You may have come to church this morning absolutely preoccupied by something horrible that's going on in life. Maybe something that nobody else knows about. Whatever you are going through now, says James, keep going.

[11 : 59] There is a glorious future and in the end you will look back on the present and it will turn out that the good God has used even the evil of the present day in that future.

Now, can I say there is not a hint of sentimentality about James. Remember who the author is? He's the half-brother of the Lord Jesus, an eyewitness of the sufferings of Jesus, an eyewitness of the persecutions suffered by Christians.

He is not wet behind the ears when it comes to hardship. When I was a medical student I spent some time in Zaire, what's now the Democratic Republic of Congo. I met a dentist from Uganda. He was a refugee from the regime of Idi Amin. Nearly all his family had been brutally slaughtered in Uganda. He was perhaps the most transparently thankful and joyful person I have ever met. but you could not possibly accuse him of being out of touch with reality. James is like that. Consider it pure joy not because the thing you're going through is a good thing but because the supremely good God, the God who came into the world in Christ to suffer dreadful things for our good and our glory, that God has promised a magnificent future to those who love him.

[13 : 26] he is able to do that kind of thing. Trust him. That's the first contrasting pair. A difficult present, a wonderful future.

How is it possible to do that? To consider the difficult present with joy, with an eternal perspective. Well, we come to the second contrasting pair and the second contrasting pair is two very different prayers.

The first is in verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him.

Now folks, this is not a verse about guidance, about what car to buy or what job to go for or what socks to wear this morning. No, this is here because we do not know always how best to face the trials of life.

Great wisdom is required. Haven't you found yourself thinking from time to time? It is a total mystery to me why God might have allowed this thing to happen in my life.

[14 : 31] Haven't you thought that? We desperately need God's help in trusting him through times of difficulty. And if we lack that kind of wisdom, look at verse 5.

God promises to give it generously and without finding fault, which is a wonderful statement. God is not irritated that we find life hard. Isn't that encouraging?

God is not cross that we need to ask him for help again to make sense of life. He is not angry when we ask him again and again for help to understand.

He is willing to give generously his wisdom to see things rightly. And that is a great encouragement because if you're finding life hard now and if you're finding it hard to trust that God is doing the right thing now, he is not cross that you find that hard.

Isn't that wonderfully reassuring? So pray. Pray for wisdom in difficulty. But notice there's a contrasting prayer here. Verse 6.

[15:42] A warning as well as an encouragement. The question is not how willing is God to help but how willing are we to want the kind of help that he offers.

Verse 6. When you ask you must believe and not doubt because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. I think what James is saying here is this. There is no point in asking for God's help if you do not want to submit to his will.

Not my will but your will be done is the most Christ-like of prayers. It's the prayer of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane isn't it? Knowing the trial that was before him the enormous difficulty facing him and praying for strength to endure what he knew would be the right thing to do but was very difficult for him to do.

Not my will but yours. It is possible for a Christian to pray quite the opposite. Actually not your will but mine. That's what I really want. I am praying and I'm pretty sure I know what I ought to be doing but actually I'm praying for a different answer in order to legitimize what I want to do rather than help in going the way you want to go.

[17:07] The danger I think that James anticipates here is that we don't always want to go God's way in the trials of life and that I think is what verse 8 is about. That idea of being double minded or more literally two soul having a split soul it's one of the big ideas in this book it's possible to be divided in loyalty as a believer saying I want to trust God but not really wanting to trust God looking like I want to go God's way and yet not really wanting to go God's way underneath I remember once speaking to a person facing a very difficult situation in life he wanted to pursue a relationship that he knew was absolutely off limits for him he knew that it would be in some ways quite costly to walk away from that relationship he said this I have prayed for help but I seem to get no help I am sure that God wants me to be happy so I cannot see that God would want me to turn away from this relationship now that

