

Our Crucible of Faith

(James 1:2-3)

In an ancient story ascribed to Vitruvius, the Sicilian King Heiro II had handed over a large amount of pure gold for a goldsmith to fashion a votive crown as an offering. The goldsmith returned with a lovely crown, but Heiro harbored suspicions that he had been cheated. He suspected the artisan had kept back some of the gold, and instead substituted its weight in silver. But how to discover the truth of the matter without melting down the crown?

As it happened, he had tasked a famous local scholar with the problem and, in a legendary tale, that scholar discovered that by submerging the crown in liquid, it would push out the same amount of water as its mass. Since gold is more dense than silver, a crown of pure gold would move more water than one of mixed metals.

That scholar, of course, was Archimedes, who famously realized this principle of displacement while taking a bath, and then proceeded to run through the streets naked, shouting "I have it! I have it! '*Eureka!*' "

Archimedes had discovered how to test the integrity of the crown without having to destroy the work to do so.

In today's passage, we have the Apostle James coming right out of the gate with some important lessons and encouragement in these first few verses. He knows how the fledgling believers have been scattered throughout the wider empire, and he knows the difficulties they face - not just those which arise from moving from place to place, but from carrying the testimony of Jesus to new towns and people.

James is eager to show us three things from the very beginning, and we're going to take some time this morning to delve into each of them in turn, so look on your bulletin with me as we'll see first in verse two that:

1) Trials are unanticipated

Following that, in the next verse, James reveals how:

2) Trials serve to strengthen and purify.

and lastly, that

3) the goal and result of trials is to strengthen a believer's ability to persevere

We'll be jumping in shortly, but before we get to our first point, I'd like to first read the passage once again:

“My brethren,
count it all joy when you fall into various trials,
knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” (v2-3)

And for just a moment, we’re stopping on this one phrase:

“...count it all joy.”

The word for “count it” is *hegesthasthe*, and it’s not really meant to be as if you were to be balancing your checkbook, counting the jellybeans in the jar or checking boxes on the form. The word actually means to lead, to rule, to be a commander, as Scripture shows in verses such as:

Hebrews 13:24, “Greet all those who rule over you...”

What James is implying here, before we even begin discussing adversity, is that we are to take the position of a field commander - a battle leader! - when we think on and begin to address hardships in our lives. We are not to “count it,” as if we have pennies in our pocket. No, we are to command it!

We are to review our situation without rushing in blindly.

We are to assess all the tools and means we have at hand - and that most certainly includes the prayerful appeals to the Father's throne for guidance and wisdom in our efforts.

We are to remember that the LORD is with us, and He has:

"...given us all things that pertain to life and godliness." (2 Peter 1:3)

... so, rather than start with a defensive posture, James would have us stand in the strength of Christ, knowing that we have been given everything we need to meet our trials in a godly manner.

So! From that firm footing, let's see what it is James would first have us learn; join me in reading the first point on your bulletin as we see how

1) Trials are unexpected

We know this is so because James says that we “fall into” them. The word has a sense of stumbling into a den of lions - as if we were walking along and, quite by surprise, we rounded a corner and ran straight into a group of evil characters with bad intent.

Jesus uses this word as he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10 verse 30 where he says:

*“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho,
and fell among thieves
who stripped him of his clothing,
wounded him,
and departed, leaving him half dead.”*

In using that same word as our Lord, James is showing how our trials can come seemingly out of nowhere as we walk the path of our day to day lives. And, like the traveller, we might fear the worst - that we may face a trial that threatens our comfort, our health or even our lives.

But Proverbs 16:9 also says:

*“A man’s heart plans his way,
But the LORD directs his steps.”*

And that's encouraging - because it means that He is fully aware of how we've gotten to this place of trial. More encouraging still is that He has already laid our path through it.

God's most common and regular means to provide His people with opportunities to grow and mature come from adversity and from discomfort. God will happily drop our crown into the tub of water to determine its composition.

Isn't it always His way?

Let me illustrate from Scripture -

The LORD led Abraham out of Ur and straight into a promised land - of famine.

God gave Jacob the birthright over his father's house - which he was then forced to flee with little more than the clothes off his back.

He gave Elijah a great victory over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, only for him to run scurrying to a cave from Queen Jezebel's execution order.

The Apostle James wants us to be aware of this truth and take comfort in it!

James knows that these new brothers and sisters, scattered far off in strange cities, are facing a period of great uncertainty - uncertainty for their livelihood, uncertainty for their families, uncertainty for their acceptance in the larger Jewish communities. In a very real and literal sense, they have given all for the cause of Christ.

