

# The Truth about Trouble

## Bringing Faith Down to Earth—Part 2

*James 1:2-12*

### Introduction

I will never forget hearing one of my Professors say in class, around the time I was in my late 20's, the statement, "God will never use you until he has hurt you."

The reason I will never forget it is because I thought this beloved professor of mine had lost a marble or two. How pessimistic can you get! I remember thinking, "He's really missed this one . . . suffering and usefulness are not necessarily connected."

But over time as my young faith grew in precept and practice I began to discover he was right.

Ladies and Gentlemen, putting faith to work in your life has more to do with how you respond to trouble than perhaps anything else in your life.

So is it any wonder that in the little book by James, as James begins to challenge the believer to bring his faith down to earth—making our faith real—that he immediately launches into giving us the truth about trouble.

Don't miss the fact that his original audience was in trouble. The last part of *verse 1* is often overlooked—notice James is writing to *the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*.

In general, the word "dispersion" (diaspora) referred to Jews living outside the land of Palestine.

The word "dispersed" (diaspora) can be translated, "scattered", like seed that is scattered by the farmer's hand. In fact, the scattering of these Jewish believers was tantamount to scattering the seeds of the gospel.

More specifically to James audience, many of these Jews had been scattered because of persecution. Claudius the Roman Emperor was driving the Jews into exile. Under his rule the Jews were driven out of their homeland and even out of Rome. Life was threatening and unsafe.<sup>i</sup>

But the Jews who had begun following Jesus Christ had double trouble on their hands. Being Jewish, they were hated and persecuted by Gentiles; and being Jew, who were now Christians they were facing persecution from their own people.<sup>ii</sup>

Talk about trouble! It was trouble on every level. Everything had changed for them—they were literally scattered—forced to leave their homes and run for their lives to other cities and villages.

You know how hard it is to move from your home to somewhere else—when you want to—when you have time to prepare?

All the details . . . the planning, the packing, the stress, the hours, the questions . . . and that's moving when you picked the date.

What if you heard on the evening news that anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is no longer allowed to live in Wake County and that all Christians have, under penalty of death, an hour in which to leave your homes and this county.

Imagine throwing whatever you can into boxes and suitcases and then running for your life.

So when you read the words, *To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*—behind those words are volumes of trouble and stress and questions and suffering.

Maybe that's why James gets right to it. With hardly more than saying "Hello", James begins to discuss the primary subject on their minds and on everyone's mind who wants to know how to live out their faith—"What do you do when you're surrounded by trouble?"

So, James effectively begins his letter with an answer he knew they were asking—and it's the same question Christians have been asking for 2,000 years, and his answer is loaded with the truth about trouble.

## The Premise

**James chapter 1 and verse 2. Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.**

I want you to begin by circling in your text and in your mind that little word, “*when*”, in verse 2.

### 1. The first truth about trouble is that it is unavoidable.

James did not say, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, *if* you encounter various trials,” but “*when you do.*”

At the very outset of this issue, James is telling us all that we are to expect trouble. Trials are a given. In fact, you don’t have to go looking for problems—they will find you all by themselves.

There are well meaning people who believe that if you really have enough faith, whatever trouble you’re having will go away. If you’re really following Jesus, trials and tribulation will become a thing of the past and you will live perpetually on the mountain top with health and wealth and dream jobs and perfect relationships and trouble free lives, but that’s not what James says. He says, “Count it all joy when you encounter various trials.”

It would make a lot more sense to us if he’d said, “Count it all joy when you escape various trials, right?”

That would seem to connect better with the idea of being joyful.

Joy is certainly the absence of trials, right? If you’re a slave of God and you want to obey your master, the Lord Jesus Christ, surely trials will become a thing of the past.

Jesus Christ said something radically different from that with His own lips when He said, “In this world you will have tribulation.” (John 16:33). He said to His disciples, “Every day has its share of trouble.” (Matthew 6: 34). Paul told his converts in Acts 14:22, “we will through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”

In other words, the Christian experience is notably distinctive, not by the absence of trials, but their presence.

James says, “when”, not “if.”

You see, in a very real way, Christians of every nationality today are God’s dispersed

people—like seed from His hand, dispersed by His sovereignty throughout the world to serve as light and salt.

