

“Life As Trial”
James 1:1–12
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I come from St Louis, which is a city that doesn't know whether it's from the north to the south or the east to the west is kind of hangs in the middle of the country looking for its identity. I knew your senior pastor, Harry Reeder, in a variety of ways. We were in four different organizations together, but the part I liked the most was serving with him on a study committee for the PCA about six or seven years ago on women in ministry. I sat next to him a lot of the time and really gained a lot of respect for him as a person, as well as a theologian. So it's good to be here and I bring you greetings from Covenant Seminary as well.

I want to read God's Word to you from James 1:1-12 which says *[1] James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

[2] Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. [4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. [6] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. [7] For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; [8] he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

[9] Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, [10] and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. [11] For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

[12] Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, give us years to hear all that You're saying to us today. Help us to take Your good Word to heart. We ask in Your Name, Amen.

I suppose you would all agree that if someone tells you the truth in the wrong time, wrong way, it's hard to digest, hard to appreciate so I ask you to imagine this scenario that didn't happen to me but could have. I like to hike in the mountains, and have hiked mountains most years of my life since I turned 40. We make plans when we hike and let's imagine a man who planned a week-long hike in the wilderness in the Rockies. He has some friends who will go with him, he has his gear, he's in shape, and he's ready to go. As he's just on the cusp of leaving, the day before he leaves, he's just walking carelessly and he steps off a curb in kind of a strange sort of way and hears a little sound in his foot. He's a little worried about that. He goes to the doctor right away, gets an X-ray and the doctor says, “You're going to be fine for you just broke a small bone in your foot. It's going to heal up perfectly in three or four weeks. You just have to keep your foot idle for the next three or four weeks.” He says, ‘Doc, I'm going to Colorado tomorrow. I've been planning this for a year.’ The doctor says, “Actually, you're not.”

The word spreads about this poor man and someone knocks on his door who is a student of the Word and has this great big Bible with him. He has a Bible verse for this disappointed man. He says, ‘My friend, I have a verse for you that says ‘count it all joy, my brother when you

meet trials of various kinds.' God has you this broken bone so you can become a better person.' The disappointed man says, "May I please see that Bible and see that verse for a minute?" He takes the Bible and starts beating the other man with it about the shoulders and neck and says, "I don't really need that verse right now. I believe in God's providence. I didn't want to hear this at this moment."

Now, I don't say this because the verse isn't true. It is true but it doesn't just speak to the moment of adversity. In fact, in a moment of adversity, remember what Jesus did when His friend Lazarus died as He came to visit His friends, Mary and Martha, and He wept with them. Now he talked, but first he wept and there's a time to weep and a time to be silent as Job's friends should have known. They were at their high point when they were sitting silently and they spoke too much too soon.

The problem with James 1:2 is not that it's false or that it's useless in any situation. The problem is we tend to take it as a limited verse. We tend to take it as a word for the disaster – the hurricane, for the lost job, for the diagnosis of a serious disease. We put it in a box of adversities but if you go through the book of James with James 1:2 being the overture to the whole book, it's very clear as time goes by that trials include things like having a lot of energy and making too much of your energy and your skills, or being rich or being a teacher. Those things test you as well. This verse is not about the moment of crisis or sorrow but it includes crisis, sorrow, hardship, prosperity and success because they test us also. It's true that we grow strong through adversity. It's certainly true that God does not want us to live a life of simply maximum pleasure seeking.

We had a couple of baptisms recently. Isn't it great to be married? Yes, and it's hard too, right? Isn't it great to be a mom and a dad? It is great but it's also hard because some of those little ones have cried for no reason from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Some of them might have done it over and over and over. All the great things in life are beautiful and arduous. We don't live just for pleasure of the moment. We need to learn how to go through hard things and beautiful things. God tries us in them all.

Some read the book of James and come to 'blessed are you when you're going through trials' and think, "James must have been writing to a church that was suffering persecution" because there was a lot of persecution in New Testament. There's no evidence in the book of James at all that the church was suffering external hardship or persecution. In fact, if you read carefully, it becomes clear that James actually worried about internal problems, like knowing a lot of theology and not living it or knowing a lot of theology and not quite fully believing in it or embracing it where they believe God exists, but it doesn't matter that much or the idea of belonging to community, but not actually fully belonging to the community and all of its people, including people unlike themselves. James is saying you're trials will test you. They will probe whether your faith is genuine, they will probe whether you will grow, whether you want to grow in the Christian life through the trials, through the adversity that comes your way.

