

James 1:1-8¹

Authentic Faith: Resilience in Trials

Introduction

Church growth is about growing in numbers AND in spiritual maturity. And why is church growth desirable?

- Not to prove that we have more people, more resources or more spiritual fervency than others.
- Not to make ourselves more comfortable than others in church.
- Not to ensure that we perpetuate ourselves for years to come.
- But to direct the people, resources and spiritual fervency we have towards advancing the work of the gospel—to impact and influence lives in the name of Jesus Christ.

The desire for healthy church growth also necessitates the process of building healthy relationships in church life. It demands that we translate that desire into lifestyle changes.

The writer of the letter is believed to be James, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was writing to “the 12 tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1b)—i.e. to Christian Jews who were dispersed all over the Roman Empire.

We will see in this letter how James helped these people to face their trials, and to confess and forsake their sins. Whether it was persecution from without or problem from within, James exhorted them with this challenge throughout his letter: “Be authentic—live out the faith you believe in.”

To be authentic in Christian living is to remain true to what the Christian faith advances—e.g. devotion to God, love for others, and imitation of Christ.

James in his letter calls for the acting out of what Christians believe in faith. It is about practical Christianity. More than being practical, it is about authentic Christianity. It answers the question: “Now that we have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ, how then shall we help one another to live for Him?”

Appropriately, James begins his letter in 1:1-8 with some lessons on authentic Christian living in the midst of trials.

I. James first teaches one reality related to authentic Christian living (vv. 1-4).

James says in 1:2—“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.”

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The word “trials” has nothing to do with the trouble or suffering we have to go through because of our own deliberate sinning. It is not about someone who angers another with a slanderous tongue and gets himself beaten up for it.

Rather, it has to do with one who is undergoing trial because he is trying to live out what he believes as a Christian. It is trouble or suffering that comes his way because he wants to stay close to God and be pleasing to Him. Such a Christian, trying to live authentically, may be ridiculed, criticized, rejected, or misunderstood by others, even by Christians themselves.

Notice that James says, “Consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials.” The word “face” can be translated literally as “fall into”. It implies something happens to you not according to your intention or expectation. It is not something you deliberately make happen.

You may know of people who have travelled on this road—everything is going on very well and then suddenly it happens—a sickness, a death, a loss of job, a failed relationship, etc.

Notice also that James does not say “if you face trials”, but “whenever you face trials”. The point is that trials are always there. It will come to us—it is a matter of “when” not “if”. You might say that trials are inevitable. And this has nothing to do with whether you are very Spirit-filled or not so Spirit-filled. The difference is that some are better able to deal with them than others.

James tells the Jewish Christians in his letter (and us today) that trials are always there. We are never immune to them. So what reality related to authentic Christian living is James teaching? It is this—we need spiritual resilience because even a godly life is not a life without suffering.

This implies that when we are still enjoying the blessings of good health, good job and good life; when pain (like cancer, retrenchment, divorce, or tsunami) has befallen on others but not on us, we must not boast and say, “God, I must be godly.” Rather, it is in such times that we must worship and ask humbly, “God, why are you so gracious to me?”

James also says something that sounds humanly irrational—“consider it pure joy ... whenever you face trials.” Let me try to paraphrase him.

- “Clap your hands with gladness when you have cancer.”
- “Clap your hands with gladness when you lose your job.”
- “Clap your hands with gladness when your loved ones walk out of you.”

How do these sound to you? Does James really mean it this way?

The saying “consider it pure joy” used by James is really deep in its meaning. The word “consider” has to do with intentionally adopting an attitude of

thinking ahead—as you live in the present, consider the future—with your feet standing on where you are, cast your eyes on what’s ahead.

So James is not saying that the joy is the trial. But he implies that beyond the trial there is something God has for us. In light of this, there is pure joy as we intentionally think ahead and consider the future to come.

Many mothers here can testify that labour pain is no joy and no joke. But what comes after the labour pangs (the birth of new baby) is what brings pure joy. The joy is not in the pain, but in what comes after the pain—holding the newly born baby in one’s hands. And when we offer our congratulations to a woman pregnant with child, we are not celebrating in advance the pain she has to go through, but the child who is to come.

