

A Survival Guide: James on Trials

Most of us wish life was always easy and we didn't need to think about how to respond when it gets difficult. But life is not always easy, and so we do.

No matter how hard we may try, we simply can't avoid getting hurt. Life is difficult. Fortunately it is difficult for a reason. God has a good purpose for the trials He brings into our lives. He wants us to help us become mature Christian and uses trials to promote our spiritual growth.

Unfortunately, trials are painful. If they weren't painful, they wouldn't be trials. Since trials are painful it's easy to respond to them in a way that dishonors God and harms us.

The way we respond to the difficulties God brings into our life is very important. In fact, when it comes to our spiritual growth, there are few issues more important. If we respond correctly to the trials that come into our life, we will take steps towards spiritual maturity, but if we respond incorrectly we will take steps back.

That's why in what is considered by many to be the most "practical" book of the New Testament, James begins by teaching us how to handle trials. He understands if we are going to be the people God wants us to be we need to know how He wants us to respond to the difficulties of life.

James is writing a group of believers whose lives were very hard. They were under fierce persecution. The Gentiles persecuted them for being Jews. And the Jews persecuted them for being Christians. The persecution they faced was so intense they had to flee their homes and families just to survive and ended living as poor refugees in foreign lands.

It's difficult to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. But try to imagine what it must have been like for these believers.

How would you react if your family deserted you for following Christ? Your mother and father disowned you for your faith? You were physically beaten for being a Christian? You were forced out of your home and your possessions stolen? Your friends betrayed you? You had to flee to a foreign country just to escape persecution?

I'm sure you could imagine all sorts of different possible responses to those kinds of trials - few of them good. Yet James begins his letter by writing,

Consider It All Joy

"Consider it all joy my brethren when you encounter various trials..."

That quite frankly, is a shocking thing to say. I mean, imagine pouring out your heart to a friend about the problems in your life. You are hurting and expect some sympathy. But instead, after you've finished complaining, he looks you right in the eye, and says, "Great. That's fantastic. What you've told me is reason for nothing but joy,

happiness, and thanksgiving!" "Say what? Did you hear me? Did you hear what I just said?"

That's not how we'd expect our friend to respond to our complaints, and if he did, we'd probably complain some more. Yet that's exactly the way James begins his letter to these suffering believers. He knows they are hurting, yet says straight up, "*Whenever you encounter various trials, you are to consider those trials all joy.*"

It's easy to take what James is saying for granted because we've read this verse so many times before. Force yourself to think very carefully about exactly what he is telling us to do.

We are going to experience trials

He doesn't say, "*if* you experience trials..." but "*when* you experience trials..." We are going to experience trials and this is how we are to react each and every time. We are to consider the trials we experience an occasion for joy - not after we have escaped from the trial - not even before we experience the trial - but when we *encounter* the trial.

We are to consider every trial a reason for joy

It's easy to start thinking our trial is the exception. It's not. Take special note of the word "*various.*" It literally means multi-colored. When James commands us to consider trials an occasion for all joy, he's not just referring to certain kinds of trials, instead he's talking about every single trial we could possibly experience.

Whenever we experience a trial, *whatever* trial we experience, consider it all joy.

We are to think of our trial as a reason for nothing but joy

Keep going. Underline the word *all*. Trials are not merely a reason for a little bit of joy. Trials are a reason for nothing but joy. We are to 'Count ourselves supremely happy' to 'rejoice exceedingly,' and 'account it sheer joy,' when we are suddenly and unexpectedly surrounded by all sorts of different difficulties.

How am I to respond when I am persecuted for my faith? Consider it all joy. How am I to respond when I get sick and am out for a few weeks? Consider it all joy. How am I to respond when I lose my job and am wondering about how I am to pay my bills? Consider it all joy.

If I don't consider trials all joy, I sin. If you don't, you sin.

That's an incredible statement, isn't it?

The command to consider trials all joy seems almost impossible to obey; yet Scripture repeatedly commands believers to respond to trials with an attitude of joy.

Peter writes, "In this you greatly rejoice even though now for a little while if necessary you are being distressed by various trials..." (1 Peter 1:6) Paul explains, "And not only this but we also exult in our tribulations..." (Romans 5:3) And Jesus says, "Blessed are you when man cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice and be glad..." (Matthew 5:11,12)

Those passages are pretty convicting. But while those commands are convicting, at the same time those same commands are also hope inspiring. What God commands us to do, He enables us to accomplish. If God wants us to respond to trials with joy, and we are believers, we can respond to trials with joy. And if we can respond to trials with joy – that means:

We don't have to be controlled by our circumstances. We can have joy in every circumstance of life.

That's great news. That's absolutely awesome news. All joy all the time. There's nothing better than that.

Still I think I know how some might be tempted to respond.

“All joy? Simply not possible. You can't really expect me to rejoice in the midst of my trials. If you knew what I've been through, you'd know that joy is not an option.”

Tell that to the apostles.

In Acts 5:40 they've been scolded, beaten and flogged, (which was a severe punishment slightly below capital punishment) and yet how do they respond?

“... they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been worthy to suffer in His name.”

Tell that to Paul and Silas.

In Acts 16, they're in prison at Philippi.

They've been beaten, treated unfairly, and put in a stinking dungeon at the bottom of the jail. And what are they doing? Crying and complaining? No, singing and rejoicing. (Acts 16:23-25)

Tell that to Paul.

In Philippians 1, he's in a prison in Rome. People he loves and cares for are attacking him. Some are even preaching the gospel out of envy and selfish ambition, just to make him look bad. Yet, how does he respond? *"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will continue to rejoice."* (Philippians 1:18)

If we are believers we can learn to respond to trials, even the worst of trials, with joy. In fact, if we are believers, we must. Joy is a command, not an option.

Impossible?

The question is how?

The fact that James commands us to consider trials all joy means considering trials all joy is not our natural reaction.

If we are going to experience joy in the middle of trials - we must do something! That is so important to understand. We can't wait until we feel joy in the middle of trials, we have to step up to the plate and take action.

SURVIVAL TIP

Memorize James 1:2-4

Write down at least five reasons your trial is good for you. Carry that list with you. When you are being to get discouraged and start to complain and grumble, make a conscious decision to give thanks to God for what you have written down on that list.

Share with a friend your struggle to rejoice. Ask that friend to hold you accountable to obeying James' command to consider trials all joy.

We must stop listening to ourselves and start talking to ourselves.

James says we have to consider trials a reason for joy.

To consider means 'to lead.' When life gets difficult we must not merely follow our feelings, but take control of our mind and lead it down the right path.

He's talking about the way we think about the trial. James isn't commanding us to feel all joy in the middle of a trial. We won't always feel like trials are a reason for all joy. But we must not allow our emotions to control us. James is calling on us to make a deliberate, determined commitment to think appropriately when we are in the midst of a trial.

Jay Adams explains, "When you are suddenly surrounded by a trial what is required is hard thinking...stop, think and learn."¹

That takes discipline. It doesn't just magically happen. If we are going to respond to trials the way God desires, we must learn to discipline our minds to think biblically about the situation we are in.

To do so requires working on changing old habit patterns. As Jay Adams writes, "Over the years, perhaps you've slackened the reins and allowed your mind to muck around in the well-worn pathways into which your sinful nature used to lead your mind. But now redeemed by the blood of Christ, regenerated by His Spirit and given a new heart oriented towards God and capable of living for Him,

¹ Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Commentary, Hebrew, James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, Timeless Texts, Woodruff, S.C., 1996, p.157

you are able to seize control of the reigns and lead your mind to the pure, refreshing waters of life. In other words, in any and all trials, if you deliberately take the time and make a prayerful effort to consider them as God does you will reach the place where you look on them entirely as a blessing - and rejoice. But you will not rejoice until you learn to consider trials what God does." ²

Please understand, this command doesn't mean we are supposed to pretend like trials do not hurt. Jesus wept and He was perfect. When He was on the cross, He cried out "My God, My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?" That's real pain. True joy isn't incompatible with genuine sorrow. But true joy is incompatible with self-pity and hopelessness.

Imagine a billionaire traveling overseas. The man has it all, everything the world has to offer. But while overseas, he's mugged. A thief steals everything he has in his wallet, and beats him up pretty badly.

Certainly, the billionaire is not going to say, "That felt really good, I just love being beaten and robbed. You know what, get me that muggers number, I want to do that again sometime soon." And if he did, we'd respond, "You might think about getting your head examined."

But on the other hand we'd think he was pretty strange if he just sat in his room weeping uncontrollably because some of his money

² Jay Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness*, Victor Books, Wheaton Ill., 1988, p.18,19

was stolen and he lost his favorite wallet. And if he did, we'd say, "I recognize you are hurting but remember what you've got back home."

When we are in a trial it is normal to hurt; but it's wrong to be destroyed. When we are hurting it's natural to grieve, but it's wrong to grieve like God doesn't exist. We must not think of our trial as a reason to be crushed, to be overwhelmed with self-pity, to give up, to complain against God or to wallow in our own misery.

Instead we should think on that trial as a reason to give thanks. Our trial, whatever it is, is a reason for joy!

O.k, But Why?

If James stopped at, 'consider it all joy' someone might mistakenly think he's talking about the power of positive thinking. Or to borrow a phrase from an old pop-song, that he's merely telling believers, "Don't worry, be happy."

"You've lost your home, you've lost your job, the rich are taking advantage of you? Here's what you do. Pretend like those things aren't happening. Think about how rich you are going to be someday. Live in a fantasy world, and you'll be able to make it through."

Don't laugh. That's how an many people respond to trials.

SURVIVAL TIP

Think specifically about the character of God and how that applies to you and your trial.

Spend the next week in your devotions focusing on the character of God. Meditate on one attribute a day. As you do so, answer this question – what difference does it make that God is ... (fill in the attribute you are considering)

They try to think ‘happy thoughts.’

And if that’s all James is teaching us – his instruction isn’t all that unusual. Any unbeliever can tell us to be happy. Any unbeliever can tell us to be joyful when life gets difficult. But there isn’t a single unbeliever who can provide a legitimate reason for doing so.

This is where the Christian message is so much better than the world’s. James is not saying ignore reality. He's saying remember reality. The believer has real reasons to rejoice in trials.

We can and should consider trials as a reason for joy because we know something about trials. I’m not talking about knowledge that we learn in a book, but knowledge that comes from personal experience. We can look on our life and realize from personal experience what trials produce. We don't hop up and down with joy because we like the trial itself. If we liked the trial it wouldn't be a trial. We consider that trial a reason for joy because we know God is the one who brings trials into our life and He does so for a reason!

Trials Test Faith

God brings trials into our lives to test our faith. The word for test literally means to evaluate something to prove or disprove whether it is genuine or not. Trials are a means of evaluating whether our faith is real or not.

We can appreciate the importance of that. If something is valuable and important to us, we want it tested. Before a doctor prescribes a new drug, we want to know whether it has been

tested. Before we buy a car, we will read reviews, to see if it passed certain safety tests. Before we buy a home, we'll hire an inspector to come and perform certain tests. If we desire tests for things like that, shouldn't we have a greater desire for our faith to be tested? Geoffrey Thomas explains, " Isn't that [*our faith*] worthy of testing? Think of all we say hangs on true faith in Jesus Christ. Eternity with God in heaven for all who believe. "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."³ If that much rests on our faith, and it does, than it would be a great tragedy to go through our lives thinking that we have a genuine faith in God when in reality we don't. We don't want to stand before God with a false faith. So we thank God for trials which He uses to give us confidence that our faith is the real thing.

God also uses trials to refine our faith. One way they do that is by pointing out its' strengths and weaknesses. It may be that we think our faith is stronger than it really is, and it's not until it is tested that we realize the areas in which we need to grow. That's why Peter says a Christian only suffers trials, "if necessary..." (1 Peter 1:6) If we are suffering a trial it is because our faith needs it. And so we rejoice. Most people don't get too upset when their stocks jump in value; and we shouldn't get too upset when God makes our most precious quality, faith, more profitable.

³ Geoffrey Thomas, <http://users.aber.ac.uk/emk/ap/sermons/james2.htm>

Trials Produce Endurance

James goes a step further. We rejoice when our faith is tested because “the testing of our faith produces endurance...”

The word endurance literally means to remain under. It’s the "ability to hang in there when the going gets tough." Jerry Bridges explains that endurance is “...the quality of character that enables one to pursue a goal in spite of obstacles and difficulties. It is one thing simply to bear up under adversity...God calls us to more than simply bear the load of adversity. He calls us to persevere (to press forward) in the face of trials.”⁴

Endurance is important. So important that the writer of Hebrews warns us, "...you have need of endurance so that after you have done the will of God you may receive the promise: For yet a little while and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul."

(Hebrews 10:35ff)

In other words, if we don't have endurance we aren't going to make it to heaven. But what’s more, if we don’t have endurance we aren’t even going to make it on earth. Endurance is an essential character quality. It’s impossible to do anything well without it.

⁴ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, Co., 1988, p.185

But notice, while endurance is very important, here in James, it isn't the final goal. Endurance produces something in the believer. *"But let endurance have its' perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."*

I want to be perfect. I want to be complete. I want to lack nothing. And if something helps me become complete, perfect and lacking in nothing, it's a good thing.

James says trials can do just that. Trials can produce endurance and endurance can produce spiritual maturity. But get this: trials don't automatically do that.

Trials can be good. They can produce endurance, and endurance can help you become mature. But we don't become mature just by going through a lot of trials. It's how we respond to those trials that counts.

That's why James says, "**Let** endurance have its complete work..." Circle, underline, highlight, memorize the word let. We face a serious danger in every trial.

When we are in a trial we will face the serious temptation to look for an unbiblical way out. We'll desperately desire to cut the process short. And listen, if it weren't possible to do so, James wouldn't have included the warning. We can cut our trial short in an unbiblical way. And if we do, we'll just have to face another trial until we learn the lesson

God wants us to learn.

This is one reason why so many people never become mature

and complete. They go to church. They say they want to be strong Christians. They say they want to grow in the faith. But every time God brings something difficult into their lives, they compromise. They fail to endure and as a result they remain babies in Christ.

Then they complain about how God isn't working in their life. They can't understand why they aren't growing in their faith. God is working in their life. He's bringing trials into their lives to mature them, but time and time again they respond to those trials by taking an unbiblical way out.

Sometimes people escape trials by running away from the church and accountability. They are in a tough spot, people are getting

SURVIVAL TIP

Be alert to the temptation to compromise.

Make a list of possible rationalizations you might give yourself for sinfully cutting your trial short.

Make a list of biblical responses to those rationalizations.

Make a copy of that list for a friend. Ask him or her to remind you of what the Scripture says when you attempt make excuses for sinning.

close to them, and their sin is being exposed. Then instead of repenting, they just look for another church, or they just stop going to church at all.

Sometimes people escape trials by disobeying God's commands. They make decisions based on what is easy, not what is right. Perhaps they are in a financial trial and they cheat on their income tax, or they steal money from work, or they compromise in another way.

If we want to become a spiritually mature person we need to let endurance have its'

perfect work in us. That doesn't mean God won't take us out of our trial. He may do that. That doesn't mean we can't use biblical means to lessen the pain of the trial. We don't purposefully make the trial more difficult. It just means we will not do anything *unbiblical* to make the trial easier. If we do we are hindering our spiritual growth. We are hurting ourselves.

Jerry Bridges in his book, *Trusting God*, tells a story about a man watching a moth emerge from its cocoon. The moth was struggling to escape its confinement and the man felt some compassion as he watched. So he tried to help the moth by snipping the shell of the cocoon. But instead of helping, he actually did great harm. The moth came out with its wings all crimped and shriveled, doomed to crawling out its brief life in frustration of ever being the beautiful creature God intended it to be.

The person watching didn't realize that the struggle to emerge from the cocoon was used to develop the muscle system of the moth's body, and pushed the body fluids out the wings to expand them. By unwisely seeking to cut short the moth's struggle, the watcher had actually crippled the moth and doomed its existence. Bridges explains, "The adversities of life are much like the cocoon of the moth. God uses them to develop the spiritual muscle system of our lives...We can be sure that the development of a beautiful Christ like character will not occur in our lives without adversity."⁵

⁵ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, p.173,174

Many people say they want to be mature Christians, but aren't willing to go through trials to accomplish the goal. They are like Calvin in an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip. Calvin is in a canoe with his dad, and it's easy to tell Calvin doesn't like it one bit. Scowling, he says, "Remember last year when we went camping and it rained all week? That was miserable." His dad responds, as dads often do, "But it built character." To which, Calvin rolling his eyes, remarks, "Why can't we build character in a nice hotel by the beach?"

Truth is, that's the way most of us are, isn't it? We want character but we want it on our terms.

It doesn't work that way. We develop godly character by responding to trials the way God wants us to.

In the end, the question is: Do we really value spiritual growth more than being comfortable? That's what it all comes down to, doesn't it? We will only consider trials all joy if we truly value what God values more than what the world values.

Some of us need to be honest with ourselves. We need to admit we value having it easy more than we do being holy.

If that's true of you, it may be because you are not truly a believer. If you are not, I beg you to get on your knees and cry out to God that He would change your heart. Jesus says, "What will it profit it a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:47) Your soul is more valuable than the whole world. Don't be a fool and trade your soul for a short period of comfort here on earth.

