



1. Trials and Temptations 1 (James 1:1-12)

What do these people have in common? Billy Carter, Danni Minogue, King John, Zeppo Marx, Prince Harry. Somehow even though some of them were or are famous in themselves, they have a more illustrious sibling. There are no prizes for guessing that we are going to be looking at a letter written by someone who had a sibling with whom he could only be a very pale reflection. Here was a man who at one point considered his elder brother was beside himself – gone nuts. He's a man that when his brother became famous, is not recorded as ever being one of his enthusiastic followers – until after he was gone.

No guesses as to who this is – James the brother of Jesus – or half-brother if we want to be precise. He was all the things I mentioned. But he wasn't insignificant. He might not have been one of the apostles, but in the early church became an influential leader in the church at Jerusalem. In our study of Galatians at the end of last year we found that at the head of those skeptical of Paul's work amongst the Gentiles was James. Let's remind ourselves of some of the things Paul suggested about James.

Gal 2:11 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

James held so much influence that even Peter was afraid of crossing him and Paul had to correct him. Not a very high view I guess. The picture we get of James is one who had an older brother who not only eclipsed him but was beyond comparison! I wonder how he felt about that? We're not told. What we do know is that he didn't immediately follow his brother and wasn't included amongst the apostles. On the other hand, James did eventually become someone who accepted the position God had given him, was an influential leader but had to accept that others were recipients of new revelation from Jesus, even though Jesus was his earthly brother. We are all who God has created us to be – not our brother or sister. In the end James was humble enough to accept the truths that Paul shared at the Council of Jerusalem and are reflected in this letter. He even recognised His position in relation to his brother *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*

So when we start reading this letter and James talks about trials and temptation, he knows what he is talking about because he's been there. He's been the "other sibling", he's been passed over, he's been publicly wrong, he's had to accept correction from a colonial upstart – and he's learned from it and he passes his wisdom to us.

The letter was probably written a lot later in his life when I guess he'd been through plenty more trials and tribulations in his life we know nothing about. He's well qualified to address these Jewish Christians scattered in the Roman Empire who were under a constant pressure to give into the values and practices of the world - or suffering discrimination and persecution from their fellow Jews.

And James addresses this directly: *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*

Suffering trials? What did he mean? The AV uses temptation but the Greek is much broader than that. It's the word *peirasmos*: *Here's its meaning* : a trial, a proving, a trial of fidelity or integrity, a temptation. It almost certainly means trial here as verse 3 gives us the clue to it's meaning , *3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.* Someone has described James' thrust here as outward trials and inward temptations.

As we go through the trials of life it's all part of our development as believers, although I'd be pretty

sure we don't think that at the time - neither were these Jewish believers! Peter is even more direct with his readers: *1 Pet 1 6-7 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

In other words, it's normal to go through difficulties and problems in life - it's part of your development as a believer! This idea challenged those who have a superficial faith that believes that unless life runs smoothly, we are not spiritual. Or worst, those who trust in "prosperity ministry" that believe a mark of spirituality is in accumulated wealth.

And James brings us a hard truth - do you want to mature in your faith? Is that your desire? Then trials and tribulations are part of that process. As Peter says, refining involved fire. There are other pictures used in the NT: suffering, pruning. Sounds rough doesn't it? We learn most effectively by experience and that experience can be positive and negative. It's the negative ones we can't stomach somehow. But even in the negative things in life, God wants to teach us something.

This chapter is intended to encourage us to see trials as an opportunity not a problem and to dignify them with joy rather than with tears. Hard? Yes, but that's why this has been written and by someone that couldn't be accused of not having a hard time!

From our trials God wants us to develop in three directions, all of which all contribute to maturity and stability in the Christian life

◆ Steadfastness

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything

The NIV uses perseverance and the AV patience here but the Greek is *hupomone* steadfastness, constancy, endurance perseverance. The correct depth of meaning is steadfastness. What trials should be doing is developing our faith In other words, making us even more sure of what we believe. It isn't like that sometimes is it? As we face trials we just feel like giving up. We feel despondent. We ask the question - why? An James comes and says - consider it pure joy when you face trials.. Joy? Joy!! How can I be joyful about my difficulties? The message of James is - dignify that trial - ask where God is in all your problems. What is He trying to teach you? How are you being built up through it? Maybe He's just calling on you to seek His face and gain strength from Him. It's often through our darkest times that we find the presence of God and realise he's there and comforts and strengthens us. You can experience the presence and power of God through having joyful times, but it's through the difficult times, the times of trial that we prove He is the, He is faithful, he's the Comforter, He's the protector, He's the Rock that cannot be moved. We become mature as we tackle the times of trial in His presence and power.

Are you going through a time of trial? Don't see it as a consequence of being a weak Christian. Rather, see it as a product of calling on God to become more mature. I remember that I baptised someone a few years ago and she came to me a few weeks later and said "I wish I'd never been baptised. I've had nothing but trouble since!" She went through her catalogue of woes. It wasn't surprising. Her desire was to become mature in Christ. She thought all she had to do was read her Bible, pray and come to church and that was it. She needed to be refined and she found that tough.

Is your desire to be a mature Christian and not just an older one? Is your desire to have a faith that is steadfast and sure? Then you will have times of trial and testing. Look at all the great men and women of God and you will find a faith tested and proved. Consider the most godly person you have ever met. Underneath all that you will find stories of problem and tragedy - and a testing of faith that has produced steadfastness.

