



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Is He Serious?

James 1:2-4

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Introduction

1. You'll probably remember hearing about it. On October 2, 2006, Charles Roberts entered the one-room Amish schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, PA with multiple weapons. He released the teacher, other adults, and the male students, and then took hostage the ten girls, ages six to thirteen. Shortly after police arrived, Roberts shot the girls, killing five but remarkably only wounding the others. He then took his own life.
2. What made that tragedy especially memorable was that the Amish community expressed forgiveness, attended Roberts's funeral to comfort his grieving family, invited his wife and children to attend their children's funerals, and insisted that some of the funds contributed for their children's medical expenses be used to care for Robert's widow and children.
3. Across the nation, there was respectful awe at what the Amish had done. Some were also incredulous. "How could they do that?" "Well, they *are* different. Quaint. Out of touch."¹
4. We often sense similar incredulity when we read this: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jas 1:2). Is he serious!?
 - a. "Put this verse on a sign next to the expressway and it would appear to be the work of a crazed fanatic. Indeed, to any culture (including ours) determined to insulate itself from trials, even from discomforts, this sounds crazy. Tragically, it even seems irrational to many who identify with Christianity."²
 - b. But "count it all joy when you meet trials" is as much a part of biblical Christianity as "love your enemies" (Matt 5:44).
 - c. If we are serious about steadfast faith, we had best come to terms with it.

Body

- I. A Matter of Attitude (1:2).
 - A. The right attitude toward trials begins with being honest about them.
 1. The issue is not "if" we will have trials, but "when" (ὅταν, *hotan*).³

¹ The above is drawn from Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith: Given Once, For All*, 13-15.

² R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 18.

³ Another aspect to this point is the fact that James does not concern himself with *why* we face trials. His concern is more along the lines of noting that we do face them and so should devote our energies to facing them well.

2. James's opening prepares for his multiple examples of trials of "various kinds" (ποικίλος, *poikilos*, "multi-colored"): poverty (5:1-6; 1:9); widowed or orphaned (1:27); victims of prejudicial treatment (2:1-13); slandered and verbally abused (3:9; 4:11); illness (5:13); and consequences of sin (1:13-15; 3:1-12; 4:1-4).
 - B. The right attitude is something learned.
 1. James commands (2PP imperative) a way of thinking: "consider" (NASB; better than "count" [ESV]), reflects the meaning of ἡγεομαι (*hēgeomai*, "to engage in an intellectual process, think, consider, regard").⁴
 2. Verse 3's participle "knowing" (NASB) (γινώσκοντες, *ginōskontes*) reinforces it.
 3. Joy in trials "is something learned rather than instinctive."⁵
 - C. What we are to eventually learn is "joy" (χαρά, *chara*).
 1. How can joy be commanded and felt when we face trials?
 - a) Many focus on its subjective aspect; joy is something we *feel*, and so the idea that it can be commanded can strike us as strange.
 - b) But the Jewish background of the word includes the objective reason for it, coming close to the idea of *shalōm*, peace, an understanding of the way things are when they are as they are intended to be.⁶
 - c) The Greek here suggests the intensity of joy rather than its exclusivity ("altogether" or "pure" [NIV], not "nothing but joy" [NRSV]).⁷
 2. The idea, then, is not that we should never hurt, feel sad, etc., i.e., feeling "nothing but joy", but rather that we should have a sense of calm, recalling the benefits and purpose of trials and gaining strength from them (cf. Acts 5:40-41; 16:25; Phil 4:7).
- II. The Benefit of Trials (1:3).
- A. James sees trials as "the testing of faith."
 1. "Test" (δοκίμιον, *dokimion*) had a background (Psa 12:6; Prov 27:21) involving the idea of gold being refined by fire.
 2. The idea is not that our trials prove whether we have faith, but they are "intended to purify faith that already exists."⁸
 - B. This occurs as we let "steadfastness" (ὑπομονή, *hypomonē*) work (κατεργάζεται, *katergazetai*).
 1. "Like a muscle that becomes strong when it faces resistance, so Christians learn to remain faithful to God over the long haul only when they face difficulty" (Moo, 55).
 - a) James is calling for ongoing steadfast trust in God and his ways.
 - b) We do this, not by waffling (1:6-8), or avoiding the heavy lifting of the life of faith, but by developing "toughness" (Hughes, 19).
 2. What keeps us going is "knowing" – we accept that as we successfully deal with trials, we are growing stronger, not for its own sake, but for the ultimate goal.

⁴ Frederick W. Danker, Rev. & Ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), Third Edition, 434. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, The Anchor Bible, 176.

⁵ Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*, 48.

⁶ See the discussion in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (DNTT) 2: 357

⁷ See Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary, 84.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 55.

III. The Goal That Allows Joy (1:4).

- A. At the heart of the process is whether we will obey yet another command, letting steadfastness “have (ἐχέτω, *echetō*, 3PS imperative) its perfect work” (ASV) (ἔργον τέλειον, *ergon teleion*).
 1. The point is not just to be stronger, but to be strengthened to reach the goal.
 2. The benefits of testing “come only to believers who respond to them in the right way. Christians must *allow* endurance to do its intended work” (Moo, 55).
 3. We do this by embracing our trials with the right attitude.
- B. The aim (ἵνα, *hina*) is to be “perfect and complete.”
 1. “Perfect” (τέλειος, *teleios*) refers either to moral perfection (as in the Greek moralists) or to maturity (e.g., Noah is the “perfect” man - Gen 6:9).
 - a) We tend to shy away from the meaning of “perfection,” but should not “lower the bar” on the expectation James sets for us” (Moo, 56).
 - b) Compare Matt 5:48 where the *teleios* of God is the aim.
 2. To be “complete” (ὁλόκληρος, *holoklēros*) is to “meet all expectations” (BDAG, 703).
 3. Put another way, it’s not “that trials bring maturity,” but that “fortitude and perseverance in times of testings produce maturity” (Hughes, 21).
- C. The faith entailed in this is seen in the phrase, “lacking in nothing,” a passive or middle participle (λειπόμενοι, *leipomenoi*), to fall short, or be deficient (cf. Luke 18:22).
 1. Ultimately, as verse 5 shows, God makes up the lack.
 2. We must not slack off in our steadfastness by letting trials deter us.

Conclusion

1. The determination of the Amish of Nickel Mines, PA to love and forgive stands as a reminder to those of us who confess Christ that we are called to a radically different way of life, a walk of steadfast faith that takes God at his word and rejects worldly direction.
2. James’s call as he begins his epistle is no less out of step with the world or resisted by many of Christ’s confessors. Lloyd Ogilvie reminds us of what is involved and what it means:

The greatest discovery that I have made in the midst of all the difficulties is that I can have joy when I can’t feel like it. . . . When I had every reason to feel beaten, I felt joy. In spite of everything, [God] gave me the conviction of being loved and the certainty that nothing could separate me from him. It was not happiness, gush, or jolliness but a constant flow of the Spirit through me. At no time did he give me the easy confidence that everything would work out as I wanted it on my timetable, but that he was in charge and would give me and my family enough courage for each day: grace. Joy is always the result of that.¹⁰

3. You can have such joy if you will live with such faith. If you need to take care of something that stands in the way of that faith – whether entering salvation through confession, repentance and baptism, or clearing away something that is blocking your growth – we will wait for you as we sing. Come now.

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⁹ See also Sirach 44:17 – “Noah was found perfect and righteous; in the time of wrath he kept the race alive; therefore a remnant was left on the earth when the flood came” (NRSV).

¹⁰ Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), pp. 176, 177, in Hughes, 19.