We are not His sheltered people, we are His scattered people.<sup>iii</sup>

### 2. In fact, the second truth he reveals about trouble is that trials are not only unavoidable, but they are unlimited.

He says at the end of this phrase that we will *encounter various trials*.

The Greek word for various gives us the term polka dot. In other words, the life of Christian will literally be spotted and dotted and speckled and splattered with trials of every conceivable size and shape.<sup>iv</sup>

You can translate it, multi-colored. In other words, trials come in all types, packages, shapes and sizes: they might involve your health, your finances, your relationships, your future well-being, your social standing; your job, your past, your hopes unrealized; your children; and on and on and on. Trouble is as varied as the colors of the rainbow. James says that trouble is unavoidable; it’s unlimited.

### 3. The third truth he delivers is that trials are unexpected.

James writes, “Count it all joy when you encounter various trials.” That word, “*encounter*” is translated in the King James translation, “*fall into.*” That’s a wonderful translation and it creates the correct word picture of unexpected suddenness.

It’s a word used only twice more in the entire New Testament; once in *Acts 27* where the ship carrying the Apostle Paul unexpectedly encountered a sand bar and began to break apart. The only other place the word is used is in *Luke 10* where the Lord is telling the parable of the man who was traveling to Jericho and he “*fell among thieves*”—he encountered thieves. (10:30).

Suddenly and without warning, this man is surrounded by trouble and there is no way to escape. This is the idea of trials here in James 1.

In fact, I find it interesting that the word translated “trials” at the end of this phrase—*peirasmos*—is linked to *peirates* which means attacker.

We have taken that particular word—*peirates*—and transliterated it to create the word, pirate;” which creates an even clearer image of the sudden appearance of a pirate ship next to yours.

I mean, you’re just sailing along, minding your own business when all of a sudden a shadow falls across your deck and you look over and there is a pirate ship and before you know it they’ve thrown ropes over and have fastened your ship to theirs, and here you are, unarmed, unprepared, unsuspecting; you are suddenly in the clutches of the Pirates of Tribulation.

Surely James will tell us how to sail away! No, James does not tell us how to escape them, he tells us what to do when we encounter them.

***Brethren (you could read verse 2), when you encounter a variety of trials, consider it all joy.***

Now you might be tempted to think of James like I thought of my professor many years ago—he’s lost a marble or two, Or maybe you think—well, he’s an apostle—he’s supposed to say stuff like that.

Just make sure you didn’t misunderstand what James said. He didn’t say that you were going to enjoy your trials; he didn’t say we were to feel it all joy.<sup>v</sup>

He isn’t saying that you don’t walk into a hospital room and say, “Cheer up . . . James says to put on a happy smile.” No, James says to ***consider it all joy.***

The word *consider* is a financial term that can mean to calculate or “to reckon” . . . To total up—to evaluate.<sup>vi</sup>

The Christian who understands he is the slave of God—James 1 and verse 1—can have joy when surrounded by trouble because he lives for the things that matter most.<sup>vii</sup>

His evaluation—the way he totals up life—his values are radically different now that he lives for God’s glory.

In fact, the believer understands that trials have value—James will show us that next: trials shape us into the character of Christ. No wonder Satan wants trials to defeat us—while God is using trials to develop us.

And the slave of God knows that His Master God is ultimately in control. I like the

way someone said it when he wrote, “Satan may turn up the heat, but God has His hand on the thermostat.”<sup>viii</sup>

It’s that kind of trust . . . it’s that kind of submission as the slaves of God that we evaluate trouble with a joyful spirit instead of a complaining, bitter, resentful spirit.

I can’t think of a better illustration than Joseph; by the world’s evaluation or reckoning, he had every reason to grow bitter and angry and live with constant complaining.

His brothers sold him into slavery; he lost his youth; he was separated from his family; he grew up in a strange land; he was sold as a slave to a man who finally showed him some mercy and gave him a better job managing his household; but then his boss’s wife accused him of attempted rape and he was sent to prison though innocent; he interpreted the dream of the cupbearer who then got out of prison according to Joseph’s interpretation and then proceeded to forget about him and for years Joseph remained in prison.

By every stretch of the imagination, Joseph should have come out of prison consumed with cynicism and bitterness toward people and anger toward God. He hadn’t gotten a fair shake in years; he’d been surrounded by trouble and no one tangibly cared.

