

1

Christian maturity

Please read James 1:2-4

‘Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything’ (James 1:2-4).

Life is full of ‘ups’ and ‘downs’. In the real world, life can be a roller-coaster ride and most folk would have little difficulty adding their own ‘Amen’ to the words of the old Negro spiritual,

Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down;
Oh, yes Lord!
Sometimes I’m almost to the ground;
Oh, yes Lord!

Everybody knows what this is like. It is a fact of life and it's here to stay, on this side of eternity. Knowing what is happening and coping with the happenings themselves are, of course, two entirely different things.

The first chapter of James' letter is a fairly general overview of how to cope with life's 'ups and downs'. James' perspective is, of course, the Christian perspective. In the face of life's difficulties, a living personal faith in Jesus Christ makes all the difference in the world. It is a faith that acts! It is a faith that surmounts the obstacles and gains victories through following Jesus Christ! Any bird can sing when the sun is shining, to be sure. Christians, more than anybody, should know how to praise God and enjoy life, when everything goes smoothly and the goodness of God is as obvious as it is abundant. But a faith that shines with lustre in the sunshine of God's favour radiates even greater brightness against the darkness of the clouds of trial and tribulation. Here is the testing of the Christian's mettle—the trying of the reality of his faith. This is always the bottom line for faith, because faith is by definition 'being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see' (Hebrews 11:1). However great our experience of God's blessing in the past or in the present, the essence of our faith is that it rests on the acceptance of the truth of God's Word as it analyses, interprets and, not least, directs our experience of life. Faith looks to God's promises concerning our future and centres everything in God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ. The certainty of this faith is not so much in what we have seen with our eyes to have been accomplished, but in 'what we hope for' and yet 'do not see'. Our faith will inevitably be put to the test in the hard experiences of life, because these things always *appear* to be the contradiction of the positive promises of God's blessing. Living faith is faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is faith that acts in obedience to him. Such a faith

perseveres even when the earthly props of temporal prosperity and well-being have been kicked away and the blessings of God seem very far off.

James approaches this most profound of problems by stating a fundamental practical principle. This is in the form of a command to ‘*count it pure joy*’ whenever we face ‘*trials of many kinds*’ (1:2). He then goes on to support this with two reasons that compel a willing and happy obedience (1:3–4).

The joy of trials (1:2)

‘*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.*’ Few statements can be more calculated to raise the eyebrows than this invitation to what looks like a species of masochism. It is one thing to believe that some disaster may be a so-called ‘blessing in disguise’; it is quite another to regard it with *joy*! The standard heroic response to trials is to keep a ‘stiff upper lip’ or, in the USA, to invoke the spirit of the pioneers: ‘When the going gets tough, the tough get going.’ But ‘pure joy’? This makes the mind boggle. It grabs our attention. It is certainly not what we hear from the counsellors and psychiatrists of our time.

Facing trials

We must remember that James was addressing the Jews of the Dispersion who had become Christians. As the ‘old covenant’ people of God they knew the cutting edge of racial prejudice; as the ‘new covenant’ people of God in Jesus Christ, their new faith exposed them to fresh experiences of the wrath of men—both of the Gentiles and the as yet unconverted Jews. They were a despised minority and they knew it. It cost them a great deal to stand up for Jesus.

The ‘*trials*’ they faced are, to use Dean Alford’s definition, ‘any kind of distresses that happen to us, from without or within, which in God’s purpose serve as trials of us.’¹ The Greek word for ‘trials’ (*peirasmoi*) is used in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:13). We are to pray, ‘Lead us not into *peirasmoi*.’ That is to say, we pray the Lord to spare us the tests of difficult experiences. The classic rendering, ‘Lead us not into temptation’, improperly narrows the focus from testing in general to the specific notion of seductive inducements to outright sin. Testing and trials may indeed issue in sinful failure, but they may simply be the occasion of sorrow and grief. Peter, for example says, ‘In this you greatly rejoice [i.e., in living faith in Christ] though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials’ (*peirasmoi*). These trials encompass everything considered as tests of character: anything that seems to be a set-back, anything that casts us down, anything that otherwise makes us angry and resentful, things that people say and do that are injurious or annoying to us, even things we imagine to be problems—all are included in James’ category of trials. It is these that he says we are to count ‘pure joy’!