If you are a believer and yet find yourself valuing what the world values more than what God values, repent and remember James' command: "Consider it all joy my brothers when you encounter various trials, because the testing of your faith produces endurance, let endurance have its perfect work so that you might be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."

SURVIVOR STUDY QUESTIONS

Describe the trials you are experiencing:

What makes these trials so difficult?

How you are responding to the trial you are enduring?

*What are you doing to improve your situation?

*What are you saying to yourself in the midst of your trial?

e.g. *“God why are you doing this to me?”*

*What do you think would “make everything better?”

Finish this sentence – “If only...then I would be happy.”

According to chapter one, what is the significance of the following words:

“Consider”

“When”

“Encounter”

“Various”

“All”

What does it mean to “consider trials all joy?”

What would it look like for you to consider your trial an occasion for all joy? Be specific...

To respond to a trial in a way that honors God you need to stop and think. Compare the way you are responding to your trial to the way God wants you to respond to your trial.

What I am thinking:

What I should think:

What I am doing:

What I should do:

What I want:

What I should want:

Biblically, what is wrong with the following statements?

“God’s not being fair to me...”

“I hate my life – everything and everyone is against me...”

“No good can come out of this...”

“I’d be happy if I could just get out of this trial...”

What can you learn about yourself from the way you have responded to this trial?

What are some ways you are tempted to cut your trial short in an unbiblical manner? What are some of the consequences you would experience if you compromised?

Why is godly character more valuable than being comfortable? Give at least five reasons...

My wife and I enjoy watching the Olympics.

Problem is, I'm a dreamer. When I watch the Olympic athletes I often imagine myself doing exactly what I see them doing. Then I go out and try. I find out real quickly it's not nearly as easy as it looks.

That was made clear to me the first time I went skiing. I was sure it'd be easy. About a thousand bumps and bruises later, I realized it wasn't. What looked so straightforward and effortless while sitting on my couch watching T.V. was incredibly challenging and difficult to put into practice out on the slopes. Needless to say, I went home pretty frustrated. I wanted to ski the way the Olympians did, I just didn't know how.

Many people feel that way about the Christian life. They are frustrated. They read their Bible and it all sounds so good. But when they actually go out and try to put what they've learned into practice, it just seems too difficult. So they end up thinking God's Word must only work for the really spiritual people – the “Olympic athletes” of the church.

If you feel that way, I can assure you, you are not alone. I even imagine the believers who received this letter from James may have felt a little like that after reading his instruction in verses two through four. They wanted to respond to trials the way James described, they understood what was required, they just didn't know how.

That's the problem isn't it? It's not hard to understand what it means to consider trials all joy, but it is hard to do it.

How do we consider it all joy when our toilet overflows, when our car breaks down, when we lose our job, when our children rebel, when a loved one dies?

Sometimes in the midst of trials, Christians are tempted to believe that considering their particular trial all joy is impossible. They are willing to admit that others might be able to consider trials all joy, but they tell themselves, that doesn't mean they can.

James has a message for people thinking things like that. They are wrong. There is hope. If a person is a Christian he can live these verses out. He just needs something.

He needs wisdom.

Many Christians think just because they have a little bit of knowledge, they have wisdom. They've read the right books, studied the Bible, gone to Sunday school thousands of times, can quote a bunch of Bible verses at a moments notice, but that's all they can do. They don't understand how to take what they know and put it into practice.

James calls that kind of person a fool. He may know a lot, but he is not wise. Wisdom is the ability to take what we know and make it part of our practical experience. Wisdom helps us live our lives in a way that honors God.

If we are in a trial, it's not enough to be able to explain James 1:2-4. We need the wisdom to take that knowledge and put it into action. We need to be able to take the Scripture and apply it to our particular life experience.

Unfortunately I've met many Christians who think they can't do that. For whatever reason, they sincerely believe they don't have what it takes to obtain the kind of wisdom they need to live a godly life.

Fortunately, that's simply not true. James explains what it takes to obtain the kind of wisdom needed to consider trials a reason for joy, and he starts off by saying, "*if any of you ...*"

This is a promise for "any of you." If we are Christians, we can become wise. We just need to know how.

Ask God for It

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God..."

In our English translations this verse reads like a suggestion, "let him ask God," but in the Greek, it is a command, "He must ask God."

When we have a problem, and we don't know how to take God's truth and apply it to our situation, we need to ask God for wisdom. We should ask God for wisdom on a regular basis. Every time we need wisdom, we should go to God, and ask Him to give it to us. And we should keep on asking Him until we receive it. God will provide what we need to live the Christian life, if we ask.

SURVIVAL TIP

If you are tempted to believe it is impossible for you to consider your trial a reason for joy – memorize James 1:5-8 and make it a practice to meditate on these verses each day for the next week.

Why Don't We Ask God?

The problem is - most people aren't humble enough to admit they need wisdom. My little daughter is in the "I want to do it" stage. We'll be putting on her shoes, I'll go to tie them, and almost every time she'll say, "I want to do it, Dad..." Now, she's two years old. She has no idea how to tie her shoes. But she'll wrestle with the laces, fumble around, sing a little song that my wife taught her about a rabbit going

round a tree, and get so frustrated that she'll finally say, "Daddy, you do it."

And I tie her laces and off we go.

That's cute when it's a two year old trying to tie her shoelaces. But it is not a cute way to live life. Still, many professing believers live their entire lives in the "I want to do it" stage. They struggle to overcome their problems because they are too proud to admit they don't know how.

When we are struggling, are we humble enough to admit we need wisdom? We won't get wisdom until we recognize we don't have it. If we lack wisdom

- we must stop relying on ourselves to obtain.

<p>SURVIVAL TIP Schedule a daily time of prayer in which you acknowledge your weakness and your need for God's help to respond to your</p>

We must humbly go to God.

As the wisest man in the Old Testament once explained, "Trust the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight." (Proverbs 3:5,6)

Others are willing to admit they need wisdom. They just don't think of looking to God for it. They turn to everyone else but to God for wisdom. They go to their friends, what do they think? They turn on Oprah Winfrey, what's she think? They go to Barnes and Noble and get the latest book, what's this or that particular author think?

They go on a frantic search for wisdom. Unfortunately, they won't find what they are looking for because they are looking in the wrong places. If I want a house built, I don't first turn to a hammer and say, 'Go for it. Do your thing.' No, I first go and talk to the builder. I understand that he uses the hammers and the tools, but I know those tools would be useless apart from his expert hand.

The same is true when it comes to obtaining wisdom. People are just tools and instruments God uses.

Scripture makes that abundantly clear. Wisdom comes from God. Proverbs 2:6, "For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth comes knowledge and understanding." Specifically God's wisdom is found in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30, "But by his doing you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God..." Paul tells us in Colossians 2:3 that in Christ, "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Therefore if we want wisdom we've got to seek God through Christ. We won't find it anywhere else. And He reveals that wisdom by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." (1 Cor.2:14) If we want to understand God's wisdom which is hidden in Christ we need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes. And one of the primary instruments the Holy Spirit uses to give us skill for living is His Word. 2 Timothy 3:16,17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

God gave us this book so that we might have wisdom. The Psalmist understood that. That's why he cries out, "Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Thy precepts."(Ps.119:99,100)

This means that when we are in a difficult situation and don't know what to do, we must:

Stop looking to ourselves for wisdom. *Admit* that we don't know exactly how to obey God in that situation. *Go* to Him in prayer. *Acknowledge* He's the source of true wisdom. *Ask* Him to show us how to obey His will. *Understand* wisdom is hidden in Christ, and the only way to access that wisdom in Christ is through the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. *Realize* one of the primary means the Holy Spirit uses is His Word. And **whatever we do, we must not say we are going to God for wisdom if we are seeking it apart from Christ and His Word.**

This is such good news. If we want wisdom, we should look to God. And James promises the person who does just that, "... *it will be given him.*" We can count on that.

Unfortunately, almost immediately our hearts object. We quickly come up with a number of reasons that promise is too good to be true. As a result, we fail to pray.

How Can We Be Sure God Will Answer?

James anticipates our objections and gives reasons to go to God in prayer. He writes, *"let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproach and it will be given to him."*

God's a Giving God

We've all had friends we would never think of asking to give us anything because they are so slow to give. We've all also had the kind of friends that if we even hint about a need, attempt to meet that need before we can finish asking.

The good news is God's not slow to give. In fact, God's better than our most giving friend. A Greek poet once called God the lover of gifts, not because he loved to receive them, but because He loved to give them. He was right. That's James' point. We should go to God for wisdom, because He loves to give. Giving is an essential part of God's nature. Verse 5 literally reads, 'let him ask the giving God...'

If we are believers we are children of God. And we rejoice because we have a Father who loves to give. Knowing that should give us great confidence when we go to God in prayer. If our son and daughter came to us and asked for a piece of bread, we wouldn't give him a rock and then laugh as he broke his teeth. If he asked for a fish to eat, we wouldn't give him a snake and then laugh as it bites him. Jesus applies that to our hearts saying, "if you then being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your

Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him." (Matt. 7:11)

God's a Generous God

Believe it or not, it gets better. James writes that God gives 'to all men generously.' There are two ways the Greek word for generously is used in the New Testament. Sometimes it is used as a synonym for 'abundantly.' The Bible teaches that God gives more than we can ask or think.

We see that in the gospel.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) God's not a miser. He gave us His Son. Jesus Christ is proof of God's great generosity.

Paul writes in Ephesians 2:20 that God is able to do "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us."

SURVIVAL TIP

Search the Scriptures for at least five promises concerning prayer. Thank God specifically for each promise. Ask God for the faith to believe His Word.

God gives exceedingly abundantly. He's done that in the past, by sending His Son. He does that in the present, by giving us the Spirit and many other blessings. He will do that in the future by raising us up with Christ, *"in order that He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."* (Ephesians 2:7)

We should be quick to ask God for wisdom because He doesn't just give - He gives abundantly.

The second way this Greek word is used in the New Testament, and the way it is most likely used here is to denote sincerity. The root for this term means single or undivided. Jesus uses a variation of this term over in Luke 11:34 where he says, "The light of my body is the eye; therefore when your eye is *single*, your whole body is full of light."

Take that definition and plug it into this passage in James. God has a single, undivided goal to give good gifts to those who ask. He doesn't give commands and then laugh as believers struggle because He didn't give them the abilities to obey those commands.

No, He's sincere.

He wants to provide us with what we need to glorify Him. As one commentator explains, "God gives with a selfless, total concern for us and with an exclusive preoccupation as if he had nothing else to do but to give and to give again."⁶

A person might wonder, 'when I go to God to ask for help, am I going to get lost in the shuffle? Is God going to be too busy, and too unconcerned to hear my prayer?' James says, No! Go to God, He loves to give and He has a "single, undivided intent to give us those gifts we need to please Him."⁷

⁶ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intersociety Press, Leicester, England, 1985, p.39

⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mi., 2000, p.59

God is a Gracious God

It may be that some of us are not as concerned about God's character as we are about ours. We know God's good. We also know you are not. We may not want to go to God in prayer because we think we are so sinful that we don't deserve to have God listen to our prayer.

We don't.

But the good news is our prayers aren't answered because we are so worthy of them being answered. Our prayers are answered because God's good.

God gives, James explains, "without reproach." Imagine a person going to a friend for help with a debt. He's asked him for help before, so he's a little reluctant to go. But eventually in desperation he goes, and when he does, he gets a long lecture. His friend is willing to help, but he does so in a scornful, condescending manner. Afterwards the person asking for help would probably think to himself, "I'm glad he gave me the money; but I know he sure didn't like doing it."

God's not like that. He doesn't knock us when we are down. He doesn't answer our prayers and then make fun of us for asking. When we go to God and ask for wisdom He doesn't bring up all the other times we've come and asked for help. God gives without scolding.

The story of the prodigal son illustrates God's attitude towards the repentant sinner who comes to him in prayer.

The prodigal sinned grievously against his father yet how did the father respond when the son returned? Did he say, "Son good to

have you back but let me tell you a long list of all the things you did wrong. Let me just share with you of all the ways you hurt me?" Did he say, "I forgive your sins, but I can't forget?"

No.

The prodigal knew his sins, but it seems as if his father forgot them. He received his son with open arms, and he cried out, "This is my son who was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and now is found." His son came humbly and his father received him fully. That's the way God treats the repentant sinner who comes to Him trusting in Jesus Christ.

SURVIVAL TIP

Write down the excuses you make for not praying. Write out a biblical response to each excuse. When tempted to give up on prayer, come back and study

James effectively silences every excuse for not going to God for wisdom.

"I'm too big a sinner, there's no way I can go to God right now, I've got to get my life right before I can turn to Him." No, James says, God gives without reproach.

"I've gone too many times. He's got to be tired of listening to me." No, James says, God gives sincerely.

"I feel too far away from God, I can't possibly

pray when I am in a state like this." No, James says, if any man lacks wisdom let him ask of God...and it will be given to him. John Blanchard notes, "The devil cannot prevent God from answering our prayers, but he does all he can to prevent us from asking, and he often does so by twisting the truth that we are not worthy to ask. Now that is true. If we were only able to pray effectively when we were worthy, or when we deserved to be heard, or when we could bring to God a standard of obedience and holiness that gave us the right to be answered, then we would never be able to pray at all...When Christ died He bought for every Christian the right to have instant, constant access to the heart of God."⁸

If we want to consider our particular trial all joy we need to know how to take the Scripture and apply it to our situation, and if we are going to have the ability to do that, we must humbly come before God and ask for His help.

At this point, I think I know what some of us may be thinking. "If that's what we need to do to handle trials correctly, why aren't more Christians handling trials correctly? It doesn't seem all that difficult."

James clarifies. If we want wisdom, we need to ask God for it, but get this,

⁸ John Blanchard, *Not Hearers Only*, p.49,50

We've Got to Ask in the Right Way!

God does not always answer our prayers for wisdom. But if our prayers for wisdom go unanswered, the problem is not with God. The problem is with us. We are asking God for wisdom in the wrong way.

"But let him 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 let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

Many ask God for His wisdom for trials, but don't really want it. What they want is for Him to tell them what they want to hear. I remember once back in college I needed to make a difficult decision, so I went to my dad for some counsel. I asked him his opinion and after he gave it, proceeded to argue with him for about half an hour on why his opinion was wrong. Finally, he stopped me and said, "Josh you don't really want my advice, do you? You just want me to agree with you." That's how many people are with God. They pretend to want God's wisdom, but in reality, they just want God to agree with them.

That's why James adds that to receive an answer to our prayers we "must ask in faith." We must commit to believing God when we turn to Him in prayer. We need to trust that He knows better than us.

Sounds simple enough. But it is often difficult to trust that God knows better than us- especially when we are in the middle of an especially difficult trial. The truth is we won't always feel like God

knows best. And there even may be times when we don't feel like we can trust God at all.

If we are going to 'survive' trials – here is the key - we must not be prisoners to our feelings. We must choose to trust God anyway.

Jerry Bridges explains, "I mistakenly thought I could not trust God unless I felt like trusting Him (which I almost never did in times of adversity.) Now I am learning that trusting God is first of all a matter of the will, and is not dependent on my feelings. I choose to trust God and eventually my feelings will follow...To trust God in times of adversity is admittedly a hard thing to do. I don't mean to suggest in my emphasis on choosing to trust God that the choice is as easy as choosing whether or not I will go to the store...Trusting God is a matter of faith and faith is the fruit of the Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can make His Word come alive in our hearts and create faith, but we can choose to look to Him to do that, or we can choose to be ruled by our feelings of anxiety or resentment or grief." ⁹ If you are going to receive an answer to your prayer for wisdom you must be ruled by faith, not feelings.

To receive an answer to our prayers for wisdom we must make a commitment to follow God no matter what. We must decide once and for all to obey God even if and when we don't feel like it!

James continues, we must 'ask in faith without doubting...' That statement used to trouble me until I understood that the term

⁹ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God*, p.195

'doubting' refers to something much more significant than merely having some questions. It literally means to be divided against oneself.

The doubter is constantly vacillating back and forth between going forward in obedience to God or going back to his old lifestyle of sin. He never commits. "I want God's way, no, no I don't." He's a man with divided loyalties. He goes to church on Sunday, but lives for himself all week. He asks God for wisdom, but refuses to pay attention to what God has to say. He plays pick and choose with the Bible, picking and choosing what he wants to hear and obey, and ignoring the rest.¹⁰

He's like "*the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind...*" He has no anchor for his soul. Picture waves going up and down, always changing, completely dominated by outside forces. He's up one day and down the next. He wants to follow God. He doesn't want to follow God. It all depends on what friends he is with, or what is influencing him. He's got no inner strength.

He's a 'double-minded man.' He has a 'spiritual multiple personality disorder.' "He acts as though two distinct souls or personalities were in his body, in perpetual conflict with one another. The one is turned God-ward, while the other is turned toward the world; the one believes God, but the other disbelieves. He is a walking

¹⁰ D.Edmond Hiebert explains, "The doubters inner yearnings are divided between God and the world. This doubting is not merely a state of mental indecision, but an inner moral conflict. The doubter is divided between his desire to have God say yes to his request and God say no to it...It is an inner unwillingness to rely wholly upon God." D.Edmond Hiebert, *James*, p.72

civil war in which trust and distrust of God wage a continual battle against each other."¹¹

James is simply saying that if we are living our lives wavering back and forth between God's will and our own, and we think that God is going to answer our prayers, we are deluding ourselves. We are living in a fantasy land. We need to wake up to reality. God will not answer the prayers of a double-minded man. In fact, if we have a divided heart, James commands us to stop thinking that God hears our prayers. He finds it contemptible that a person living his life trying to serve two masters would ever dare expect God to answer his prayers.

