



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Is He Serious!?

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On October 2, 2006, Charles Roberts took over the one-room Amish schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. After releasing the teacher, other adults, and male students, he took hostage ten females from ages six to thirteen. Shortly after the police arrived, Roberts shot the girls, killing five of them, and then took his own life.

After the preliminary reports on the horror of the event, many turned their attention to the reaction of the Amish community. They expressed forgiveness, attended Roberts's funeral to comfort his 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 Roberts's widow and children. They showed themselves to be a community who took seriously Jesus' command to "love your enemies."

Across the US, many were in awe, but others were dubious. "How could they do that?" they asked. "Well," some answered, "they *are* different. Quaint. Out of touch." (Summary from Colson and Fickett 2008, 13-15.)

Like the reaction of many to the command, "love your enemies," many are incredulous when they read the command that begins James's letter: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (Jas 1.2). As Kent Hughes wrote,

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 (Hughes 1991, 18).

But “count it all joy when you meet trials” is as much a part of following Jesus as “love your enemies” (Matt 5.44). If we are serious about steadfast commitment to being God’s friends, we must come to terms with James 1.2-4.

It Begins with Attitude (1.2)

James shows that the right response starts with a right attitude that begins with being honest about trials. He does not say, “if you meet” but “when (ὅταν, *hotan*) you meet trials.” Without offering any explanation for why we have trials, he simply acknowledges their existence and says that our concern should be with how we’re going to meet them well.

He also says that trials are neither singular nor isolated. Instead, they are “of various kinds” (ποικίλος; *poikilos*, “multi-colored”). This sets the stage for references to specific difficulties later in the letter, including trials such as poverty (Jas 5.1-6, 9); being widowed or orphaned (1.27); being a victim of prejudice (2.1-13); being objects of slander and verbal abuse (3.9; 4.11); and illness (5.13).

The attitude he recommends does not come naturally. It must be learned and intentionally practiced. The verb the ESV translates “count” (ἡγέομαι; *hēgeomai*) is an imperative. The NIV’s “consider” better translates the word which means, “to engage in an intellectual process, *think, consider, regard*” (Bauer 2000, 434). Using the participle “knowing” (cf. NASB) to reinforce his point, James says that our first response to trials should be to stop and think and then to react with “joy.”

Of course, it is when we see the word “joy” that we are most likely to wonder how James can possibly be serious. How can joy be *commanded*? We ask that because we typically think of joy subjectively, as something we feel. But the Jewish background of *χαρά* (*chara*) includes the objective reason for experiencing joy. The idea is close to the Hebrew word שְׁלוֹמִי (*shalōm*), “peace” (see *NIDNTT* 1976, 357), which describes things when they are as they are intended to be. Furthermore, the Greek word *πᾶς* (*pas*) at the beginning of the sentence suggests intensity rather than the extent of joy. It is better translated “pure” (NIV) or “altogether” (McCartney) instead of “all” (ESV) or “nothing but joy” (NRSV, NET) (McCartney 2009, 84).

The idea, then, is not that we should not feel pain, sadness, stress, etc.; that we should always feel happy or glad when we undergo trials. It is that we should have a sense of calm, the result of stopping to think and recalling the benefits and purposes of trials (see Acts 5.40-41; 16.25; Phil

4.7). Pausing to “consider” allows us to evaluate how our trials are contributing to our commitment and growth.

The Benefit of Trials (1.3)

Because he views trials as a means to growth, James sees them as tests to help build stronger faith (Jas 1.3). “Testing” translates δοκίμιον (*dokimion*), a word that sometimes referred to putting gold or silver into fire to remove impurities (e.g., Ps 12.6; Prov 27.21). James is not saying our trials prove we have faith, but instead are “intended to purify faith that already exists” (Moo 2000, 55).

Trials accomplish this purifying effect by helping us develop “steadfastness” (ὕπομονή; *hupomonē*; “endurance” in NRSV) so that it will have “its full effect.” Literally, the phrase is, “have its complete work” (ἔργον τέλειον; *ergon teleion*). In Douglas Moo’s words, “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 2000, 55). But we won’t realize such strengthening if we waver in our commitment (cf. 1.6-8) or seek to avoid trials. Trials help us develop spiritual “toughness” (Hughes 1991, 19).

As noted above, we are sustained by “knowing” (NASB; accurately translating the participle γινώσκοντες, *ginōskontes* in v. 3) the reality that, as we successfully deal with trials, we are growing stronger in faith.

Reaching the Goal (1.4)

Whether we experience this growth depends on our response to another command: we must let steadfastness “have its perfect work” (1.4 ASV; ἔχω; *echō*, “have,” is here an imperative verb). The point is not to gain strength for strength’s sake, but to become tough enough to see our faith grow. This takes us back to the matter of attitude.

The conjunction ἵνα (*hina*) alerts us to the fact that our trials and endurance have a goal, namely, to be “perfect and complete” (v. 4). “Perfect” (τέλειος; *teleios*) could refer to moral perfection, as in the Greek moralists. It is more likely that it refers to maturity, as in Jewish thought. A notable example of the latter from the Jewish tradition James shared with his readers was “Noah [who] was found perfect (*teleios*) and righteous; in the time of wrath he kept the race alive; therefore a remnant was left on the earth when the flood came” (Sirach 44.17 NRSV; cf. Gen 6.9 LXX).

Like his command to find joy in trials, James’s claim that we are trying to reach perfection may lead us to wonder if he serious. Being well aware of our shortcomings, we shy away from the notion that we could be “perfect,” even in the sense of maturity. But we should not “‘lower the bar’ on the expectation Jesus sets for us” (Moo 2000, 56). Indeed, when we read Jesus’ words,

we see that the *teleios* for which we are to strive is modeled by God himself: “You therefore must be *perfect*, as your heavenly Father is *perfect*” (Matt 5.48; *teleios* both times).

Helping us understand the perfection James has in mind is the word he uses with it, “complete” (ὁλόκληρος; *holoklēros*; v. 4) which refers to “meeting all expectations” (Bauer 2000, 703). The idea is not “that trials bring maturity,” but rather that “fortitude and perseverance in times of testing produce maturity” (Hughes 1991, 21). The result when this occurs is a level of faith that is “lacking in nothing” (v. 4).

Conclusion

The exhortation to endure trials with joy is as needed in our world as it was in James’s. Lloyd Ogilvie’s assessment of how this teaching helped him illustrates the difference an attitude of obedience to these commands can make.

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 (Ogilvie 1978, 176-177).

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