

Commentaries on James

James Garriss' commentary and sermon

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Bible Knowledge Commentary

1. ATTITUDE IN TRIALS (1:2)

1:2. To persecuted Jewish believers scattered among pagan peoples, James gave the surprising advice, **Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.** Trials should be faced with an attitude of joy. Trials should not be seen as a punishment, a curse, or a calamity but something that must prompt rejoicing. Furthermore they should produce “pure joy” (lit., “all joy”; i.e., joy that is full or unmixed), not just “some joy” coupled with much grief.

Though James' command was direct and forceful, he did not preach at his audience. He identified with them. He addressed them warmly as “my brothers.” This mode of address is characteristic of the epistle. He used this familiar form no less than 15 times. James' direct commands are coupled with deep compassion.

It is important to note that James did *not* say that a believer should be joyous *for* the trials but *in* the trials. The verb translated “face” might more literally be expressed as “fall into,” *peripesēte*, much as the poor man “fell among robbers” (Luke 10:30). The “trials of many kinds” (*peirasmois ... poikilois*) were also referred to by Peter, who used the same Greek words, though in reverse order (1 Peter 1:6). When surrounded by these trials, one should respond with joy. Most people count it all joy when they *escape* trials. James said to count it all joy in the midst of trials (cf. 1 Peter 1:6, 8).

It is clear that the reference here is to external trials, or tests of stamina (*peirasmois*) whereas later in the same chapter (James 1:13) the verb form (*peirazomai*) of that noun is used to speak of inner temptations, or solicitations to sin.

Obviously the question arises: How can a person find joy in trials?

2. ADVANTAGE OF TRIALS (1:3–4)

1:3. Christians can face trials with joy because there are rich advantages from these testings. Trials, rightly taken, produce the sterling quality of endurance.

This is no new revelation. It is a simple reminder. James wrote, **because you know**, literally “knowing through experience” (*ginōskontes*). Everyone has experienced both the pain of problems and the ensuing profit of persistence. There is no gain in endurance without some investment in trials.

It is the true part or approved portion of faith that produces perseverance. **The testing** refers more to “approval” than to “proving.” The word (*dokimion*) appears only here and in 1 Peter 1:7. **Faith** is like gold; it stands in the test of fire. Without this approved standard of faith, trials would not yield perseverance. There would only be ashes. True faith, like pure gold, endures, no matter how hot the fire. True faith therefore **develops**, or more literally “works” (*katergazetai*), **perseverance** or staying power. The noun “perseverance” (*hypomonēn*; cf. the verbal form in James 1:12) means steadfastness or endurance in the face of difficulties (cf. 5:11).

1:4. Perseverance is only the beginning of benefits. There are more advantages to trials. **Perseverance must finish its work.** Just as tested and true faith works to produce perseverance, so perseverance must be allowed to continue its perfect or finished work to produce the ultimate by-products of maturity and spiritual fulfillment. This, of course, is the lofty goal that serves as this epistle's unifying theme. James' main point was to show how to achieve spiritual maturity.

Two words describe the goal: **mature and complete.** "Mature" (*teleioi*), often translated "perfect" or "finished," is coupled with "complete" (*holoklēroi*, from *holos*, "whole," and *klēros*, "part") to give the idea of perfected all over or fully developed in every part.

Trials can be faced with joy because, infused with faith, perseverance results, and if perseverance goes full-term it will develop a thoroughly mature Christian who lacks nothing. He will indeed be all God wants him to be.

James' argument may seem logical, but it is still difficult to see how trials can be welcomed with an attitude of joy. Where does one turn for help to understand this paradox?

New Bible Commentary (DA Carson)

1:2–4 Testing. The Christians James was addressing were facing *trials of many kinds*. These trials were not severe persecution (and certainly not illness, for which different terms are used), but rather low-level persecution such as social rejection and economic boycotts. This was happening simply because they were Christians. Although the trials were painful, James calls the believers to rejoice, not because the pain is pleasant but because they should have a perspective which looks beyond the present life to eternal reward. The *pure joy* is not a present happiness, but joy in anticipation of God's future.

The reason they could rejoice is that this testing of their faith would produce perseverance or patience. Perseverance is an important Christian virtue, mentioned often by Jesus (Lk. 8:15; 21:19; cf. Mt. 10:22) and Paul (Rom. 5:3–4; 8:25; 2 Cor. 6:4; 12:12). For those readers who knew their Scripture, as James certainly did, the importance of this virtue is underlined by the fact that Abraham is the first person in Scripture to be tested (Gn. 22:1) and God rewarded his faithfulness. Furthermore, Job was also tested by Satan, and in the stories about Job circulating in first-century Judaism he was the supreme example of perseverance. Surely these Christians could expect a similar reward.

