

Bethel Fellowship, Minneota, MN
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Introduction¹

Andrew Skurka is famous for being an adventurer, especially in his younger days. He's an ultra-long-distance hiker. He once hiked the Sea-to-Sea Route, running 7,778 miles from Washington to Quebec. It took him 11 months.

Here in Minnesota, the Superior Hiking Trail makes up 310 miles of that Route. Andrew Skurka did it in the winter. In snowshoes! Some of you know how hard it is to use snowshoes on the prairie. I don't know how he did it on the North Shore.

I heard an interview of Skurka about that hike. When he was asked if it was fun, he said it was "type 2 fun." That type 1 fun is fun while you're doing it. And that type 2 is NOT fun while you're doing it, but fun to look back on and grow from the experience.

To paraphrase Skurka best as I can recall, he said that by mile 22 a marathon runner is not having type 1 fun. He is having type 2 fun. He's in sheer agony! But he knows that when he gets across that finish line he is going to laugh with his fellow runners when he asks them, "Did you see me throwing up on the side of the road at mile 22? Man!" But at mile 22, he is just glad to still be in the race.

Life is like that. It's not always type 1 fun. We face trials in this life. But for Christians, trials are opportunities to experience the greatest type 2 fun — or to use a Biblical word, they are opportunities to experience *true joy* that lasts for eternity. When we face trials, we shouldn't grumble. We should rejoice — not in spite of our trials, but *because* of our trials.

I wouldn't dare say that to you if it were just my idea. Right now some of you may be going through more difficult trials than I have ever faced. But I can stand here this morning and exhort you to enjoy your trials because that's what the Bible says in the epistle of James.

The very first thing James talks about is how we should think and feel about trials:

James 1:1–4 1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. 2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I am going to spend most of the sermon this morning on vv. 2–4, where James talks about trials. But v. 1 helps us to understand vv. 2–4, because it gives us some clues about the kinds of trials James might be talking about.

The man who is writing this letter is named James. But just who is this James? That's a pretty common name at the time of this letter, and we meet several men named James in the New Testament. The traditional view is that this is James, the brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and

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Mary. Some people have challenged this view, but I'm not going to spend any time on their arguments this morning. I'm persuaded that James, the brother of Jesus, is most likely the one who wrote this letter.

James says he's writing this letter to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." Do you know what that means? "The twelve tribes" is pretty easy — that means the Jews, the sons of Israel. But what is "the Dispersion?" What does that mean?

Literally, "the Dispersion" means "the scattering." This was the scattering of the Jews throughout Palestine and beyond. At the time James is writing this letter in the mid-40's A.D., this has been happening for centuries — and it would happen with a vengeance after their failed revolt in 70 A.D. But James isn't writing to just any of the Jews. He's writing to Jews who believe in Jesus.

We know that because Jesus comes up over and over in this letter, beginning right here in v. 1. James says he is "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" — the Master, Jesus, the Messiah. And we know something else about James, too, if he's who I think he is. We know he is the senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem. You can read about him leading the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. And he is surely agonizing over the plight of his flock.

So it makes perfect sense that James would be addressing his letter "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," for two reasons. First, at the beginning the church in Jerusalem was completely Jewish; there were no Gentile members. That's why James is addressing this letter to "the twelve tribes" — that's exactly how we might expect one Jew to address his fellow Jews. And second, they were scattered after Stephen was stoned to death in Acts 7. You can read about it in Acts 8:1: "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." That's why James is addressing this letter to "the twelve tribes *in the Dispersion*."

We can hardly imagine the hardship they faced. They've been scattered like the wind, refugees uprooted from their homes, strangers in strange lands. James writes this letter to encourage them, exhorting them to stand firm and persevere and live holy Christian lives wherever they were, whatever they were going through.

It's no surprise, then, that trials are the very first thing James writes about. His brethren are facing terrible trials, trials that might even make your worst trials seem easy. But still he tells them to rejoice in their trials, because their trials are good for them spiritually. And we need to hear that today, because we all face trials, too. This letter may be written to Jewish Christians, but what James says in this letter applies to *all* Christians — Jewish and Gentile, then and now.

So in my sermon this morning I want to exhort you, too, to "count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." But first, we better make sure we understand what James means by "trials." Then I will turn to the way we should respond to our own trials — and why.

Exposition

I. The Trials We Face

So what does James mean by "trials?" The Greek word here is used in a couple of ways. It could mean trials, or *tests*, or it could mean *temptations*. If you have a King James Bible, then you actually see that word "temptations" here in v. 2: "My brethren, count it

all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.” But obviously James really does mean “trial” here in v. 2, because in the rest of the sentence in v. 3 he talks about “the testing of your faith” – and the word he uses there *definitely* means *testing*.

But don’t trials and temptations go together? Usually. If you lose your job or you lose your crop or even your favorite toy, that’s a trial, a test. The temptation that follows is your gut reaction to get angry and throw a temper tantrum — or worse. Will you indulge your gut and give in to temptation, for everyone watching to see, from your family to the angels above? Or will you keep your eye on the prize and keep running the race in a way that brings glory to your Master?

But just what kinds of trials is James talking about? He doesn’t say, exactly – all he says is “trials of various kinds” here in v. 1. But there are clues in the rest of this letter that help us. First, it’s obvious that some of his brethren are poor. In 1:27 he writes about “orphans and widows in their affliction,” and in 2:15 he writes about brothers and sisters who are “poorly clothed and lacking in daily food.”

