

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

A RADICAL APPROACH TO TRIALS

James 1:1-4

By

Steven J. Cole

April 17, 2005

© Steven J. Cole, 2005

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons
via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

April 17, 2005
James Lesson 1

A Radical Approach to Trials James 1:1-4

One of the popular TV shows when I grew up was “Dragnet,” starring Jack Webb as Joe Friday, a detective with the Los Angeles Police Department. Joe Friday was a no-nonsense cop. His famous line was, “Just the facts, Ma’am.” He didn’t want to hear anything irrelevant to solving the case. If somebody went off on a tangent, he cut to the quick with, “Just the facts, Ma’am.”

James is the Joe Friday of the New Testament. He cuts to the bottom line without messing around. He’s not really interested in hearing your *profession* of faith. He wants to see your *practice* of the faith. Several writers refer to James as the least theological epistle in the New Testament, except for Philemon. It’s not that James discounts the importance of sound doctrine, but rather that he wants to see that doctrine affecting how we live. Talk is cheap; James wants to see results. Of the 108 verses in the book, 54 (half) contain imperative verbs. James is like a crusty sergeant barking orders at the troops. He wants to see some action!

Who was James? There are several men in the New Testament by that name. We know that this James was *not* the apostle James, brother of John, because he was martyred in A.D. 44, too early for this epistle. The vast majority of scholars agree that the author of James was the half-brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55). Apparently he did not believe in Jesus as Lord until after the resurrection, when the risen Savior appeared to him (see John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7). He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the years following the Day of Pentecost (Gal. 2:9; Acts 15:13-29; 21:17-25). He became known as “James the Just” (or, “Righteous”) because of his well-known holiness.

James could have pulled rank by opening the letter, “James, the son of the virgin Mary, brother of none other than Jesus Christ. I grew up with Him! I knew Him long before He became famous!” But James (1:1) and his brother, Jude (Jude 1), both opened their letters by calling themselves bond-servants. The word means, “slaves,” and refers to those who are the property of their masters.

They had no rights. They lived to do their masters' will. James adds, "a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." By mentioning God and Jesus Christ on equal terms, and adding "Lord," the Old Testament word for God, to Jesus, James affirms the deity of Jesus Christ.

James wrote this letter to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1). This identifies his main readers as Jews who lived outside of Israel. The contents of the letter further identifies them as followers of Christ, although they were perhaps still worshiping in synagogues ("assembly" in 2:2 is literally, "synagogue"). It is likely that James was the first New Testament book written, perhaps around A.D. 47 (before the Jerusalem Council in 49). According to Josephus, James was martyred in 62.

Some of the readers had probably been members of the church in Jerusalem, but they had scattered into many locations because of the persecution that arose after the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1; 11:19-20). Because of anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire, these believers in Christ were often the brunt of hostility both from the pagan world, as well as from their own people.

Word got back to James of some of the difficulties that these brethren were encountering: affliction from without (5:1-6) and, as often happens at such times, conflicts within (2:1-13; 4:1-12). Some were lapsing into a superficial, formal religion that professed orthodox beliefs, but practiced selfish, ungodly lifestyles (1:22-27; 2:14-26; 3:9-12). As a pastor, James writes to these scattered Jewish believers to make the point: True faith shows itself in practical, godly living. He develops several themes: endurance through trials; the dangers of riches and encouragement to the poor; the law and love; faith and works; the coming of the Lord; and, humility. But his main point is that true biblical faith *works*.

Many writers claim that there is no unifying theme to James, but that it is just a series of unrelated, random exhortations. But, as difficult as it may be to outline the book, I think that the contents may be arranged under this theme of true faith. James is giving a series of tests by which one may determine whether his faith is genuine or false (D. Edmond Hiebert makes this point, "The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* [135:539, July-September, 1978], pp. 221-231). I offer this outline:

Introduction: Author and recipients (1:1).

