

**DATE:** June 1, 2008  
**SERIES:** James – Walk the Talk  
**SERMON:** *When Troubles Pile Up*  
**SCRIPTURE:** James 1:1-12  
**SPEAKER:** Pastor Dick High

**Introduction:** Today we introduce a new sermon series from the book of James. This timing purposely coincides with the beginning of Summer Sundays. This summer we have encouraged a broader focus on the book of James than just the Sunday morning sermon. Children and youth Sunday school curriculum will parallel what we focus on each week. A special booklet has been prepared that can be used as a devotional, either individually or in a family setting from now through July 13. It also contains preview and application questions for each passage so you can use the booklet in a variety of ways. Please pick one up as you leave the service today. For those four Sundays when we have one worship service (July 20 & 27 and August 3 & 10), we are planning to have weekly supplements.

The book of James is considered by some to be among the earliest written New Testament books. The author is believed to be the earthly brother of Christ, an individual who became prominent in leadership of the church in Jerusalem. What he writes is primarily addressed to Jewish believers scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. In the absence of established local leadership, James wrote to encourage them to incorporate their faith into all aspects of life.

The specific audience of this book does not negate the broader, more general application of the truth addressed. The major premise of James is that what Christians believe must affect what they do: Their walk (life) should reflect their talk (profession). The style in which this message is conveyed is often direct. In reading through material that Pastor Mike had written about this book he made the observation that *the author is an apostolic agitator, a meddler more than a preacher.*

I think we'll see that illustrated in how quickly James launches into a very significant subject, as well as the strong way in which he addresses that subject. Turn with me to James 1 (or take a pew Bible) as I now read the first two verses: *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.*

### **The Reality of Difficult Times (verse 2b)**

I want to suggest that the bold challenge of verse 2 – it is actually an imperative which conveys the sense of “do it!” or “have at it!” – may not be a truth that we readily want embrace. While we may be willing to acknowledge that life does have its difficulties, it certainly is a much different matter to be committed to receiving them with an attitude of anticipation and joy.

Let's take time this morning to stir around in this verse for a bit to help us directly encounter what is being taught! I suggest that we initiate our focus with the more general statement in the second half of the verse – *whenever you face trails of many kinds.* The first word in this phrase lays before us the reality that trials are part of life, they are inevitable. This second half of verse 2 would convey a much different message had it begun with the word “if.” Doing so would speak only of that which was potential or possible, but not certain. But a realistic understanding of life is that difficult times do happen; it is just a matter of *whenever.*

What I am referring to when I use the words “difficult times” is what this verse describes by the word *trials*. It is a word that seeks to convey that believers face times in their life when their faith is tested or stretched. This word does not imply that such times must involve temptation to sin. That is a different term and a different subject, which will be addressed next week (see verse 13ff). According to I Peter 1 God looks at the believer’s faith as something of such value that His desire is for that faith to grow, develop, and mature. Trials present environments in which that can occur. And, according to what is written in verse 2, such times of trial are inevitable. What we will soon consider in the first half of verse 2 is that whenever these situations arise there is a desired mindset that we can have that would allow us to best walk into and through such times for the greatest benefit to our faith.

But before we get there, let’s focus some more on the second half of the verse. The wording tells us that the trials we face come in various sizes, shapes, and circumstances. The specific wording speaks of *trials of many kinds*. This word could refer to a time when we have suffered financially, physically, or relationally. It could be a time when we can honestly state that we made wrong choices and our own actions weigh significantly as to the cause of the specific trial. It could be a time that others might say was strictly circumstantial. It could also be trials that are related to our work; coming from the boss, or from an employee. All of these would be just a few suggestions among those various trials that God desires for us to embrace with joy.

When we acknowledge that the primary initial audience was scattered Jewish believers, there is an additional thought that we need to consider. The Jewish mindset frequently interpreted and applied OT instruction on “blessings and curses” inaccurately. John 9:2 is a clear example of the belief that looked upon times of adversity as a distinct indication that there had been sin in one’s life accompanied by God’s resultant displeasure in some clearly identifiable way. The question that the disciples asked in this situation was “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” (The answer is “Neither!”)