We Need to Decide Who to Serve

We must not blame God we are not getting the wisdom we need. It's not His fault. God is sincere. He sincerely wants to give us wisdom. The question is: are we sincere? Do we really want to know what He wants?

He'd love to give us wisdom if we would just fully trust in Him and commit to doing His will. This means to respond to trials in a way that honors God and benefits us each of us must make a choice.

We must decide whom we are going to serve. We can't serve two masters. It's impossible. And if we try the results will be devastating.

¹¹ *ibid*, p.75

If we are double-minded it will affect our relationship with God. He promises that He will not listen to our prayers. But that's not all. It will also affect us. James writes, "...you are going to be unstable in all your ways."

The word unstable means unsettled. It was used in Classical Greek to describe someone who was politically unstable, swayed by every new idea that came his way. It describes a person who doesn't have a solid place to stand.

If we are trying to live our lives half and half, partly for this world and partly for the next, trying to seek first the kingdom of heaven and seek first the kingdom of self, trying to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven while we are just as diligently trying to store up treasures here on earth, there is no way we are going to be able to consider it all joy when we face trials of many kinds. Because to do that, we need to make a commitment. We need to choose who we are going to serve – otherwise we are going to be unstable in all we do.

There's Hope

When it comes to responding to life's difficulties, James has great news for us. We can respond with joy to absolutely every circumstance that comes into our lives.

We can respond in a way that benefits us and those around us. We can be over-comers.

But if we are going to be victorious, we need to the ability to put the truth we know into action. We need wisdom. And to receive that

kind of wisdom we need to humble ourselves and “call for help...” If our calls for help are going unanswered, we need to ask ourselves several questions:

- 1.) Do I lack wisdom because I’m not going to God for it?
- 2.) Do I lack wisdom because I’m looking in the wrong places for it?
- 3.) Or do I lack wisdom because I don’t really want it?

<p style="text-align: center;">SURVIVAL TIP</p> <p>Clearly define the trial you are experiencing. With a friend, sit down and search the Scriptures for specific biblical principles in regards to your particular trial. For each biblical principle – mark down what the Scripture says, what it means, how it applies and how you should change as a result.</p>
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Every single Christian can learn to take the Scripture and apply it to their particular situation. James’ command is not reserved for the incredibly intelligent or marvelously talented. We don’t have to be some kind of superhero to be spiritually mature. But we do have to be humble. We do have to commit to doing what God wants no matter what.

SURVIVOR STUDY QUESTIONS

What's the difference between wisdom and knowledge?

According to Proverbs 2:1-11 how does a person become wise? How does what you learn from Proverbs 2 match up with what you learn about becoming wise in James?

What have you done to develop the wisdom you need to respond to your trial the way God desires? Be specific.

When you are facing a problem, are you humble enough to admit you need wisdom? Be careful answering this question, because even the most proud person often thinks he is humble. Ask someone close to you whether or not they believe you are willing to ask for help when you need it.

Who are you prone to look to for wisdom instead of God?

What does it mean to “look to God for wisdom...”
Again, be specific – what would it mean for you to
“look to God for wisdom...” in the midst of your trial?

What excuses do you typically give for failing to
pray? Respond to each of your excuses with biblical
truths...

Excuse -

Truth –

What are some reasons God doesn't answer prayers for wisdom?

What are some reasons a person may not want God's wisdom?

Why is it sometimes difficult to trust God? What

makes it difficult for you to trust God in the midst of your trial? What does it mean to be “ruled by faith instead of feelings...”

What is it that God wants you to do in the midst of your trial? Are you willing to do it?

Give examples of ways in which you are tempted to compromise with the world in the midst of your trial...

Are there specific ways in which you are compromising with the world? Are you willing to repent?

Many of us talk like the Bible is practical and speaks to us today, but act like it is archaic and has little to do with real life. We say we respect the Bible and live like we don't.

We go to church and nod our heads when the pastor says we shouldn't be proud. But then we go out and live self-centered lives, never stopping to consider how the truths we learned on Sunday might apply specifically to the way we live our lives. Or we read the commands in Scripture to love others sacrificially, but when someone comes to us with a need fail to think about how what we studied in our devotions might impact how we react to that particular crisis.

We've mastered the art of sounding spiritual while living worldly.

That may be due to the fact that it is much easier to sound biblical than it is to live biblically. It is easier for me to tell you that you need to consider it all joy when you face many trials than it is for me to respond with joy when my car breaks down, or things don't go my way.

We fool ourselves into thinking if we just talk about something enough we're actually doing it. We're like a man who continually talks about going to the gym but never does, and can't figure out why he's not getting into shape. We continually talk about the Christian life but don't live it out, and then can't figure out why we are not maturing.

Many of us have developed a pattern of coming to church, sitting, listening, but never changing. The truth is, we're not sure how

to move beyond spouting off the pious platitudes we've become so accustomed to - to actually putting those platitudes into practice.

I've found that to be true when it comes to handling trials. Most Christians know what Scripture teaches about considering trials a reason for joy. But few Christians actually consider their trials a reason for joy. That's because many of us fail to think specifically about how the truths James teaches actually relate to the way we live our life.

That's a problem - a major problem. James didn't write this letter merely to inform us, he wrote it to change us. That's why time and time again throughout this letter you'll find that he teaches a truth, explains it, and then concludes by illustrating and applying it. He doesn't want to leave the principle hanging out there in the land of fuzzy thinking but instead zones in to show us the difference that truth should make in our every day lives.

And that's exactly what he does in this particular passage. He begins in verses 2-4 by giving the basics for handling trials. "Consider it all joy my brothers when you encounter various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." God wants us to look on trials as an occasion for rejoicing because of what we know to be true about them. But James knows we are going to have difficulties doing that, so he explains in verses 5-8. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But

let him 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 let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." If we are going to become complete Christians we must respond to trials correctly. If we are going to respond to trials correctly we need wisdom. If we lack wisdom we must ask God for it. And when we ask God for wisdom, we've got to want it.

Now, all that sounds great on paper, but what's it look like lived out?

That's the question James answers in verses nine through eleven. He takes the general principles he's given, and gets specific. He gives us a 'survival test.' James knows it's one thing to know how to handle trials when you are "sitting in the classroom," it's another when you are "out in the wild..." It's one thing for a person to be able to recite James 1:2-8 back to their pastor while at church, and another to live James 1:2-8 out when they are confronted by the pressures of real life.

Responding with Joy when Life is Tough

It's easy to consider it all joy when everything is going our way but what does it look like to consider it all joy when we do not have enough food to eat? When we have a hard time paying our bills? When others look down on us because of our financial situation? That's where the rubber meets the road.

James' answer to these questions is pretty surprising.

"But let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position."

Early Christians referred to one another as brothers and sisters. In fact in the margin of my Bible there's a footnote which says the word brother could be translated church member. So we know James is describing a Christian.

This particular Christian is 'of humble circumstances.' The word humble means lowly, unimportant, and poor.¹² This is a person who doesn't have much. His clothes are dirty, he lives in a bad part of town, and as far as the world is considered, he is completely insignificant.

Most of those to whom this letter was addressed would have readily identified with this man of humble circumstances. They were godly people. They loved Jesus Christ. But as we've seen, they were of humble circumstances. They were living in a foreign country, hated by their own people, looked down on, abused, oppressed, and treated as unimportant and insignificant.

Truth is, they weren't all that unique. Most of the early Christians were of 'humble circumstances.' One historian goes so far as to say that Christians

¹²Sometimes you'll hear a false teacher say that if you are a Christian you are not going to be poor. But that's not true. Just look here at James 1:9. He's talking about a brother, and he says he is of humble circumstances. He doesn't reprimand him for it. He doesn't even encourage him to look for a way out of his poverty. You can be godly and still be poor.

were the "dregs of the populace."¹³

Few of us know what it's like to be as poor as these early believers. Even most who consider themselves poor in America are rich by most of the world's standards. I remember the first time I went to the Dominican Republic being shocked by the poverty. Kids growing up with only one pair of pants, no shoes, a shirt if they were lucky; going home to a house that's just a couple pieces of tin that their parents found alongside the road and nailed together.

Yet even though we may not know that kind of poverty, we can identify to a certain extent with the brother in humble circumstances. We know what it is like not to have much, we know what it's like to be looked on as insignificant and unimportant.

Honestly, that's a difficult trial. How should a believer deal with that? James says that the poor, insignificant brother should glory in his high position. The word glory is the first word in the sentence in the Greek. That means James is emphasizing it. It literally means to take pride in. It's equivalent to boasting. He's describing a strong personal reaction, a feeling of pride and exultation.

That's pretty shocking. Think about what James is saying:

Let the brother who is looked down on by everyone glory...

¹³ David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mi., 1998, p.168

Let the brother who is being abused by the rich in society glory...

Let the brother who doesn't have enough money for nice clothes glory...

Let the brother who is a slave glory...

Let the brother who has no home glory...

Let the brother who has to sit outside the home of a rich man and beg for food glory...

Let the brother who has no earthly inheritance glory...

Let the brother who the world thinks of as a failure glory...

Let the brother who the world thinks of as insignificant and unimportant glory...

Let the brother who has no money in his bank account glory...

Let the brother who has a terrible, low-paying job glory...

James is turning the world's way of thinking completely on its head. In fact, what he is saying sounds almost un-American. When the world looks at the poor person what do they say? "So sad. I feel sorry

for him.” Even the word poor is used to describe a person who doesn't have much money as well as someone we pity. Poor guy.

And if we are thinking like the world, when we are in a situation where we don't have much money, where people don't notice us and think we are important, or where we are looked down on, our first reaction, most likely, will be to pity ourselves. We'll want to focus on what we don't have and feel sorry for ourselves.

But James says, as a believer that's not how we are to respond to our circumstances. There's no reason for self-pity. We shouldn't be going about moaning and groaning. We shouldn't be constantly worrying about how you can become rich.

Instead if we are poor, insignificant in the world's eyes and looked down on by others around us our basic attitude should be that of joy. It should be that of glory! It should be that of exultation! We shouldn't be complaining. We should be boasting.

He isn't saying we should glory because we don't have much money or because we are insignificant. We're not more holy just because we are poor or unimportant. James doesn't write, "Let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his humble circumstances..." Instead he is just saying, poverty, riches; they are not really the point. The Christian's position is not linked to his earthly condition.

The world says if a person is poor and impoverished then he is a person of low position and if a person is rich and famous he is a person of a high position. But God looks on life very differently. In fact, God

turns the way the world looks at life upside down. The things that cause shame and dishonor in this world are by no means the same things the Bible considers shameful or dishonorable. And the things that our culture considers honorable might in fact be quite dishonorable in God's eyes. James is teaching us that, "...what seemed shameful...such as being born among the lower levels of society...could go hand in hand with great honor in the sight of God."¹⁴

A person may be poor and lowly in the world's eyes, but if he is a believer, he is not poor and lowly in God's eyes.

James is saying when we are poor we should remember we are rich. If we are believers, we may be lowly in the world's eyes, but we need to stop and consider what's real. We can rejoice and boast about our high spiritual standing before God because of His grace and the hope which that brings. I like how Dr. MacArthur puts it. The brother of humble circumstances "may be hungry but he has the bread of life. He may be thirsty but he has the water of life. He may be poor but he has eternal riches. He may be cast aside by men but he has been eternally received by God. He may have no home on earth but he has a glorious abode in heaven. When God in His wisdom and sovereignty takes away physical possessions from some of his children it is for the purpose of making them spiritually mature, a blessing infinitely more valuable than anything they have lost or have wanted but never possessed. The believer who is deprived in this life can accept that

¹⁴ Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p.169

temporary and insignificant deprivation because he has a future divine inheritance that is both eternal and secure."¹⁵

James is showing us what it looks like to apply God's wisdom to every day situations of our life. God's Word should affect the way we look at our circumstances.

Your child comes home from school crying because he's been mocked, ridiculed and treated poorly by his peers.

How do you counsel him?

If he's a believer, here's where you can start.

Gently remind him to glory in his high position; to stop worrying about how he can get in with the "in" crowd and start exulting right now where he's at.

You look like a failure in the eyes of the world. You haven't been successful at anything you've done.

No one notices you. You feel very insignificant and unimportant in the great scheme of things. You are tempted to become bitter and

SURVIVAL TIP

To thrive in the midst of trials your heart must be right. *Evaluate where your heart is at by answering the following questions.*

What do you love most?

What makes you sad?

What makes you proud?

What causes you the greatest fear?

Answer the same questions biblically:

What should you love most?

What should make you the saddest?

What should make you the proudest?

What should cause you the greatest fear?

Compare and contrast your answers. Develop a specific

¹⁵ John MacArthur, *James*, p.39

resentful about the way things are going in your life. How should you respond?

Exult, glory, boast right now where you are at in your high position. Focus on God and what He's done for you. Find joy in Him.

How do you do that?

You must stop looking at your circumstances from the world's perspective. You must start looking at our circumstances from God's. Instead of getting upset that you don't have much materially, instead of becoming resentful and discontent about your financial situation, and our obscurity and your seeming insignificance, you must remember "that you are a prince. As a Son of the King, you are heir of the future kingdom in glory. You need not be disheartened by your present poverty, or regard it as evil, you are the possessor of spiritual riches that more than counterbalance your material poverty."¹⁶

I understand that's not easy to do. It takes commitment and it takes practice. But that's why poverty's a great test for us - especially those of us living in an affluent society.

If God came and stripped everything you had away from you right now, would you still be joyful? If you lost your job and people looked down on you, would you still be able to glory? As one writer has asked, 'how much are you worth if you lost all your money?' What are you boasting in? Where's your treasure? What's the source of your joy?

¹⁶ D.Edmond Hiebert, *James*, p.77

Responding with Joy when Life is Good

It's easy to see we need wisdom if we are going to respond to poverty in a way that honors God, but riches don't seem like much of a test. Yet James spends more time talking about the rich man and how he should respond to his riches than he does about the poor man.

He writes, *"but the rich in his humiliation because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits."*

Some think James is being ironic here by contrasting the poor believer with the rich unbeliever. That he is saying the poor believer has so much more than the rich unbeliever because all that the rich man has will fade away. If a rich man boasts then he is really a fool because he is just boasting in his humiliation.

But while that principle is true, it's better to understand these verses as referring to the rich believer. That's the most natural meaning of the sentence and it best fits with the grammar of the passage.

James is looking at two believers with very different life experiences. To the one who is poor, he says, you should boast. And to the one who is rich, he says, you should boast. You both should "consider it all joy."

Finally a person who is an unbeliever might think “I can agree with James about this. I get this. I don't understand how the poor person can boast, but I completely understand why the rich person should. That's obvious. That's what rich important people do. They glory in their fame, or they glory in their fortune. We see that happening all the time. Just turn on Entertainment Tonight or read People magazine. It's human nature.”

But take special note of what James tells the rich believer to boast in. He doesn't say ‘let the rich man boast in his riches or in his high important position,’ but *‘let him boast in his humiliation.’* It's his humiliation that should make him proud.

"Let the brother in a low position boast in his high position, and let the brother who is in a high position in the world's eyes, boast in the fact that he's been brought low, about his low position."

With different trials come different temptations. The man who is poor will be tempted to forget how rich he is in Christ, and the man who is rich will be tempted to forget how needy he really is. The man who is poor will be tempted to become downcast and discontent and the one who is rich will be tempted to become haughty and self-satisfied. So the poor man needs to continually reflect on his riches in Christ. He needs to understand that although he is low in the eyes of the world, he is spiritually exalted. And the rich man needs to remember that he is only saved because of God's grace. He needs to rejoice in the fact that God has humbled him; that although he may be exalted in the eyes of

the world, the only reason he has hope for eternal life because he has been brought low in the sight of God.¹⁷

Biblically speaking wealth is dangerous. The rich face a serious temptation. They are tempted to forget God, to think too much of themselves and to put their trust and confidence in riches rather than in Christ.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:17ff. "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God who gives us richly all things to enjoy." If we are rich we are going to be tempted to think we are better than we really are, and to become self-confident and forget our need for Christ. Proverbs 28:11 says, "The rich man is wise in his own eyes, but the poor who has understanding searches him out." If we are rich we are going to be tempted to think that we know it all, that we got there by ourselves. Ezekiel 28:5 says "your heart was lifted up because of your riches." If we are rich we are going to be tempted to put our hope in our riches rather than in the Savior. We will be tempted to think that our riches are more valuable than the Savior. If we are not careful our riches can blind us of our great need. Jesus comes and rips into the church at Laodicea for just this, "Because you say 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' and do not know that you

¹⁷Randy Alcorn notes, "Statistically speaking if you have sufficient food, decent clothes, live in a house that keeps the weather out, and own a reasonably reliable means of transportation, you are among the top 15% of the world's wealthy. If you have any money saved, a hobby that requires some equipment or supplies (fishing, hunting, skiing, astronomy, coin collecting, painting), a variety of clothes in your closet, two cars (in any condition), and live in your own home, you are in the top 5% of the world's wealthy." Randy Alcorn, <http://www.epm.org/lifestyle.html>, accessed February 28, 2003

are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked...I rebuke and chasten you. Therefore be zealous and repent..."