Yet he emerges from the shadows of prison with grace and balance and faith and winsomeness. Why? Because he had come to believe that God had orchestrated everything according to His plan . . . which meant years of suffering for His servant Joseph.

The opening statement of James delivers the premise—**Consider it joy, my brethren when you encounter various trials—why? Because God has a product in mind.**

Before we look at the product, there’s something I want you to understand from James opening premise.

In fact, if you forget everything else in our study today and I prophecy you will even though I am not a prophet or the son of a prophet and I even work for what, a non-profit.

I do want you to remember this basic premise: here it is—you do not get to choose your crosses in life . . . you get to choose your responses, in life.

**You do not choose your crosses . . . you choose your responses.**

Speaking from his experience as a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps, Dr. Viktor Frankl said this, “Everything can be taken from a human being but one thing—the last of human freedoms—the freedom to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” How true—trials can strip away everything but our attitude toward them.<sup>ix</sup>

We can’t choose our crosses—but we can choose our responses.

### **The Product**

James goes on to say in *verse 3*—and here’s the product—*knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect—that is, mature—and compete, lacking in nothing.*

The word for endurance is a compound word that means to stay under—the ability to abide under the pressure.<sup>x</sup>

James says, “I want you to know that when your faith is stretched and challenge, the end result is endurance.”

Like lungs that have been developed through exercise, you are able to stay underwater longer—you are able to run longer. Your practical faith that lives out in public has staying power.

Would you notice how James exhorts the believers in *verse 4* to “*let endurance has its perfect—or completed—result.*”

In other words, don’t short-circuit the work of God in your life by trying to escape the trial. Let endurance be developed—this is an imperative in the Greek language—you could put an exclamation point after that phrase—*let endurance have it’s perfect result.*<sup>xi</sup>

What is that perfect result—the end of *verse 4* says—that you may be perfect and complete lacking nothing.

Everyone immediately says, “There’s no use trying . . . I’m far from perfect. All the troubles and trials in my life haven’t made me one inch closer to perfection than when I was 5 years old and won the prize for best eraser cleaner.” That’s the closest I ever got to perfection. So I guess there’s no need to sign up for endurance.

The word translated, *perfect* refers to having an undivided relationship with Christ—a pure relationship with Him with undivided affections. You are His slave—remember *verse one*.

Trials have a way of doing that, don’t they? In the midst of suffering, everything the world clamors for suddenly becomes nonsense—the Apostle Paul called it garbage.

All of your clinging to the world, all of your clinging to self, all of your clinging to temporal things begins to lose its grip on your life; your focus turns to Christ and His sufficiency.<sup>xii</sup>

You begin to *run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God . . . you begin to look to Christ who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).*

James says in effect, “trials produce single minded affection for Christ,”—he goes on to *end verse 4* by saying that endurance of trials also produces completeness—or *maturity*.

By the way, James uses this word “complete” or “mature” (*telios*) more than any other New Testament author.<sup>xiii</sup>

Maturity is big to James. And why not—faith that matters in life—faith that makes a difference in life is a faith that is growing up.

Trials are not electives in God’s school of spiritual maturity; they are required courses.<sup>xiv</sup>

You must do the homework and you must take the tests.

In my office at home I have a framed cross stitch of a poem written by an unknown author. It hangs in my office and for years has been a source of encouragement and quiet conviction. It reads in part:

*When God wants to drill a man  
And thrill a man  
And skill a man,  
When God wants to mold a man  
To play the noblest part;  
Now He ruthlessly perfects  
Whom He royally elects!  
How He hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows converts him*

*Into trial shapes of clay which  
Only God understands;  
How He bends but never breaks  
When his good He undertakes;  
How He uses whom He chooses  
And with every purpose fuses him;  
By every act induces him  
To try His splendor out –  
God knows what He's about!*

But James is a realist. He knows that in order for us to accept his premise and adopt an attitude of joy; for us to stay under the pressure and allow testing to produce maturity in our faith—he knows we've got a problem—at least two of them.

## The Problem

The first problem we have is we simply don't understand! We're going to need wisdom to see past the hammer of God and see the hand of God at work.