James 1:9 to 11 starts to develop this idea. We all fail some tests. When James says we want to pass a trial, it doesn't mean we need to be perfect because we're not perfect but we're fundamentally faithful people and we look at trials a certain way, not as aberrations or terrible mishaps, but as a way to grow. James 1:9 to 11 make this pretty clear and talk about those who are rich and those who are poor. First of all, James 1:9 says the lowly brother should boast in his exaltation and the rich man should boast in his humiliation, especially because he knows that his life is short and it's going to fade away even as he goes about his business. James is basically saying that everybody knows that poverty is a trial.

This morning when I woke up, it said on my little watch that it's 42 degrees. I have clothes that will keep me warm and keep me cool but the poor person has only certain things that may not keep him warm. They don't have additional clothes and they can be cold. That's the message of James 2 and they can be hungry; not the hunger that we feel at noon, but the hunger that goes from having no meal for a day. The poor person is humble.

James 2:1-7 says [1] *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. [2] For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, [3] and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," [4] have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? [5] Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? [6] But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? [7] Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?*

Here even at church the poor man is mistreated. Later on in James 2 it says that even people who could help often don't help the poor and James 5 says that the rich sometimes oppress the poor and there's nowhere they have to turn for even the judicial system won't help them. They have to crowd to God. So the poor person humbled has to remember that they're exalted in the sight of God – son or daughter of God – and the rich person is also tried because they can think, so James says, that they don't really need God. They forget how humble they are. They forget that their life, as James 4 says, is like a mist on a lake. Do you ever work on a lake? Mist comes up when the sun rises and you go out to look at the lake, it's beautiful and you come back an hour later, it's gone. James says 4:14 says [14] *yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*

We need to remember that because you're tempted to believe, as the Bible says in Proverbs 18:10-11, you're your wealth, your strength is your strong tower. So everything tests us and so says James. Some say, 'I'd like to have the test of wealth. I wouldn't mind that for a change.' Pride is the bane. That's why Proverbs 30:7-9 says as a prayer 'Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread otherwise, if I have too much, I may disown You.' He says to God that he doesn't need God and say, 'Who's the Lord? Or I might become poor and steal breaking God's law' thinking I have to take care of myself. So riches and poverty both test us. James 1:13-14 says [13] *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. [14] But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* Here no one is singled out, especially for testing. If anything, God wants to test us all so we share weakness so we need to see our need of grace and come to life by the Word of truth.

The whole book of James develops this theme. For example, if you have knowledge, that knowledge will test you. James 4:17 says [17] *So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.* So, if you know that tests you. James 3:1-2 says [1] *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. [2] For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.* The more you talk, the more you you're liable to say something that's false or unhelpful or maybe even wrong. James 4 also talks about the person is full of energy. They say to themselves, I'm going to go to this city or that city. I'm going to trade for a year, I'm going to make money and James says, 'How do you know that?

You seem a little overconfident to me. You think everything will work out in a year or so you have to humble yourself when you've got a lot of energy.' Illness tests us as James 5 tells us, as does prosperity. Remember to praise God also James 5.

We could talk about other things like great beauty or great athletic skill. If you like football, when you make an incredible play, you can get some praise for that, my friends but be careful because the adulation that comes to beautiful people and talented people can go to your head. It can try you. Anything can try you. A couple of weeks ago, I was on a walk with my ten-year-old granddaughter who lives by me, and I try to go on a little date with my grandchildren from time to time. We had decided to go to a place called Castlewood Park, and it's about a five-mile trail up and down the hills. There's a little cave to explore and you can throw rocks at the train tracks down below to hear that little ding from the hitting of the metal with those rocks. We had a great time. One of the trials was that she comes from a family of runners and she started running at about the four mile mark and she thinks I can keep up with her. That was fun. I kind of did but my real trial was the desire to keep her there. I want her to stay nine but she's ten now. I don't want her to be 14 yet I have to let my children and grandchildren go. Everything is a test. All of life is a test.