(Rev. 3:17,19)

Riches can easily get in the way of the most important thing in our life - our relationship with God. Specifically, our riches can easily blind us to our desperate need for Christ.

A person who is not aware of his desperate need for Christ is in a terrible position no matter how much money he has. It's much better (by far) for a person to have nothing in this world and know his need for Christ than to have everything and think he is fine without Christ. It's much better (by far) for a person to be living in absolute squalor in a remote village in Africa and to be right with Christ than it is to be living in America lounging on his yacht and thinking that his life is great without God.

Want to know why? Life is short.

We are going to die. After that, we face God and all the material possessions we accumulated while on earth will not do us any good.

James wants us to know that day is coming sooner than most of us think. *"For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes."*

Flowers don't last forever. They are only beautiful for a short period of time. The sun rises and the heat withers the grass and that flower dies and very quickly what was once beautiful becomes just an

ugly old weed.¹⁸ That's what our life is like. We are here - we are gone. *"As for man his days are like grass; as a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."* (Psalm 103:15,16)

A rich man and a poor man live very different lives, but go to their funerals, and despite their different stations in life, they both are dead. What good does it do the one man that he had all sorts of riches on this earth, now that he is dead? None at all. And what difference does it make that the one man was poor, now that he is dead? None at all.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 illustrates that fact very clearly. The rich man had everything. He lived in splendor every day. Lazarus had nothing. He was a beggar. He was so poor and sick that all he could do was lay at the rich man's gate. The dogs even felt bad for him – Jesus says they would come and lick his sores. To make matters worse, he was constantly hungry. So hungry that he longed to be allowed to eat even the crumbs that fell of the rich man's table.

A person looking at these two men from the world's perspective would say they envy the rich man and feel sorry for Lazarus.

But Jesus tells us we must move on and look at them from the perspective of eternity. Both men died. Poor Lazarus was a believer,

¹⁸ In Israel there are three very common flowers, the anemone, the cyclamen and the lily. You see the beauty of their color in February and they are gone by May.

and the rich man wasn't. Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man didn't.

SURVIVAL TIP

Write down how God views your life – (complete with Bible references.)
Read often. Ask God to help you look at your life the way He does.

Now look at the rich man. He's the beggar. He cries out "Father Abraham have mercy on me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in the water and cool of my tongue I am in agony in this flame..."

Heaven and hell completely change the way we look at the rich man and Lazarus because heaven and hell completely change who is rich and who is poor.

Some reading this book may be living like all there is - is this world. A nice home, a nice car, a nice family, that's what they think life is all about. That's not what life is all about. Jesus puts it bluntly, "...life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." If we think it does, we are entirely missing the point of life. We are looking at life from man's perspective, not God's. God looks at life in this world completely different than unsaved men do.

David Wells explains, "God...is the great reverser of what we think is normal...First he opposes the proud but lifts up the humble (whereas we typically fawn over the rich and powerful and disregard those who are judged to be insignificant.) God scatters the proud... and he puts "down the mighty from their thrones" (Luke 1:51,52), but his mercy reaches out to those who fear him and those of low degree he

exalts. This violates every canon of what is constituted honor" and "of what constitutes importance in our" society. Second he passes by those who are full. The "rich he has sent empty away," but he "has filled the hungry with good things." This hunger...is...owning inward moral bankruptcy and wanting some resolution to it...It is not the self-righteous, not those who find their confidence in the honor they enjoy that Jesus calls to himself, but sinners. It is the weary and heaven laden that he calls to himself, sometimes the outcast and those who are unacceptable, not the self-satisfied...It is paradoxical that those who know they have failed God are made to succeed, those who have fallen are raised, those who are bankrupt are made rich, those who are empty and depleted are satisfied, and those who are in their own eyes of no account are made to stand beside the Lord of the Universe. This overturns all human calculations. Standing in this world brings no standing with God regardless of family wealth or connections. We can acquire a massive number of goods, be showered with honor and prestige, but despite all the earthly security we can buy or negotiate, the day comes when we lose our soul because what elevates people in this life may also contribute to their shame in the next."¹⁹

We must not waste our lives living for now - living for nothing. We are not going to be able to go back and make changes when we are facing God on judgment day, and we never know when that day is going to come. We must stop being so concerned about our position in society and accumulating wealth for ourselves here on this earth, and

¹⁹ David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue*, p.174,175

start being concerned about our relationship with God and doing what He desires.

When a person spends eternity under the judgment of God his riches here on earth aren't going to matter all that much to him.

If we could somehow go to hell and talk to all the billionaires that are there right now I am sure none of them would say their money brings them any comfort. And if we could somehow go to heaven and talk to all those who lived difficult lives here on earth I am sure none of them would say their suffering here on earth brings them any sadness.

That's why the rich believer doesn't boast about his high position in this world. And that's why he boasts about his humiliation. He looks at his material things and realizes they don't matter all that much.

Instead, he finds joy in what is real. He cries out with the prophet Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches, but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord; exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight says the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:23,24)

And that's why the rich believer can rejoice in the midst of trials. Trials remind him of his need for God. And the rich believer

loves to be in that position because he understands that God listens to the prayers of the humble but from the haughty He is far off.

Bringing It Home

The Bible has something to say about the most practical issues of life. And if we are going to be a complete Christians we must learn to stop merely talking about God's wisdom, and start applying it to every area of our lives. In short, we need to learn to think biblically.

This chapter gives us a great place to begin evaluating whether or not we are thinking biblically. Ask yourself: How do I view riches and poverty? Am I boasting in what is temporal and does not last? Or in what is eternal and can't be taken away?

Do you pass the 'survival test?' Can you make it in the 'wild?' Church history is full of believers who understood these verses and lived for what really mattered - believers who took the general principles of Scripture and applied them specifically to their daily life.

William Borden was one. He was a heir of the Borden milk fortune. In his first year at Yale he committed himself to reaching the Muslims of North China. Three years later he sailed for Egypt to study Arabic. Before he left he gave away his inheritance of nearly a million dollars to missions. He was in Cairo for four months before he contracted spinal meningitis. He had scrawled on a piece of paper under his pillow the words, "No reserve! No retreat! No regrets!" From

the world's standard, he looked like a failure. But William Borden wasn't living by the world's standards, he was living by God's.

How about you?

SURVIVOR STUDY QUESTIONS

What are several reasons it is easier to sound biblical than it is to live biblically?

What are some specific ways your walk tends to be different than your talk?

What are some of the difficulties that go along with being poor or 'insignificant...'

What advice does the world typically give to a person who is poor or insignificant? How does their 'wisdom' differ from that of James?

Describe a time in your life when you were either poor or felt insignificant? How did you react?

What does it mean to 'glory' in something? What does the poor believer have to glory about?

Why is self-pity, for the believer, so ugly?

What are you tempted to pity yourself about? What are some of the things you tell yourself when you are in 'self-pity' mode?

If you are poor or feel insignificant – list ten reasons you have to boast and glory...

What do you tend to boast about? What, honestly, is the thing that brings you the greatest joy?

Why are riches a difficult trial for the believer?

What does James tell the rich believer to glory in?

What does he mean and why is this command so significant?

Has there ever been a time in your life where 'prosperity' got in the way of your relationship with God? Explain...

Give five reasons it is foolish to trust in prosperity...

What can you learn from Luke 16:19-31?

As you look at the way you are living your life, are there any ways in which you are tempted to look at life from the world's perspective rather than God's? Be specific...

What should the rich or 'important' believer boast about?

Why should a rich or 'important' believer rejoice in the midst of trials?

How should you change as a result of what you learned in this chapter?

Sometimes preachers make it sound like if a person chooses to follow Christ his life will suddenly, miraculously become easy. When they say things like that, I'm never sure what Bible they are reading. If there's one thing God's Word makes crystal clear it's that life as a Christian is anything but easy.

The apostle James certainly doesn't pull any punches. He writes, "*Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial...*" which implies that believers will experience trials. And trials by definition are painful. If they weren't painful, they wouldn't be a trial.

When people experience pain, they react in a number of different ways. One of the most common responses is to complain. James understands that. That's why he writes in verse 2, "*Consider it all joy my brothers when you experience various trials...*" He gives this command to consider trials all joy because he knows it is not natural to think of painful circumstances as an occasion for joy.

Think about the last time you experienced something difficult. What was your first instinct? Most likely you were tempted to complain.

Perhaps you invited someone over to dinner, you made the meal, and they called at the last minute to cancel. How did you respond? To consider that circumstance an occasion for joy or a reason to complain? Or maybe you went to work and your boss treated you unfairly. Reason for rejoicing or for complaining?

Sometimes trials become so difficult, however, people move right past complaining to escaping. That's why James calls on us to persevere.

He writes, "*Blessed is a man who **perseveres** under trial.*" In other words, "Blessed is the man who remains under the trial." Or to say it another way, "Blessed is the man who doesn't compromise and quit when his life gets difficult."

When we are hurting, we are going to be tempted to give up. We are going to want to do whatever it takes to "get out."

Maybe it's something as simple as going to church and being around other believers. You find it difficult to go to church because you are busy, or the people at church aren't as friendly as you'd like, or maybe you have another reason unique to your situation. But you know Scripture commands you to encourage other believers daily, and not to forsake the assembling together. Many escape the 'trial' of going to church by giving in to their feelings, and not going to church when they don't feel like it.

SURVIVAL TIP
Don't Be Surprised When You
Feel Like Giving Up

Make a list of the negative
consequences of
compromising in the midst of

Or maybe it is something more extreme. You are in a difficult marriage. It's not easy to get along with your partner. But you know you don't have biblical grounds for divorce. Many have given in, and refused to endure. They escape their trial by divorcing their spouse,

having an affair or just isolating themselves. They know what the Scripture says, but they refuse to endure.

I don't know what you are going through, but I am certain if you are interested in doing what is right, you are going to be tempted to give up. You may not face this temptation right away, but somewhere along the line, you will be tempted to quit.

The temptation to quit is a powerful temptation because it often seems much easier to give in than to endure. That's because as D. James Kennedy notes, "Every other temptation tries to lure us into something that will require some effort, but it takes no effort to quit. If you want to rob a bank, you would have a great deal of hard work ahead of you. How many people would be bank robbers, except they are too lazy. I am sure there are people who would become adulterers except for the fact that adultery takes so much work. Most sin requires us to do something. But to quit, we don't do anything. We just stop. Sit down. Fold our hands. Give up."²⁰

it seems easier to quit, when we do, we miss out on the blessing God intends for us. Trials won't do us any good if we fail to endure. Notice James writes, "**Blessed** is a man who endures..." It's 'good' not to give up.

When James calls on us to endure trials, however, he's not simply telling us not to quit. He's also calling us to press forward in obedience to God. Endurance is a joyous, steadfast, focused obedience.

²⁰ D. James Kennedy, *Turn it to Gold*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1991, p.127.

Endurance is not merely sitting the trial out, hoping for it to pass. Instead endurance is an attitude of hope that produces a lifestyle of obedience in the midst of the greatest of difficulties. When James says "Blessed is a man who endures," he is saying, "Blessed is a man who *joyously and steadfastly continues to obey God* even in the midst of his trials..."

There will be times in our lives when we feel like giving in and when we don't feel like doing what is right or pressing on. Those times are called trials. And James is saying, "We are blessed if in the midst of difficult circumstances, we refuse to quit or compromise but instead continue to obey God no matter what the consequences."

Unfortunately, when we are in a trial it's often difficult to think straight, and many times the last thing we want to do is continue to obey God. So if we are going to obey God when we don't feel like it, we need motivation – a motivation that is more powerful and more compelling than any of the lies our desires are telling us.

That's why James writes, "Blessed is a man..." He wants us to know how good it is to persevere. There's actually no "is" in the original. This verse literally reads, "Blessed man..." which means this is not a wish -it's a fact. We need to write it down in our Bibles, tell it to our friends, and fix it in our minds: it is good to persevere. The man who perseveres under trial is blessed.

Sometimes the word 'blessed' is translated happy. That's how it is translated in Romans 14:22, "Happy is he who does not condemn

himself in what he approves..." Thus, we could read James 1:12, "Happy is a man who perseveres under trial..." The world wants happiness and says the way we get it is by escaping the trial. James says, no, if we want true happiness we need to persevere in the midst of the trial.

The problem with translating blessed, 'happy' however is that people often think of happiness in too superficial of terms. For example, we wouldn't look at a person who was crying tears of sorrow and

SURVIVAL TIP
Watch Out for Rationalizations – make sure you are aware of the excuses you give for compromising and disobeying God.

Make a List of Reasons Why Your Trial is Good for You – get specific. If you can't think of any reasons, go to your pastor or a godly friend

say he is happy. But we could look at him and say he is blessed.

The person who perseveres in doing what is right in the midst of trials is blessed by God. He's a recipient of God's favor. (1 Peter 2:19)

That may be a little difficult to swallow. When we are in the middle of trials, it is easy to think of that trial as bad for us. If we are going to endure, we need to understand just

how good that trial really is for us.

Fortunately, James doesn't merely write that the person who perseveres is blessed, he also explains why. "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trials *for...*" Circle that word for. That's the thought

James wants to fix indelibly in our minds. He wants us to understand why the person who endures trials is so blessed.

It's good to endure trials because of what God is doing in those who endure...

God uses trials help Christians become more holy

Every single trial that comes into our life has a purpose: to make us more like Jesus. God only allows trials to come into our lives for our good. He wants to help us become more holy. I like how the writer of Hebrews puts it, "...but he disciplines us for our good, that we might share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful but sorrowful, yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness." (Hebrews 12:10,11) Discipline is painful. We don't like it at the time, but we know it's worth it, because it produces holiness.

Every single Christian needs to be more holy. And trials are one of God's most effective tools for accomplishing that. As John Flavel explains, "...there are rank weeds springing up in the best soil which need such winter weather to rot them. And certainly if we reckon humility, heavenly mindedness, contempt of the world, and longing desires after heaven to be the real interest and advantage of the church; then it is evident, nothing so much promotes their interest as a

suffering condition does; Adversity kills those corruptions which prosperity bred."²¹

It's good to be holy. If we don't endure the trials God brings into our lives we won't become as holy as He desires and as a result we'll miss the blessing holiness brings.

God uses trials to remind Christians what is really valuable

On special occasions I'll often take my wife to a nice restaurant. She likes that, but gets pretty disappointed when I only order a salad. She'll try to get me to change my order because she says I can order a salad anywhere. She thinks since we are at a fancy restaurant I should order something really good. She loves me so she wants the best for me.

God loves us and wants the best for us. He wants us to enjoy what's really good: eternal things. But sometimes, even as believers, we will be tempted to enjoy temporal things more. So He uses trials to get our attention and help fix our attention on our heavenly hope.

The more our trials hurt, the more we are going to want to be with Jesus. And if we don't endure, we're going to miss that blessing. We're going to continually fill ourselves up with that which is trivial and ignore that which is most valuable.

²¹ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel vol. 6*, Banner of Truth Trust, London England, 1968, p. 10

God uses trials to make Christians more dependent on Him

Trials reveal how much we need God's help. When a person prospers Satan tempts him to trust in his prosperity rather than in Christ alone. Trials reveal how foolish it is to do that. If we escape your trial by compromising, we're not going to learn how good it is to depend on God alone.

God uses trials to equip Christians to better help others who are experiencing trials

Paul rejoiced in the midst of his suffering because he realized that God was using his suffering to prepare him to better help others. He writes in 2 Corinthians 1:3,4 that God "comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

Elisabeth Elliot explains, "No matter how monstrous an evil may have been perpetrated against us, both by intention and act (think of Joseph's brother's treatment of him) it is mysteriously transformed into great good by Him who is the Lord of the Universe and my Redeemer. It took Joseph's sufferings to accomplish God's will for Israel. The sufferer himself became the redeemer for his father and his hateful brothers. They meant it for evil. God meant it for good. The portion assigned to me each day is precisely measured by God, not only for my good...but also - let me not forget, for the good of all the others

whose portions He is allotting...If your life is broken when given to Jesus, it may because pieces will feed a multitude when a loaf would satisfy only a little lad."²²

If we choose to escape our trial we will not only hurt ourselves, we will also harm other believers, because we are not going to be able to as effectively minister to them when they need it most!

God uses trials to prove the Christian's faith is genuine

James writes, "*Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial for once he has been approved...*" The word approved comes from the Greek word 'dokimos.' Greek writers often used this term to describe coins that had been tested and shown to be genuine.

Jay Adams explains that in James' day "a coin was put through various tests in order to assure that it was solid. When it rang true, it was declared approved. Christians are also approved by means of being subjected to tests. In trials, they too will ring true...To be rewarded the believer must not only be tested but also be attested as having shown himself genuine. The aorist participle 'having been proved' denotes that the testing has effectively demonstrated his character as firm and reliable. Each new test the believer successfully endures adds fresh proof of his fidelity to God and contributes to his approved character."²³

²² Elisabeth Elliot, originally published in her monthly newsletter

²³ Jay Adams, *Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude*, p.164

Recently I listened to a testimony my uncle gave about a month or two before he died from cancer. Although his circumstances were difficult, his testimony was not sad but full of joy. One of the reasons he gave for being so full of joy was rather unusual. He explained that his life had been relatively easy up to that point and he had faith in God but it had never really been tested. But when he came down with cancer and faced death his faith was tried and it was stronger than ever.