Perseverance itself, however, has an effect. It is like holding a fine steel sword blade in the fire until it is thoroughly tempered. In this case the sword is the believer, the fire is testing and the 'tempering' is that the believer becomes *mature and complete, not lacking anything* (4). The Greek term for 'mature' is also often translated as 'perfect'. This is the virtue that Noah exhibited in Gn. 6:9 (translated 'blameless' in the NIV). This is what Jesus intends when he calls his followers to be 'perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48). It indicates a character like God's. This type of maturity is produced by holding fast to the faith and Christian virtue while in the fire of persecution. The impurities in one's character will be burned off. The end result will be not just maturity, but completeness, which means that not a single part of a God-like character will be lacking. If this is the end result of the readers' trials, difficult as they may be, there is indeed something to rejoice about.

The structure of these verses is that of a 'chain saying' (a produces b which produces c *etc.*). It must have been a traditional saying in the church, for we find versions of it in Rom. 5:3–6 and 1 Pet. 1:6–7.

New American Commentary (Kurt Richardson)

1:2 James began with pure encouragement, commending to believers the “pure [lit. “all”; NRSV “nothing but”] joy” that was theirs in the face of “trials of many kinds.” Being brothers in Christ means sharing in the testing of their faith. James encouraged them to embrace their trials not for what they were but for what God could accomplish through them. As in the admonitions of Rom 5:2–5 and 1 Pet 1:6–7, James here teaches that trials serve as a test for genuine faith. Earthly hardships and losses put believers on display. Trials form an essential part of God’s plan for his people. The God who will save us from the fate of the world will sustain us with joy in the midst of it. An eschatological joy is in view here (cf. v. 12). Believers know all the more by their suffering (Matt 5:11–12) that they belong to God. The knowledge of this truth is the cause of their “pure joy,” which rests upon the future revelation of God and the reversal of their circumstances (Mal 3:17–18).

The wordplay between “greetings” (*chairein*) and “joy” (*charan*) establishes the connection between James’s greeting and his introduction, which suggests something of a title for his letter: Joy in serving God. James’s reference to trials has in view specific sufferings of his readers (cf. 2:6; 5:1–6). The real artistry of the wordplay and other features of James’s text indicate a crafting for the sake of moral persuasiveness. The use of numerous verbal imperatives also accomplishes this. The first imperative of the letter, “consider it pure joy,” initiates a series that continues through to the final chapter with “take the prophets,” whose faith proved genuine after “testing” (cf. 5:11). Above all, Abraham (cf. Gen 22; Jas 2) is that one who endured the trial and was proven in the test. Many fail the tests of God, as in the example of Israel (cf. Num 14), but all of these tests are part of the larger scriptural context of our letter. In every trial the people of God should see their preparation for greater things God has planned for them.

What exactly did James mean by “trials”? Although the word *peirasmos* can be understood in other contexts to mean a leading into evil, that is, “temptation” in the passive sense (cf. *peirazo*, “tempt,” in 1:13), this is not the case here. These are testings in the active sense of experiences that prove a person’s intentions. James’s hearers were undergoing trials in the permissive will of God to prove the genuineness of their faith. Such trials come close to the crossbearing Jesus required of his disciples (Matt 10:38; 16:24). There would be trouble for them as they lived for him and his gospel. These trials involved persecution “because of righteousness” (Matt 5:10; cf. 1 Pet 3:14).

Like the great exemplars of faith, disciples should joyfully accept as tests the opposition they encounter to serving God. This is also in line with Paul’s “many hardships” (Acts 14:22) by which we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 16). In such testing, the basic truth of discipleship in Jesus’ own thinking must be kept in view: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first” (John 15:18; cf. Matt 10:22; 24:9). Disciples are not greater than their Master, and essential to serving him is the testing that strengthens faith. Thus, because Jesus was tested (cf. Heb 2:10), his followers should expect and accept the troubles that test them.