I want to walk you through that for a moment. This morning I saw a bumper sticker on a car that said something about a high school senior on it. So let's imagine a high school senior who is tired of mom and dad, tired of rules, tired of teachers, tired of books, tired of teacher's dirty looks but wants to go to college because there they are free. They can be their own person at college, do whatever they want. The only problem is this person is a metallurgical engineering major that takes some time in the lab. He doesn't have all the money needs so he has to work part time. College is actually a lot of work and as a college senior, he meets a young woman. She's an education major and they're falling in love but they haven't known each other that long. They're going to sort things out and she stays in Birmingham and he goes off to Dallas – 636 and a half miles away. It's not easy kissing each other goodnight on the phone.

They decide to get together as much as they can and eventually, they decide to get married after a couple of years. They are married, they settle down, they're so happy and they think to themselves, "Finally our trials are over," right? But marriage brings us trials, doesn't it? For example, she's one of these people that believes in tokens of affection, and she wonders why he doesn't write her cards anymore and send her flowers and he says 'tokens of affection? I mean, you have one on your finger, baby. I mean, I eat with you and sleep with you every night. What do you need tokens for? You have the real deal. You have me.' That doesn't always go over well, especially because he kind of eats like he is still at the frat house from time to time. At night he thrashes around like he's reenacting the decathlon.

Anyway, they sort it out and they decide to have a child after a couple of years and after a few months of trying, they begin to realize this isn't working out. They see a specialist and eventually she's pregnant. Our trials are over, we're going to have a baby. Hooray. I'm not going to mention the trials of nausea and mood swings and alien body forms. They have a baby. She's healthy, happy and we're going to go to sleep and our trials are over. They go to sleep at 10:30pm and she's awake at 1:30am for 4 hours. Then as the child gets older, they think, 'our trials will be over when our children understand our words.' Then we think when our child goes to school, or when our youngest child goes to school, then our trials will be over. Then they're in school and they're full of activities and you think as soon as we have a driver, then our trials will be over. You go through life always thinking the next phase will be the easy one. Some people even think that when all their children are gone, it will be easy and some people think life will

get easy when they can finally get rid of that job they've never really liked and they find they lost half their friends and don't know what to do with their spare time. Let's not even think about health issues.

There's always a trial and God's Word says the same thing to us. James says 'brothers, meaning the whole family of God, consider it pure joy when you come upon these trials of various kinds.' That means, first of all, when you encounter trial, you give it thought. You don't react. You say, 'Let me think about this.' James says, consider, weigh it, evaluate it, come to a conclusion that God actually wants to do something in me and God has a purpose in trial. This is not a random event that just happened to strike me.

At Briarwood Presbyterian Church I saw Stones of Remembrance walking around the church which was to remember how God has carried us through our years at that point, 50 years as a church. I'm confident that difficult things have happened in this church. My home church, in 2021 had disagreements about political matters, then disagreements about COVID masks, when to meet in person, when not to meet in person. How about the masked people sit over there and the non mask people sit over there. That's a terrible idea. I don't know why it's a terrible idea, but it's a terrible idea. Then there's disagreement and then if you asked them today about that time they would say, God used that time and we are stronger and better than ever. I think it's true God uses trials in our lives.

For example, just to go back to children, a woman is not glad to be pregnant because she likes nausea. She's glad to be pregnant because she sees past that and knows she will have a child. We are not thankful for the trial, for the pain we're thankful for what God is doing in the trial, for the end result, which is that we will be mature and complete lacking in nothing. I find that interesting because people tend to say "In this trial, God's going to teach me patience. I'm going to learn patience, I'm going to have deeper faith." I have no objection to that idea but it doesn't say in the trial you'll learn to have more faith or you'll get more patience. It says if you take the trial the right way, you will be mature and complete, lacking in nothing, that is to say there is no deficit, no spiritual fault or weakness in your life that cannot be cured by some trial if you face the trial correctly. "Consider that," James says.

There is no virtue without perseverance, right? If you have a soldier who goes through five battles bravely and then runs in the sixth, just throws down his weapon and runs, what do you call them? Do you say 83% courageous? Unfortunately, you have to say, 'friend, you have to persevere through all the battles. Perseverance is what God asks for, not an occasional bit of success.'