It gave him such joy to know that his faith was real and wasn't dependent on his circumstances. If he hadn't endured he would never have known that blessing. He wouldn't have had the assurance that his faith was the real thing.

When we are experiencing trials and we are tempted to give up, (when we know what God wants us to do but we don't want to do it because it seems too hard) we need to remember that it's good to steadfastly and joyously obey God in the midst of trials because of all that God is doing in our lives as we continue to endure. Although it may not feel like it, God is promoting our happiness when He brings trials into our life. He's brings trials into our lives because He wants what is best for us.

But notice in verse 12 that James goes on to make it clear that endurance doesn't only benefit us in this life - it benefits us in the life to come.

It's good to endure trials because of what God will do for those who endure

Our trials will come to an end. And when they do, God will reward us – if we have persevered. He will give us a crown of life.

Just knowing trials have an end is good news. Whenever we are in a trial, we need to remember whatever trial we are experiencing will only last for a short while.

That's why when people say something was like hell on earth, while I understand what they mean, they are grievously mistaken. For even if the pain they are experiencing could somehow compare to the pain experienced in hell, it wouldn't be nearly as terrible as the pain in hell because here on earth pain fades. There's an end to the trial. In hell there is no hope of relief. And that is one of the things that makes hell so awful. The pain will never fade away. It will just go on forever and ever.

We can rejoice because we know our trial no matter how much it hurts and no matter how long it lasts, does have an end. But while it's good to remember trials have an end, James is saying more than merely that. He's encouraging us to endure because God is going to give something to those who endure that he's not going to give those who don't. *"...for once he has been approved, he will receive..."*

That little phrase helps us better understand the biblical perspective on trials. The Bible never tells us to enjoy the pain of a trial for the pain's sake. Christians are not called to rejoice in the pain of the trial in and of itself. Instead believers are to rejoice in what God

is doing in them through the trial. Believers are to rejoice because the trial they are experiencing will end and they realize when it does they are going to receive a reward from God for their faithfulness in the midst of that trial. And that reward will make the suffering they experienced look light and easy.

The Christian life is full of joy and exultation because the believer has something to look forward to – a reward – which James says is the crown of life.

When he talks about the crown of life he's most likely not talking about "a gem-studded headpiece worn by kings and queens..." Instead, "... people in the Greco-Roman world would probably have thought more often of the laurel wreath given to victors in athletic contests..." In modern day Olympics the athletes are given gold medals, in James' day, they were given laurel wreaths. "James probably has this imagery in view, since the victory of a trained and disciplined athlete in a race is a fitting image for the reward that God bestows on those who remain faithful to him over the long and often difficult race of life."²⁴

The crown James describes consists of life - eternal life. God promises eternal life to those who persevere. And James' point is that this crown of life is a great reward. It's worth enduring for.

If we are going to persevere in trials we must fix in our mind that heaven, eternity and the reward God promises those who endure is far better than any "reward" we might possibly receive by

²⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Eerdmans Pub., Grand Rapids, Mi., 2000, p.70

compromising in the midst of a trial. We have to think long and hard about how superior heaven and eternal life and the promises of God are to anything else in this life. We must learn to compare our suffering with our hope.

There are a number of reasons the crown of life is better than anything on earth. For one, it is eternal. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:16-19, "Therefore we do not lose heart because though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Everything you get here, you lose. But that's not true of what God promises those who persevere. The crown of life will last forever.

This crown of life is better than anything on this earth because it is untainted by sin. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:4 that our inheritance is "imperishable, and undefiled and will not fade away." Sin has affected everything here on earth. There's no sin in heaven. It's a perfect place. Life in heaven is so much better than life here on earth. In heaven God will be our shepherd, He shall guide us to the springs of the water of life, and He will wipe every tear from our eyes. (Rev.7:17)

Compare the crown of life to some of the things people are living for.

It's better than fame. Which is really more valuable, being known and loved by a bunch of human nobodies or being known and loved by the Creator of the Universe?

It's better than money. Money can't satisfy and money doesn't last. "The person who loves money will not be satisfied with money and he who loves abundance with its income." (Ecc.5:10) But in heaven we will be satisfied. We will experience perfect contentment. Besides that, the riches of this earth can't even compare to the riches of heaven.

It's better than sinful desires. Sinful desires actually wage war against our soul. We think by feeding them we are going to bring ourselves pleasure, when in reality, by feeding our lusts we are doing ourselves great harm.

It's better than the absence of conflict on earth. We can do everything to avoid conflict here on earth, but we are not going to be able to do so because we live in a sinful world. As long as there are sinners, there will be conflict. But, there's no conflict in heaven. Heaven is as Jonathan Edwards describes it, 'a world of love.'

This crown of life is better than anything on earth, and "so worth" the short period of pain and suffering we might have to endure before we receive it.

In the midst of a trial we are going to be tempted to give up, to do what is easy and sin, and that's when this verse has to come flooding back to our minds. We must think about eternity.

If there's anybody we learn that from, it's the apostle Paul.

Beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, hated, mocked, persecuted... What kept him from giving up? One answer is found in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." That's why Paul didn't give up. He considered. He thought. And he realized that whatever pain he had to endure in this life could never compare to the joy he would experience in the life to come. He fixed his hope on eternal realities. He had a future focus. So he endured.

Paul's not unique. It's this future focus that has kept many great believers from giving up. There's a beautiful illustration of that in Hebrews 10. The writer of Hebrews is writing to a group of professing believers who, although they started the Christian life well, were because of the great trials they were experiencing, on the verge of giving up. So he reminds them of how they responded to trials when they first became Christians.

"For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property..." (v.34)

Their homes are being taken away, their material possessions are being stolen, but they are not devastated, no they are accepting *joyfully* the seizure of their property. They are rejoicing.

That word joyfully is what gets me. This is a living illustration of what James is calling us to: refusing to compromise, refusing to give up, and obeying with joy.

Why would they respond like that? Because they knew

something. That's the key. The writer of Hebrews explains, "...
*knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an
abiding one.*"

They were able to endure, and to do so with joy, because they had a future focus. John Piper writes, "...these early Christians were aliens and exiles whose true home was in heaven and in the age to come with Jesus. That world was so real to them and so precious that they did the unthinkable, 'they joyfully accepted the seizure of their property...' There's only one explanation for this joy: they really believed it. They were enlightened by God to see it. They believed two things about their possession in heaven: one that it is better...and the other that it is abiding. In other words they really believed that this world is inferior and this world is temporary. The one to come is superior and the one to come is eternal. These were not words, they were realities. They were so real that when the house and the furniture and the clothes and the books burned, and the horses were stolen they knew...that God was actually preparing them for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison...The key to their joy in the midst of danger and loss was simply that they did not put much stock in this world. They had been transferred into the kingdom of God's Son. They had passed from death to life. Their lives were hid with Christ in God. The two things that

SURVIVAL TIP

Put Your Trial in Perspective - write down ten reasons heaven is going to be great; and spend some time praising God for the crown of life He's going to give you for enduring.

everybody wants they had found - but not in this world. Everybody wants the best happiness possible and the longest happiness possible. This is what the words 'better and abiding' point to. They had a better possession and an abiding one. And the possession they had was a place at God's side in glory. "In your presence is fullness of joy and at your right hand are pleasures forevermore..." Full and forever. Better and abiding."²⁵ They had hope of eternal life.

Frankly, it's that hope that has motivated every Christian hero.

In Hebrews 11 the writer describes men like Noah and like Abraham who made incredible sacrifices for God.

He explains that these men endured and made great sacrifices because they were looking towards heaven.

"For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is they desire a better country that is a heavenly one..." (v.14-16) If they had been focusing on the things of this world they would have given up. They wouldn't have endured. But they did endure because they were looking forward to something better.

The ultimate example of this is Christ Himself. Hebrews 12:1,2, "Therefore since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before

²⁵ John Piper, A Sermon Entitled "You Joyfully Accepted the Plundering of Your Property", May 9, 1993 <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper93/05-09-93.htm>

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..."

How did Jesus endure the worst trial anyone has ever experienced? "For the joy set before Him he endured the cross." We need to do the same. We will experience trials. We will be tempted to quit. But when that happens, we must remember James 1:12. We must remember how good it is to endure.

SURVIVAL TIP

Find a friend you can be honest with – tell them that you want to escape, how you want to escape, and ask them to keep you accountable so that you don't escape

SURVIVOR STUDY QUESTIONS

List three of the most painful times in your life...

Describe how you responded to each of these situations...

If you are experiencing a trial right now, describe the ways in which you are tempted to give up...

What does it mean to endure?

Specifically, what does it mean for you to endure the trial you are presently experiencing?

Speak truth to yourself – what are ten reasons it is better to endure your trial than it is to give up?

How can the trial you are experiencing:

Make you more like Jesus?

Kill Sinful Desires?

Reveal Your Need for God?

Make you better able to help others?

Prove Your Faith is Genuine?

What specifically can you learn from the trial you are experiencing about how to minister to others?

Why is the crown of life better than compromise? Be

specific. Compare your trial with your reward...

What would it look like for you on an everyday basis to fix your hope on heaven? How specifically can you get better at doing that in the midst of your trial?

I love playing golf...most of the time. The thing that frustrates me most about golf, however, is that I have no idea why I'm so bad. I can hit a great shot on one hole, and then a terrible shot on the next; and have no clue why one shot worked and the other didn't. I know I'll never become a good golfer until I can figure out why I am a bad golfer.

The same is true when it comes to responding to trials. James begins his letter by teaching us the right way to respond to trials. He writes in verse 2, 'Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials...' and comes to a climax in verse 12, 'Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial...' But here in verses 13-15, he turns a corner and gives a behind the scenes look at why people fail to respond to trials correctly.

James doesn't live in a dream world. He realizes there will be times when a trial comes into our lives and we fail. Here he shows us why. Just as I'll never become a better golfer until I figure out why I'm so bad, we will never be able to handle trials correctly until we figure out why we don't.

It's Not God's Fault

He begins by making it very clear who is not to blame. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God...'"

James understands the way the human heart works. He

anticipates the way many people will respond to his commands to endure trials. They'll say they can't.

"James, consider it all joy, are you crazy?

Blessed are those who endure? You don't know me. You don't my situation. You don't know how difficult it is for me. I can't endure. I have no choice. I've got to give in. There's no way out. So don't blame me for giving in to temptation."

When people are under pressure, and have a desire to do what's wrong, they are very good at finding ways to say: 'This is why I just have to sin...' And then after they've sinned, they are even better at coming up with all sorts of different excuses for that sin. 'This is why I just had to sin...'

Sometimes they are very bold and blame God directly for their sin. "I am being tempted directly by God." Why do they say that? To get themselves off the hook! If God is enticing you to do evil, He certainly can't blame you for doing it.

There's an old poem by Robert Burns in which he illustrates this attitude. In his poem, 'A prayer in the prospect of death,' he gives excuses for a short life packed with sexual sin, saying to God:

"Thou know'st that thou hast formed me,

With passions wild and strong;

And listening to their witching voice

Has often led me wrong..."

Later he even goes on to say "The light that led astray was light from heaven...!"

In other words, "God you made me this way so it's your fault I do the things I do."

A very daring statement. But not all that original. It's just what Adam said when confronted with his sin in the Garden. "It's that woman you gave me..." Robert Burns is eloquently expressing the basic attitude of many individuals. "I can't help but sin. I didn't want to sin, but God forced me to do it. It's his fault. You can't hold me responsible."

This response is instinctive. Solomon notes in Proverbs 19:3, "The foolishness of man subverts his way, and his heart rages against the Lord." Man sins, his sin has consequences and so he gets angry with God for his sin and the consequences he brought on himself. "I did it, but it's your fault."

Sounds like a nice excuse. But it won't fly because James makes it clear: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God...'"

No one has the right to blame God for his desire to sin, or for his actual sin because God does not bring situations into people's lives to entice them sin. He brings them into their lives for their good.

Thus, when a person sins it is not God's fault.

Most people have sat in enough Sunday Schools to know that they can't blame God directly for their sin. Instead they find ways to blame Him indirectly.

That's actually the issue James is addressing here in verse 13. In the English translations this statement, "I am being tempted by God..." sounds very bold and direct, but in the Greek it is a bit more understated and subtle.

There are two Greek words for by, the one is apo and the other hupo. James could have used the Greek word 'hupo' which refers to a direct agent but instead he uses the word 'apo' which refers to a remote source.

"What James is saying, therefore, is that no one should say that God is even indirectly responsible for temptation. He is in no way and to no degree responsible, directly or indirectly, for our being tempted."²⁶

Some of the ways people blame God indirectly for sin are obvious. When a person blames his parents you are saying, 'I am being tempted by God.' "If you just knew my Dad, you'd understand why I am the way I am. He didn't discipline me the way he should, that's why I am so lazy and why I am not a good parent. If I had more godly

²⁶ John MacArthur New Testament Commentary, James, p.46

parents, I wouldn't have the problems I have." When a person blames his mate he is saying, 'I am being tempted by God.' "If my wife was just more loving and submissive then I wouldn't get so angry. How can you expect me to be kind and loving when she is the way she is? It's just not possible." When a person blames his circumstances he is saying, 'I am being tempted by God.' "If I just had more money and a better job than I wouldn't have this bad attitude. I just can't help it." Ultimately, regardless of who or what a person blames directly for his sin, indirectly he is blaming God because He's the one who gave him his parents or his mate, and He is the one who is in control of their circumstances.

But some of the ways people blame God indirectly for sin aren't so obvious. Our culture has come up with some very sophisticated ways of blaming God for sin. Frank Furedi takes notes of this in a very perceptive article entitled Making a Virtue out of Vice. He writes,

"Once upon a time there were seven deadly sins. They were called deadly because they led to spiritual death and therefore to damnation. The seven sins were (and are): lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy and pride. Now all of them, with the exception of pride, have become medical conditions. Pride has become a virtue. A secular society always feels uncomfortable with the moral imagination associated with the seven deadly sins. The Enlightenment replaced the idea of sin, which is deemed to be an offence against God, with the idea

of crime, which is an offence against other people. But the rationalists still shared with religion the belief that individuals are responsible for their wrongdoing. However, these days we do not simply feel estranged from a religious universe; we also find it difficult to attribute the act of sinning to human behavior. Today, the notion of personal guilt, which underpins the concept of the seven deadly sins, exists only in caricature. That is why Western culture can only make sense of the act of sinning as a symptom of a regrettable psychological disease. Actions that were once denounced as a sin are no longer interpreted through the vocabulary of morality but are diagnosed through the language of therapy. The deadly sins have become behavioral problems that require treatment rather than punishment. There are no longer sinners, only addictive personalities...Of all the seven deadly sins, pride is the only one that has been completely rehabilitated. That is why pride is never diagnosed as a disease. The American sociologist Joel Best has observed that it is the absence of pride that constitutes a serious psychological problem. These days virtually every social and psychological problem is blamed on low self-esteem. The solution to poor educational performance, teenage pregnancy, anorexia, crime or homelessness is to raise the self-esteem of the victim. In our self-oriented world, society continually incites people to take

themselves far too seriously. That is why pride has become one of the prime virtues of our time."²⁷

Calling what God calls sin a sickness is a very 'sophisticated' way of blaming God for one's temptation. We don't hold someone personally responsible for getting sick. If sin is a sickness, we certainly can't hold them morally responsible for sinning. When a person says that his sin is a sickness, he is saying it's God's fault and we are doing exactly what James says we must not do here in verse 13. "Let no one say when he is being tempted, 'I am being tempted by God...'"

James gives two rock solid reasons why no one can excuse their sin by blaming God for their temptations.

God cannot be tempted by evil

God is literally 'untemptable.' Time and time again the Bible asserts God's absolute moral purity. He doesn't secretly delight in sin. Evil isn't attractive to Him. He hates it with all of His being. "His eyes are too pure to approve evil, and He can't look on wickedness with favor." (Hab.2:13) So He's never going to be tempted with a desire to tempt you to do evil. He desires for you to be holy, not wicked; therefore He's not going to entice you to do what He hates.

²⁷ Frank Furedi, "Making a Virtue out of Vice", *The Spectator*, 1/12/01

God does not tempt anyone to do evil

In case we missed the point, James continues "and He Himself does not tempt anyone." As one writer explains, "He is of such unmixed goodness in his attitudes and actions that there is no room in motive, will or deed for that which would bring disaster, great or small, on any of His people. To be sure, He places tests in our pathway...But there is never an ulterior motive in all this, for His holiness offers no lodging place for evil within His nature...When He tests, it is so that we may pass the test and inherit the blessing. When the reverse happens, the blame lays elsewhere than in the God of all grace."²⁸

When we desire to do evil, it's important to know right off the bat - who is not to blame. It's not God's fault. So we must not go there. We must not start rationalizing and excusing away our sin.

"Let no one say when he is being tempted, 'I am being tempted by God' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does God Himself tempt anyone to do evil." Why do you fail? The problem is not with God. Instead, the problem is with how we are handling our desires.