Pure joy

What is this ‘*pure joy*’? And how is it to be derived from the cauldron of affliction? Suppose we think of our life experience as a ledger in which we keep accounts. Some items are entered in the credit column, others on the debit side. Obviously, we naturally see our tribulations as negative entries. But it need not be that way! John Calvin suggests that we can decide ‘that temptations ought to be so deemed as gain, as to be regarded as occasions of joy’. If we do this then ‘There is nothing in afflictions which ought to disturb our joy.’² Trials will always come in on the debit side. We will always tend to say, ‘Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong? When will it

ever end?’ and the like. We will naturally be tempted to anger, frustration and despair. Sometimes people take their own lives because they feel their situation to be irretrievable.

What James is saying is that *as an act of faith* we must put these trials in the credit column. That does not mean uttering a glib ‘Praise the Lord anyway’ and attempting to put it all in the past. And it doesn’t mean smiling the pain away. That just won’t happen. Jesus turned his suffering into our salvation and his triumphant ascension to glory, but he had to agonize every inch of the way. So will we, as we grapple with life’s harder realities. The point is that real pain and distress can be turned into occasions of joy by faith that looks to Jesus Christ and we can come to see that the Lord is using that distress to draw us into a closer relationship with him. With the help of the Holy Spirit, this is how we are to redeem the downside of life. James is teaching us ‘to bear adversities calmly, and with an even mind’ and ‘shows that there is a reason why the faithful should rejoice when pressed down by them.’³

This is, no doubt, a great paradox. Perhaps you just cannot fathom how anyone can really turn affliction round into a blessing. To the Christian, however, this is not only something he can understand—it is something that he can *obey*. Christians agree with the writer to the Hebrews when he said, ‘No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it’ (Hebrews 12:11). Yet no one has difficulty understanding the value of training, however painful it might be. Athletes only become athletes because they are willing to sweat and suffer. They can even learn from their injuries and their defeats in competition! Spiritual growth—including counting trials as pure joy—is the same principle

worked out in the even more intense arena of a person's innermost being. And just as it takes an act of will for an athlete to turn his pain into happy achievement, so it takes an act of will, through faith in Christ, to bring joy out of pain in the Christian life!

The alternative is to let affliction do the devil's work: lie down under it; brood on what might have been; feed your frustration with a festering resentment against others, perhaps even against God himself, and slide into the gall of bitterness, your life crushed by defeat and hopelessness. The Lord Jesus Christ calls us to the very opposite—'a harvest of righteousness and peace'. However 'victimized' we may be by adverse circumstances, we do not need to add the self-victimization of a decision to feel sorry for ourselves and resentful of all others. God calls us to *choose* the way of life—by his free grace, through personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Whenever you fall

The original Greek text says, 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you *fall into* trials ...' (NIV has 'whenever you *face* trials'). The Greek word, *peripiptein*, carries the idea of suddenly finding yourself surrounded by unanticipated difficulties. You don't go looking for troubles—they will come to you, and often when you least expect them! The significance of this is twofold.

In the first place it gives no encouragement to those Christians who sometimes seem to go out of their way to bring afflictions on themselves. The Bible speaks often about martyrdom, but it never encourages the so-called martyr-complex. No Christian need feel he is failing his Saviour because he has not so far had a hard life or experienced serious persecution. In fact, Scripture positively forbids Christians from indulging in all forms of

religious masochism and goes as far as to call such measures ‘self-imposed worship’ and ‘false humility’! (Colossians 2:23). The true spirit of the gospel of Christ waits upon God’s providence and prays for a quiet life (1 Thessalonians 4:11).

Secondly, no one should imagine that the only way to ‘pure joy’ is through facing trials. This is another pernicious fallacy of asceticism—namely, the notion that ‘The more it hurts, the more good it must be doing you!’ We are not called to castor-oil Christianity! Our lives ought to be filled with ‘pure joy’ without the ministry of trials and tribulations. James’ point is that the negatives can be turned to positive effect. Meanwhile, the outright blessings of God can speak for themselves. We don’t need to be told that *they* are ‘pure joy’!

Two reasons for counting trials as pure joy (1:3–4)

There are two substantial reasons for making trials the occasion of joy in the Lord. The first is that ‘*The testing of your faith develops perseverance.*’ The other, which we shall look at shortly, is that this is God’s road to our completeness as whole people (1:4).

