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MINISTRIES

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Living Faith: Count It All Joy (James 1:2-4)

Welcome back to our study through the Book of James. In this teaching, we will be going through James 1:2-4. How should believers respond when they experience trials? And what’s God’s purpose behind allowing trials?

Before we get there, he’s a quick summary of what we discussed last time.

1. This epistle was written by James, the brother of Yeshua, who was a respected leader in the early Jerusalem church. The epistle was likely written between 42-44 AD during a time of persecution.
2. James addressed his letter to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” a reference to the scattered people of Israel. These early believers—mostly Messianic Jews but also some Gentiles—were called to live out their faith in Yeshua through obedience.
3. James’s message highlights his commitment to the Torah and his emphasis on good works as evidence of true, living faith.

Following his greeting, James opens his letter by giving instructions on how believers should respond when they experience trials. Here is what he says:

James 1:2

[Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...](#)

Here, at the very beginning of his epistle, James encourages his readers to “count it all joy” when they experience “trials.” In Greek, the word translated as “count” is ἡγεομαι (*hēgeomai*), which in this context basically means to engage in an intellectual process—to “think” or to “consider” (BDAG 4th ed., 383). And the word for “joy” (χαρά, *chara*) just means “the experience of gladness” (BDAG 4th ed., 959).

So, James acknowledges that his readers are going through trials, and he urges them to *think* a certain way about them. Instead of giving into grief and despair, which is the typical emotional reaction to

hardship, believers are to *think* about these experiences as being opportunities for joy. In other words, James calls on his readers to *choose joy* when they experience trials. Joy is not a natural result of trials; it is something one must choose in spite of trials.

But why should believers consider trials to be a cause for joy? James gives two reasons. Later in his letter, he explains that believers who remain faithful while facing trials will be rewarded in age to come:

James 1:12

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.

James 2:5

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?

So, according to James, the eternal reward awaiting believers makes all the present suffering worth it. In the age to come, the trials of this life will come to an end, and believers will experience an everlasting joy in God's kingdom. That wonderful hope for the future gives believers reason to rejoice *right now*, even as they endure trials.

However, while the hope of a future reward is certainly one reason believers can rejoice in the face of trials, James appears to have another, more immediate reason in mind for why trials should be considered a reason for joy. Here is what he says:

James 1:3

...for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

So, trials are a reason for joy because they are a “testing” of your “faith,” which in turn produces “steadfastness.”

In Greek, the word translated as “testing” is δοκίμιον (*dokimion*), which means the “process or means of determining the genuineness of something” (BDAG 4th ed., 226).

So, the idea here seems to be that trials serve as a means of determining the genuineness of one's “faith.” And whatever is proven genuine through this testing produces “steadfastness.” A similar idea appears in 1 Peter, where Peter uses the same word that James does:

1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the **tested genuineness [δοκίμιον]** of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Like James, Peter teaches that trials test the genuineness of one's faith. And Peter goes on to use an analogy that sheds some light on this idea. He compares the testing of faith by trials to refining gold by fire. In the ancient world, precious metals like gold were heated to high temperatures to burn away impurities. In the same way, God uses trials to refine his people, purifying their faith like a precious metal. Peter says that genuine faith is “more precious than gold” in God's eyes.

So, believers are to count it joy when they experience trials because they know that trials are a tool that God uses to purify their “faith.” This brings up another question. What does James mean by “faith”? As we will explore more deeply in a future teaching in this series, faith is a very important concept for James. For now, it’s enough to understand that, here, James is referring to a firm devotion to the Messiah. One’s devotion to the Messiah involves not just what one believes intellectually but also how one *acts* upon that belief. It is not just mentally agreeing with certain truths, but also *living out* those truths.

So, trials are a means of determining the genuineness of one’s devotion to the Messiah. And when one’s devotion to the Messiah proves genuine through that testing, it produces “steadfastness.” What is steadfastness? In Greek, this word is ὑπομονή (*hypomonē*), and it means “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty” (BDAG 4th ed., 925). Steadfastness is a type of stability and strength of mind in the midst of pain or adversity.

James’s readers were facing “various trials,” especially persecution. Later in the letter, James describes how the rich and powerful were oppressing the righteous and defrauding them (James 5:1-6). Given this situation, his readers seem to have been struggling with the temptation to retaliate in anger. We see James addressing this a little bit later:

James 1:19-21

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Instead of responding with violence, “steadfastness” in this context appears to refer to the inner strength and resolve to choose love and peace when confronted with persecution. If a person is genuinely devoted to the Messiah, he will possess this strength of mind.