Now, when people face trials, they ask questions and some of them are good and some are not. The good questions are; What is God teaching me? How will God reveal Himself in His goodness? Bad ones are; Is God punishing me? What did I do to deserve this? How can I get out of here as fast as possible? People sometimes say this to me, "If you knew the trouble I have, you wouldn't say this." I think 'I don't know the trouble you've had and I'm not saying it. I'm only say this is in the Bible.' God tells us to consider the trial a source of testing that will enable you to grow in holiness. I don't know what's happened in your life. I can't fathom it, but God does and He says that He could use this for your good. That's why I say it.

Of course, trials and suffering can break us and can make us bitter and angry, and even people sometimes turn away from God saying 'How could God allow this to happen to me?' But James does promise that we will come to maturity through trials if we meet them with faith and with the request for wisdom. I want to speak of this personally. When I was 34, I had a seven year old, a five year old and a one year old. I was a college professor at that time and I taught at a

school that was about five blocks away from where I lived, which meant I would stay in my study due to the noise from my children at that age and I would have to get my work done. I'd stay in my study till about 5:10 then walk five blocks, through leafy streets, no traffic, all calm, get home and supper is at 5:30 to 5:40 ish. I would come home at that hour when kids are hungry and mom can't pay attention because it's a tough time. If they're doing well when I came in I'd say let's have a romp or play a game. If they're a little bit off, I'd maybe get down on their level and look in their eye and say 'Honey, what's the problem?' If they're really misbehaving, I might put on the dad voice and tower over them and it worked. They were like putty in my hands.

I would think to myself, "Why aren't all fathers as magnificent as I?" I should write a book about this. Then my wife got a herniated disk. She went to the hospital for a week, and this happened a day before she was going to start weaning our one-year-old so then I have a baby being suddenly weaned without warning and a seven-year-old, a five-year-old and no family nearby. Then my wife came home from the hospital and so now I had a seven-year-old, five-year-old and an invalid lying on the floor and still no help. Then I couldn't take the time to size everything up and decide whether to use the thundering voice or the calm voice or look them in the eye. Instead, I'm just kind of shouting from room to room, "Would you guys get over here? Supper's getting cold. What is wrong with you?" My wife didn't say anything at all. She just laid on the floor but one day she was lying on the floor and she kind of looked at me and the look said, 'So where's the wise father now?' I said, "I don't know."

I needed that trial. I certainly am not glad that my wife had a herniated disk but I needed that trial to realize that I wasn't nearly as good a father as I thought I was, and that I had a problem with pride and that life was so easy I thought that an easy life was a good life. I had just been taking it easy. I thought I'd done something great. I had not done anything and I needed that to be humbled. James 1:5 says, if you want to be humbled and grow from it, you have to have wisdom – if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God. There's a line here that's so rich in the remaining part of James 1:5 that says you should ask the God who gives which literally means – the giving God – that is to say, when you ask God for something point there are four points you need to see here.

Number one is, you have to understand it's God's nature to give. He's the giving God. That's who He is. James 1:5 goes on to say 'when you seek wisdom, you should ask the giving God, the God who gives, who gives generously to all without finding fault.' Second is He gives generously. The Greek word is actually simply – God simply gives. He doesn't give and say 'Now I want it back.' He just gives – ask for the God who gives simply to all who ask in faith without finding fault. Thirdly, He doesn't give with reproach. It means that we often have people give to us with reproach. That is to say, "I'll help you, but this is your mess. You caused it. This is the last time going to bail you out of this." That's giving with reproach. Nobody likes that. Some people like to do it. Nobody likes to receive it. The Bible says God does not give with reproach. He's the guy who gives. He gives generously and gives to all without reproach.