I think is to be two soul to want happiness and so not want the way that you know is God's way and so pray and get no help that is precisely what James is talking about here when he talks about doubting in verse six he doesn't mean having no uncertainty he means dithering between two wills shall I shant I I want to I don't want to that's what he's talking about that person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord verse seven of course ultimately God's way will prove the happy way to have gone ultimately God's way will prove the happy way to have gone but it may not be comfortable along the road so we have a first contrast difficult present wonderful future a second contrast prayer for help which God promises to answer prayer for our will to be done which God will not answer and then the third contrast and the third contrast is quite surprising verse nine in verses nine following we have two sets of financial circumstances which kind of comes unexpectedly verse nine those in humble circumstances and verse ten the rich why are these examples here well I think for this reason

I think they are examples of the sorts of trials in life which test our dependence on God when we talk about trials we often use we are often thinking about things like sickness or massive suffering life or in life or persecution or death or bereavement or those more occasional things in life most of the time those things don't hit most of us all the time but our financial circumstances they test our confidence in God all the time this is an area in which we need God's wisdom and in which we can easily be overtaken by double mindedness it's a very searching test actually most of us spend the best hours of the best years of our lives engaged in the activities which determine our financial and material circumstances what better place for our allegiance to

God to be tested than in that area now it's been said that this letter doesn't have much gospel in it but I think that's quite wrong we meet here two trials of gospel belief first trial by humble circumstances verse nine believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position first question that strikes you well what high position has the believer in humble circumstances got to take pride in christians have very rarely been in high position in the world now there is only one thing in this passage that is anything elevated and it's in verse 12 the crown of life that the christian is to receive in the future what is the high position of the poor brother well the high position of the poor brother is that the lord jesus christ the king of glory has promised to give him a crown of life in the future that is what the poor is to glory and what the gospel has done for him it is possible you see to feel very inferior in life because of your humble material circumstances people often feel ashamed of being less or having less money is often right at the heart of the things that

give us status in this world the way we value one another the poorer christian can be made to feel inferior because of humble circumstances not fitting not belonging not as important not as welcome not as useful or valuable and so here the poor brother is urged to take pride in his high position what the lord has lifted him up for this exhortation comes straight from the cross of jesus it is the cross that lifts up the humble only the cross of christ makes the poor rich poverty is a real test of trust in god and his gospel but and let me say here we're beginning to get to the answer of that question we asked earlier on why does james start his letter like this there is a much bigger test of gospel belief in these verses and it's the test of riches verse 10 the rich should take pride in their humiliation since they 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 will fade away even while they go about their business do you notice that the rich get much more air time here than the humble do do you notice that verse 9 is brief verse 10 and 11 much longer the language used here is much more ambiguous verse 9 the poor man is called a brother here the rich is just called a rich man the language is odd for a

Christian look at verse 10 and 11 in the same way the rich will fade away not their riches but they will fade away in the end why the difference in language between poor and rich well I think because verse 10 contains a warning the poor are dealt with briefly the rich at length the poor encourage the rich warn strongly perhaps perhaps the trial faced by the rich is more dangerous in some ways than the trial faced by the humble circumstance perhaps perhaps the rich is less likely to persevere under trial than the one in humble circumstances or at least James may think that that's the way it is where he's writing to perhaps the rich is more prone to double mindedness to that friendship with the world which is hostility towards