Okay, so to sum up verses 2-3, James says that believers should view trials as a reason for joy. Why? Because God uses these trials to determine whether their devotion to the Messiah is genuine, and this genuine devotion produces stability and strength of mind. Now let’s turn to verse 4:

James 1:4

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Here, James assures his readers that if they allow steadfastness to complete its work in their lives, it will lead them to be “perfect.” Here, the word translated as “perfect” is τέλειος (*teleios*). What does that mean? Well, James does not mean to imply that he expects his readers to be *sinless* in this life. This is evident in James 3:2, where he admits, “**For we all stumble in many ways,**” particularly in the area of speech. In this context, τέλειος (*teleios*) more so pertains to being mature or fully developed (BDAG 4th ed., 885). Although James does not imagine that his readers will be sinless, he does expect them to grow in spiritual maturity and to turn away from sin consistently over time. The scholar Scot McKnight gives an excellent summary:

For James...we may safely conclude that he believes the messianic Jewish community is to strive for a level of morality (character and behavior) where particular forms of sin are not manifested and that this morality derives from a perfect God, who gives perfect gifts, not least of

which is new birth (1:18), and from a royal, perfect Torah, so that the messianic community can be noted for its Torah observance. Such an understanding of perfection is Jewish and at the same time consistent with Jesus (Matt 5:48; 19:21), with the Pauline notion of “living in the Spirit” (Gal 5:13-26; cf. also Phil 3:15; Col 1:28; 4:12; 1 Cor 14:20), with the Johannine notion of “walking in the light” (1 John 1:5-7; 2:9-11; 3:9), and with the notion of “perfection” in Hebrews (5:14).

—Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 82

So, when steadfastness—again, meaning strength of mind amid trials—does its work within believers, it leads them to become “perfect,” or spiritually mature. This maturity is then described as being “complete, lacking in nothing.” The word translated as “complete” is ὁλόκληρος (*holoklēros*), which means to be whole, undamaged, and intact (BDAG 4th ed., 624). The noun form of this word ὁλοκληρία (*holoklēria*) is used in Acts 3:16 to describe someone in “perfect health” after being healed.

Thus, the one who has become mature and complete has reached a “state of soundness or well-being in all parts” (BDAG 4th ed., 624). They lack nothing.

In sum, James urges believers to think of trials as an occasion for joy. This is because God uses these trials to determine whether their devotion to the Messiah is genuine. If a believer’s devotion to the Messiah is genuine, it will produce stability and strength of mind. And when believers allow this strength of mind to fully do its work in their lives, they will reach maturity, being perfectly whole and healthy, lacking nothing.

Joseph: How God used Trials to Bring a Man to Maturity

The story of Joseph, found in the book of Genesis, powerfully illustrates how God uses trials to shape us for his purposes. As one of Jacob’s twelve sons, Joseph endured intense suffering—even at the hands of his own family! The story begins with God giving him amazing dreams that foretold his future rise to power (Genesis 37:5-8). However, in his excitement and immaturity, he shared these dreams with his brothers, who were already resentful of him since he was their father’s favorite son (Genesis 37:3-4). Their hatred and jealousy toward Joseph eventually reached the point where they decided to get rid of him. They threw him down a pit, sold him into slavery, and deceived their father into believing he had been killed by a wild animal (Genesis 37:18-36). After all that, he was taken to Egypt, where he was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown into prison unjustly.

So Joseph endured many trials and hardships—betrayal, false accusations, and more. And yet, God worked through those trials to position Joseph for his greater purpose. Through a series of miraculous events while in prison, Joseph was brought into direct contact with Pharaoh. As a result of this encounter, he was elevated to a place of authority over all of Egypt, where he played a key role in saving many lives during severe famine (Genesis 41:14-41; 50:20).

This story is a powerful reminder of how God can work through any circumstance to accomplish his will. But there is something else we want to highlight about this story—that is, the work that God was doing *within Joseph*.

God used these trials not only to raise Joseph to authority, but also to refine his character through them. During the famine, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain, where they unknowingly came face to face with Joseph. After so many years, they didn’t recognize him at first, but he recognized them.

Can you imagine the wave of emotions Joseph must have experienced in that moment? Reuniting with his family likely stirred a complex mix of love and pain. There is little doubt that the sting of betrayal and rejection still lingered in his heart. However, despite these deep emotional wounds, those trials had shaped him into a man of maturity and wisdom. His faith had been tested and found genuine. He was able to look past the pain to see the bigger purpose in his suffering, and he was able to forgive and reconcile with his brothers. Even though he had the opportunity to retaliate, he chose forgiveness and compassion:

Genesis 50:19-21

But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

This is the kind of character that God wants to develop in each of us. He wants us to be a forgiving and kind people, who are able to see past the hurt to what God is doing in the world and in our lives. So let us consider it a joy when we encounter trials of all kinds. God is using them to test our faith and bring us to maturity.

In the next teaching, we will go through James 1:5-8. We’ll see that when facing trials, not only do we need steadfastness, but we also need God’s wisdom. We’ll see you there!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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