How, then, are they - and we - to take that position of commanding confidence that the Apostle recommends? How do we face an unclear future without fear? How can we expect to find joy in uncertainty?

James reminds us why.

If, as we've heard, "the LORD plans our steps,"
if we know that the Lord is the "Author and Finisher of our faith,"
...then we can't help but conclude that our trials, our adversities are in God's hand and part of His careful design.

God Himself has placed us into them!

And if the Lord has so done,
if the LORD places us in trials so that He may test our composition,
if the LORD will not test us "*beyond that which we are able to bear*" (1 Cor 10:13),
then we can easily see why James tells us to "*count it all joy*:"
it's because we already have the victory in this trial - and in all trials!

James knows this from his own experience with Christ, he knows the disbelief and doubt we can face when our faith is up against a real, immediate and very present trial.

He wishes to give that same comfort and confidence to the believers in this hour of testing. James reminds them of our first point of application, and it's this:

Trials are unanticipated - but with God, the outcome is certain.

How confidently the general would walk, or the soldier would fight, knowing they would win the battle!

How boldly the soldiers would charge into the fray, knowing they will see the day's end!

What victories could be found in our lives if only we would believe that:

Trials are unanticipated - but, with God, the outcome is certain.

At this stage, a person might be forgiven for asking, "What's the point? If God knows the outcome, if the Lord had already provided the things we need to handle the trials He Himself has appointed, then why are we going through it?" It could seem like an exercise in futility, or worse, we could perhaps feel that God is capricious - that He's somehow taking joy in our difficulties. You see where that could lead to feelings of resentment - and this is not a new thing. When all sorts of horrible catastrophes had befallen Job, his own wife said:

"Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God, and die!" (Job 2:9)

James isn't about to let that doubt take root in these believers, so he moves right on to the next piece of our passage in order to make his next point, you'll see it on your bulletin, how:

2) Trials serve to strengthen and purify

... which we learn as James continues his message.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials,
knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” (v2-3)

I can go on for days about the word “knowing,” which is *ginosko* in the Greek, and how it means an intimate and experiential knowledge. It’s the same word that Christ used when He said in John 17:3:

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you,
the only True God,
and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

What James is pointing out here is that the thing we are to learn, this thing he is about to tell us, is a knowledge that’s intimate, and gained through personal experience. It’s a knowledge that has to go down into our bones if it’s to work effectively.

You only have to grab a hot pan by the handle once. Then you **know**.

You know?

So what is it that James wants us to know?

It is :

“... that the **testing** of your faith produces patience.”

Well - what sort of testing? What are we talking about here?

Hadn't James just indicated to us, in the start of his letter, that we fall into trials? It seems like he's repeating himself here with this talk of trials and testing. Today as well, were likely to make the same assumption. Trials, temptations, testing, it's all the same thing, right?

James is very deliberately saying this is something entirely different.

In the first verse, where the Apostle spoke of the trials that we fall into, that word is like our crown in the bath. It's meant to determine the composition or character of a thing. It's a scientific experiment. That's a trial.

But this - this is Testing.

This testing, this thing which James would have us know through experience, this is “*dokimion*” - and the meaning here is simply to be put into a crucible. In the furnace, all parts come undone. In the fire, the pure metal sinks down even closer to the heat while the impurities rise to the top. The crucible wants impurities gone - and the impurities would much prefer to be away from that fire.

In using this one word, James is telling the church that their very faith will be taken apart and put to the refiner's fire. He wants them to expect it.

Do you now see why the Apostle began this letter at the start by encouraging the believers that the Lord will keep and equip us during all our trials? He did this because, in his love for his brethren in Christ, James wanted us to joyfully walk *into* the fiery furnace.

Matthew Henry speaks of this principle of joyful embracing of adversity as a gift from our Father in this way:

“There must be a sound believing of the great truths of Christianity, and a resolute cleaving to them, in times of trial. That faith which is spoken of here as tried by afflictions consists in a belief of the power, and word, and promise of God, and in fidelity and constancy to the Lord Jesus.”

Without knowing this as “gospel truth,” without having it in our bones in that “ginosko” fashion that James is stressing, then we simply are going to cave in the times of trial. We're not going to see them as loving shapings from the hand of our Maker; no, instead we'll grouse about our bad lusk. Or, worse yet, we may be as Job's wife and mutter: “Curse God and die!”

Put simply: without Christly assurance, there is no Godly endurance.

Without belief and reliance on the unbroken promises of God -
promises for our safekeeping, and our growth, and our maturing, and our continued and continuing conformation to the image of His Son

His Son who died on a Cross as that ultimate promise, that 'earnest' payment that guarantees the whole,

without faith in that assurance which comes from Christ,

then you simply will not endure.

