

The Joy of Trials

Prepare Your Heart: Oh Lord, we desire that Your Word be living and powerful in our lives! Give each of us a humble and teachable spirit as we lay open the pages of this book.

In the ancient world letters typically began by identifying the sender and the recipients, which often provided important clues about the nature and purpose of the letter. The introduction of James is no exception.

1. **Read** James 1:1 and respond to the following questions.
 - a. What do you learn about James from the fact that he did not introduce himself as Jesus' brother?
 - b. How does James refer to himself instead? What is significant about this expression?
 - c. Who were the initial readers of James' letter? Explain. (See also 1:2, 16; 2:5; 3:1 and 5:12.)

*Try to imagine the unique pressures these Jewish believers faced as they found themselves pressed and persecuted on every side. It was against this backdrop that James confronted his readers with one of the most stunning exhortations. **Read** James 1:2-4 from several translations.*

From our vantage point trials often seem like tragic accidents, but James says "consider" your perspective ... align your thinking with God's thinking.

2. What divine command are we given when facing trials and enduring life's troubles (verse 2)?
3. Why can believers react to trials with such a strange and unexpected response as joy (verse 3)?
4. What is God's goal in the life of every believer (verse 4)?

A Closer Look

With these facts in mind let's probe deeper into the meaning of these thought-provoking words.

The *all* in "all joy" (verse 2 NASB), carries the sense of *wholly*. Count it a thing *wholly joyful*, without a mixture of sorrow. The Greek word translated "when" (NASB) and "whenever" (NIV) carries the idea of the inevitability of trials, not simply the possibility of trials.

5. Using a Webster's dictionary or an expository dictionary look up the other key words from James 1:2-4 to get a clear definition of each term. Write your findings below.

Faith

Trials

Testing

Endurance (Perseverance, NIV)

Perfect (Mature, NIV)

Read James 1:2-4 a second time. Ask God to bring together in your mind all the facets of His refining work in our lives. Continue to linger over these words ... considering the personal implications for your life and faith.

6. Do you normally look at trials as a welcome friend or an unwanted intruder? How has this passage shed light on your daily journey of faith? Be specific.

Enduring trials with joy goes against our natural inclination. To come to a place where we can count it joy is a wrestling in itself. We will certainly wrestle in prayer, maybe often, to choose to trust God's character in the midst of all that we face.

7. How is it possible to cultivate joy in the midst of hard times? See Ephesians 3:14-21 and Galatians 5:22-23 for examples.

Jesus knew this kind of joy in the midst of extreme suffering (Hebrews 12:2), and other New Testament writers such as Paul often wrote about this same principle (Philippians 2:17).

8. Is it a sin to feel sorrow and grief in a trial? If not, how do these feelings fit with God's joy?

9. From a spiritual perspective joy includes:

10. In what ways are you living out or experiencing James' words in 1:2-4 right now? Comment on any or all aspects of these verses.

11. Why do you think trials refine us so well?

In order for God to do His *perfect* and *complete* work in us He needs our willing submission. The word "let" in verse 4 (NASB) implies submission to God in the trial. **Reread** James 1:4 with this thought in mind.

12. Talk to God about your trials and your need to surrender more fully to the safe hands of the Master-Potter. Meditate on the following cross references as you pray: 2 Corinthians 8:1-2; 1 Peter 1:6-7; Romans 5:3-5, 15:13 and Philippians 4:4-7. *Close by writing out your praise to God for what He is accomplishing in your life for all eternity. Humbly open your heart to Him ...allow Him to fill you with the miracle of His Holy joy...!*

What James has described for us in verses 2-4 is God's view of life. If we do not understand His view James urges us to keep on asking God to enable us to understand it. **Read** James 1:5-8.

13. How would you define wisdom in this context?

14. How might trials expose our need for God's wisdom to endure trials joyfully?

15. Within the context of this passage what does it mean to ask in faith? How might verse 5b motivate the faithful believer?

James 1:6-8 paints a sad picture of the person who is afflicted with doubt when facing intense pressures. **Reread** these verses carefully.

16. Why is God's wisdom of no profit to the doubting and erratic person?

Note: The picture in verse 6 is not of a wave mounting in height and crashing to shore, but of the swell of the sea, never having the same texture and shape from moment to moment, but always changing with the variations in wind direction and strength. *—Hort*

17. **Pause and Reflect:** What personal lessons has the Holy Spirit been teaching you through your study of James 1:1-8? Make a plan of how you want to apply these lessons.

18. Discuss honestly with each other your reactions to this passage. Since prayer is the foundation of authentic application spend time praying together. Pray that God would give you an insatiable hunger for wisdom and endurance and an eternal mind-set when facing trials. Pray for specific needs that anyone in your group may have. Pray with a spirit of joy and thanksgiving to God "who gives to all men generously and without reproach."