



WHEN TROUBLES COME YOUR WAY – James 1:2-12

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Is it possible to avoid trouble in this life? I don't think so! Just a quick glance at the latest news will confirm that no matter who we are – rich or poor, famous or ordinary - troubles come our way. One of Job's friends was right when he said, "*People are born for trouble as readily as sparks fly up from a fire.*" (Job 5:7)

If we can't avoid troubles, then how should we face them? What difference does being a Christian mean when troubles come our way? The recipients of James' letter were not facing an easy life. They were refugees and outcasts; they were poor and persecuted. These people were facing genuinely life-threatening troubles. As he seeks to care for them with the heart of a pastor, James tells them that their troubles should actually strengthen their faith in God and enlarge their experience of His work in our lives. The troubles they were facing should push them towards God and not away from Him. How can that be?

Over the years, I have heard quite a few sermons on this passage. That is not always helpful as I can find myself just reading the passage in light of what I have heard before. My preconceived ideas stop me from reading with an open mind and heart as I think I know what it is all about. One way I find helpful to get past this is to look more carefully at the words being used.

I find checking different translations is very helpful as I see how different people translated the text from Greek or Hebrew into English. For instance, there is rarely one word in English which corresponds exactly to the Greek word used. Many times the Greek word has different meanings depending on its context. My Greek studies have helped me a bit with this but I am far from fluent and I need to look to others with a lot more expertise than I to better understand it.

One tool which is very helpful if you use a computer is a website like Bible Gateway. You can ask it to give you a verse in every English translation – it will give you about 60 different versions! You can also choose one of those translations to work with. One I would suggest you look at if you would like to understand the Greek words a bit more is the Mounce Reverse Interlinear New Testament. It has an English translation with the related Greek words underneath. If you click on a word, it brings up possible meanings and other references where that Greek word is used. It also highlights other places in the chapter you are looking at where the word is found. This doesn't require any Greek knowledge, just the ability to type in the Bible reference and click and read. I know not everyone uses the computer like this, but if you do, I recommend you check it out.

I found looking at word meanings very helpful in understanding what James is saying in our passage today – and what he isn't saying! Therefore, today we're going to work our way through the

verses looking at some of the words James uses. I pray that it will give you some new perspectives as it did me.

OUR ATTITUDE IN TROUBLES

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. (v. 2)

There are a couple of words in this first verse that are very important for our understanding of all that follows. The first is what the New Living Translation calls troubles and some other translations call trials. This word is a bit tricky because its meaning can vary depending on the context in which it is used. It can mean “testing” to prove someone’s character like one might test the purity of a metal. It can also mean “tempting” someone to do the wrong thing. The first is the positive idea of proving the goodness in someone while the second is the negative idea of revealing the weaknesses in someone. James will talk about both of these aspects in the coming verses as he explores troubles of any kind.

When these troubles come along, what are we to do? We are to consider it an opportunity. I think it is important to realise that the word consider is a mental attitude, not an emotional state. It refers to what we need to understand about the troubles, not what we feel about them. And what should we understand? That troubles give us an opportunity for joy. Many years ago, I came across a quote which has influenced my understanding of joy. It said, “Joy is not exuberance; joy is not happiness. Joy is perfect acceptance of and surrender to the will of God.” Joy is not primarily an emotion; it is a quiet, confident trust in God. We need to understand that even in the midst of the troubles we will inevitably face, we can be confident that God is in control and worthy of our trust. This needs to be our underlying attitude to troubles.

THE GOAL OF TROUBLES

After James’ introduction to the topic, he is going to look specifically at the first kind of trouble – the testing of our faith.

For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. (v.3,4)

James changes the word he uses here to specify what kind of troubles he is talking about. He now uses a different word which means to test or prove the genuineness of something. For instance, if you want to sell a diamond ring, they will test it to ensure that it is a genuine diamond. It is interesting to see that James says “when” your faith is tested, not “if” it is tested. It is assumed that our faith will be tested.

This causes me to ask, who needs to be convinced that my faith is genuine? Does God need proof of my faith? He already knows those who are His children. He knows everything about me and my faith in Him. He doesn’t need to be convinced. In the story of Job, God knew that Job’s faith was true, he tells Satan this at the very beginning. It is Satan who doesn’t believe it. Maybe Satan needs proof that we are truly God’s children. Did Job’s friends believe his faith in God is strong? No, they are constantly questioning his faith. Maybe testing comes to show our faith to those around us. And finally, what do we think about our own faith? At the end of Job, he discovered some things which proved his faith and some areas which needed work on. At the end of his testing, he says, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42:5) His relationship with God had grown. Our faith can gain from testing.

Which is what the next word is about. Endurance is the extension of faith over time. It is one thing to have faith in one point in time, for one event. It is another thing for that faith to continue over time. That is endurance. And it is that endurance in faith, through the ups and downs of life, which ultimately results in us being perfect and complete or mature and whole as a Christian. As we walk

with God through troubles, our faith grows to become a more well-rounded, a more complete faith as we learn to walk with God in different circumstances.

The goal of this kind of testing is not to cause you to fail. In fact, it is just the opposite. It is to show you, and anyone watching, the genuineness of your faith. And, as you go through this testing, your faith will grow and strengthen. While it may not be fun in the heat of the furnace, it will ultimately be a good thing! And we know from other passages in the Bible that God promises He will be with you, enabling you to endure the test.

OBSTACLE: WISDOM

Next James anticipates a couple of obstacles you may face in the midst of the testing.