It is possible that some of the trials experienced by the original audience were occurring because they were the objects of persecution. Yet, regardless of the specific nature of their trials, or ours, James’ words challenge us to embrace God’s perspective on trials. They are not the result of sin; rather they are an expected part of life. There is an appropriate attitude with which we should respond. That is what is addressed in the first phrase in verse 2 – *Consider it pure joy, my brothers...*

### **Choosing an Appropriate Attitude (verse 2a)**

Because this phrase occurs first, we are faced with the truth that before we encounter trials, before those inevitable difficult times arise we are to have a mindset or perspective already determined that directs our response to these times. The very first word in this verse, *consider*, is in the form of a command. We are challenged to give thoughtful evaluation to the subject at hand. This term confronts us with the need to come to the place where we have wrestled in our mind and heart with God’s perspective on trials or difficult times and we have a settled mindset that parallels His. One of the meanings of this word is that we regard something as particularly important; we esteem or highly value it. In this case that “something” that we are to value and esteem is the trials that we face.

And we are to do that with an attitude of joy! The settled disposition and outlook that we are to have as we encounter trials is to be literally one of “all joy!” In fact, those two words are the very first words in the Greek sentence, lending emphasis. The root of the term used for joy is “that which delights.” It speaks of those times when someone considers themselves to be in a favorable situation, where one is a recipient of kindness.

Is that a representative description of my mindset, or your mindset and attitude when we encounter trials? Or would it be a more accurate representation of our attitude if we used the words “apprehensive,” “resistant,” or even “surly?” I stated earlier that James’ style is to be very direct. That is certainly the case here; you only need to venture into the first phrase of the second verse to be confronted with challenging truth!

Think back over the last five months of your life. What are some of the difficult times that you’ve encountered? Has your mindset and attitude towards those times been one that reflects this Scriptural command?

There is one other item I want to focus on before we move beyond verse 2; we would really be negligent to overlook this matter. Please focus on the final two words in that phrase, *my brothers*. The first thing that these two words tell me is that James is not standing at a distance lobbing truth grenades at these believers. He considers himself one of them, one among them, an individual who himself experiences trials and difficult times and is called to respond in the same way that he challenges them to respond. I believe that his use of these two words is also intended to convey to us that even when we experience a trial individually, we are part of a body of believers and we can give (and receive) meaningful encouragement from one another and influence one another to live out our faith, as God would desire, amid trials.

Before we look to verse 3 I offer this paraphrase of verse 2: “Before trials ever come, we as believers, both individually and corporately, are to nurture a settled mindset that embraces the various times of trial that we face with esteem and value, and a heart full of all joy!”

### **The Foundation for an Appropriate Attitude (verses 3-8)**

Perhaps you have noticed that verse 2 is not a complete sentence; it is just the first half and the remainder is in verse 3. It is there that I believe we find an answer to such questions as “How?” and “Why?” (“Why should I desire this attitude?” “How can I go about incorporating such an attitude toward trials into my mind and heart?”)

Verse 3 tells us that when it comes to the matter of difficult times there is a certain understanding that we as believers should have. If we don’t, then we’ll lack an essential foundation from which to move toward the attitude we’re commanded to have in verse 2. Verse 3 states *because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance*. Do we know that? Do we really believe that? Are we willing to accept that as a very important truth?

The verb *you know* refers to more than just intellectual comprehension and acceptance. It speaks of continually grasping and embracing settled knowledge. It speaks of embracing truth, embracing things as they really are, specifically from God’s perspective. Practically this means that we have an accurate and solid knowledge of God and His word. There is conviction about the truth of Scripture. My use of the word “conviction” is intended to incorporate faith as a vital part of that word. It involves bringing the knowledge we have (*that the testing of our faith develops perseverance*) to accurately bear on life’s experiences; so that how we act is consistent with the truth/principles of Scripture we claim to believe. Thus, we encounter life through this conviction. We accept God’s perspective on trials as integral to our sanctification, that they are a crucible in which perseverance can be nurtured. When we know this, when we fully incorporate that truth into our life, a critical foundation is in place from which to move towards obeying the challenge presented in verse 2.

In light of this, I pose these questions: Do we want to grow in our faith? (I would expect that many of us would answer that with the affirmative.) Will we welcome and submit to God's use of trials for that purpose? (Perhaps we're not sure we can honestly reply with a resounding "Yes!")

Perhaps James' strongly stated challenge here is necessary to help us understand the commitment that is required to live out our faith. At times we may look down the road of life uncertain regarding what lay ahead. The application of these verses call for a commitment to look both at current and future trials with the knowledge of how God desires to use them in our life! The reality of that commitment will be demonstrated in our steadfastness, patience, diligence, and joy in pursuing God's desires during difficult times.