We're going to need wisdom to believe that the presence of trials doesn't mean God has disappeared. We're going to need help growing up!

We've had four children and all four children had the same problem . . . and at about 8 months it became a really big problem. They got to where they didn't want to go to sleep in their cribs, alone in the room . . . they would stand up and cry and cry and cry . . . our twins were really frustrating because if one got started the other one would not be outdone.

Your children, like ours, assumed that because they couldn't see you, you weren't around. And so they pitched a fit.

Most parents went in and held them for a while and then put them back down. Which was harder to do with twins—you pick one up you have to pick up the other—then they sit there and pull each other's pacifiers out—you have to bend down and pick up the pacifier and blow it off—10 second rule—but that only lengthens the crisis.

What you want as a parent is for your child to learn how to go to sleep without you in the room, or them in your arms. Because in a couple more months, they're going to figure out how to climb over the crib railing and toddle out to where you are and then you're really in for a battle.

Another young father in the church told me they solved that by putting a screen door on the crib, hinges and all—I'm sure there are laws against that now, but it was a fascinating idea.

Some of the best advice we ever received was to wait 10 minutes, then go into the bedroom where our child was screaming and pat them on the head, pick up their pacifier, give them a hug, lay them down, put their blankie back up under their nose, which was the preferred location and say, "Night night." And leave.

The crying starts again . . . wait 15 minutes and go back in and do everything again—don't even pretend to notice the fact that their faces are all blotched and their nose is running and by now they're madder than a hornet.

Just wipe their noses, hug them while they remain in the crib, then lay them down . . . they may refuse to lay down . . . you just say, "Night night." And leave.

Then wait 20 minutes . . . and so on. Finally, your child will fall asleep absolutely exhausted. And so are you . . . by now you've got your pacifier and blankie. We found that after 3 or 4 nights, it worked.

A sign of physical and mental maturity is the ability for your child to go to sleep when they're alone.

**A sign of spiritual maturity is the wisdom to know how to rest even when God seems absent.**

And James knows that everyone of us need that kind of growth—but we don't understand and if we'll admit that and desire growth and understanding, James says in *verse 5, Ask God!* (Exclamation point—another imperative).

If you need wisdom to evaluate your problems in life with joyful endurance—and every believer will—go ahead and *ask God who gives to all*—I love that word, *all*. God doesn't play favorites—He doesn't say, "You're not one of my top students, so you don't get as much wisdom as they do." No!

God gives to all—note this—generously and without reproach—"that is, without insult."<sup>xv</sup>

God never says, “You need wisdom for that . . . that’s easy. God never says, “You . . . again?!” He gives!

Would you notice that James does not say, “If any man lacks knowledge, let him ask of God.”

There’s a big difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is facts—it’s data—that you learn. *Wisdom* is knowing how to correctly use what you have learned.

Mankind has learned enough knowledge to know how to travel faster than the speed of sound. Wisdom knows that mankind in general is traveling faster and faster in the wrong direction.<sup>xvi</sup>

And isn’t it interesting that James tells us to ask God for wisdom. Why not deliverance or strength or grace? Because we need wisdom so we will not waste the opportunities God is giving us to grow up in the faith and move toward the product which is spiritual maturity.<sup>xvii</sup>

In his commentary on James, Warren Wiersbe told of a secretary in his church who was going through severe trials. Her husband had lost his sight and she had recently suffered a minor stroke. Then her husband grew ill and was rushed to the hospital where most everyone expected him to pass away. Wiersbe wrote, “I saw her in church one Sunday and assured her that I was praying for her.” She said, “What exactly are you asking God to do?? Her question startled Pastor Wiersbe, who responded, “Well, I’m asking God to help you and strengthen you.” She said, “I appreciate that, but I want you to pray about one more thing—pray that I’ll have the wisdom not to waste all of this suffering.”

Wiersbe wrote, “She knew the meaning of James 1:5—asking God for wisdom so that her suffering would produce endurance and not be wasted.”<sup>xviii</sup>

James now moves to a warning—notice *verse 6. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man.*

And the average Christian again says, “Well that rules me out—I need wisdom, but I doubt God will give it to me.”

To the casual reader, that can be an unfortunate interpretation. However, James is actually describing a wicked man, the same way Isaiah described one as being like the troubled sea.