²⁸ J.A. Motyer, *James*, The Bible Speaks Today, series editor John Stott, IVP, Downers Grove, Ill., 1985, p.51

Therefore When We Sin It's Our Fault

I realize that's blunt, but James doesn't pull any punches. *"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death."* In other words, "you are the reason you fall to temptation."

If we are going to overcome temptation we need to stop blaming everyone else for our sin and deal with our own hearts. We do what we do, we say what we say, we react the way we react because we want what we want and often what we want is really the wrong thing.

"But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust."

Don't be put off by the word lust. It's not primarily a sexual term. It's much broader than that. Lust means desires. It's used to refer to all the different kinds of cravings people have. In fact in the Scriptures this term can either refer to good desires or to bad desires depending on the context. Lust is not sinful when it is, as someone somewhere has put it, "acquired biblically, aroused biblically, and gratified biblically." However, since in this context James is talking about sin and temptation, that indicates the lusts he refers to are not neutral but out of control.

James says each one of us are carried away and enticed by our own lusts. By using the adjective *own* he is making it clear he's talking about our peculiar individual desires. Every one of us has the

same basic innate desires but those desires can look different in each of us. That's one reason why what's tempting for you might not be tempting for me, and what's tempting for me might not be tempting for you.

We are tempted when our desires carry us away and entice you.

The terms carry away and entice are hunting and fishing terms. To carry away refers to a dominating power that picks you up, pulls you away and allures you. You can picture a fish being attracted to a hook because of the bait, latching on, and then being drawn out of the water by the fishing line. When we fall for temptation, we are like that fish on a hook being led by our desires. Our desires overwhelm us and then they entice us. The word for entice was used to refer to a baited trap designed to lure an unsuspecting animal into it. And so it expresses the "magnetism of desire, the hypnotic attraction of bait for a hungry beast."²⁹ Desires, if not under control, can make sin look so attractive that we throw caution to the wind, stop thinking straight, and pay no attention to the trap that lies behind the bait until it's too late.

SURVIVAL TIP
Keep a journal for one week. Mark down the ways you were tempted to sin or did in fact sin each day. At the end of the week examine each day. Do you find a common theme?

Think about how this works out. An event occurs. It stirs up your desires. "You recognize this and could cut the process short before sinning in your heart by changing the direction of your thoughts. You

²⁹ J.A. Motyer, *James*, p.52

don't. Instead you...assent to the sin in your mind; your mind goes to bed with the desire."³⁰ Your will yields to your lust. And the result is that your desires conceive. James writes in verse 15, "Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin..."

That's why we sin. Our desires have children. We are placed in a situation that stirs up our desires, we begin to desire something that is wrong, we don't deal with those desires in a biblical manner, our will assents to our desires, so our desire conceives and gives birth to outward acts of sin.

Perhaps you are in a difficult marriage. Your spouse doesn't appreciate you the way you think you deserve. You want to get out. You know it's wrong but that desire starts to take over. And so you begin to try to justify and rationalize your sin. You come up with a million different reasons why it is o.k. for you to go ahead and do what you know is wrong. You think about ways to sin, and even plan ways to do it. Eventually, if you don't repent, that desire is going to give birth to an outward act of sin. And to make matters worse, your sin will have a baby, and that baby is death. James says, "...when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death." Sin always has devastating consequences. It produced physical death, it causes spiritual death, and for the unbeliever will result in eternal death.

Trials can be sweet. If we consider it all joy when we encounter various trials, if we endure, refusing to compromise and give in, steadfastly obeying God even when it's difficult that trial will make us

³⁰ Jay Adams, *A Thirst for Wholeness*, p.31

more like Christ. But trials can become bitter. When that happens, it's not God's fault. It's the way we responded to our desires. If we allow our desires to take over and control us when we are in the midst of a trial, our desires will conceive and give birth to sin, and sin will result in devastation. That's why we fail.

But failure won't do us much good if we don't learn from it. James didn't just give us these verses just to show us why we fail. He gave us these verses to help us learn from our failures.

We Are Going To Be Tempted

James assumes we are going to struggle with temptation. He begins verse 13, "Let no one say..." not "if he is tempted" but "when he is tempted."

He doesn't say, "There is a possibility that you are going to be tempted." Or "Many of you are going to be tempted..." Or even "Most of you will be tempted..." No, he says in verse 14, "each one is tempted..."

Many times temptation catches us off guard. Sometimes temptation catches us off guard because we are proud. We think we are above temptation. Pride puts blinders on our hearts so we don't see the temptation coming, and it deadens our spiritual senses so we aren't aware when temptation sneaks up on us. We deceive ourselves into thinking we are stronger than we really are, and when temptation proves so enticing we are shocked by it, and often end up giving in to it. Pride comes before a fall.

Sometimes temptation catches us off guard, because we are spiritually lazy. Our desires entice us, and we aren't strong enough spiritually to do battle against them, because we haven't properly prepared ourselves to fight.

If we don't stand guard, if we are not ready, if we are not watching, we are going to fall to temptation.

It's that simple.

Temptation isn't Sin

Sin can follow temptation. But it doesn't have to. James says, "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own desires." He doesn't say, "But each one sins when he is drawn away and enticed."

Joseph didn't sin when he was tempted. He was tempted time and time again by Potiphar's wife,

and time and time again, he said 'no!' Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't sin when they were tempted. They were tempted to bow down and worship the image in Daniel 3, but even though their lives were on the line, they said no. Jesus didn't sin when he was tempted. Hebrews tells us He was tempted in all points like we are, yet was without sin.

SURVIVAL TIP

Note several specific ways sin has deceived you in the past. Mark down the lessons you can learn from those experiences and how they can help you be stronger in the present.

It's possible to be tempted and yet not give in! Temptation becomes sin when our will assents to our lusts, when we stop fighting and give in. We must not allow our minds and hearts to go to bed with our desires. We are going to be tempted, but we don't have to sin. In fact, in the midst of a trial, we need to realize that...

God's Goal is Our Good

Every circumstance that comes into our life is an opportunity to move forward or to move backward. God wants us to move forward.

To put it another way, God tests but He never tempts. (It's interesting that the word translated temptation is the same word translated trial and testing early in James 1.) What's the difference between a test and temptation?

Our response!

This means, God's not out to get us. Whatever circumstance we are in we can be confident that God's goal is not our harm but our benefit. He doesn't delight in seeing us fail. He's never working against us. He's always working for us.

We can know without a doubt, regardless of our situation, that there is a positive side. God never puts us in a situation that is too much for us to bear, where we just have to sin, and where there's no hope for our good. We can respond to that circumstance, whatever it is, in a way that actually benefits us and glorifies God. We may not see how, but it's true.

There's hope whether we think so or not.

So We Must Stop Trying to Rationalize and Excuse Our Sin

When we are tested and we begin to desire to do evil, there's an almost overwhelming temptation to figure out reasons why we just have to do what we want to do.

We must refuse to rationalize. If we do we are going to fail, because...

To Overcome Temptation We've Got To Deal With Our Desires

Why does one man overcome temptation and another man fall? Not necessarily because their temptations were so different, but because their hearts were. Get that. If we fall to temptation and we see another man overcome: we must not think it's because our situations were so different. The difference is in the way we handled our desires.

Jesus explains in Matthew 12:35, "A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things." Jesus is specifically talking about our speech, but the principle holds true. Why does a man say or do evil things? Because of the evil that lies in his heart. Our hearts are like banks. We store in our hearts either good or bad desires, and then later when temptation comes, we go to the ATM of our hearts and

withdraw either good or bad desires³¹, and so respond either properly or sinfully depending on what is stored up in our hearts. And that's what James is saying here, we sin because of our wrong desires. Temptation would have no power over us if it weren't for our desires.

For example, my wife loves cheesecake. I hate it. Put a cheesecake in front of my wife and she'll be eager to eat it. Put a cheesecake in front of me and I won't have the slightest desire to even take a bite. What's the difference between us? It's the same piece of cheesecake. The difference is in our desires.

What makes temptation tempting is not so much the thing itself, but instead what is going on inside our hearts.

Some people think that the primary reason they fall to sin is because of the situation they are in. "If I didn't just have such a bad husband, I wouldn't be the way I am. Or if everybody was just nicer to me then I wouldn't be the way I am." But the problem is not so much in the situation, it's in our heart. We've got the wrong desires, so we do the wrong thing.

To overcome temptation we've got deal with our desires. To do that:

*** *We need to know the Word well
enough to identify what is a wrong desire.***

³¹ Thanks to Kris Lundgaard and *The Enemy Within* for the concept behind this illustration

Desire is powerful. Our desires allure us, capture us, entice us and dominate us. We're not going to be able to withstand desire unless our mind is filled with the powerful truth of God's Word. And we're certainly not going to be able to recognize what is a wrong desire unless our mind is filled with Scripture. We must meditate on God's Word day and night, thinking specifically about how it applies to our life and to our situation, so that when desire comes in and tries to deceive us, we are able to fight it with truth.

** We need to know ourselves well enough to know what desires we struggle*

with. We each have desires that are peculiar to ourselves that lead us to sin.

Unfortunately, too few actually know themselves and understand their desires, and so too many fall to the same sins over and over again. We need to know our own particular tendencies and what desires we struggle with, so we are ready to fight them and don't fall into the same traps time and time again.

SURVIVAL TIP

Develop a specific plan for putting off evil desires and putting on godly ones. Get together with your pastor and show him your plan. Ask for his counsel and input.

** We need to wage war against our evil desires and replace them with godly ones.* Ephesians 4 tells us as believers the way we change is by putting off sinful habits and desires

and putting on godly ones. If we are controlled by a desire for something evil, we need to put off that desire and replace it with godly desires.

If we do that we are going to be prepared when temptation comes and temptation won't be as tempting to us. John Owen encourages us to picture our hearts like a fortress. When an enemy comes near to a fortress to overtake it, oftentimes if he sees that the fortress is well manned and furnished with provisions for battle he'll withdraw and he won't even assault it. We need to be laying up provisions, right desires, in our hearts so that we are prepared when temptation comes. He explains, "If Satan, the prince of this world, comes and our hearts are fortified against his batteries and provided to hold out, he not only departs but as James says, he flees. He will flee from us."

* ***We need to deal with our desires immediately and decisively.*** Our desires are deceitful. The longer we play with them, the more danger we are in. Al Martin notes, "...sin comes to us with modest proposals, 'Indulge me this little bit; give quarter this little bit.' But child of God, never forget sin's real intentions. Every stirring of envy, if it had its way, would lead to murder and destruction. Every doubt on any phrase of Scripture, if it had its way, would lead to the ultimate denial of God and of every truth of Scripture. Every breathing of pride in its first stirrings, if it had its way, would run and tear the crown off God's head. Every unclean thought, if it had its way, would

lead us actually to wallow in the filth of lechery and immorality. Strike at the first risings of sin ! Sin's proposals are modest, and if you once let them gain ground in your affections, it will then go to the judgment and it will lessen your ability to grapple with it. Never debate with passions. Passion has never lost a debate yet. The most powerful persuasive debater is sinful passion leading to envy, uncleanness, to doubt, to pride. 'Ah, isn't that a bit morbid and a bit extreme ?' says someone. I answer, look at the great train of people who like Samson, once knew what it was to accomplish mighty conquests for God but who now have their eyes out and are chained to some mill and they grind out day after day an empty, powerless, useless round of 'Christian' activity - I put 'Christian' in quotes. The breath of the Almighty has gone from their lives. Where did it start ? When sin came in with a little modest proposal, and the door was opened, and sin was entertained. Strike at the first risings of sin !"³²

* *We need to walk in the Spirit.* Paul puts it like this in Galatians 5:16, "I say then: walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh." There's a command and a promise in that verse. The command is to constantly walk in the Spirit. We must make walking in the Spirit a lifestyle. What's that mean? We are to walk in dependence on the Spirit. We are going to rely on the power of the Spirit to live the kind of life he wants us to live. We will make prayer a priority, we will constantly be calling out to Him for help and strength,

³² Al Martin, "Practical Helps to Mortification of Sin", Banner of Truth magazine, no. 106, p.30

constantly communing with Him and thinking about God. We will fill our minds with what He desires, and then work at walking in obedience to His Word. We will focus on emptying our hearts of our desires and filling them with what the Holy Spirit desires. We will choose to trust Him for the strength to do what He wants us to do and then move out and do it. That's the command. The promise is that if we obey this command, we won't be overcome by temptation. Paul doesn't say, "Walk by the Spirit and you will sometimes not be carried away by the desires of the flesh." He doesn't say, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not be carried away with the desires of the flesh most of the time." No, he says, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not be carried away by the desires of the flesh." That's a rock solid, take it to the bank promise. If we walk by the Spirit we will be able to say no to temptation, to endure in the midst of trial, and to do what God desires.

Be encouraged! We can win the battle over temptation. One key to victory is knowing Satan's strategy. You may have heard how the North defeated the South at the Battle of Antietam. Confederate General Robert E. Lee had invaded the North, and General George McClellan was the Union General responsible for chasing him down. Things looked good for the South, because McClellan wasn't nearly the leader Lee was. As he searched for Lee's troops, he struggled to decide exactly what he should do.

But God is sovereign. A northern regiment stopped for a rest in a field, one that "happened" to have been occupied by Confederates day

before. As they relaxed, three soldiers spotted an envelope lying in the grass.

They were excited because they noticed inside were three cigars wrapped in a piece of paper. They decided to split the cigars, and then one of them thought to look at the paper.

That moment changed history because the paper those men found contained a copy of the marching orders for Lee's army. It told exactly where the Confederates were going and exactly what they had planned.

This was all McClellan needed. With advance notice of Lee's battle plan he was able to launch a successful counter attack.

When it comes to our war against temptation, that's what James has given us here. We must take advantage of what we have learned, so that we too can launch a successful counter attack! By understanding why we fall to temptation, we can learn to move from failure to success.

SURVIVAL QUESTIONS

Why do you think it is so tempting to blame God for your sin?

What are ways in which you are tempted to blame God for your sin?
(Directly or indirectly...)

What do the following verses teach about God and His attitude
towards sin...

How do these verses help you when you are struggling with
temptation?

Psalm 7:9

Psalm 11:7

Psalm 71:19

Psalm 145:17

Matthew 5:48

Matthew 19:17

Habbakuk 2:13

Why do you fall to temptation? Why is that important to understand?

What are some of your strongest desires? What sins do you find yourself falling to, over and over again?

What particular lies are you especially prone to believe when you are tempted?

Why are people surprised by temptation?

How are you being tempted to sin in the midst of your trial?

What would it look like for you to withstand temptation? Be specific...

How are you feeding your sinful desires?

How can you develop good desires?

What specific plan do you have for denying sinful desires and developing good desires?

What small compromises are you particularly tempted to indulge?
Why should you war against them?

I recently read an interesting article concerning a young scientist in Idaho. "It's rare that a junior high school science fair project can be deemed newsworthy, but in Nathan Zohner's case, we're willing to make an exception. Zohner, 14, was a freshman at Eagle Rock Junior High in Idaho last April when he won top prize at the Greater Idaho Falls Science Fair. His project consisted of two parts. First, he explained the scientifically proven dangers of dihydrogen monoxide:

It can cause excessive sweating and vomiting;

It is a major component of acid rain;

It causes severe burns when in gaseous form;

It can be fatal if accidentally inhaled;

It has been found in the tumors of terminal cancer patients.

He then asked 50 people attending the science fair whether they would support a ban on dihydrogen monoxide. The result: 43 favored a ban, 6 were unsure, and 1 person was opposed. That person, it turned out, knew what dihydrogen monoxide is: good old H₂O, or water. Zohner's project was titled "How Gullible Are We?" He concluded, "I'd say they're extremely gullible. They need to pay more attention."³³

That's a good warning. It pretty much sums up the point James makes in verses 16-18.

³³ <http://www.stats.org/newsletters/9710/zohner.htm> accessed February 27, 2003

When trials come into our lives, we are extremely gullible. We are prone to believe things that are not true. We need to pay attention.

The most dangerous lies are not lies that other people tell us, but the lies we tell ourselves. James points that out when he says, “We are tempted when we are carried away and enticed by our own desires.”

The lies we tell ourselves are particularly persuasive when life gets tough. That's why James writes in verse 16, "Don't be deceived, my beloved brethren." He doesn't want us to be misled. When we experience trials we are in danger and we need to be on guard.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to believe that we have no choice but to be miserable.*

We begin to think our situation is so difficult that the only possible response is to complain, grumble, and become depressed. We just “have to” give up, give in, and wallow in our hopelessness.

But James says in verse 2, that's a lie. "Consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials."

When we face trials, we not only can, we as believers must consider that trial an occasion not just for some joy, but for all joy. Misery isn't the only option - it's a sin. And joy isn't only possible - it's demanded.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to believe that our trial is “all bad.”*

We begin to think our situation is hopeless, and that nothing good could possibly come out of the trial we are experiencing.

But James says in verses 3 and 4, that's a lie.

We are to consider trials all joy not because

We are out of touch with reality, but because we are in touch with reality. We know that trials produce endurance, and if we don't give up, endurance will make us mature children of God.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to believe that prayer has no point.*

We begin to give up on prayer because we don't think God's listening. There are times we want to look to Him for help, but most of the time, we'd rather go to the world, because we think, "God doesn't care about us so why should we care about Him?"

