

*Wisdom and Troubles*  
**James 1:2-4 (1:12-16; 5:7-11)**  
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We're starting a series through the New Testament letter of James. This James was one of the brothers of Jesus. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. You can read some about him in the book of Acts (12:17; 15). Remember, he's not the apostle James son of Zebedee, brother of John, or the apostle James the Less. His writing echoes a lot of what Jesus said. James is concerned about practical application of God's word. The book of James is sometimes called the "Wisdom Literature" of the NT because it's similar to Old Testament wisdom books like Proverbs. James talks a lot about wisdom and what he says about wisdom is almost the same as what Paul says about the Holy Spirit in his letters. The first chapter of James introduces various themes that he repeats and reemphasizes throughout the letter. In this series we'll look at five major themes and how they relate to the wisdom James teaches about. We're starting with "wisdom and troubles."

There's bound to come some trouble to your life  
But that ain't nothing to be afraid of  
There's bound to come some trouble to your life  
But that ain't no reason to fear  
I know there's bound to come some trouble to your life  
But reach out to Jesus, hold on tight  
He's been there before and He knows what it's like  
You'll find He's there

(Rich Mullins, from the album *Never Picture Perfect*, 1989;  
[http://lyrics.christiansunite.com/lyrics\\_1525\\_7.shtml](http://lyrics.christiansunite.com/lyrics_1525_7.shtml))

James wrote to people who had trouble in their lives. They were facing trials/tests/temptations (the one Greek word he uses can be translated all of these ways) of many kinds. They were being tested as they went through hard times. And James says to consider this testing pure joy.

He wants them to rejoice in their troubles, not because troubles are good in themselves, but because more is going on than they can see. Their hard times are part of a purifying and maturing process. The testing of faith leads to endurance. The outcome of endurance is a person who is perfect—mature and complete.

The troubles James' community faced included economic difficulty and probably some form of persecution. But don't you imagine these words can apply to anyone facing trouble or enduring hardship? Think of someone struggling with physical pain or illness, a young person trying to resist pressure to do what they know is wrong (or an older person for that matter), a person wrestling with doubt, people in trouble financially, relationships that are going bad, lonely people. Put your troubles, your trials/temptations/tests in this list. What puts your faith to the test? Feel the pressure of your struggles. Think about things you're going through that you don't know if you can endure.

Can we rejoice? Do you have the joy of knowing that what you're going through is part of a process that will make you mature, not lacking anything?

How can anyone have that kind of joy? How can anyone have confidence that God is at work in that kind of process? God's gift of wisdom can help us discern what's going on in our struggles. It can help us see *that* God is at work, though we might not see *how* God is at work in the midst of our troubles. Like metal in a flame, we're being purified and refined, shaped and sharpened by God through times of trial. Those troubles can be part of our becoming all that God wants us to be.

This doesn't mean we should go looking for trouble or seek suffering. There have been Christians who saw the value of suffering for maturing faith, so they looked for ways to suffer. They indulged in suffering and didn't try to get relief from it. They went too far in that direction. That's the opposite of how most of us are today. We'll do just about anything to avoid hardship or suffering.

God doesn't tell us we have to try to enjoy trouble, but we do need to look for how God is at work in it and ask for the wisdom to see what God's doing, how God's working in all things for our good (Romans 8:28).

So we see that God can use times of trouble to purify and mature us. But then James tells us that God is not the source of the trouble:

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. (1:12-16)

Joy was the proper response to testing in verse 2. Now we see that blessedness is the result of testing in verse 12. The person who endures or perseveres under trial, who stands the test, will receive a crown of life—eternal life. This is God's promise to those who love God.

Then James addresses those who want to blame God for their troubles. A time of trouble or testing can be a time for growing or it can become a temptation to blame God, to disbelieve, to go away from God. Our response and attitude have a lot to do with how we'll experience those trying times. James emphasizes that God isn't the one who tempts people. "Tempt" here means to entice toward evil, to lead astray. God wouldn't draw us away from himself. The line "God cannot be tempted by evil" might be better translated, "God ought not to be tested by evil persons" (Peter Davids, *Commentary on James, New International Greek Testament Commentary*.) This recalls Israel in the wilderness when the people repeatedly questioned God, blamed God, spoke evil of God, and tested God. In tight situations, when we're struggling, there's this temptation to challenge God.