James teaches us that in our pursuit of authentic Christian living, even a godly life is not a life without suffering. We need to help one another to grow in spiritual resilience in light of this hard reality.

And what does this resilience imply in our attempt to build up our life as a community of God’s people? It implies that we must not be fatalistic but God-fearing. Being fatalistic tempts us to do what is popular—just do what others are doing since godliness cannot guarantee us immunity from life’s suffering. On the other hand, being God-fearing directs us to do what is right before God.

I am sure you have your own experiences with trials and suffering. And you may become so disillusioned that you may be tempted to take the “broad and easy way” of doing what’s popular before men rather than what’s right before God. Join the crowd—do to others the bad they do to you, not do to others the good you want them to do to you.

And when we live this “broad and easy way” in church, the resilience to be God-pleasing in church will be lost. We begin to tear down rather than edify and build up one another. But if we desire to be God-pleasing, we will not do to one another in church what we dare not do to others in the world, no matter how right we think we are.

James teaches us to face and grapple with one hard reality—a godly life does not mean a life without suffering. Difficult time is no time to be fatalistic and join the worldly crowd. Rather, it is a time to exercise holy resilience—i.e. we must continue to be God-pleasing and do what’s right before God. We must continue to help one another do this in church—to press on in doing what’s right before God even when we are put in a place of trial.

And James continues to exhort that authentic Christian living rests on promise believing, not positive believing—we can think past our present trials to the joy ahead because God Himself has promised something worthy.

In v. 3, James gives us the reason why we are to consider it pure joy whenever trials come our way—"because the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

Satan will want very much to use a trial to bring out the worst of faith in us. However, God uses the same trying situation to test us and to bring out the best of faith in us.

For a child of God, a trial is not a test to find if faith is in him. It is a test to strengthen the faith already in him. In this light, James says, "Consider it pure joy. Rejoice in this prospect. Persevere."

This word "perseverance" literally means "remain under". It pictures someone remaining under a heavy load without giving way. It is a picture of the power of resilience.

ILLUSTRATION: There's a recent movie titled "World Trade Centre". It is about the true story of two police officers trapped in one of the twin towers in New York that collapsed after they were hit by terrorists on 911.

Both men had volunteered to go into the tower to rescue people trapped in the burning building. Just when they had entered it, the whole tower came crashing down. The two policemen were pinned under some heavy debris, seriously injured, bleeding, and unable to move.

The rest of the movie was about how these two men fought desperately to stay alive. They kept talking to and telling each other to hang on and not to give up. They kept recalling memories of times with their loved ones—both the good and the bad times. The idea was to help each other avoid slipping into unconsciousness.

Rescue workers eventually reached and extricated them from the wreckage to the thunderous cheers of many. Both men were pinned under heavy loads of steel and concrete for several hours, yet they did not give up the hope and fight to survive. It is a picture of perseverance, a picture of the power of resilience.

Perseverance is not the destination but the process towards an end. James says in v. 4—"perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

When we talk of growing as a church, we need also to consider growing in perseverance through this process of going through trials. This process itself is never easy. So we need to help one another to persevere, to be spiritually resilient.

James teaches us that when we help one another to persevere (to be resilient) in our difficult times, God uses that process as a journey into spiritual maturity. The mature Christian life is the sweet fruit of bitter times, not one that's always sweet and never bitter.

Of course, perseverance only makes sense when we are willing to continue and change as the Lord leads. To refuse to change but to continue in our own straying is not godly perseverance or resilience; it is human stubbornness.

What we need to help us plod on in the face of earthly trials is not so much human ingenuity. What we really need and often lack is heavenly wisdom.

II. James teaches us to ask for heavenly wisdom, and this implies an assurance of great comfort (vv. 5-8).

James calls on us to ask God for wisdom to help persevere through trials (v. 5). We need to ask for such wisdom from above in times of trial because such occasions almost always stir up:

- Guilt
- Confusion
- Fear
- Anger

James reassures that God is one who gives wisdom “generously” and “without finding fault” to those who ask so that they can deal with these sentiments. He does not use our failures or shortcomings against us when we ask of Him. He does not say:

- “Why are you so stupid to get yourself into such a mess?”
- “Serve you right. Didn't I tell you so?”

