

Proper View of Trials (2–4)

2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into manifold temptations [Or, trials]; 3 knowing that the proving of your faith works patience [Or, steadfastness]. 4 And let patience [Or, steadfastness] have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing.

If my explanation of the dispersion (v. 1) is correct, some of James' readers may think joy is about the last emotion they could be expected to feel. To be driven from their homes under the hand of a powerful persecutor and to have to resettle in a strange land amidst a Gentile population must have subjected them to many trials. The word *peirasmos* can refer to a test or trial in general, such as persecution brings upon one, or it can apply specifically to an enticement to do evil arising from within (as certainly described in verses 13–15). But in general, it need not refer specifically to a temptation to do evil, but more generally to any trial which puts one's faith to the test. The word *poikilos* describes trials as being manifested in a lot of different ways, "of various kinds, diversified, manifold" (AG, 683; cf. GT, 527). For example, either poverty or wealth can be a trial (cf. vv. 9–11). The scattered disciples must have found themselves undergoing a lot of different trials.

James begins his epistle by instructing his brothers in Christ with regard to how they are to look upon these trials when they are encountered. The Greek *egeomai* means "to consider, deem, account, think" (GT, 276); "think, consider, regard" (AG, 343). But what a surprise that James should tell his readers to regard their many trials as "all joy"—"pure joy" (AG, NIV), nothing but joy.

To be sure, trial is not something to be sought, and Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13). But one does not have to look for trial. Persecution is certainly not a trial that one would seek. James speaks of "falling into" various trials. The verb *peripipto* means "so to fall into as to be encompassed by" (GT, 504), and so "*fall in with, encounter, fall into* especially misfortunes" (AG, 649). The word is used in Luke 10:30 for a man who "fell among robbers." So trial is something that one may experience without specially seeking it.

But what is it that enables one to regard such trials as occasions of joy rather than evils or misfortunes? GT, 276 discusses various synonyms of the verb to think, consider or regard. The Greek *egeomai* is one of two verbs which “denote a belief resting not on one’s inner feeling or sentiment, but on the due consideration of external grounds, the weighing and comparing of facts.” That is certainly true of its use in the present passage. Verse 3 begins with the conjunction *hoti*, which means “because.” James is going to explain why trials are to be regarded as occasions of joy. The reason lies in what is known about the effect of having one’s faith tested. *The proving* (or *testing*)⁵ *of your faith works* (produces, RSV, NASB; develops, NIV)⁶ *patience* (endurance, perseverance). As the trials and discipline of boot camp prepare a soldier for the difficulties of war, so the testing of our faith in the fire of trial builds the fortitude that will enable us to be faithful right on through to the end. Compare also the training and conditioning of an athlete that aims at getting him “in shape” to hold out to the end of the game. Many talented teams lose a game at the end because the opponent had superior conditioning.⁷

But (Grk *de*) this patience (endurance, perseverance) that is produced by undergoing trial must be permitted to have its perfect work (v. 4). It must go on until it has finished the job. The prophets and poets of the Old Testament often counseled believers to “wait for Jehovah” (cf. Ps. 37:7; Is. 40:30f; and many other passages). Do not take matters into your own hands, but wait for Jehovah to act in his own time. If someone asks: “How long should I wait?” the answer

⁵ Grk *dokimion*, GT, 155a & BAGD, 256a.

⁶ Grk *katergazomai*: to work, perform, accomplish, achieve; “work out, i. e. to do that from which something results” (VED, “Work,” B.2; GT, 339a; BAGD, 531). The same word rendered “work out” in Phil. 2:12.

⁷ I have often wondered how great athletes could combine the demands of something like college football with the rigors of college academics. When I had opportunity to put that question before Ronnie Powell, who played for the University of Georgia during some of their most competitive years, including a conference championship season and another when Georgia played and lost the championship game, Ronnie had some interesting explanations of how it worked, but perhaps most to the point was the suggestion that it was an opportunity to learn discipline. This good man continues to put on display a model of the disciplined life even after his sports career.

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would be that you must never stop waiting for Jehovah. Patience must go on working until its job is done.