[25 : 05] God I think we find that hard to believe don't we if you were asked which would be most testing of your faith in God this week would it be too little or too much which test would you rather have trial by poverty or trial by riches just think about that one for a moment which would you rather have well to be honest I might I think really deep down that trial by riches is a trial I quite like to have a go at maybe not forever but just for a while and maybe not a lottery win or anything like that but which of us doesn't dream from time to time of just having enough to make life more straightforward if you've ever worried about your job security your mortgage payments your children's future what would happen to your family if you fell ill or died how you will cope in your old age you will have imagined what it would be like to have just a little more in the bank something to take the pressure off something to make life less frantic less anxious a bit more certain a little more predictable a little less precarious don't you wish for that from time to time not vast riches just a cushion security enough to take the worry away why do I fancy that a bit more money would be nice often because it delivers me from having to trust God day by day see money buys security takes away really does take away many of the stresses of life takes away some of the things that remind us of our human frailty life seems not so hard the world seems more comfortable when there's money in the bank very hard to remember that the rich for the rich to remember that wealth and the status it brings is only of temporary significance how much did you come into this world with absolutely nothing you came in bare and with nothing how will you leave it with absolutely nothing that you can take with you riches are a real test a real test of active faith again the gospel is the antidote verse 10 the rich should take pride in their humiliation what does the gospel say to the rich don't think for a second that you are secure without

Christ don't think for a second that your riches are of eternal value don't think that for a minute the only way to have ultimate security is in Christ and what he's done not in you and what you can earn and it involves a climb down to do that the gospel is a great leveler it lifts up the poor it brings down the rich makes everybody the same the same security in God God is the only right security the great danger for the rich is that the rich considers himself herself secure in this world and the rich is in great danger says James of disappearing with his riches at the end our great danger is that we might be two sold divided double minded looking like God trusting people and yet being people whose security is in material things in a previous church that I worked in one of the staff lamented the fact that in their 30s and 40s many people seem to lose their gospel edge lose their sense of urgency about

Christian things because of a kind of creeping materialism lose their sense of being in conflict with the world the flesh and the devil and start being in conflict with one another why is James raising this issue because in a letter about Christians behaving badly towards one another one of the

issues in this letter is poverty and riches it runs all the way through the letter when people desire what the world offers they lose their sense of conflict with the world's values and can easily fall into conflict with one another three contrasts then difficult present glorious future two prayers one asking for wisdom one asking in order to follow our own desires and two tests humble circumstances and riches three things to close very briefly why does James start like this why not go straight towards the bad behavior because he wants to get at the disease not just the symptoms riches and poverty are important in the bad behavior in this letter and he wants to get at the issue of double mindedness the possibility of being divided before he starts dealing with the symptoms of that double mindedness which is all the fighting and squabbling that's going on second thing to close a word to the person who finds himself this morning in two minds it is possible to look Christian and absolutely not be wanting to do what God wants you to do it is possible to know what the right thing is to do and yet to be resisting it firmly it is possible to cover up disobedience in spiritual looking clothes that is an unstable unhappy miserable and ultimately disastrous position to stay in if that's you have you forgotten what God has promised to you he's promised that you will in the end be mature and complete lacking nothing he has promised to you a crown of life victory and joy in the age to come what do you think that you can have now that is better than those a perfected self and a perfect future do you think he's a liar and he won't deliver do you think he lacks power the one who raised

Jesus from the dead do you think he can't deliver do not think that staying in two minds is a good place to stay third a word to the person facing great difficulty at the moment you may be in great difficulty at the moment and no one else know but you you may be finding it very very hard to trust God at the moment in the difficulty you cannot see what it's all about or why it might have happened to you says James do not lose heart present difficulties are real painful often evil but transient in the end present difficulties will give way to a crown of glory for you in the end your present difficulties will have been used as part of that final solution to usher you into a future glory not worth comparing with the difficulties of this present age do not lose heart let's pray together let's pray just a few minutes to reflect in the quiet on what

[32 : 58] God has said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters whenever you face trials of many kinds not because they're nice good in themselves but because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance and let perseverance finish its works that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything we thank you gracious God that you promise to give wisdom generously to those who ask without finding fault we often are perplexed in life and in pain and difficulty we cannot see why things happen thank you that you know about them thank you that you're sovereignly in control over everything thank you most particularly for the

Lord Jesus who gave himself enduring great difficulty for our future thank you that because of him those who persevere will receive the crown of life that he has promised to those who love him keep us in this trust we pray in his name amen