1. True faith responds with practical godliness under testing (1:2-27).
 - A. True faith responds with joy when it faces testing (1:2-4).
 - B. True faith seeks God for wisdom in times of testing (1:5-8).
 - C. True faith adopts God's eternal perspective in both poverty and riches (1:9-11).
 - D. True faith perseveres under testing, not blaming God for temptations (1:12-18).
 - E. True faith obeys God's word, even when provoked (1:19-27).
2. True faith shows itself in practical obedience (2:1-26).
 - A. True faith does not show partiality (2:1-7).
 - B. True faith practices biblical love (2:8-13).
 - C. True faith proves itself by its works (2:14-26).
3. True faith controls the tongue and acts with gentle wisdom (3:1-18).
 - A. True faith controls the tongue (3:1-12).
 - B. True faith acts with gentle wisdom (3:13-18).
4. True faith resists arrogance by humbling oneself before God (4:1-5:18).
 - A. True faith practices humility in relationships (4:1-12).
 - B. True faith practices humility with regard to the future (4:13-17).
 - C. True faith practices humility by waiting for God to judge the wicked who have wronged us (5:1-11).
 - D. True faith practices humility by speaking the truth apart from self-serving oaths (5:12).
 - E. True faith practices humility by depending upon God through prayer (5:13-18).

Conclusion: True faith practices biblical love by seeking to restore those who have strayed from the truth (5:19-20).

With that as a brief introduction and overview of the whole book, let's zero in on James' radical approach to trials (1:2-4). Writing to refugees who have suffered the loss of their homes and homeland, plus many of their possessions, who are being persecuted in the places that they have sought refuge, James says,

When we encounter trials, we should count it as joy, submitting to God, knowing that He is using it for our maturity.

Kent Hughes (*James: Faith that Works* [Crossway], pp. 17-18, ellipsis marks his) imagines the original readers response: "How nice...a letter of encouragement from Pastor Whacko! Don't worry ...be happy!" We may hesitate to call James "Pastor Whacko," but we might question whether his advice is practical and realistic when we're going through terrible trials. It may work for the little irritations that we encounter every day, but is it realistic advice for facing the huge trials that hit us?

Before we write off James as a masochistic weirdo, we should recall that two other New Testament writers said similar things. Peter wrote to suffering believers whose faith was being tested by fire. He told them that "to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing" (1 Pet. 4:13; see also, 1:8).

The apostle Paul wrote (Rom. 5:3), "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance...." He wrote Philippians from prison, and the theme of that letter is joy in Christ. He gave that impractical command, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4; see also, 1 Thess. 5:16). Not only that, but Paul practiced what he preached. As he sat in a Philippian jail cell, unjustly arrested and beaten, unable to sleep, he and Silas sang praises at midnight (Acts 16:25). And so if we write off James as being a bit out of touch with reality, we also have to write off Peter and Paul!

The alternative is to consider that perhaps these godly men were onto something. Consider three things:

1. We should adopt a radical attitude in trials: "Consider it all joy" (1:2).

"Consider" means to think, count, or regard something based on weighing and comparing of facts. It denotes deliberate and careful judgment stemming from external proof, not subjective judgment based on feelings (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Harper & Brothers, 1887], p. 276; *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, G. Abbott-Smith [Charles Scribner's Sons], p. 119). Although powerful emotions are inevitable when we encounter severe trials, once the emotions have subsided a bit, we

need to think about the trial from a biblical perspective. Let's consider several aspects of this radical attitude:

A. This radical attitude accepts trials as expected, not as a surprise.

James does *not* say, "if you encounter various trials," but *when*. It's not an elective. It's a required course in the school of faith. As Peter wrote (1 Pet. 4:12), "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; ..." Many Christians naively think that if they obey the Lord, they will be spared from any trials. When trials hit them, they are confused and often angry at God: "I was following You! Why did You allow this to happen?" But the Bible gives abundant testimony that *all* of God's saints encounter trials. And these trials are not necessarily the consequence of disobedience. Rather, God uses them to test our faith. They will be *varied* according to His sovereign purpose. We cannot understand why He sends the particular trials that He does, but whatever they are, we can know that they are from Him.

B. This radical attitude does not require denying emotional pain.

I base this observation on several Scriptures. Jesus did not condemn Mary for weeping at the death of her brother Lazarus. Rather, He wept, too (John 11:33-35). When the Savior faced the cross, He did so with "loud crying and tears" (Heb. 5:7). Paul instructs us, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Hebrews 12:11 acknowledges, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, yet sorrowful. ..." So James does not mean, "Put on your happy face and deny that you're hurting."