But what is the job of patience? What does it aim to do? James answers this question too: *that you may be perfect and complete* (whole, sound). These words, and perhaps especially the second, are defined by the following clause: *lacking in nothing*. The Greek *leipo* has the idea of being left behind, lagging behind, and from that, falling short, being inferior, deficient, lacking. BAGD translates here: “fall short in no respect.” The clause defines what is meant by attaining one’s end or object and being whole or complete. The work of patience, the spiritual toughness that sticks it out to the end, whatever may come, aims to produce character that is altogether complete. This explains what God is doing in us. Even in the trials that he permits to come upon us he is working toward that end. The movie *Shadowlands* had C. S. Lewis explaining that God was chiseling away at us, as if shaping a piece of stone into a work of beauty.

The Need of Wisdom (5–8)

5 But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and upbraids not; and it shall be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubts is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. 7 For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord; 8 a doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways.

As the word joy (Grk *chara*, v. 2) was linked to the author’s wish that his readers may have joy (v. 1, Grk *chairō*) the word “lacks” (Grk *leipo*, 5) is connected with the ending of verse 4. The Jewish Christians who first received this epistle had been driven from their homes by persecution. No doubt they had suffered a lot for their faith. But now they are called upon to regard their trials as an occasion for joy. Perhaps a reader would respond: “How can it be? I cannot see it. I do not understand what is going on in my life. It is all a mystery. I do not see my hard experiences as an occasion for joy. They just seem bad.”

Is that the way you see James’ opening challenge? Does it seem unrealistic? If so, then what you need is wisdom. It takes wisdom

to see life's trials in their proper light. These verses tell us what to do about that.

To be sure, wisdom has some different aspects. It can be the skill of a workman (as in 1 Cor. 3:10). God acted as a wise masterbuilder when he planned the world and brought it into existence (Prov. 8:22–31). Divine wisdom devised the scheme of redemption (1 Cor. 1:20–25; 2:6–13) and works providentially to save as many as possible (Rom. 11:33–36 in context of the chapter). Wisdom is manifested in the revealed will of God, providing skill for living one's life (Deut. 4:5–6; Book of Proverbs; Eph. 5:15–17). Finally, wisdom is required for the understanding of divine providence. That is the context of the present passage, and the context of Job 28 is similar. Job and his friends had debated the reason for human suffering, but particularly Job's own suffering. They had said everything human beings could say on the subject. But the debate is concluded with an evaluation by Job. Mankind, says he, has been able to dig into the heart of the earth and to discover many wonderful treasures. But man has not been able to find wisdom, the wisdom that can explain the workings of the world. Only God knows the place where wisdom resides. He alone has wisdom. The only real wisdom that has been revealed to mankind is a skill to live one's life (v. 28).

God alone has real wisdom. One must seek wisdom from him. We must ask him for wisdom, and he will provide it. But I agree with Garry Friesen: "James 1:5 is not a promise of instant solutions to every problem" (*Decision Making & the Will of God*, 195). We pray for daily bread, but cannot expect it if we do not want it enough to do what we can to get it (cf. 2 Thess. 3:10). The same is true with regard to obtaining wisdom from God. Effort on our part is required.

"Jehovah gives wisdom; out of his mouth *comes* knowledge and understanding" (Prov. 2:6). These things come out of God's mouth. But we have already learned that wisdom is manifested through divine revelation. We cannot expect to obtain wisdom from God if we will not listen to the voice of wisdom as it is made known through the mouths of God's spokesmen. But God also teaches us wisdom through experience and circumstances. Deuteronomy 8:3 is one of the best indicators of that. Israel's experiences in the wilderness were intended to teach a lesson: "that he might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceeds out of the mouth

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of Jehovah does man live.” We cannot receive wisdom from God if we despise his loving discipline (cf. Prov. 3:11f) and do not open our hearts to the lessons of experience. God does indeed give wisdom, but not without these means. We must show that we really want wisdom by making use of these means by which wisdom is bestowed.

The characterization of God should encourage us to seek this great blessing from him. He *gives to all liberally and does not upbraid*. The Greek for liberally (*haplos*) is best explained as “with singleness of heart” (VED); as GT, 57 explains: “led solely by his desire to bless” (cf. BAGD, 104). God has no ulterior motive when he gives. He is not like the hypocritical giver who puts on a show of concern for the poor and needy, but is really out to get praise from men (Matt. 6:2–4).

