

On trials and temptations

Isaiah 53:4–12

Psalms 91:9–16

James 1:1–17

Mark 10:35–45

Text: James 1:2, 12

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ... Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Introduction

Carl Trueman is a professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College (Pennsylvania). In a recent [article](#) he observed that “For most Americans, Christianity is moving rapidly to the margins of life. ... The days when Christians could be both respected by their society and faithful to their beliefs are drawing rapidly to a close. The terms of membership in civic society and in the church are becoming increasingly antithetical.” Canada is, in my opinion, moving in this direction as well. One only has to observe that elected office is deemed to be only for those who hold all the politically correct attitudes on current social issues.

It isn't easy to be a Christian in such a setting. The pressure is on to regard faith as a personal inward private matter—outwardly to live pragmatically by going along to get along. The pressure is exerted economically in the threat of the loss of livelihood and the requirements of career paths, let alone the pressures of social media and advertising. When the Apostle James takes up the pen to write this letter, he does so because Christians have found themselves in a world hostile to their faith; being faithful to their beliefs meant lots of trouble for them. The pressure was on to regard faith as a ‘private matter’ inwardly while outwardly living a non-Christian ethic was emerging among Christians.

When James writes his letter the church has been alive for thirty years and now false teachers are creeping in who distort the gospel and mislead people. Persecution has intensified as well. Paul, widely known in Christian congregations, is a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial (and execution.) Within eighteen months James himself will be murdered. In a word, the world has proven to be more hostile than expected. In the face of the world's resistance to the gospel and the world's nastiness towards Christians, James is worried that Christians might take refuge in a psycho-religious inner “trip” as they pretend they believe the gospel with their heads—and yet no longer do the truth of the gospel with their lives. He insists that truth must be done; faith must be lived. If Jesus Christ is appropriated inwardly in faith then the same Lord must be exemplified outwardly in life. Christians must continue to march to the beat of a different drummer regardless of the difficulty of the marching.

Who was James? Two of Jesus' disciples were named James but neither of them wrote this letter. Some scholars argue we don't know. Others maintain that a case can be made that the author of this letter is the James who was the brother of Jesus. I am convinced that it is the Lord's brother. From Mark's gospel we know that our Lord's family thought him deranged at

one point in his earthly ministry. (Mark 3:31) After the resurrection, Paul tells us, under the impact of the same kind of resurrection-appearance that turned Paul himself around, James came to believe that his brother Jesus, a Jew of course like James himself, was indeed the Saviour of the world and the Lord of the whole creation. (1 Corinthians 15:7)

James had become the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Approximately 30 years after the crucifixion of his brother Jesus, James is martyred. I point this out for us to note that as James writes this letter; a letter that begins by addressing the trials Christians are facing and says to consider it “nothing but joy;” James does not write this from an ivory tower secure from these trials. He is immersed in them too.

1. I do understand that we live in a culture that prizes safety as a great good, certainly among the highest of goods—clearly evident in response to the pandemic. It is also a therapeutic culture that believes that the assertions of the individual trump all other considerations. Universities are to be ‘safe spaces’ so that no talk deemed to do violence to treasured beliefs is to be heard. The gospel is regarded as hate speech in certain places because of its pronouncement that humans are sinners in need of a Saviour. So when we hear the Apostle James say, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,” he may sound like a masochist in such a culture. But James is not someone who enjoys pain for pains’ sake—he never says that the trials themselves are joyful things. Rather, that you face trials of any kind for the sake of faith, is to be considered as ‘nothing but joy.’

James’ brother Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” And even though he said this millions of people have gladly followed Jesus throughout the ages and found the truth of what he said to indeed be so. What is this ‘joy’ these two brothers are talking about? Consider it nothing but joy; rejoice and be glad.

James grew up in a devout Jewish family. As Jesus was taught by Mary and Joseph to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, so was James. Both brothers were committed to serving the God of Abraham who had given His people Israel the law through Moses. There was always this current in Jewish understanding that faithfulness to God provoked hostility in a world turned away from God. James’ understanding of what faithfulness to God looked like went through a massive shift when he met Jesus risen from the dead where he now knew his brother to be the Lord Jesus Christ. This put him at odds with the world and at odds with many of his own countrymen. The historian Eusebius tells us that James was killed by Jewish leadership. So when James commends joy in the face of these trials he speaks from experience. He knows the joy, the blessedness, Jesus was talking about.

Consider the warmth of this saying. “My brothers and sisters,” begins James. He loves these people and wants good for them. He addressed his readers several times this way throughout the book. To be sure, James is serious about faith but his warmth towards his readers is unmistakable.