In recent weeks we spoke about changing our perspective - here, then, is the Apostle James giving us this one-two punch of encouragement in telling us how the Lord is not only stage-managing our trials

but that these trials are going to remake us, re-build us, refine us.

After all, isn't that what was promised? Isn't that part of our signing bonus?

"And we know that all things work together for good

to those who love God

to those who are the called, according to His purpose;

For, whom He foreknew,

He also predestined to.... to be conformed to the image of His Son!

That He might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Romans 8:28-29)

"For this is the will of God: Your sanctification..." (1 Thess 4:3)

Isn't that what we want? James is saying to us, 'this is how it happens.'

This testing, this refining, this is how we are brought more and more into conformity with the image and mind of Christ. Like we'll sing in our final hymn:

“The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design
thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.”

James knows that is a great encouragement, and so he uses this opportunity to strengthen their faith in the Lord. We also can take confidence and learn this second point of application from our passage today, and it's this:

Testings and trials are direct evidence of God purifying and sanctifying your life

(repeat)

We say it so often, we say it so glibly. We can even recite passages like:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.

Therefore, be zealous!

and repent.” (Rev 3:19)

... but we don't really take it to heart as often as we should. Instead we can find ourselves looking at trials as disasters or adversity.

What a trick of Satan hides in that word!

Let me illustrate.

In our video study “The Truth Project” with Del Tackett, we learned about “foundational suppositions.” These are assumptions which we presume are true based on the statement being made.

This word, then: “Adversity.”

“Ad,” meaning “against.”

“Verso,” meaning the Word.

The very term itself seems to argue that if something doesn’t go your way, why it must be against the very word of God!

Yet God’s word says precisely the opposite:

“Whom the LORD loves, He corrects,

Just as a father the son in whom he delights.” (Prov 3:12)

We’re taking these loving gifts of our Father and we’re rejecting them, complaining about them, saying they’re meant for ill. James, with this one passage, reminds us all that:

Testings and trials are direct evidence of God purifying and sanctifying your life

“Does God hear me?” you ask.

“How do I know He hasn’t turned His face from Me?”

Well, do you have adversity in your life?

Are events and circumstances such that it’s causing you to seek the Lord, to question Him and His actions, to find out what it is he thinks he’s doing?

Then praise the Lord, brother and Hallelujah, sister, God has by no means given up on you because testings and trials are direct evidence of God's interest and activity in your life.

And when we finally learn that as truth, when we know it the way James wants us to know it, we understand the last point he makes in this passage, read it with me on your outline:

3) the goal and result of trials is to strengthen a believer's ability to persevere

James has told us we already have the victory.

James has told us that this un-making of ourselves is evidence of the loving Father conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ.

Is this all true? Can this be what he's really meaning to say?

James confirms this is indeed the case, as he says in our passage:

"Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience." (v3)

This is another one of those words whose meanings have been diluted over time. We hear a word such as 'patience' and picture some meek, quiet lady in a shawl, sitting in a chair in a doctor's office, not saying a word while she waits for her name to be called. In other parts of Scripture such as Romans 5, this word is translated as "perseverance." Maybe that's closer to the mark, but still a bit 'off the mark.'

As Christians, we can easily think of 'patience' and 'perseverance' as actions, as verbs. We imagine patience as a thing we 'do' in response to some other thing - such as the trials and testings which James refers to in today's passage.

Not surprisingly, James is very very careful with his words here, because the structure of the phrase is such that it is not **we** who are working the patience. Did you get that, I'll repeat it: James makes very clear that it is not we who are working the patience.

We have patience, yes.

We exercise the patience we have, yes.

But what grows and strengthens it in the believer? What gives us more patience?

Nothing less than the trials and testing James has been talking about.

Now let's take a second here because this can touch on a topic that can cause confusion and division, and needlessly so. The question always arises: Are we supposed to work? What is it we're supposed to do - and to what effect?

So before we get to our application, we need to be careful of what we mean. For that, let's take a second and turn to John 15, verses 1-5:

"I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser.

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away

and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes - that it may bear more fruit.

You are already clean, because of the Word which I have spoken to you.

Abide in Me - and I in you.

*As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you, unless you abide in Me.*

I am the vine. You are the branches.

*He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit,
for, without Me, you can do nothing.”*

There is work we do - there is fruit we bear - and we are enabled and motivated and energized and I might even say compelled to do so because of the completed work of Christ on the Cross and the presence of His Holy Spirit in us. Because He is in us, because we are in the vine, we can work, do work, want to work, and work effectually in the will of the Father.

But what work must I do? you may ask.