The other characterization of God assures us that God gives without reproaching or insulting the one who asks. The Greek verb is *oneidizo* which means “to find fault in a way that demeans the other, *reproach, revile, mock, heap insults upon* as a way of shaming” (BAGD, 710b). Have you ever had to ask a favor of someone, but knew you were going to receive a painful lecture along with it? How anxious were you to ask the favor? I know exactly how you felt. And I know how desperate you would have to be before you would ask the favor of such a person. God is not like that. He is not going to provide the gift, but along with it, an insulting lecture about how stupid we are that we make so many mistakes and have to come to him for wisdom to clean up our messes.

The assurance that God will provide wisdom for the one who asks is not unconditional. *But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: ...* (6a). The request must be made with a trust in God that is complete and wholehearted. One must not ask God for wisdom but without being sure that wisdom from God is what he really wants. He must be ready to accept the wisdom that comes from God, fully committed to the acceptance of that wisdom.

Doubting is from the Greek *diakrino*, which implies being divided or separated, with several different applications; hence to separate one from another, to distinguish, e. g. Jew and Gentile (Acts 11:12; 15:9); to distinguish as being superior, as when we speak of one as being “a distinguished personality” (1 Cor. 4:7); to separate oneself from others and thus to oppose, dispute, contend (as Acts 11:2; Jude 9); here in a sense first found in the New Testament: to be divided within oneself,

“hesitate, doubt” (GT, 138), “to be uncertain, be at odds with oneself, doubt, waver” (BAGD, 231).

For (Grk *gar*) introduces an elaboration of the idea (in 6b), the reason one must act in faith without doubting, by comparing the doubter to the rough water and violent surging and agitation of the sea (Grk *kludon*, GT, 350; BAGD, 550) as it is *driven by the wind and tossed*. The doubter is like that, tossed this way and that and unable to make up his mind or to settle upon what he really wants. He may ask for wisdom, but does he really want it? God has wisdom to give him, but does he really want that wisdom without reservation, whatever that wisdom may be or teach? Unlike the person who comes to God with wholehearted faith, trusting him no matter what his counsel may turn out to be, the doubter does not have that kind of commitment.

For (Grk *gar*) at the beginning of verse 7 introduces further elaboration, taking the reason for acting in faith, without doubt, a step further: *For let not that man* [i. e., the one who doubts, compared in 6b to a storm tossed, surging sea] *think that he shall receive anything of the Lord* [i. e. neither wisdom nor anything else]; the apposition in verse 8 describing him in terms that indicate the reason. He is a *doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways*.

Doubleminded is literally *two-souled* (Grk *dipsuchos*). This man is like someone with two different persons living in his body. Now he thinks this way, now that way. He has no settled and solid conviction. He cannot make up his mind. He asks for wisdom from God, but he has mental reservations and is not sure that is really what he wants. The same word is used in James 4:8 for someone “*divided in interest* sc. between God and the world” (GT, 153); “*being uncertain about the truth of something, doubting, hesitating*” (BAGD, 253). In the context of Chapter 4 such persons are called spiritual “*adulteresses*” (v. 4), supposedly married to God but carrying on a love affair with the world.

The doubter is further described as *unstable in all his ways*. Not just about this or that, but in all his ways. The Greek *akatastatos* means “*unstable, inconstant, restless*” (GT, 22) and is used “of vacillating persons” (BAGD, 35).

The adjective is formed by putting an *a* before the verb *kathistemi*, literally to set or place down, to establish in a place or position; hence refers to someone not committed to a fixed or solid position. He is not solid, but “wobbles,” to draw a word from R. C. H. Lenski.

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Most experienced Christians have probably known people like this. Their lives are a mess, but the solution seems fairly simple to someone knowledgeable in the scriptures, not necessarily, however, to say easy. But if one opens the scriptures and shows them that simple solution, he pretty soon loses his audience. The persons being counseled with divine wisdom had rather stay in their misery than to take the action that is necessary to solving the problems. Such people need not ask for wisdom from God. They may ask for it, but they do not really want it, not when they see what wisdom from God amounts to. James is teaching us to ask in faith, i. e. with wholehearted trust in God, willing to accept whatever solutions he gives us.