Rather, James exhorts us to ask in faith. Since God is not finding fault with us when we ask of Him, He in turn expects us not to doubt Him when we ask (v. 6).

James speaks against being “double-minded” when we ask of God (v. 8). The word literally means “of two souls.” It pictures someone who wants to trust God and something else at the same time. As a result, he becomes unstable and inconsistent in his Christian witness.

We are to ask of God and not doubt Him. But “not doubting” does not mean “not questioning”. Rather, when we question, it is not to reject God in our situation, but to seek to find Him in it. When we question, it is to seek to believe more in God and not to believe less in Him.

But our comfort doesn't lie in getting good answers to our questions. It lies in the assurance of great comfort that James implies when he teaches us to ask

for the heavenly wisdom. And that assurance of great comfort is this—we can be resilient because God cares for us even in our difficult times.

Yes, God does care in our times of suffering. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense to ask and seek Him for wisdom or for anything in times of suffering. God send Jesus Christ who came in the likeness of human flesh to identify with us—He was tempted (though He did not sin) and He suffered the pain of death.

Hebrews 4:15-16 says this of Jesus Christ: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

We can be resilient because God cares for us even in our difficult times. What does this imply in terms of building ourselves up as a community of God? It implies that we must encourage one another not to wallow in our helplessness, but to walk in the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

God in Jesus Christ cares even in our difficult times. Christians need to constantly remind one another of this hope, and help one another to walk in it.

There is a teaching called deism. It teaches that there is a God and He created mankind. But He is a very busy God. So after He has created mankind, He sits back and says, “Well, from now on, you are on your own. I don't have a grand blueprint for your destiny and story. You go create your own destiny and story.” And this teaching encourages a self-dependent spirit, not a God-dependent spirit even though the existence of God is not denied. It also encourages an independent spirit. It encourages an individualistic rather than a community lifestyle:

- I am the master of my own destiny and story.
- I better set my own agenda and take care of myself.
- I will only do it my way and no other way.
- I will only be interested if I can get some personal benefits from it.

But James today exhorts us to pray to God for heavenly wisdom in times of trial. Why? It is because God cares when we go through these times. And His caring implies that He is not passively looking at our situation. Rather, He is actively working in our situation. Indeed, when we pray, God works. And God works because He is intensely interested in us. We don't have to wallow in our helplessness, but we can walk with the hope we have in Jesus Christ. And if we are to be growing as a community of God's people, we are to so remind and encourage one another.

This does not mean that we cannot point out our sins to one another. Sometimes we go the other extreme—i.e. we tell a sinner that God cares for him. And we tell it so much that we unintentionally go soft on his sin. We

quote the Bible—“You must not see the speck in someone’s eye but not the log in your own eye” (Matthew 7:3-5).

But this “speck and log” analogy is not a license for us to be easy on sins. Rather, it really communicates three things:

- Don’t exaggerate the faults of others while excusing that of our own at the same time.
- Judge ourselves first before we judge others. The world’s way is to judge others first so that we look good. But the way of God is to judge ourselves first so that others can look good. This is the way for Christians if we are to build up and not tear down even in our judging.
- Even if you have to judge, do it gently. How would you remove a tiny speck in your own eye? Do you do it roughly just because it is only a tiny speck? Or do you do it with all the gentleness you have?

Conclusion

The letter of James is about living an authentic Christian faith. This does not mean denying the hard realities of trial and pain in this life. Rather, it means growing in holy resilience to deal with these realities. We help one another to persevere in being God-pleasing and to do that which is right before God.

Also, we grow in spiritual resilience as a community by reminding one another that God cares even in our difficult times. So we are not to wallow in our helplessness but to walk in the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

Today, we are reminded that God’s people must be resilient in God’s way even in adverse times because He is still in charge. He is with us and He cares even in the midst of our trials. That’s the joy we can carry with us as we learn and grow to be resilient in Him.