But what is this joy? The challenge we have in English is that our word ‘joy’ has this ‘happy, happy’ connotation. James is not commending putting on a happy face. What we are to understand is that these trials are no barrier to this joy he speaks about. One thing he points out with regard to how you could consider such things as joy is that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and endurance leads to maturity in faith. Maturity helps you navigate the next challenge that comes. The idea that everything should be smooth sailing is a sign of immature faith. Jesus said that in the world you will have trouble because of your identification with him. He does not mean ‘trouble all the time’ but we are in a battle with the powers of this world aligned against God.

Think about any worthwhile achievement in life. You have to endure lots of discouraging moments to achieve a level of proficiency that you might call a maturity in relationship to the task or work. Think about a pianist who leads public worship. Sarah makes it look so natural on a Sunday morning as if it were effortless; we know differently—that lots of study and practise and effort went before. I am sure that many trials come along to discourage a person from persevering to learn and yet at the end there is a joy that overtakes you that you cannot describe but you experience nonetheless. It steals over you like happiness—not because you pursued happiness but because you gave yourself to the process; you gave yourself to do something outside yourself. The Apostle James said the believer should start counting the joy now in the midst of the trial or testing.

James understands that every believer will have their faith tested in a world hostile to faith. And you aren’t alone in this. God isn’t watching on the sidelines to see how you will make out on your own. Yes, you have to do your own believing but even this is a gift. James points out that “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” ‘Wisdom’ is for James what the ‘Holy Spirit’ is for the Apostle Paul. Wisdom is personified in the Hebrew scriptures. Prayer is what undergirds the believer in all of this.

I note with you that James speaks of ‘trials of any kind.’ His admonition isn’t limited to the kinds of trials we face because of our identification with Jesus. Many things will test faith. Many of you, like me, have been in that place where you prayed for the health of a loved one who faced a life-threatening illness; you prayed but the answer to your prayer for healing did not come in this life. James does not ask us to call these trials joyful—yet there is a settled joy that only the Saviour can give in the midst of such things. I can tell you what many other believers will attest, that in the midst of the sadness there is a joy he gives us that our loved one is loved more intently by him; loved more by Jesus than the most in-love spouse can love. It isn’t the joy of streamers and balloons, it the joy of a settled peace this is beyond comprehension yet it comprehends me. Yes, I certainly cling to the promise Jesus made to his disciples that he would come and ‘take us to where he is.’ I relish the truth expressed through the Apostle Paul that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. But this settled peace that issues in joy is more than a head knowledge of these texts of scripture. It is a gift that our Saviour gives in relationship with him.

2. “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one,” writes the Apostle James. Now in our English

translations the discussion in the first chapter of James has changed from trials to temptations. I point out to you that in both places it is the same Greek word—a word that can mean trial or temptation. (Also the word test and tempt derive from this same word). To be fair to English translators, it is apparent that James has what we in English call temptation in mind—temptation to sin. But it is the same word in Greek as trial/test. So when James says “God tempts no one” we say yes. But does James also mean that God tests no one.

Does God send difficult things into your life to test you? The problem is that a test can go either way. Does God want your faith to blossom or bomb? Does he set up a test just to see what will happen? I hear many believers say, when difficulty arises, that God has sent this for a purpose he has in mind. Does God do that? What would the Apostle James say? He says God tempts/tests no one. God does not do things to send you away from himself.

Our question—does God send trials our way to test us—often assumes a picture of reality that is not the one painted by the gospel. This picture of reality assumes that we live in a world that is governed by natural laws—do this and all will be well, do that and the laws will crush you. Periodically God steps in to shake you up. This is the way Job and his friends conceived of reality—God sent this difficulty, his friends thought because Job had done something wrong so out with it, Job insisted on his innocence and said there was some hidden purpose. At the end, after God meets Job, Job admits “I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know.”

The gospel says that we live in a fallen world in which death and its errand boys of evil and sin wreak havoc. It is a world hostile to God. Think for a moment about building a house. There is a significant difference between building a house on a new building lot and building on a lot where there is a house now fallen into ruin. We don’t live in a new-lot world, we live in the rubble of sin. Anyone turning to God will find themselves walking headlong into winds all blowing in another direction. It would be my conviction—and I think this consistent with my namesake the Apostle James—that God is not the inventor of the difficulties of sin and evil but that God meets us in the midst of these things and works his purposes for us. God does not send them but joins us in the midst of them with the purpose of working all things for our good.

Keep in mind that Jesus said that ‘it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come ... and they defile a person.’ (Mark 7:21-23) James says the same thing when he says that ‘one is tempted by one’s own desire.’ Our hearts are not pure; the corruption of the human heart cannot be understood nor explained. The world out there is no level playing field neither is the world within. What we do know is that God wants our good. Jesus does not want us to trip up or stumble in our walk with him.

Listen to how James concludes this section with what he knows to be the character and purpose of God. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”