According to verse 4 we must not look at *perseverance* as just an end to itself. The implication here is that something is lacking in our life as a believer and perseverance has work to do in addressing that lack. Thus, perseverance has a goal in mind, the growth of our faith, our maturation as believers. God desires that we become *complete*. That word conveys the concept of wholeness, as when one who was lame can now walk. It conveys the concept of life functioning as it was intended to by our Creator.

I want to pause for just a moment and take a breath. These early verses of James present us with quite a challenge. As we've focused on them has there arisen a sense of need for God's grace and wisdom in accepting these truths? If I've explained these verses accurately, I know that I certainly need help in "walking the talk" in this area of life.

Well, it is no coincidence that verse 5 speaks to this very issue. The reality is we lack wisdom to pull this off. We need God's help, whether we want to admit that or not. We are dependent upon Him to respond as He desires, in all circumstances of life.

Verse 5 is about a willingness to admit our need for His wisdom. It is an encouragement to unreservedly ask God for wisdom. *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he would doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*

What are some considerations we need to have in mind as we ask God for wisdom? **First**, we must keep this encouragement to ask God for wisdom in its context. The wisdom that we are encouraged to seek is most specifically needed when we encounter trials. It is the wisdom to understand how God looks at trials and how we are to think about them. It is the wisdom to recognize that the intent of trails is the development of perseverance. It is the wisdom that perseverance has the goal of the maturing of our faith, of the increasing enjoyment of the fullness of life that is available to a believer.

**Second**, when we ask for this wisdom we need to be willing to submit to it. As observed earlier, what James addresses here is more than mere intellectual knowledge. There is the need for acceptance of, an embracing of God's truth, and that He is truly wise in all His thoughts and actions.

**Third**, I want to speak to what I believe are two facets of doubt that we may encounter when we ask God for wisdom in facing life's trials. My initial focus when I consider the matter of doubt here is my hesitancy to believe that God will answer my prayer. The issue here, in part, may be to doubt that He really cares about us and what is happening in our life. If that truly is where our heart is then it is

difficult to pray boldly. I want to suggest that there may be another facet of doubt to consider. That would be my uncertainty about wanting to really hear what God has to say, about the wisdom He has regarding facing trials. It is more a doubt of application than understanding. I believe the words, *not doubt*, in verse 6, speak less to the matter of doubting God or His ability to answer, than being uncertain if we really want to know His ways, to understand and obey His wisdom. (It is helpful to look ahead to 4:8 – where one who is double-minded could be described as someone who sways between submitting to God or to the devil!)

### **Recognizing True Needs (verses 9-11)**

As we move further through our passage of study this morning we may have some questions regarding the connection between what we've examined in the first 8 verses with the subject presented now in verses 9-11. *The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.*

Regardless of who we are, or regardless of the circumstances of life in which we find ourselves, the truth is that we all lack wisdom. Some of that lack of wisdom is specific to our misunderstanding of Scriptural teaching about our identity in Christ. All believers are of equal worth to God. All believers are significant in and to the body of Christ. All believers need to keep a balanced perspective on both our exaltation in Christ and our humility before Christ.

If someone is living in what James describes as *humble circumstances* it is wrong to conclude that the likely trials that accompany such a position in life are somehow a statement of God's displeasure, or an evaluation of one's worth, or their significance to the body of Christ. That is wrong thinking; that is thinking based on human wisdom. Such an individual may need to come to understand their true position in Christ and that in their privileged identity as a child of God, the trials they experience are opportunities to see their faith, which He regards as precious, grow and mature.

On the other hand if God has allowed that we are *rich* (the term used in verse 10), then we need His wisdom to not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We need to understand some of the particular temptations that can arise that will lead us away from dependence upon God. God's wisdom tells us that wealth is fleeting, and affluence is a very unstable foundation. Such emphasis is obvious in verses 9-11: *pass away like a wild flower* (vs. 10), *the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant* (vs. 11), *its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed* (vs. 11), and *the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business* (vs. 11). We are not self-sufficient. We are dependent.

Regardless of position in life, every believer needs God's wisdom as we face trials. His thinking is so different than ours!