You do have to believe (this is the 4th statement), He says, for the person who believes and disbelieves simultaneously should not think that God owes him an answer. This does not mean you have to have perfect faith. It means you shouldn't toss up a prayer and simultaneously say to yourself, 'This will never work.' Jesus is very tender with doubters. Think of (doubting) Thomas who heard from the other Apostles that Jesus is alive. He said, 'Well, I missed that. I don't believe it and I'm not going to believe unless I put my fist into his side.' Jesus came back a week later and said, "Hey, Thomas, I was listening, here's My side." Jesus is very tender with Thomas. He was tender with John the Baptist who actually introduced Jesus as the LAMB of

God who takes over the sin of the world found in John 1. Then in Matthew 12, he's saying, 'You guys, please tell me if I blew it, if I got the wrong guy' – Jesus was very tender with John the Baptist. But the Bible never commends doubt in itself.

God is tender with doubters. Our culture says doubters are bold, brave they're cultural warriors and they're honest. Doubting is an evil. Take your doubt to God that's good but doubting is not as good as faith. James says, you have to ask and believe. Now, it doesn't mean, again that we have to have perfect faith. In James and Romans, Abraham is presented as an example of faith. You think to yourself, how could he be an example of faith? He betrayed his wife twice and went with Hagar. But it says that Abraham did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened by his faith being fully persuaded God had the power to do what He promised (Romans 4:20-24). It doesn't always look that way when you look at Abraham's life, but praise God we are not evaluated on our worst moments. God looks at the course of our life, and if you look at the course of Abraham's life, the thread that runs through is faltering, yes, but he began with faith and he ended with faith. That's it. God says this to you as well, right? You falter, you're imperfect, you have doubts, and failings, but God doesn't judge you on the basis of your worst moment. He judges you on the basis of who He knows you are in and with Christ – the pervasive faith that you have. So, we ask God for wisdom in the trial. We consider it pure joy.

There are many trials. To pass our trials are various trials, including weakness and strength, riches and poverty, we need wisdom. If we don't have enough wisdom, we ask God and we ask the Spirit for sufficient grace to guide us and to persevere. We are thankful when we have much. We see that, however, as a trial. We understand that business success can be a trial. We also understand that business failure can be a trial. It's hard when you have too much business. It's hard when you don't have enough business. It's hard when everybody wants you. It's hard when nobody wants you. You need wisdom in all the trials, but in the trials, whether possessions are multiplying or decreasing, whether your reputation is up or down, we always look to Jesus and we look to Him in two ways.

The first way is to recognize that Jesus is the Man who persevered in the trial like nobody else. He is the Man who is blessed for persevering in the trial. Blessed is the man who perseveres in trial because God will give him the crown of life (James 1:12). God crowned Jesus with life in His resurrection, and Jesus stood firm – praise the Father, praise Him in every trial. In fact, at the very beginning of His ministry, He was tried/tempted by Satan for 40 days in the wilderness, and He passed every one of those trials. Then when He started His ministry, the people who should have been His first and best allies, the leader of Israel, hated Him, falsely accused Him and said He was a blasphemer and a dangerous person. That was a trial. He didn't let it stop Him. The disciples who were very loyal many times, were not always loyal. They got angry at Him and sometimes exasperated. Of course, they ran at His greatest trial. Jesus was faithful above all on the cross as He died and rose. So, He is par excellence – the Man who was blessed in the trial, we look to Him.

We don't just look to Jesus to worship Him, adore Him, and find direction from Him, although we do, we also look to Him when we fail our trials because we do and we may fail badly. You may be someone who thinks they just fail all the time. Okay, then you're ready to turn to Jesus in the trial. Then we fail here and there, like Abraham, generally a faithful life, but some low moments for sure and we take that to Lord Jesus, too. He passes the trial and He forgives us when we fail and indeed even gives us His righteousness when we fail. So, we look to Him in all the trials – abundance and lack, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, all the

trials of life. We receive them from God's hand. We turn them over. We consider them a source of God's sanctifying work in our life. We turn to Jesus for wisdom in all of this, and we turn to Him for forgiveness when we fail. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I do thank You for giving us this Word, this challenging Word, that we should give thanks and consider it a joy in trials. We admit we don't always do that. I admit this very week I failed to give thanks in a trial and probably everybody reading this would say something similar. So let me thank You for your grace as well as Your direction. We do pray for more wisdom, for more faith. We ask for Your blessing and we know that it comes ultimately, finally, and always through You. Lord Jesus, You passed the trial and have the ability to give us Your presence, Your strength and Your grace, in Your Name, Amen.