C. This radical attitude is not natural.

While believers grieve, they do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Our response to trials should distinguish us from the world. Underneath the grief and tears, there should be the serene confidence that God is in control. He will cause "all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). "Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning"

(Ps. 30:5). "Those who sow in tears shall reap with joyful shouting. He who goes to and fro weeping, carrying his bag of seed, shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves with him" (Ps. 126:5-6). Biblical joy in times of trials is not natural optimism. It is the joy of hope in God and His sure promises.

D. This radical attitude results from a deliberate choice.

The choice is, "Will I trust in God and His promises, or not?" As James says, it is our *faith* that is being tested. We do not know if our faith is genuine until it stands up under the test. You can buy a jacket that claims to be waterproof. If you wear it on dry days, you have not put the jacket to the test. The test of that jacket is, if you get caught in a downpour, does it keep you dry? If it does, you say, "That's a good jacket!"

It's easy to proclaim, "I trust in God!" Anybody can say that. But, the test of your faith is when you really do choose to trust God in a severe trial. Afterwards, you know that your faith is genuine, because it brought you through the trial. But the point is, when you are faced with a trial, you have a choice: Will I trust God and the promises of His Word, as I have professed to do, or not? To trust God and experience His hope and joy in the midst of trials is a radical attitude that James commands us to adopt.

2. We should understand a reassuring truth in trials: "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (1:3).

There are two aspects to this reassuring truth:

A. God is sovereign over every trial.

The verse implies that God is using the trials for His purpose. He is not sitting in heaven saying, "I didn't want that to happen, but now that it has happened, let's see how we can make the best of a bad situation!" Scripture is clear that God is sovereign over *everything*, from the rain and snow that fall (Job 37:6-13), to seemingly random events (the lot, Prov. 16:33), to the events of nations (Ps. 22:28; Acts 14:16; 17:26). On the personal level, He ordained all of the days of our lives before we were ever born (Ps. 139:16). He fashions our hearts (Ps. 33:14-15) and orders our steps (Ps. 37:23; Prov. 16:9; 20:24).

There are some radical Arminians (“Open Theism”) who try to get God off the hook when it comes to trials, saying, “This was not in His plan.” They argue that God does not control (or even know in advance!) the choices we make. But the Bible affirms that God is sovereign over birth defects (Exod. 4:11), natural disasters (Gen. 6:17; Jonah 1:4), and even over the evil things that people do, although He is not responsible for their sin (Gen. 50:20; Exod. 4:21; 1 Kings 22:23; Isa. 10:5; Acts 4:27-28). It robs people of comfort and creates a very scary world, where evil is out of control, to deny God’s sovereignty over trials, because it denies that He is purposefully working those trials for our ultimate good. The hymn writer had it right: “Every joy or trial falleth from above, traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love” (Frances Havergal, “Like a River Glorious”).

B. God is using the trials to test our faith to produce endurance.

Testing is like the refining of a metal: it produces a better product through the process. “Endurance” is the better translation here. It means to stand fast or persevere. R. C. Trench (*Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 198), says that the Greek word translated “patience” is used with respect to persons, whereas “endurance” refers to things. Thus the man is *patient* who is not easily provoked or angered by difficult people, whereas the man *endures* who does not lose heart under great trials. We might call it “spiritual toughness” (Hughes, p. 19).

Picture an athlete who pushes himself to build up strength and endurance for an upcoming race. If it’s a 10k run, he may start with 5k and gradually extend his distance and speed. If he’s serious about winning, he will be running farther than 10k before the race, so that the race will seem easier than what he is conditioned for. In the same way, when we endure trials by faith, our faith is stronger for the next trial. We know that we can endure, because we’ve already been through previous trials. And when we endure trials by faith, *with joy*, it brings glory to our Lord and Savior.

Thus when we encounter trials, we should adopt the *radical attitude* of counting it all joy. We should understand the *reassuring truth*, that our sovereign God is using it to develop enduring faith.