Then James gets on to verse 4. The end of all trials is maturity - not lacking in anything. Maybe you're already saying "that's not me" - when I have problems I just fold. I might want to grow as

a Christian but I feel incomplete because I just can't cope with the situations that God is allowing me to go through or putting me through". James follows it with verse 5 where he calls on us to ask God for wisdom, which is the second product of times of trial.

◆ Wisdom

4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. 6 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. 7 That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

"I wish I was like so-and-so. They cope with problems so well. I'm just human. I can't have joy in trial. I can't dignify the problems I am going through". I wondered at the start why James seems to go on a tangent and talk about wisdom in a passage about steadfastness. Of course, if we think carefully it's obvious. In those dark times when there doesn't seem a way, we need to have the wisdom of God. When Solomon asked for wisdom he was commended. Why? Because wisdom allows us to see things as they are - as God sees them. Wisdom allows us to make right decisions.

How often do we pray for wisdom. Even more so, how often do we pray for wisdom and are still as much in the dark afterwards? This is a promise not a good idea. Are you having problems with the trial God is taking you through and you can't dignify it by considering it pure joy? *Ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.* It's a promise of grace given to all without finding fault. Pray believing and wisdom will be given and you will get that perspective and understanding you seek.

In Swaffham we come across people who say they were once believers but they became discouraged and gave up. Why? For whatever reason, doubt started to set in and where are they now. I remember one year we were coming back from a day trip to Calais in winter and we were on the Stena Challenger. It was very rough and if you stood up you probably ended up walking all over the place. We took anti-sickness tablets and tucked into our evening meal whilst all around us had their heads in sick bags - delightful! If you don't claim the promise of God for wisdom in your trials, you will end up doubtful and discouraged. You'll be tossed around by the waves and as a Christian will become disoriented and sick.

Maybe that's how you feel this morning. Then the promise of wisdom is the same this morning as it ever was. Pray - Believe. Accept - receive.

◆ Perspective

9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. 10 But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. 11 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 man will fade away even while he goes about his business. The third thing that trials bring us is correct perspective. I also wondered why something on wealth was in a passage on trials. But then it became rather obvious. You see. Many of our trials in life concern material things. We think to ourselves: if only I had more money, I could afford that operation privately and not suffer waiting on the NHS. If only I had more money I wouldn't worry about the car repairs. If only I had more money I could afford this or that.

And James comes in to all those poorer people in the church and says *The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.* What a statement! Our God is a God of the poor - all the people who find life difficult because they do not have all the things that the wealthy do. If you look around the world today you see the church growing rapidly in countries that are full of poor people and amongst the poor. Why? When you have nothing that prayer of faith for wisdom becomes most meaningful. The rich on the other hand will rely on themselves. One of the most difficult groups of people to reach are those who are prosperous because they don't need God - or so they think! *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?* Do you have trials this morning

about money and material things. Then rejoice in your humble circumstances - you will have less problems dignifying your trials than someone rich who thinks they have no trials. No trials = no spiritual development which is why being rich may not conducive to spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is not determined by wealth. Wealth is like a wild flower that shrivels and dies in the heat. We cannot rely on it to deal with the trials of life and certainly not see it is a mark of spiritual success. What may be success in the eyes of the world isn't success before God.

◆ Reward

12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Which logically leads me to the last point. The ultimate reward for us as believers is to have stood the test, to have been found steadfast as the trials of life have surrounded us. In the end, right perspective means that unlike the rich who build up for the things of this life, we have invested in eternity by seeking maturity. Are you suffering trials this morning? Maybe it's something you are unaccustomed to. Maybe it's something that has been going on for months, even years. Maybe it's sapping your spiritual strength. Then pray for wisdom so that you may see things in perspective and dignify that trial and allow God you mature your faith through it. Just trust God.

*When the tides of life turn against you,
And the current upsets your boat,
Don't waste those tears on what might have been,
Just lie on your back and float.*

In trials, we do not have to go under as we shall see in the next installment of James - but God wants us to grow through them and have that crown of life. Let me finish with a story that is told by someone who got to know an elderly lady who lived in Seattle in the USA.

Her name was Helen Hayworth Lemmel. She was in her nineties. She had been born and raised in wealth in England, and was well-known as a songwriter. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Lemmel probably wrote seventy or eighty Christian hymns and gospel songs that were popular in the 1920s through the early 1950s. Mrs. Lemmel had married into nobility; her husband was a lord. But she was stricken with blindness as a very young woman, and her husband divorced her because he didn't want to be married to a blind woman. I don't know all the circumstances, but somehow she ended up destitute in Seattle, Washington, a ward of King County, living in a tiny room in a home where the rent was paid by the county.

Every time we would visit her or she would come to our home, we would ask her how she was doing, and she would always say, "I am fine in the things that count." That's a godly perspective on things that could be embarrassing or humiliating.

One final thing about Helen Lemmel: she had in her room a little plastic organ on a table. It was like a child's chord organ. She would play that and cry and sing. She had this vision of getting to heaven and having a mighty, thundering pipe organ. She didn't see the little plastic organ as a disadvantage. It was just a foretaste of glory. This was a down payment on what God was going to do for her, and she counted on that. Another of her sayings was "I can hardly wait!" You probably know the most famous song that Mrs. Lemmel wrote:

*"Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."*

Are we experiencing trials this morning? Then let's allow God to give us His wisdom and perspective and trust Him