James says that's a lie. "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all generously and without reproach and it will be given to him." (v.5)

When we don't know what to do, we must go to God. He is not immune to our pain. He loves to answer the righteous man's prayers. Only we must go to God in faith, sincerely desiring His wisdom and willing to obey it.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to value what the world values.*

The world's perspective of life is totally different than God's. When we are hurting it's easy to begin buying into the world's way of looking at life

and at our particular situation.

But James says watch out, that's a lie. "But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position and the rich man in his humiliation."(v.9,10)

It's not about material possessions; it's about our relationship with God. We must learn to view our circumstances from an eternal perspective.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to believe we'd be so much happier if we just gave up and gave into sin, instead of enduring the trial and obeying God.*

We begin to think to ourselves, "This trial is too much. My life would be so much better if I just gave up on God, and started doing what I want to do."

James says that's a lie. "Blessed is a man who endures under trial..." (v.12) The man who endures is eternally blessed by God. He's the one who has found true joy, true happiness, true blessedness.

It's much better to obey God and endure the trial, than it is to sin and give up because of what God has promised to those who endure: the crown of life.

- *Sometimes when life is difficult we are tempted to believe that sin is our only choice.*

We excuse our sin by saying, "I just had to sin. I had no choice. It's not my fault. God's the one

to blame."

James says that's a lie. *"But let no one say when he is tempted that he is being tempted by God..."*(v.13)

God's not the one to blame for our temptation. The problem is with our desires. We must stop making excuses and start examining our hearts.

When life gets difficult, we need to watch out. It's easy to start believing all sorts of different lies. But perhaps the most devastating of all the lies we will be tempted to believe concerns the character of God.

It's very easy to allow our circumstances to shape what we think about God. And when our circumstances shape what we think about God, our view of God becomes twisted. It's that issue James is addressing in verse 16.

When we are tempted to sin, "Don't be deceived my beloved brethren about the character of God." In particular, don't start doubting God's goodness.

Although most professing believers would never say out loud God's not good, when life gets hard, many often think it, and live like it. As Nancy DeMoss explains, "Theologically, intellectually, we know that God is good. But deep in many of our hearts, there lurks a suspicion that He may not really be good, at least, that He has not been good to me."³⁴

In the midst of a trial it's easy to think that God is out to get us.

³⁴ Nancy DeMoss, *Lies Women Believe*, Moody Press, Chicago Ill., 2000, p.48

We know what the Scripture says, that God wants our best, but when we look at our circumstances we are tempted to believe that God's promises are not true. Sometimes we are even tempted to think that God doesn't care about us at all.

James says that's lie. And he's very, very concerned that we don't fall for that lie. Because "once you doubt the goodness of God, you feel justified in rejecting His will and making your own decisions about right and wrong." ³⁵

When life gets difficult our desires will tell us God isn't really good – that we can't trust Him. Therefore, we will be tempted to think that it is better to disobey Him than it is to do what He says. We better be convinced God is good, and that every good thing comes from Him, or we are going to listen to our desires, give in and end up living out the cycle James describes in verse 15: lust, sin and death.

The way we respond to trials will shape the way we mature in Christ, and in the end, our theology will shape the way we respond to trials. Therefore it's vital we get our theology right.

We can Trust God because of Who He is

If we are going to refuse to listen to our evil desires and choose to trust God we must be convinced of certain truths about Him. In particular, we must be convinced that,

³⁵ *ibid*, p.48

God's All Good

"Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..."

If we have something good and perfect in our life and we want to know where it's from – we can bank on it, it's from God. If something is good, if it is noble, if it is beautiful, if it is of value, if it is perfect, if it is complete, if it is mature, it is a divine gift.

Think about that. Every single good thing in our lives is from God – coming down as James describes from the 'Father of lights.'

The phrase 'Father of lights' is a Jewish way

SURVIVAL TIP

Write down seven characteristics you know to be true of God. During the next week, study one characteristic a day, marking down exactly what the Bible teaches you about that characteristic and how that truth applies to you and your situation.

of describing God. It means that God is the creator of the heavens. Here James uses this phrase as a metaphor for purity and holiness. By calling God the Father of lights, James is describing God as the creator of all that is good and all that is holy. As we look at the good gifts in our lives, we need to

remember that they have come down from God, who is the Creator of the heavens.

It's easy to complain in the midst of trials, but we need to remember the good gifts God has given us. That's usually the last thing we want to do when we are hurting. Our trials warp our

perspective and it can become difficult to think of anything good. We must make it a practice to stop and consider all the reasons we have to give thanks to God.

We can begin with common grace; things like your job, your health, and your family. All that's from God.

But then we must move on to God's special grace. That in particular is what James is referring to. He's calling on us to consider the spiritual blessings in our lives.

As believers, when faced with a trial, we need to learn to stop and consider our spiritual privileges. A good place to start is by considering Jesus Christ. He is the ultimate expression of God's mercy, kindness, grace and goodness.

Just think John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son." That's an amazing statement. As Geoffrey Thomas explains, we'd expect that verse to read 'God so loved his Son that he gave him the world.' But it is the world of sinners that God loves, and he gives to that world his own Son. ... Paul says, "He loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). He is the God who gives himself to every believer. Saul of Tarsus was a cruel bigot, but the Father of the heavenly lights gave up his own Son for him. It is so personal and passionate a commitment.... He gives forgiveness of my sins, and reconciliation with alienated divinity. He gives [the believer] the righteousness of Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the adoption of sonship, the inheritance of the saints and the hopes of heaven..." God gave us His Son - what a gift. "...the Creator of the

rolling spheres, He who is ineffably sublime; the one in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge - and he's mine: the one who is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of his person - and he's mine: the good Shepherd: my prophet, priest and king: the one who has no restrictions, and no boundaries save his own determination and purpose - he is given to me! He plants his footsteps in the seas for me, and rides upon the storms as he comes to me. He nourishes and cherishes me. He comes to me in my loneliness and spreads a table for me in the presence of my enemies. He fills my cup to overflowing. When the Christian looks back he says, "Goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life." When he looks ahead he says, "And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." He will present me faultless before the presence of his glory in that tremendous day. Facing the future the Christian has strong hopes and a single eye, because God promises that the flood of these good and perfect gifts will never end. "Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise."³⁶ God's so good that He gave us His Son.

We serve a great God. He is the giving God. He gives liberally and without reproach and everything that He gives is good and perfect.

Stop and feel the force of that.

No matter what trial we are experiencing, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt: *God is good and everything He does is good.* No matter how difficult our circumstances are,

³⁶ Geoffrey Thomas, <http://users.aber.ac.uk/emk/ap/sermons/james7.htm>

SURVIVAL TIP

Make thanksgiving a daily practice. Over the course of the next week, before dinner, have each member of your family give thanks to God for two specific blessings.

we know beyond a shadow of a doubt:

God never does anything wrong.

God is good

whether or not He

seems good to us. God

is doing good whether or not we think

so. And God's gifts are good whether or not we feel like they are. For as John Blanchard explains "Nothing good comes except from God, and nothing except good comes from God."³⁷

The only way we are going to keep from giving in to our desires when life gets difficult is by developing firm convictions about the character of God. We need to know James 1:17 well. We need to be convinced that God is good no matter what.

But perhaps someone might say, "How can we be confident of that?"

God's Unchanging

"...with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow..."

James is painting a picture. By calling God the Father of lights, he is leading us to think about the sun and the stars. The only problem with that picture, however, is that although the sun and the stars are beautiful, with the sun and stars, there are variations and

³⁷ John Blanchard, *ibid*, p.82

there are shadows. Sometimes it is light out, and sometimes it is dark. James wants us to know God's so much better than that.

The heavens change, God does not. Malachi 3:6, "For I the Lord do not change..." and Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." There are no variations with God. There are no shadows. There's not even a hint of darkness in his purity and his goodness. God's the source of 'all good,' and we can always count on that, because God does not change.

That's a rock solid truth to bank our lives on. It means when life gets tough:

We can't even start thinking, 'maybe this time God's not so good.'

We can't even start thinking 'maybe this time my sinful desires are right and God's plan isn't so good.'

And we can't even start thinking, 'maybe this time God's out to get me.'

God is the source of 'all good.' If our sinful desires are telling us to do something contrary to His will we know that it's not good, because all that's good comes from God. So we must speak truth to ourselves. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived. 'If God is good and does not change, He cannot be trying to trap us into doing evil.'

Someone once said what we believe about God is the most important thing about us. They were right. Everything in our lives depends on "the sort of God we worship." I'm not talking about what

we say you believe about God, but what we really believe about Him. What we really believe about God affects everything about us.

If we want to protect ourselves from giving into our desires, we must get to know God. We've got to begin to see just how good He really is. If we really believe God is 'all good' and that He does not change, we will have the strength to obey Him even when things get tough.

One thing I love about James is he knows how to pound a point home. He knows there might be a believer who still needs a little more convincing.

So he gives us one more proof of God's goodness in verse 17.

We can Trust God because of What He's Done

James writes, *"In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures."* In other words, our salvation is proof that God is kind and that won't ever change.

God's kindness is displayed by how He saved us. James says, "He brought us forth..." The phrase brought us forth doesn't fully capture the meaning of the Greek term. The word is 'a-pe-keus-en' which literally means to give birth to. James is "using language that ordinarily applies to physical birth (being brought forth out of our

mother's wombs, and into the world) and applies it to spiritual birth."³⁸
So he's saying if you are a believer, it's because God caused us to be born again.

We are not who we used to be. We have been transformed. Before God saved us, we were spiritually dead. (Ephesians 2:1) We walked according to the course of this world. (Ephesians 2:2) We lived in the lusts of our flesh. (Ephesians 2:3) And we were, by nature, children of wrath. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.

That's why salvation is a miracle.

If a person is saved it is a miracle on par with a person being raised from the dead! Imagine seeing someone in a coffin one day and then the next day seeing him walking around. That's true for us spiritually. We were in a spiritual "coffin" and then God worked, and here we are walking around, with new life.

We may not fully understand how it all works. But we must understand that to be a Christian is not just to be a better person. We didn't become Christians just by going to church, pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, and becoming a better, more moral person. No, becoming a Christian is a work of God.

As John Blanchard writes, "We have not just been improved, or morally strengthened, or given a new vision or outlook. It is not that a

³⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994, p.700

sort of inherent godliness has been fanned into a flame. What has happened is a miracle that has transformed deadness into life."³⁹

God gave us new life.

After Augustine was converted, one day as he walked down the street, a woman he used to live with came running up behind him. She kept calling out his name, but Augustine wouldn't answer. She finally caught up to him and said, "Augustine, it is I." And he responded, "I know, but it is no longer I."

That's the point. We are new people.

When Christians consider just how good God's been to them, they are often led to ask why.

James answer is simple: He wanted to.

He brought us forth because of the "exercise of His will..." The phrase 'the exercise of His will' is just one word in the Greek and it refers to desire. But it's not like a whim or a passing fancy. It's a deliberate thought out desire. That's why our versions read in the exercise of His will. The translators are trying to get across the idea that we are born again, because of a deliberate and purposeful desire of God.

Nobody can take credit for their physical birth. No one goes around boasting, "I was born. Look at me. I did it." And the same is true spiritually. We are not born again because we desired it. We are born again because God desired it. Just as we can't will himself to be born physically, we can't will ourselves to be born spiritually.

³⁹ John Blanchard, *Not Hearers Only*, p.93

The apostle John puts it like this in John 1:12,13, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

So as we look at this new life we have in Christ, we must constantly remember that only the reason we are who we are and we have what we have is because of God's amazing grace. We owe everything to God.

This is even demonstrated by the way in which God gave us this new life. James explains we were brought forth 'by the word of truth.'

The phrase word of truth is used in the New Testament as a way of describing the gospel message. Obviously, the whole of Scriptures are the word of truth but specifically, James here is talking about the gospel. Paul explains in Ephesians 1:13, "In Him, you also, after listening to the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise..." Colossians 1:5, We give thanks to God because we have heard of your faith and love, "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you..." 1 Peter 1:23, 25, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and abiding Word of God...the word which was preached as good news to you."

God created a perfect world, and man disobeyed and ruined

things. Yet even after his sin, man didn't run back to God. Instead, he ran away. But God pursued him.

And God pursued us. We were totally confused about who God was. We were in the dark. So God revealed Himself to us in a person - Jesus Christ - and in a message - the word of truth. This word of truth reveals God's great grace and His plan for saving men - Jesus Christ. We are born again because He sought us out and revealed to us in the gospel what we couldn't figure out on our own.

What motivated God to do all this? *"...so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures."* God by giving us new life has made us a kind of first fruits among his creation.

The term first fruits is a figurative expression drawn from the Old Testament. God commanded the Israelites to offer up to him a first fruits of their harvest. They were to do so every year, and this first fruits was to be the best of their crop and set apart for God. Obviously all of their harvest belonged to God, but this part of the harvest was especially devoted to him. When God says that He has given us new life among all His creation, He is saying that He has saved us that we might belong especially to Him.

How's all this connect?

When we experience trials we are going to be tempted to believe lies about God. In particular, when we are hurting, it's will be very tempting to think that God's not really all that good.

There may be some reading this book who are struggling with that temptation right now. Maybe you are in a difficult situation at work and you are tempted to quit when you know you shouldn't. You are starting to question whether God really is that kind to you. Or maybe you are in a tough marriage. Your spouse isn't all that you expected them to be, and you want to give up and compromise. You are wondering whether or not God's way really is the best. Or maybe it's just the average run of the mill stuff. Your life is not turning out the way you expected, and so you want to throw in the towel.

When we struggle with those kinds of thoughts, we must come back to James 1:16-18. We must fill our minds with truth.

God always does what is good. He never does what is evil. We can count on Him. He hasn't changed and He never will.

When I was a child, when things didn't go my way, I would often exaggerate my problems. I would become worried and anxious, and act as if everything were hopeless. At times like that, my mother would come and counsel me. We'd look together at some of the promises given believers in God's Word. We'd also look at some of the ways God kept His promises throughout Scripture. Then my mom would look me right in the eye, and ask me, "Josh, God made these promises thousands of years ago. He's kept every promise He's ever made for thousands of years now. Do you really believe, that you are so important, that He'd break His first promise just for you?"

Of course not.

God's good. He's always been good. He is always going to be good. He's not going to stop being good just for you!

SURVIVAL STUDY QUESTIONS

What lies are you particularly tempted to believe in the midst of your trial:

Lie:

Truth:

In particular, are there specific lies that you are tempted to believe about the character of God?

Write down ten ways God has blessed you materially...

Write down fifteen ways God has blessed you spiritually...

Explain five reasons it is amazing God gave His Son for you...

Why should you trust God in the midst of your trial?

Why can't you even start thinking, 'Maybe this time my sinful desires are right and God's plan isn't so good?'

What does regeneration mean? How is your regeneration proof of God's unchanging goodness? Be specific...

Why is your salvation a miracle? Write out the things that make your own testimony amazing...

If we are committed to doing what is right, we can expect to be hurt by other people.

Jesus once told his disciples, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...” (John 15:18-20)

Jesus doesn’t merely say that we might be attacked if we do what is right. He says we will.

Honestly, that can be pretty hard to handle. It’s difficult enough to understand how God could possibly allow those who are righteous to suffer *as much* as those who are wicked. But it’s even more difficult to understand how God could possibly allow those who are righteous to suffer *at the hands* of the wicked.

That’s exactly the issue the believers in James were struggling with. They were believers and they were suffering. Yet they saw wicked men all around them thriving. And to make matters worse, these wicked men were prospering at their expense.

James tells us the wicked were storing up their treasures while at the same time refusing to pay their employees. They were living luxuriously while at the same time starving those who worked for them. And when their poor employees protested, they were silenced, often times by being put to death.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to work all week, only to have your employer refuse to give you what you rightfully earned so that he could spend your money on himself? Try to picture sitting around the kitchen table with your wife and children, realizing you don't have anything to eat because your wicked employer stole your check. And even worse, that you can't do anything about it because he controls the courts.

It'd be pretty tempting to become angry, and even to start questioning God.

While our particular life-circumstances may be a bit different than that of these first century believers; each of us knows what it is like to watch the wicked deny God and prosper while the righteous obey God and suffer.

Maybe you are a woman whose husband is an unbeliever. He mocks and abuses you for your faith. He finds joy in watching you grieve. Yet you stay faithful. But you have friends who in the same situation, compromised, disobeyed God and seem so much happier. And so you wonder...

Or maybe you are a godly employee. You try to be kind and loving, but still refuse to go out drinking with your boss and co-workers. So when it comes time for promotion, your boss overlooks you in favor of someone he "gets along" with better. And so you begin to question...

You get the idea. I don't know what particular trial you are experiencing, but I'm pretty sure I know what you are asking.

How am I to respond when life seems unfair? How am I to respond when the righteous suffer and the wicked seem to flourish? How am I to respond when I'm oppressed and abused for righteousness sake? How can I endure unfair, unjust persecution? How am I to respond when attacked?

Be Patient!

James' answer is simple. "Be patient therefore brethren..."(v.7) "You too be patient..."(v.8) "As an example of suffering and patience take the prophets..." (v.10) "...we count those blessed who endured..."(v.11)

When life seems unfair – as believers – we need to be patient. When others persecute us for doing right – as believers – we need to be patient. When we are tempted to give up the faith – as believers – we need to be patient. When we are tempted to pursue earthly treasures – as believers – we need to be patient. When we see the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish – as believers – we need to be patient.