The word *double-minded* is literally translated, “two-souled”—a man with two souls, or in our vernacular, two hearts—two directions.

James is actually referring to someone who is constantly changing allegiances—you see, this is a deeper problem than doubting God will answer his request—it actually relates to a person’s unwillingness to live in the will of the God.<sup>xix</sup>

One author called him a walking civil war in which trust and distrust of God wage a continual battle against each other.<sup>xx</sup>

So you need to understand that James isn’t referring to someone with honest doubts and even perhaps a misdirected sense of humility that assumes God probably has more important things to do than answer their prayer.

James is describing a person who says he wants God’s direction in life but in reality he’s keeping all his options open.

James says in effect, “No one will receive wisdom from God until their only option is obedient submission to God.”

Until then, James writes in *verse 8, “this man is unstable in all his ways.”* The word for unstable comes from a word that means to not be able to settle down.<sup>xxi</sup>

It carries the idea of never committing in life—he inclines toward God one day and toward the world the next. Paul used this same word to describe confusion and disorder in I Corinthians 14:33.

So ask in faith—which means, you’ve made up your mind that you want the wisdom of God so that you can ultimately obey the will of God.

## The Perspective

Now, several Bible scholars believe the book of James is actually a sermon he delivered and someone transcribed.

One indication of that is that James inserts an illustration in the middle of his discussion on trials and endurance.

Notice the illustration in *verse 9. But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory*

*in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.*

The point of the illustration is perspective. The poor believer and the rich believer both realize that the ground is level in suffering. Both are given a new status in Christ and it is in Christ that they are to trust.

The poor man needs to consider his high position as a prince of God even when life tells him he's anything but a member of God's high and holy family.

The rich believer needs to remember that his trust cannot be in his wealth because it can wither away as quickly a flower losing its petal in a scorching desert wind storm.

### **The Promise**

But here is the truly happy man—*verse 12—Blessed is the man who preservers under trial; for once he has been approved he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

*Verse 12* is the concluding statement of James' discussion on trials.

It's in the form of a beatitude. James is sounding like his half-brother Jesus Christ. ***Blessed is the man!*** Literally, "happy, or satisfied, is the man who perseveres."

This isn't a wish, by the way. I hope you will be blessed—I hope you will be satisfied.

This verse is a verdict. You *are* blessed—you are satisfied; now and later, as James writes here, ***when you receive the crown of life.***<sup>xxii</sup>

James is not implying that you can earn eternal life by enduring suffering; he is saying that the believer can earn a crown—unique rewards for having suffered with joy.

You don't choose your crosses . . . you choose your responses . . . and one day you'll be rewarded every time you chose to respond with faith and wisdom and prayer and joy.

John Phillips, who only recently went home to be with the Lord, recorded in his commentary a story told by Howard Hendricks at Moody Bible Institute's annual Founder's Week Conference. Let me just read it as we wrap up our study today.

*Howard Hendricks once had the opportunity to play the town's champion checkers player. Hendricks was a young fellow at the time and so confident that he felt he could take on the old veteran. He was given the first move and decided to set the pace. After a few moves, his opponent put a piece in the line of fire and said, "Jump me." Hendricks did so, scooping the piece triumphantly off the board. He thought that he had the game in the bag when his opponent put another piece in jeopardy and said, "You'll have to jump me again." Hendricks happily took the piece. And then it happened. The old man picked up one of his checkers and, Jump! Jump! Jump! Jump! His checker hopped down the board, scooping up four of Hendricks' checkers with relentless precision. And the old man's checker landed in king territory. He announced, "Crown me." After that, young Hendricks didn't have a chance as piece after piece was pounced on until he had lost them all. Then Dr. Hendricks made the point. "No good checker player minds losing an occasional piece, [and he can with joy], so long as he knows he's heading for [a crown]."*<sup>xxiii</sup>

Ladies and Gentlemen, you can't choose your crosses . . . you choose your responses . . . and what better way to encourage us all at the end of the discussion, than to here James effectively say— one day your crosses will be exchanged for a crown.

**So play on . . . crowning day will soon be here!**

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- iii Wiersbe, p. 23
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- xx Hiebert, p. 74
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- xxiii Phillips, p. 42