3. We should submit to the refining process in trials: “Let endurance have its perfect result” (1:4).

“Let” implies submission to God in the trial. Submitting to God does not necessarily mean passively enduring it without praying for relief. Paul prayed that God would remove his “thorn in the flesh.” He stopped praying when God told him, “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor. 12:8-9). Being submissive to God does not necessarily mean that we do not take steps to remedy the problem. If the trial is the loss of a job, it is right, in dependence on the Lord, to seek another job. If the trial is an illness, it is right not only to pray, but to seek medical help. If it is a difficult circumstance, it is not necessarily wrong to try to change the circumstance.

Submission is an attitude toward God, where we do not defiantly shake our fist in His face and tell Him that He has no right to do this to us. We are not submitting to Him if we ignore Him and take matters into our own hands, apart from prayer and faith. One of the best examples of submission was Job. After God afflicted him, he said, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Briefly note two things:

- A. Recognize that maturity is a process, not instant perfection.

“Let endurance have its perfect result....” This isn’t a quick fix. The word “perfect” does not imply that you reach a point in this life where you’ve arrived and need no further progress. I find myself failing in lessons that I thought that I had already learned. So, I have to take the course over again and again! We don’t graduate until we go to heaven.

- B. Submitting to the process will result in spiritual maturity.

God’s goal in the trials is “that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Again, this does not mean that you can arrive at a state of sinless perfection or perfect maturity in this life. Rather, the idea is that you will be spiritually mature, well-equipped for the purpose that God created you. The fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) will be evident in your daily life. Peter Davids says that the word *complete* “stresses the incremental character of the process. That is, perfection is not just a maturing of character, but a rounding out as more and more ‘parts’ of the righteous character are

added" (*New International Greek Commentary*, James Eerdmans], p. 70). William Barclay observes (*The Daily Study Bible, the Letters of James and Peter* [Westminster Press], p. 44), "By the way in which we meet every experience in life we are either fitting or unfitting ourselves for the task which God meant us to do."

Conclusion

John Piper (*Future Grace* [Multnomah Press], pp. 171-172) relates the amazing story of Marie Durant (from Karl Olsson in *Passion* [Harper & Row]). In the late 17th century, in southern France, Marie was brought before the authorities and charged with the Huguenot heresy (being a Reformed Protestant). "She was fourteen years old, bright, attractive, marriageable." She was asked to recant her Huguenot faith. "She was not asked to commit an immoral act, to become a criminal, or even to change the day-to-day quality of her behavior." She was only asked to say, "I recant." She refused.

Together with thirty other Huguenot women, she was put into a tower by the sea and left there for 38 years. She and her fellow martyrs scratched on the wall of their prison tower the single word, "Resist!" Tourists still see and gape at that word on that stone. Olsson reflects (*ibid.*, p. 172),

We can understand a religion which enhances time... But we cannot understand a faith which is not nourished by the temporal hope that tomorrow things will be better. To sit in a prison room with thirty others and to see the day change into night and summer into autumn, to feel the slow systemic changes within one's flesh: the drying and wrinkling of the skin, the loss of muscle tone, the stiffening of the joints, the slow stupefaction of the senses—to feel all this and still to persevere seems almost idiotic to a generation which has no capacity to wait and to endure.

Piper points out that a key adjective in that story points to the power of Marie Durant's endurance. Olsson said, "We cannot understand a faith which is not nourished by the *temporal* hope that tomorrow things will be better." Piper adds (*ibid.*), "Surely we cannot, if 'temporal' hope is the only kind we have. But if there is a hope beyond this temporal life—if future grace extends into eter-

nity—then there may be a profound understanding of such patience in this life.”

James (5:7) later encourages us, “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.” His radical approach to dealing with trials is: Adopt *a radical attitude*. “Consider it all joy.” Understand *a reassuring truth*: “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.” And, submit to *the refining process*: “let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” That is one way that true faith responds with practical godliness under testing.

Discussion Questions

1. Are we supposed to deny our feelings when we “consider it all joy” in time of trial? How does this work in practice?
2. Why does the Open Theism view that God is not sovereign over trials rob God’s people of hope and comfort?
3. Some Christian psychologists say that to encourage a suffering saint to “trust God” is useless advice. Agree/disagree? Why?
4. Is it sin to feel sorrow and grief in a trial? If not, how do these feelings fit in with God’s joy?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2005, All Rights Reserved.