Refuse to Retaliate

The word James uses for patience comes from two Greek words – one meaning long and the other meaning tempered. To be patient is to be long-tempered.

A patient person is not a hot-head. He's not someone who is quick to take vengeance. He's self-controlled. He isn't quick to

retaliate and lash out when he is being persecuted and abused. He's slow to become angry with other people.

Stop and think carefully about what James is telling these believers. He knows what they are experiencing - they are watching righteous people *die* at the hands of ungodly men.

Yet James tells them to do what?

Be patient. He is exhorting them, "Be willing to suffer - for a long time." This is one of those times where most of us want to close our Bibles real quietly and move on and hope nobody noticed.

We don't like to hear that: *be willing to suffer for a long time.* In fact, we're even tempted to ask: "James, are you crazy?" Problem is, if we ignore this passage in James, we're going to end up ignoring most of our Bibles because the principle found here is not limited to James. It's everywhere.

Just think about our hero, Jesus Christ.

Peter explains in 1 Peter 2 that "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps..."

We're to suffer like Christ suffered. And how was that? He "... committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him

SURVIVAL TIP

Meditate on 1 Peter 2:21-25.

Describe how Jesus responded when he was unfairly treated by others.

Mark down five specific ways you can follow in his footsteps.

who judges righteously...” (1 Peter 2:21)

Jesus was perfect, yet reviled. He was insulted and mistreated unfairly, yet he did not retaliate in kind. Instead He put his trust in God. He was patient. He was willing to suffer for a long time. And Peter says, we need to follow his example.

In case someone might wonder what it means to follow Jesus’ example in real life, Peter gives us an example of what it looks like. If a person is a slave following Christ’s example and being patient means he is to submit to ungodly masters. “Slaves you are to be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.”

It was terribly humiliating to be a slave. It was also incredibly difficult. Slaves were mistreated, abused, and oppressed. Yet Peter doesn’t say rebel, he says submit, and not just to good masters, but to ungodly ones.

We’re not slaves, but we get the point. When someone is out to get us, or when somebody takes advantage of us, if we are believers, we are to be patient with them as God has been patient with us. Even if we are doing everything right, and still are mistreated, we need to refuse to retaliate.

That's a pretty amazing statement. It runs counter to everything our world would tell us. Think about what the world would tell someone suffering the way these poor believers in James were.

The rich are abusing you? Burn down their barns, steal back what's rightfully yours, and avenge yourself.

But James says just the opposite. "Be done with all that, instead just be patient." James is not talking about overlooking and ignoring injustice. That's not the point. Scripture makes it clear God's given us government for a reason, and it's not wrong to use legitimate means like policemen, etc. to protect our families or ourselves. God hates injustice, and all throughout Scripture men of God stand up against it.

Instead, James is calling on believers to willingly, consciously, relinquish their rights. He is saying that as believers we must be concerned about something much higher than self-interest, we must be controlled by a desire for the glory of God. And when the pursuit of self-interest conflicts with the pursuit of the glory of God, we must be willing to lay aside their pursuit of self that Christ may be glorified.

When we are treated unfairly, if we are believers, we should respond in a completely different way than the unbeliever. Because the unbeliever is primarily motivated by a desire for self-protection and even self-glorification, when as believers, our response should instead be motivated by a desire for the glory of God and the other person's good.

Refuse to Become Resentful

James continues in verse nine, *“Do not complain brothers, against one another...”*

This is where it really gets difficult.

At first this particular command seems a bit odd, because it appears to be out of step with the context. Every other verse in this passage is about patience, yet here thrown in the middle is one about not complaining.

But stop and think about how it connects.

James recognizes one of the most difficult temptations believers face when they are being mistreated – to lash out at those closest to them.

Someone might very well say, “I am patient, look at me, I’m not retaliating against those who are persecuting me.” But that’s a pretty easy test. Especially here in James, because there was absolutely nothing these poor believers could do. The rich were in control of the courts. These poor believers had no possible way they could retaliate.

So James shows the way most of us end up expressing our impatience when we can’t get back at those who are actually hurting us. We complain against each other.

The word for complain actually means groan or sigh silently. It primarily refers to an inner feeling of dissatisfaction or resentment. When things are not going our way, it’s so easy to get frustrated, and as a result develop a bitter attitude.

We're being treated unfairly – we can't do anything about it – so we begin to become fretful and impatient – we get frustrated - and so instead of taking our frustrations out on those who are treating us unfairly – we develop a resentful heart - and we start taking it out on each other.

Does James know us, or what? He knows that the natural human tendency, when a person is under pressure, is to become irritated with those closest to him.

You're being treated unfairly at work, you can't do anything about it, so you get mad, and you come home and you take it out on your wife, your kids, your dog, whoever gets in your way.

Be aware of that temptation. If you are being mistreated refuse to develop a bitter spirit. Be patient. Instead,

Continue to Do Right, No Matter What

James illustrates the kind of patience we must exhibit in verse 10. *“As an example, brothers, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.”*

It's never been easy to do God's will. Just think about the prophets. These men actually spoke the very Word of God - yet their lives were incredibly difficult.

“They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword, they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, men of whom the world

was not worthy, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground...” (Hebrews 11:37-39)

Think about Noah. He obeyed God and yet he spent much of his life being mocked and ridiculed by all of those around him. Think about Moses. He obeyed God and his own people and even his own family turned on him. Think about David. He obeyed God and was pursued and hunted down by Saul. Think about Elijah. He obeyed God and ends up in the desert wanting to die. Think about Jeremiah. He obeyed God and ended up in a pit.

Yet in spite of all the persecution they endured, these men continued to obey God. Noah kept building the ark, Moses kept leading God’s people, David kept praising and worshiping God, Elijah kept speaking God’s Words, and Jeremiah refused to complain and continued to prophesy.

Certainly, they had their struggles. There were times when they questioned what God was doing. But even still, they kept pressing on, and they continued to do what was right no matter what the consequences were.

SURVIVAL TIP

Think about your funeral. Write down how the fact you are going to die should make a difference in the way you respond to the trial you are experiencing.

We as believers look up to people like that. James is telling us that we as believers should be like people like that. That kind of perseverance shouldn’t be all that unusual.

It’s never been easy to follow God!

But, like the prophets, believers today must be patient.

But why?

We should be patient because Jesus is coming back. This life is not all there is. “Be patient therefore brethren **until** the coming of the Lord. (v.7) “**For** the coming of the Lord is at hand.” (v.8) “The Judge is standing right at the door.” (v.9)

God doesn’t call us to endure suffering forever. I love that little word, **until**. There is an end. Jesus is coming back. And after that we don’t need to be patient anymore.

As believers, we choose to patiently endure difficult circumstances and difficult people now, because we’re looking forward to something better in the future. We keep pressing on now, because we know that the coming of the Lord is at hand, which of course means it could be anytime.

We’re a people whose lives are literally controlled by that hope. We know that the Lord’s return is a fact, and we know that the Lord’s return could be anytime, and we know that when Jesus returns he’s coming as Judge, and that changes everything about the way we live and the decisions we make.

I recently spoke with a woman who had been in a very difficult marriage for many, many years. Her husband was unkind and verbally abusive for a long, long time. She wasn’t in any physical danger but it was hard and it was sad, and I’m certain, the world would counsel her to get out and have some fun while she still has a chance. But my counsel was completely different because it wasn’t my

counsel it was from God's Word, and God tells us there is an end, Jesus is coming, and that makes all the difference.

It's easy to get so lost in the debates about eschatology that we miss the primary thrust of Scripture: Jesus is coming back and we need to look forward to His return.

The unbeliever wants everything now. He's banking all his hopes on this world; **whereas, the true believer makes a conscious, deliberate choice to wait for the next.** He is a person controlled by thoughts of heaven and of the world to come. He's a person who has fixed his hope on the return of Jesus Christ.

That's one of the most basic differences between the believer and the unbeliever.

Christians are not masochists. We don't enjoy pain. But we recognize that there is something much worse than any suffering on earth, and that is called hell. And we realize there is something much better than any pleasure this world might have to offer, and that is called heaven. So we make a choice. We say, "Yes I'll gladly endure this suffering now for the joy that is to come."

John Bunyan tells a story which illustrates the true believer's attitude.

He writes, "I next saw in my dream that Christian was taken to a small room where two children sat, each one in his own chair. The name of the older one was Passion, and the younger Patience. Passion seemed to be quite discontent, but Patience was very quiet. Then Christian asked, 'Why is Passion so unhappy?' Interpreter answered,

‘Their guardian wants them to wait for their best things until the beginning of next year, but Passion wants everything now. Patience, however, is willing to wait.’ Then I saw someone come to Passion, offering him a bag of treasure and pouring it out at his feet. Passion quickly picked it up, rejoiced over it, and began to laugh scornfully at Patience. I noticed however that before long Passion had wasted all of his treasure and had rags left only for clothing.’ Christian turned again to interpreter, ‘Explain this matter to me more fully.’ ‘These two boys are symbols,’ answered Interpreter, ‘Passion represents the people of this world and Patience represents the people of the world to come. As you can see Passion wants his treasure right now, this year, that is to say in this world. This is how the men of the world are; they must have everything right now...But as you observed he quickly spent all his treasure and was left with nothing but rags. And that is how it will be with all such people at the end of this world.’ Christian said, ‘I can see now that for many reasons Patience has the best wisdom. First, because he waits for the best things, and second because he will have glory while the other has nothing but rags.’”

That’s James 5:1-11. James is exposing the folly of Passion and the wisdom of Patience.

“Look,” he writes in verse 7, or “Behold, a farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient...”

Picture a farmer. He’s not rich. He’s just got a little piece of land. He’s dependent on this field to feed his family. So one day he

goes out and he sows his field. He works hard. He labors. He goes to bed. He wakes up.

Does he expect the crop to be ready after one day's work? Of course not. He'd be a fool if he did.

Imagine an impatient farmer. He goes out and sows his field. He works hard. He labors. He goes to bed. He wakes up. His crop is not ready, so he says, "Forget it, I give up."

If we saw a person do that, we'd say he was foolish because everyone knows it takes time for things to grow. If he quits, he's going to miss out on the benefits to come.

The farmer is patient because he realizes that certain things must happen before his field is ready to harvest. It needs the early and late rains. There may be times when the farmer wishes it would go faster, when he didn't have to work so hard, but he's willing to wait, he's willing to work, because he knows the value of the harvest that is to come. His precious produce is worth the wait.

SURVIVAL TIP

Get together with a few of your friends specifically to praise God that He is going to return and to pray that He would return soon.

That's what we're to be like. Sure life seems unfair. Sure life is hard. Sure we have to go through difficulties. But we know now is not all there is. We know the end is worth the wait. And so we're patient. But we're not only patient because we look forward to the reward we're going to receive when Christ returns, we're patient because we know *why* Christ is going to return.

That's the point James is making in verse 9, "Don't complain..." why? "*that* you yourselves may not be judged; behold the Judge is standing right at the door."

We are careful about the way we respond to mistreatment because we take God seriously. We understand that when He returns He's not going to just be a jolly old Santa Claus, He's coming as a Judge.

And the fact that He takes our behavior seriously causes us to be serious about our behavior. As the apostle Peter explains, "...if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon the earth..." (1 Peter 1:17)

We must remember when our life on earth seems unfair, life on earth is not all there is. Christ is returning and He's returning to Judge. Be patient.

The Way to Become Patient

James doesn't only explain the 'what and why' of responding to mistreatment, he also teaches us how.

"...**strengthen your hearts...**" (v.8) If we are going to be patient when we are mistreated we need to do some serious heart work. We need to "firm up your faith."

We won't naturally respond to trials by being patient. To do so will require effort. This verse is a command. We have a personal duty to develop an attitude of courage and firmness in facing your

circumstances. We have a personal duty to make sure our heart is strong.

We strengthen our hearts by *looking forward to the future*. That's the whole flow of this passage. James writes, "...until the Lord comes." "For the Lord is coming." "Behold the Judge is standing at the door." Fixing your hope on the return of Christ requires discipline. Peter explains, "Gird your minds for action,

keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:13)

That means we must do some hard thinking. We must stop and seriously evaluate our lives. We must refuse to be sucked in by all the lies that are out there in this world. We must not allow the temporary pleasures this world has to offer to fool us into missing the point. We must make a firm commitment to put all our hope in Christ's return.

We strengthen our hearts *by looking back to the past*. In verse ten, James commands us to think about the prophets and follow their example. In verse eleven, he tells us why.

"Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful."

SURVIVAL TIP

Study Hebrews 11. On a three by five card mark down the top five lessons you learned about faith and enduring trials. Keep this three by five card with you throughout the next week and when you are tempted to complain, prayerfully reflect on the lessons you learned.

One of the reasons God tells so many stories in the Old Testament is to remind us how good it is to endure. When we go through trials and life doesn't seem to make sense, when we can't see the end of the trial and are afraid it isn't going to work out, when we think that God has forgotten us, we need to remember the ways that God worked in the past, how His ultimate plan is our good, and how there is a reward for those who do endure.

John Piper writes, "There is a gigantic statue outside the National Archives building in Washington D.C. A noble Greek figure sits with spread knees and a huge book in his lap. On the front of the massive base are the words 'Study the Past.' That's good advice – and biblical too...The past is a record of setbacks and how people coped with them. It is a reservoir of folly to be avoided and wisdom to be loved, of lessons to be learned and to be heeded, of heroes to be admired and villains to reject. It is full of the sovereign hand of God and the sinning hand of man. It keeps us from exaggerating the present. It makes us mature and steady in the storms of change."⁴⁰

Just think about Job.

Remember how he suffered. But still he pressed on. It wasn't easy, he struggled, he hurt, there were times when he wanted to give up, but he kept obeying God, and we have seen how it all ended, how God worked it all out, how God proved He was full of compassion and mercy.

And that helps us endure because we know God hasn't changed.

⁴⁰ John Piper, *A Godward Life*, Multnomah Pub., Sisters Ore. 1997, p.210,211

If we are going to strengthen our hearts – not only do we need to look to the future and look to the past – we need to *look to God Himself*.

We must get to know His character – how he as James puts it here – is compassionate and merciful. For as we learn from Daniel it is “the people who know their God” that “will display strength and take action.” (Daniel 11:32) If we understand who God is and what He is like we will have the strength to obey Him even when we don’t understand what He is doing.

Listen, obeying God isn’t easy. We will suffer for doing what is right. That’s not merely a possibility; that’s a promise.

Because of that many think Christians are a bit crazy. I mean, why would anyone choose to obey God when it is so difficult? Just compare the two lives that James describes in chapter 5. In verses 1-6 he talks about living luxuriously, living lives of wanton pleasure. And then in verses 7-11 he talks about suffering unjustly, struggling financially, hurting physically. Why would anyone choose life number two over life number one?

In the end, there’s only one reason: **Now is not all there is.**

We can’t even begin to compare the sufferings believers have to endure right now with the glory and the riches that God’s going to pour out on them in the future.

So don’t cash in. Christ is coming back. When mistreated, refuse to retaliate, refuse to complain and become bitter, and continue

doing what's right no matter what the consequences. Put your hope in God.

Be patient.

SURVIVOR STUDY QUESTIONS

What makes being hurt by other people so difficult?

What are some reasons why it is sometimes so difficult to watch the wicked prosper?

Have you ever experienced a trial that was especially difficult because you thought it seemed so unfair?

Describe what the trial was like and how you responded...

What does it mean to be patient?

Why is it so difficult to be patient?

What is the world's advice to the person who is suffering at the hands of someone else?

When James talks about being patient is he talking about overlooking injustice? Why or why not? Defend your answer biblically...

What would it look like for you to be more concerned about God's glory than your own personal comfort in

the midst of the trial you are experiencing?

In what ways do you complain against those close to you?

When do you get most irritated and why? (This is not an opportunity to put someone else down – but an opportunity to look at your own sinful heart and think about how you can change...)

Why is complaining so foolish and wrong?

Choose one of the following and explain what the kind of trials they experienced when they obeyed God...

Moses; Noah; Daniel; Elijah; David; Paul; Jeremiah; Ezekiel

What can you learn from them about how to handle your trial?

Describe what it would mean for you to be patient in the midst of your trial. Be specific...

Why should you be patient? Give five reasons it is so foolish to be impatient...

Write down a specific plan you are going to implement over the course of this next week in order to grow in your patience...

A Closing Thought

We cannot say God hasn't given us the information we need to know how to 'survive' and 'thrive' in the midst of the difficulties of life. And we cannot say God hasn't given us the resources we need to 'survive' and 'thrive' in the midst of the difficulties of life.

Yet while that's true, many of us aren't 'surviving' and 'thriving' in the midst of the difficulties of life. That's because if we are going to 'survive' and 'thrive' in the midst of the difficulties of life we have to take what we've learned and put it into practice. It's not enough to merely know what the Scripture teaches, we have to go a step further and obey what the Scripture teaches.

James puts it like this, "...*prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.*" (1:21) This means we have a responsibility to think hard about how we need to change as a result of what we've learned. If we don't do that, we've completely missed the point.

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