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with a divided loyalty ... should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (v. 5-7)

Firstly, it takes wisdom to know how to deal with trouble. Have you ever faced a situation and you just didn't know what to do? I have certainly felt that way! But here we have God's promise that He will not leave us to muddle along on our own. He wants us to ask Him for help. As we saw last week, wisdom is the skill needed to apply what you know to your current circumstances. It is practical and relevant. When God gives us wisdom, it comes from His perfect knowledge of the situation, our personality and ability, and all possible outcomes. And He isn't stingy in giving it out, He gives it generously and without reluctance or rebuke.

There is only one condition – we must be totally committed to Him and to doing His will. The New Living Translation says we must not waver or have divided loyalty. Other translations talk about doubting and being double-minded. I think it is important to understand that this doubt is not the opposite of faith. We are not talking about someone who is unbelieving and rebellious against God. They would not even be asking God for wisdom because they don't follow Him at all. What James is talking about is someone who wants to follow God's will, but they also want to keep their options open if they don't like what God says. In their mind is a tug-of-war between God and the world and they aren't sure which one to choose. I think most Christians go through periods like this. But as we said last week, we are servants of God and servants don't have the option to only obey when we like the command! We must be willing to follow God wisdom, otherwise God will not share His wisdom with us.

James goes on to describe these "double-minded" people.

... a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do. (v. 6-8)

What a vivid picture! Do you ever feel like this? What is holding you back from trusting God fully? I would encourage you to pray and ask God to show you what is holding you back. I remember many times when I was struggling to work out what to do as a teenager and young adult. After my mum had listened to me, she would invariably tell me to go into my room and spend some time with God and work out what was coming between Him and me. My mum was wise enough to see that the problem wasn't about finding wisdom, but in submitting to God.

OBSTACLE: STATUS

James goes on to address another obstacle his readers might encounter as they face troubles.

Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honoured them. And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. (v. 9,10)

This issue has to do with status and resources needed to face troubles. The word “poor” describes those in humble, dependent or even humiliating circumstances. The Christians to whom James was writing had fled the persecution in Jerusalem and were very low in status in their new location. But it seems that some of the newer Christians, who came from the local community, were relatively wealthy and this caused a friction which James addresses several times in his letter.

People may have felt that their circumstances meant that they could not possibly handle any more trouble. But James assures them that God has not forgotten them and that God himself has given them status – he has honoured or exalted them. They are no longer inferior. And those who are rich, with all the attendant status and honour? They need to know that their riches did not make them immune to trouble. They too needed to look to God for He had humbled them. The word “humbled” here is the same one translated “poor” earlier. This reminds me of Jesus’ statements that, in the Kingdom, the first will be last and the last will be first.

James then draws another of his vivid pictures:

They will fade away like a little (grass) flower in the field. The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all their achievements. (v. 10,11)

I love that James says that for all their power and wealth, they are only a little grass flower - something that in the larger scheme of things is so insignificant. I wonder how Elon Musk would feel about that description? Or Vladimir Putin? Or any of our politicians?! Material possessions and earthly honour will not ultimately help us face troubles and they won’t last into eternity. Their glory is brief, and their value is limited. But the honour which God gives is truly worth boasting about.

GOD’S BLESSING THROUGH TROUBLES

God gives wisdom, God honours and God blesses.

God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation (troubles). Afterward (when the testing shows they are genuine) they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (v. 12)

God is not sitting at a distance waiting for us to fail so that He can chastise us for our failure. God is right here with us, seeking to give us all we need to pass the test because He knows our faith is genuine. Through the testing, He is show our faith to anyone who is watching and he uses these times to grow our endurance in faith and to show us ways we can continue to grow in Him.

This verse is an example of when it is helpful to look at something like the Mounce translation on Bible Gateway. Some of the words used here are the same as those we’ve seen before but that doesn’t show through in the translation very well. The words “patiently endure” come from the same word translate simply “endurance” before. Remember that we said that endurance means the extension of faith over time – faith that holds true in all kinds of troubles. This time they have chosen to not translate the word as “troubles”, but to indicate the two types of trouble we have talked about – testing and temptation. This may be because this verse is the transition between James’ discussion of the two kinds of troubles. It finishes up his explanation of testing and begins his discussion of temptation.

I also think it is important to understand that James is not stating a condition here. He is not saying “God will bless you if you endure troubles.” In the next sentence, he is not saying that “If the testing shows you have genuine faith, then God will reward you”. Conditional sentences are very clear in the Greek, and they are not in evidence here. James is not saying “if”, he is saying “when”. When you endure God will bless. When you are proved genuine, God will give you the crown of life. This is not a crown of kingship, but the laurel wreath given to the victor in a competition or in war. It signifies to all watching that we are God’s people with God’s life – tested and proven before anyone who would doubt us. Remember, the doubter is not God. He already knows our faith is genuine.

Once we have truly turned to God and entered into a love relationship with Him, then our future is secure in God and our present is supported by God.

CONCLUSION

When troubles come our way, it is never easy. We often feel like the guy at the end of the rope hanging off the cliff, don't we? The Bible may say that troubles are inevitable, but it never treats them lightly but acknowledges that they are difficult. What it does say is that God will always be with us in our troubles, and that He will make it possible for us to maintain our faith and endure through them. And more than just endure, He will make it possible for us to grow a stronger, more stable faith. It is counter-intuitive, but as we walk through difficult times, and see God at work in our circumstances and in our hearts, we grow to trust Him more. We draw closer to Him. The next troubles we face, our past experience with God makes us stronger in our faith as we are more confident in God's ability to see us through. I don't think it is ever easy, but it is always possible. And this brings us joy and life and an honour that will never fade away.