Wisdom for All Circumstances (9–11)

9 But let the brother of low degree glory in his high estate: 10 and the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. 11 For the sun arises with the scorching wind, and withers the grass; and the flower thereof falls, and the grace of the fashion of it perishes: so also shall the rich man fade away in his goings.

Wisdom is needed in order to see trial as an occasion of joy. After the discussion of how wisdom may be obtained (5–8) James shows the application of wisdom to various conditions of life. Among Christians both the lowly and the wealthy can not only view trial as an occasion of joy; they even have reason to glory in their respective circumstances.

James has not finished the subject of trial, as we see in verse 12 and then again in verses 13–15. The intervening verses, 9–11, are best seen in that light. Either the low estate of the poor or the elevated position of the wealthy can be a trial. The Greek *tapeinos* (v. 9) simply means low. Here it describes the condition of a brother, the brother that is low—low on the economic scale in contrast to the rich (v. 10); low with regard to position, power and influence (as in Luke 1:52). Psalm 73 shows how envy of the wealthy and mighty of the earth can be a trial for the faith of the poor and afflicted. But it is mostly the poor of the world who have become “heirs of the kingdom” (James 2:5; cf. also 4:6, 10). Instead of envying the wealthy or complaining of his own lot in life, the brother of low estate has reason to glory (or boast) in the elevated position to which he has been raised in Christ.

One need only glance around him to realize that not many of the high and mighty of the earth are found among believers (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–29), but a few are. One may think of Abraham, David, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathaea, perhaps Barnabas (Acts 4:37). James later provides counsel for merchants who travel about for the purpose of getting gain (4:13). In verse 10 he is not dealing with the non-Christian rich, but the wealthy brother in Christ. Wealth can be a trial, and Paul wanted Timothy to warn the wealthy against being “highminded” and setting their hope “on the uncertainty of riches” (1 Tim. 6:17).

The rich Christian may have had elevated status in the world. But in Christ he is on the same level as the poor person. For him the part of wisdom is to glory in his abasement, his lowness in Christ (10). James is not being sarcastic or merely teasing the rich man. The wealthy person has real reason to glory in the low estate to which he has been reduced in Christ. It is a great advantage to find himself on a level with the poor person. The reason is given in 10b: *because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away*. The point is elaborated in verse 11: *For the sun came up with its scorching heat, and withered the grass; and its flower fell and the beauty of its appearance (lit. face) perished. So also the rich man will fade away in his goings*.

“To be sure, the lowly, poor Christian will also die; but he never blooms like the one who has wealth” (Lenski). Since this is the end to which the rich man is headed, it will be a great advantage to him if he learns to glory in the humble station to which he is reduced as a Christian, rather than depending so much on his wealth and taking pride in the luxurious life that money can provide. Wisdom from God will teach him about what is really important.

The Ultimate Blessing (12)

Blessed is the man that endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love him.

Trial is not always an occasion for joy (v. 2). It can bring about one’s destruction and thus be an occasion of grief. The blessing is for the one who endures trial. Verses 2–4 have discussed an immediate benefit of passing through trial. But now James speaks of the ultimate

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blessing, not indeed of one who merely experiences trial, but of one who deals with trial successfully. James pronounces blessed “the man who endures trial.” So now we see that it is not merely the experience of trial that brings a blessing, for indeed, trial can be a rock against which one’s faith is wrecked. Trial only has the benefit discussed in verses 2–4 when one deals with it successfully.

The explanation of this blessedness is introduced by the conjunction *hoti*, meaning because. *For having become approved* (i. e., tested and found genuine), *he shall receive the crown of life which he promised to them that love him*. Parallels to “the crown of life” are found in Second Tim. 4:8 (“the crown of righteousness”), First Peter 5:4 (“the crown of glory”), Revelation 2:10 (“the crown of life”). The crown of life most likely means the crown which is life. No promise is recorded in precisely these words. But the promise of life is frequent (cf. 1 John 2:25). The one who is approved will be crowned with life. A crown (Grk *stephanos*) may indicate either victory (as in 1 Cor. 9:25) or royalty (Matt. 27:29 and frequently in the Greek Old Testament). Having passed the test by enduring trial would seem to point to victory, but certainly not with the intention of excluding the share in royal reign which will be the reward of those who love the Lord (cf. 2:5, with 2 Tim. 2:12 and other such passages).