### **Purposeful Encouragement (verse 12)**

Well, we've made it to verse 12, our final verse for consideration today. *Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.* I look at this verse as primarily a restatement of what we examined in verses 2-4; but spoken in a gentler way. It states the anticipation that we will persevere, that we will "stand the test" (i.e. we will have faced the battles of life and demonstrated that our faith is

genuine, and that we were willing to continually encounter life on the basis of God’s truth, on the basis of His thinking.) What a great encouragement!

The result for one who does *stand the test* is that they *will receive the crown of life*. This phrase is used only one other time in Scripture; Revelation 2:10. It is difficult to be concise in determining its exact meaning, but this is what I note. The context of both usages is the reality of trials, suffering, and difficult times. The crown of life is promised to those who in the midst of these situations are faithful and preservers in their obedient walk with Christ. They truly “walk the talk” in challenging circumstances. God wants the believer to know that He honors that highly!

Are we individuals who truly embrace obedience to God in all our ways? Do we take our cues as to what life is really all about from Him and His word in contrast to the values of the world around you? If we can say “yes” to those questions, verse 12 is an encouragement that God really honors that, both now and for eternity.

## Final Thoughts

I share these final thoughts as we conclude. These opening verses of the book of James challenge us:

1. To be disciplined in our thinking. We need to realize that perspective does impact perseverance. We need to know and heartily believe what God says about the purpose and value of trails. We need to submit our thoughts on this matter to Him. II Corinthians 10:5b phrases the challenge this way, *we (are to) take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*
2. To chose to respond to life’s trails in accordance with God’s desires. This is to be both a settled mindset and a perpetual choice. Paul expresses this truth in the book of Philippians (3:12b): *I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.*
3. To humbly seek God’s wisdom whenever we faces trials of any kind. Let’s do that, encouraged by the words of the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 12:9: *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

As time allows, I will close with the following illustration. It allows us to acknowledge that these verses in Scripture are not intended to be understood in the context of a sterile, academic evaluation. Rather, these verses are pertinent to the very personal aspects of life that we experience as we encounter difficult times.

This is an excerpt from a recent missionary letter. It is written by the teenage son of some good friends. This young man grew up overseas and has only lived in the US for the past 5 years. An opportunity has arisen for him and his father to return for a short time to the country where he grew up.

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Not many people today know what it is to have “itchy feet.” There are few who understand how painful it is to have “home” be on a different continent, and to not be able to even visit. For approximately 5 years, I have been away from my home -- visiting a place that is foreign and bizarre to me. Because this is not where I belong, for 5 years I have been called strange (and worse) for acting how I had always viewed as normal. In missionary circles, they refer to people like me as TCK’s, or Third Culture Kids, because we will never really belong in either culture (in my case -- Nigerian or

American). Yet we still feel the need to belong in each place. Most people think we're cool, but they never really accept us. To them we're a novelty item for a moment; then we're just strange.

Imagine if you had to leave your home right now and go to a different country. You would be sad to leave, but when you got there it would be cool because of all the good food and culture. After a while, you would try to learn how they speak, if only not to stand out and get ridiculed. You would learn to eat what they ate, trying as hard as you could to fit in. But you never would because you belong in your home, not theirs.

That is how I feel now, and how I have felt for the last several years. I have a fundamental need to go back to Niamey (Niger), the place that was my home for as long as I can remember, if only to see the place where I grew up. Unless you have felt this need yourself, you can't fully understand how I feel. If I were told that I had the next 3 days to sell all of my possessions to buy a round trip plane ticket to Niamey for even 1 week, I would not hesitate. I would sell my stuff, say goodbye to my friends, and leave with the clothes on my back if I had to.

If I went back to Niamey, I would reconnect with what made me who I am today. I would visit the places that I grew up around, climb the trees that entertained me for endless hours as a kid, talk to the nationals, drink Green Tea (a local staple of everyday life), and eat what the nationals eat. I would spend the time reliving my childhood and getting to know the culture that I grew up in and took for granted. But most of all, I would spend my time being where I belong more than anywhere else.

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The reality is that the trails of life that we face are so varied. And they are personal. And there is emotion involved as we seek to live in the midst of these trials. This is true regardless of the strength of our faith. This young man's thoughts also give a pointed perspective on the reality that for the believer, this world is not our home. There will be tension between living where we are, and knowing that ultimately this is not home.

Lord, help us to embrace anew the reality that you want us to welcome the trials of life as Your tools to fashion us more and more into the image of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and to prepare us for our eternal home.