Let Jesus give you the first and most important:

“This is the work of God: that you believe in Him Whom He sent.” (John 6:29)

Believe!

Not ‘believe - plus,’ not ‘believe but I’ll set aside a little something something in case it gets really bad,’ no, it’s simply to believe. That’s your work. That’s your job, right there. That’s all you, through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, are required to do.

But, thanks be to God, that is not all we are *enabled* to do, that is not all we are *motivated* to do, that is not all we are *equipped* to do. Those works are the joyous fruits of being in Christ.

So - what, then, works the patience?

The testing that the Apostle spoke of - that works the patience.

Have you ever wondered why you couldn't seem to get it together in a trial no matter how hard you tried to endure, to persevere? Maybe it's because we as Christians are not meant to be the ones enduring and persevering.

Christ said to abide in Him - remain in the vine!

Are we drawing on the vine, or are we trying to face this trial under our own power?

Remember again what Jesus said:

"Without Me, you can do nothing."

And - in one regard - we're supposed to be resting! Resting in our faith, resting in the finished work of Christ on the cross in our behalf. Resting, as James notes, in joy that the Father is doing some construction work on His Son's temple.

Are you aware that a vinedresser will cut back new shoots on an existing vine, will cut off their early attempts at fruit, so that they climb higher and grow stronger, so that they receive more of the sun and produces fruit up high, fruit that endures?

Are you resting, knowing that the Father is dressing your branch?

Or are you reacting?

Matthew Henry, again from his commentary, reminds us of the better way - you'll see it printed in your bulletin in blue on the right:

“Let us take care, in times of trial, that patience and not passion, be set at work in us; whatever is said or done, let patience have the saying and doing of it: let us not allow the indulging of our passions to hinder the operation and noble effects of patience; let us give it leave to work, and it will work wonders in a time of trouble.”

If we want our faith to grow, the message is clear: our faith grows when the Lord puts it to the test. Muscle grows when you work out at the gym, stamina increases when you run three miles a day. Faith grows when God puts it to the test - and we get the blessings!

I encourage all of you to take a little time this week and do a work study on “patience” or “perseverance.” On the ground, laying in the field waiting for you are gems like:

2 Thess 1:5: *“Now may the LORD direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.”*

Hebrews 10:36: *“But you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise...”*

and this great one from Christ Himself:

*“Because you have kept My command to persevere,
I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world,
to test the whole earth.” (Rev 3:10)*

And all that’s required of us is :

“...that you believe in Him Whom He sent.”

and when that happens, when we’re in the Vine, when we’re in Christ, He says:

*“Most assuredly, I say to you,
he who believes in Me,
the works that I do, he will do also,
and greater works than these he will do,
because - “*

Because he’s full of vigor and self-determination?

Because she’s stoic and organized?”

No - but instead, we do these greater works because, Christ says:

“... because I go to My Father.” (John 14:12)

So how about you, then?

Have you found yourself uprooted, upended, moved from places of comfort and familiarity? Are you circling the wagons and trying to get some sort of handle on what's going on in this world, in your life, in your head and in your soul? Are you trying to stand against the storms and find yourself knocked to your knees?

There's no better place to be, brothers and sisters.

God is saying to you:

"Do not be afraid!

Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD,

which He will accomplish for you

this day!"

"The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace!"

(Ex 14:13,14)

If you know the Lord and have forgotten that He will fight for you, then praise Him that He has cared enough to bring you to your knees and care for you as his own child.

If you don't know the Lord, then look up.

Look up from your knees and "see the salvation of the LORD!"

Look up from your own hands, battered and bruised from fighting to do for yourself what you cannot.

Hold out your hands to Him and take hold of that salvation of the LORD “which He will accomplish for you, this day! The LORD will fight for you!”

Did you hear that?

Are you fighting God? Do you understand He has set his heart on you, He will have you, He died on a cross for you, so you had better believe the LORD **will** fight for you...

...especially if it's you that's fighting back.

So lay down your arms come to Christ, where you'll find both joy and peace in the midst of the storm.

Let's pray:

1) Trials are unanticipated

2) Trials serve to strengthen and purify.

3) The goal and result of trials is a believer's ability to persevere

“Let us take care, in times of trial, that patience and not passion, be set at work in us; whatever is said or done, let patience have the saying and doing of it: let us not allow the indulging of our passions to hinder the operation and noble effects of patience; let us give it leave to work, and it will work wonders in a time of trouble.” (Matthew Henry)

Hymn 1: 68: We Praise Thee, O God, Our Redeemer

Hymn 2: 526: The Solid Rock

Hymn 3: 408: How Firm A Foundation