Warning Against Self-Deception With Regard to Trial (13–18)

13 Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted of [Grk from] God; for God cannot be tempted with evil [Or, is untried in evil. Grk evil things], and he himself tempts no man: 14 each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed [Or, tempted by his own lust, being drawn away by it, and enticed]. 15 Then the lust, when it hath conceived, bears sin: and the sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. 16 Be not deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift [Or, giving] and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning. 18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

WARNING AGAINST SELF-DECEPTION (1:13-18)

James continues to deal with the right view of trial. Verse 13 takes up a new angle of the subject, with a transition taking place in the meaning of the language, shifting from the general sense of trial or testing to the specific sense of seduction to evil. James anticipates that in the process of passing through trial a person may fall into sin and seek to justify himself by blaming God. But if one follows James' reasoning in the next few verses he can be quite certain that God is not responsible for any evil to which he succumbs.

The reasoning begins thus: *Let no one say, when he is tried: I am being tempted from God*—i.e., the source (Grk *apo*) of my temptation is God. The following explanation makes it very plain that the second occurrence of *peirazo* has the specific meaning of seduction or enticement to evil. James answers the false claim with some straight talk about temptation and where the responsibility really lies. The reason (introduced by the conjunction *gar*) God can never be charged with enticing anyone into evil follows: *God is apeirastos of evil*. The word means not only untempted but untemptable. God cannot be tempted by evil. God simply has no desire for evil at all. It has no appeal to him. For that reason one may be quite sure that the second part of the explanation is also true: *and he himself does not tempt anyone*. Why, indeed, would one entertain the notion that he is being tempted to do evil by God, when God has no desire for evil and certainly, then, would not try to get one of his creatures to do evil?

The truth about temptation is then set forth (v. 14): *But each one is tempted by his own lust, being drawn out and allured*. As explained in footnotes, lust is personified as a woman, perhaps a harlot, and the technical language of hunting and fishing is applied to the seductions of a harlot.

Verse 15 takes the description further, completing what Lenski calls “the natural history of lust as it operates in temptation.” *Then the lust, having conceived, gives birth to sin; and the sin, having reached its end [come to maturity (GT), run its course (AG)] gives birth to death*.

The next development begins with a warning against being deceived or mistaken (v. 16). When James calls his readers “my beloved brothers” he wants them to understand that he cares deeply about them and does not want anything bad to happen to them. He therefore provides them with truth that will prevent them from falling under the influence of false impressions.

He tells them the truth about God so that they will not be deceived or mistaken to their own detriment (vv. 17–18). *All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights*, referring to the heavenly bodies, sun, moon and stars, the Greek *phos* (light) being used “by metonymy for that which gives light, a light(-bearer)” (AG, 871; cf. GT, 662). God is called “the father of the heavenly bodies” (AG on *pater*, 3a, 635) or “of the stars, the heavenly luminaries” (GT, 495) as being their creator and the one from whom all light ultimately derives.

James uses this designation for God because of the point he wishes to make about God: *with whom there is no variation or shadow cast by turning* (or *rotation*). Shadows are cast by the revolution of the planets around the sun and the relation of one heavenly body to another. But the creator of these luminaries is all light. Only light proceeds from him without change or variation (cf. Mal. 3:6), which is to say in the context that only good gifts proceed from God.

Consider then what God has already done for us (18). Notice first that the divine action was an exercise of the divine will, what God wished or willed to do, or perhaps, what he deliberately chose to do. What did God do out of his own will? *He brought us forth by the word of truth*. By means of the word of truth, explained in Ephesians 1:13 as the gospel of our salvation (cf. also 1 Pet. 1:22–25), God brought us forth as a new creation. The divine intent was: *that we might be a certain firstfruits among his creatures*. The firstfruits of the harvest were given to God (Ex. 23:19; Deut. 26:1–11). The term is applied to Christians as belonging in a special sense to God, his special possession among all his creatures.

This being what God willed, how can anyone possibly imagine that this unchangeable God would now act to undo what he had willed to do and then done by seducing his new spiritual creation to do evil? It is simply unthinkable.