1. Perseverance (1:3)

‘Affliction,’ writes Robert Johnstone, ‘lets down a blazing torch for [the Christian] into the depths of his own nature—and he sees many things which he little expected to see.’⁴ Not too many years ago, in my native city of Edinburgh, workmen were starting to repair a crumbling plaster ceiling in a seventeenth-century tenement in the heart of the Old Town. As they scraped off some rotten plaster, they discovered beautiful painted woodwork underneath—the original work of 300 years ago!⁵ Needless to say, the later plaster was all removed to restore the original to its former splendour. Sometimes the opposite can

happen. What was thought to be the real thing turns out to be less than expected. I still remember my mother's disappointment when she discovered that Grandma's (supposedly sterling) 'silver teapot' was cheap electro-plate after all!

Trials work in these ways. Sometimes they show us that we are neither as strong nor as wise as we imagined ourselves to be. At other times they have revealed strengths and graces in us that we never dreamed could be ours. Tertullian once said, in his inimitable fashion, that 'Innocence is best tried by iniquity.' You have to melt the rocks if you want the metal! Consequently, where there is true faith in the heart, testing works 'perseverance'. Paul says that 'Suffering produces perseverance' (Romans 5:3). This means, as Calvin comments, that our experience in grappling with evil and overcoming it leads us to 'experience how much God's help avails in a crisis'.⁶ Again we have a paradox: in weakness, the Christian finds true strength in Christ; in darkness, living faith shines ever brighter; and in need comes the discovery of the abundant grace of God which supplies all our needs. So far from dampening our devotion to the Lord or stifling our enthusiasm for living the Christian life, the hard experiences actually stimulate a deeper commitment and a growing personal holiness. Perseverance is that willingness to keep running the race that is generated in the course of the race at precisely the moment when the muscles are hurting and the lungs are bursting. It is the triumph of the spirit over the felt weakness of the flesh. This is simply a fact of life. And it is a fact of the Christian life. Testing actually produces perseverance! The obverse is that until we are afflicted, we tend to go astray (Psalm 119:67).

2. *Completeness (1:4)*

If perseverance is the journey, completeness is the destination.

‘Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.’ The whole process is one of growth and improvement towards spiritual maturity. The key words are ‘finish’ (*teleos*) and ‘complete’ (*holokleros*). They speak of the goal and the completeness of the work of *sanctification*—the progressively growing personal godliness of the believer which issues in being made perfectly holy in heaven.

There is an imperative quality to the work. Perseverance ‘*must ...*’ To stop being patiently persevering has the practical effect of denying the faith. How easy it is to begin a project with great zeal, only to drop it later as the initial enthusiasm wanes! But the work of the Holy Spirit has a goal, and it will be, it must be achieved. It is a fact of divine revelation that the good work begun by God in every Christian will carry on to completion until ‘the day of Jesus Christ’ (Philippians 1:6). This is the promise upon which we may act confidently. Our exercise of faith must not be interrupted—it must go forward until it is completed according to God’s purpose for our lives.

The goal, then, is maturity and completeness. The central focus is on the fulness, the richness and the well-roundedness of our spiritual character in the eyes of God. ‘In regard to evil, be infants,’ says Paul, ‘but in your thinking be adults’ (1 Corinthians 14:20). ‘All of us, my brethren,’ writes Robert Johnstone, ‘in religion as in intellectual culture, are in danger of being one-sided. Yielding to natural temperament, we are apt, whilst cultivating certain departments of Christian thought and activity, to neglect others. The believer of a contemplative disposition, for instance, may shrink from taking his proper share in the church’s work; whilst another Christian, strenuous in labour, may forget to some extent that the tree of piety can bring forth fruit to perfection only when watered with the dew

of the Spirit through prayer and quiet communion. Thus the new man has deformities, his growth being inharmonious, without fitting proportion of parts. God's varied discipline is designed to produce a perfectly balanced completeness of character. Now there are some elements of holy character which can be acquired only in trouble. The beautiful graces of resignation and sympathy cannot grow but in a soil through which has passed the ploughshare of affliction, and which has been watered by the rain of tears. Therefore it is that God "scourgeth every son whom he receiveth," and "every branch of the true vine that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit"⁷

It is no accident that the sequence is trial—pure joy—perseverance—maturity—completeness. We would think it more appropriate to put the joy at the end—after the pain of persevering was past and done! God's point is that joy, in Christ, is the power-house of perseverance. To be sure, that joy looks ahead to the reward which will be garnered at the final goal. But joy is the leading motif of the Christian faith *as it is lived out in daily life*. Our calling is a happy one. Our perseverance in the face of trials partakes of that joy precisely because it is God's gracious purpose to work in us 'an eternal glory that far outweighs them all' (2 Corinthians 4:17).