James corrects this attitude by showing where temptation comes from. He says that we're tempted when we're lured away and trapped by our own evil desire. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin. Sin grows up and gives birth to death. When people want to blame God for their

problems, especially their temptations to sin, James points to each person's own responsibility. He could have talked about the devil as the tempter—and he will mention the devil later in the letter. But he won't let us get away with saying, "The devil made me do it" any more than he'll let us get away with blaming God. We're responsible for what we do. God values our freedom and responsibility—because God gave them to us. How will we respond to what comes to us in life?

We may scream and curse and ask, "Why?" God can handle that. We may shut down and withdraw, but God won't leave us alone. If we don't give up, if we endure with patience, we can affirm faith and goodness. And we'll discover that God does stay with us, that God endures with us, that God in Christ suffers with us. God doesn't send temptation, but God reveals himself, sometimes unexpectedly, in the midst of trials and temptations. He is with us to help us. If God doesn't send temptation, what does God send? James announces, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created" (1:17-18).

God is intent on making us his people and giving us all we need to know him, to realize his purposes, to live as his people.

In chapter five James returns to the theme of suffering and trouble. We've seen that God can use trials to purify and mature us. By God's gift of wisdom we can see that God is doing that. While God can use trials/tests/temptations, God doesn't send them. Instead God sends every good and perfect gift that we need to be born anew and live new life. Now we see that God promises to deliver and so God gives hope that enables us to have patient endurance.

God's not done with us or the world we live in. Hear what James says and notice the repetition here:

*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one*

*another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

Brothers and sisters, as an example of *patience in the face of suffering*, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (5:7-11)

Among calls to be patient, James illustrates patience with the picture of a farmer planting seed and waiting for the land to produce the crop. Some of the people James wrote to were likely farmers, whose crops were their only source of income. Their crop would certainly be valuable or precious. When we plant seed, we have to trust that it's going to grow. We can't keep digging up seed to see how it's doing. That same kind of patience and trust are needed as we wait for the Lord to fulfill all his promises, to complete his purpose in the return of Jesus.

As other examples of patience in suffering, James lifts up the prophets. This probably refers to many OT heroes and other faithful people whose stories James' readers would have heard since they were children. He also lifts up Job as an example of endurance. In the book of Job, he's not especially patient. But in some of the later Jewish writings that interpreted Job's story, he's the model of patience and generosity. After Job endured, the Lord brought about a great blessing. James caps off this section with the reminder that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

We can be confident. We can trust that the Lord will see us through and that he will come again, putting everything right and giving the crown of life to his people who endure. That hope and confidence can help us during times of trouble. Some years ago, my great-aunt, my dad's aunt died. In her funeral, the pastor said that "the candle of hope" had not gone out in her. How's our candle of hope burning?

Sometimes it is hard to see how God is at work. We may be tempted to lash out at God or turn away from God. But if instead we'll ask God for wisdom and the grace to endure, we'll find that God is at work. He's purifying, refining and completing us, giving us the crown of life.

A Christian band called Glad recorded a song that helps sum up what I'm saying. I mentioned that James is a kind of wisdom literature. The OT wisdom literature used poetry, so it seems right to let a song help us hear God's message through James. This is a prayer song:

Sometimes I see you through a glass that's almost clear  
Your power overwhelms me and my illusions disappear  
Sometimes I hear you with your gentle soothing voice  
Your words are always truthful and they cause me to rejoice

But most of the time I'm still not understanding  
The smallest part of what you're trying to say  
And most of the time I find that I'm pretending  
And the things that you desire get in my way

Sometimes I want you when I'm weak and despised  
I run to you for comfort and you never act surprised  
Sometimes I want you with a passion and a zeal  
And then sometimes I realize that I do just what I feel

And most of the time I'm still not understanding  
The smallest part of what you're trying to say  
And most of the time I find that I'm pretending  
And the things that you desire get in my way

Is it asking you too much to change me from inside?  
I know I haven't kept my promises even when I've tried  
I'm becoming more aware how much I leave you out  
Are these seeds of hope or seeds of doubt?

But all of the time you say that you're perfecting me  
And every word you say I know is true  
And some of the time I'm close to understanding  
That it isn't up to me, it's up to you

(from *No Less than All*, 1983)

Do you still have in mind the troubles and struggles you were thinking about earlier? Can you ask God for wisdom and grace to be more aware of God's presence with you in those struggles? Ask God to help you see more clearly that he is at work, even in those troubles, to help you grow to be more like him. It is up to the Lord, but he expects us to trust him, to rely on him, to cooperate with him in that process.