James also referred to “trials of many kinds.” A multitude of afflictions are in view: conflicts from opponents, doubts, fears, and tribulations. These trials are mostly external in comparison with those discussed later in the chapter. Enduring trials is something the servant of Christ must do in view of the inheritance of glory. The end of the ages has come in Christ, and service to him brings opposition. This is the very cause of trials in the Christian life. The biblical text presents no strong demarcation between the tribulations near the end and the tribulation in the end.

In the face of these many kinds of trials, James pointed to God, who was ready to bestow blessing. Joy is a reality for those who serve. We see a reciprocal dynamic here. The servant of

Christ swims against the stream of unbelief in his or her service. No time is free of conflict. The servants of God point to the only way of serving God, and this is a scandal, a stumbling block to the followers of other religions. The world, which is primarily religious but pagan, opposes the servants of Christ. But this is to be expected.

1:3 God proves the genuineness of faith in his servants: this is a fundamental biblical theme. The believer endures such testing of faith and service because of what is promised: divine favor in the judgment (i.e., the reward of life in 1:12). As discussed in the introduction, judgment is the end of the trajectory of faith. But the servant of Christ faces that judgment and the trials of the present with joy because of the promise of God's mercy (cf. 2:13). The teaching on trials in the Christian life, like that found in Hebrews 12, focuses on trials as proving our parent-child relation with God and as the discipline necessary for walking in the way of faith. The true pattern of service that must be kept in view by faith is the service of Jesus himself, "who, for the joy set before him endured the cross" (Heb 12:2). He was the true Son and was tested; thus every servant of Christ should bear up under trial as the proving of his or her identity as a true child of God. Indeed, Jesus accepted discipline, thereby growing "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52).

This proving of filial identity supplies us with a key to understanding this section of James (1:2–8). The proof that those who suffer trials are God's children is necessary from God's perspective, for it will provide a threefold witness: to himself, to the believer, and to the world. God's interest in the witness to himself can be seen in the testing of Abraham: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen 22:12).

One of the interpretive challenges of this section of James is to show the relation between "trials" and "temptations" (v. 13) and to account for the shift in meaning between them. The temptation narratives of Jesus in the Gospels, however, furnish a possible solution. With temptations there is also the test: "If you are the Son of God ..." (cf. Matt 4:3, 6). In an astonishing way, Jesus succeeds in demonstrating his identity to Satan rather than to the world by enduring his temptations. The devil wanted Jesus to put his power on display for the world and in turn submit to him. Jesus obeyed his Father and gave no demonstration to the world at the devil's behest. If he had done so, he would have failed the test.

James had an underlying confidence that believers would pass their testings. In every confrontation in service, the believer should see a basis for joy in trials in that they are acquiring the perseverance necessary for greater service and also are proving that they belong to God.

But James's readers knew the good reason God allows such trials (v. 3). God intends for them to result in a mature and complete faith; perseverance is faith's first product. But perseverance is not a minimal virtue. Rather, it is elemental to that fortitude of the soldier who braves all in his life-and-death struggle on the field of combat. Praised by Paul (1 Thess 1:3) and by the author of Revelation (cf. 14:12), perseverance characterizes the godly both before and after Christ. The gradual and painful acquisition of this virtue is also unmistakable. Perseverance, though essential to faith, is not infused immediately in a moment of conversion. Only through great ardor and the stumbling pursuit of the goal laid before it and only through sustained service in spite of opposition does perseverance come.

1:4 The perseverance of faith is a virtue in and of itself. Indeed, perseverance characterizes genuine faith. Faith, one of the "good and perfect" gifts of God (v. 17), grows up to produce perseverance in the believer; indeed it makes the believer a perfect (*teleios*; "mature," NIV) work. Believers have been birthed by God (v. 18), and they grow up to full maturity in him.

What James said about persecution must be balanced with what he said in 3:2 about all of us

stumbling in many ways. Immediately following, James spoke of someone who is “perfect” in speech. Completeness of faith is meant here whereby profession and behavior are inseparable—this is the maturity of faith James wanted for them.

“Perfect” (*teleios*) was an extremely important word for James, occurring in 1:4 twice (cf. KJV, “Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect”) and in 1:17, 25; 3:2. It has three aspects: the character of individuals in all their acts, a divine model or purpose that is under construction or in process, and the ultimate realization of that purpose in the eschaton or the last things. The use of *holoklēros* (“complete”) along with *teleios* (“perfect”) implies a gradual process of adding virtue upon virtue until one is “not lacking anything.” Thus faith becomes complete in the fullest sense, ready to stand before God in the judgment, which is faith’s goal.