And some of them are poor because they are being exploited by their wealthy employers. In 2:6 James writes, “Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?” And in 5:4, we find out that these poor people are being cheated – James tells those rich men: “Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” So some of the trials these Jewish Christians face are the day-in, day-out miseries of poverty-stricken refugees who are being exploited by their cruel employers.

But they are probably facing religious persecution, too. They may have fled the persecution in Jerusalem, but they are surrounded by unbelievers who are not friendly to them. In 2:7 James says that these cruel, wealthy employers “blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called” — the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So these are at least some of the trials that these early, Jewish Christians are facing. Some of them are sick, too — James says so later in this letter. But surely there are other trials, too. Anybody who has lived long enough knows that there are all sorts of other trials that we all face from day to day.

None of us face the kind of poverty that some of these Christians are facing. But that doesn’t mean you don’t face trials when it comes to money. Most of you grown-ups know what it’s like to have bills coming due, but you don’t have enough money in the bank to pay them. Because you’ve been there at least once in your life.

None of us face the kind of religious persecution that these Christians are facing. But many of you still know what it’s like to be mocked for being a Christian.

Nor have most of us faced sickness like these Christians. Modern medicine has eradicated many diseases, and when we do get sick or injured we usually don’t have to endure pain and suffering like they did. But we still suffer, and we still die.

But the lesson James is teaching here isn’t just a lesson about such big trials. When you hit your thumb with a hammer, or your sink starts leaking, or your car breaks down, or a

thunderstorm spoils your plans for the afternoon, it's a test. It doesn't matter how small the test is. It is still a test. The question is, how are you going to respond?

Satan wants you to respond sinfully. He wants it in the worst way. Satan hates God, hates him down deep in his gut, and he hates to see God honored. He hates to see us being faithful, being joyful in the Lord, being content and grateful to God. What Satan wants is for us to turn away from God, if even for a moment.

That's what he wanted back in Job 1. When God spoke with Satan, God asked Satan if he had seen his servant named Job, the most godly man on earth. How did Satan answer God? He got downright surly, and he said:

Job 1:9b–11 9 . . . “Does Job fear God for no reason? 10 Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”

You know the rest of the story. God let Satan do terrible things to Job, but Job remained faithful. How Satan must have raged!

Satan wants you to stumble the same way he wanted Job to stumble. And Satan doesn't care what it takes — any trial, big or small, just so long as you fail. So take the small trials just as seriously as the big ones, my friends. How much more must Satan smile if it only takes light suffering to make us stumble? And how much more must Satan rage when it only takes light suffering to sanctify us?

We have looked at what James means by “trials.” Now let us look at how we should respond to trials in our lives.

II. The Way We Should Respond to Trials

How should you respond when you slave over a dish in the kitchen only to drop it on the floor, or when your favorite pet dies, or when your hopes of marrying somebody are dashed? How should you respond when the bills are due and you don't have enough money, or your business is struggling despite all your best efforts, or your doctor tells you that you have cancer?

James says, “Count it all joy, my brothers.” Count it all joy, as in *pure* joy. Does that come easy? No, of course it doesn't. If it did, James wouldn't have to write this and I wouldn't have to preach it. It comes hard.

It comes hard because trials are hard. It comes hard because we groan when we suffer. Paul said so in his letter to the Romans, when he wrote about suffering in chapter 8:

Romans 8:22b–23 22 . . . the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Yes, we groan — but not as those who have no hope. We, that is, who have faith in Jesus.

I know I'm almost always preaching to three groups of people. Brothers, sisters, and friends. Brothers and sisters in Christ, that is. But friend, if you have not turned to Jesus, what are you waiting for?

We who have faith in Jesus know this life is not all we have. There is something more, something in store for us at the end. The pains of childbirth are hopeful pains, because there is joy to come when the baby is born. Even so as we suffer, we know there is joy to come one day when we are glorified with Jesus. Take everything else away, our health, our wealth; our faith matters more — it is more precious than gold.

Paul wrote, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18b), and:

2 Corinthians 4:17b–18 17 . . . this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

This is how we should respond when we face hardships that test our faith in Jesus, our faith in God's promises, our faith in his love and power and glory. We should respond in faith, putting our hand in the Father's and trusting our great high priest Jesus, who knows our weakness. That is how we pass each test, each trial.

And when we do, our faith will be refined like gold in a crucible. In v. 3 James uses the same word, “testing” that Peter did when he wrote:

1 Peter 1:6b–7 6 . . . now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

In the crucible of suffering, in the fire of a trial, our faith, like gold, is melted so that our impurities come to the surface like dross, to be scraped off and thrown away. As James says in v. 3, “the testing of your faith produces steadfastness,” perseverance, endurance — just as Paul said, in Romans 5:3.

Assuming, of course, that you do pass the test. Don't forget the sober warning in Hebrews 3:

Hebrews 3:7b–11 7 . . . “Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, 9 where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. 10 Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ 11 As I swore in my wrath, ‘They shall not enter my rest.’ ”

God tested his people Israel time and again. But he did it because he loved them. Moses told them that God led them “through the great and terrifying wilderness,” with all of its hardships, “that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end” (Deu 8:15a, 16b)

And so God tests us. He doesn't tempt us — we do that all by ourselves, James says later in this chapter. But God does test us. He tries us. And he does it because he loves us. And with each trial that we pass, we grow. With each temptation we resist, we grow.

Some of you know exactly what I mean. You've been through trials you never imagined. Thank God for the trials he gave you years ago that prepared you for them. Those trials produced the endurance that you have now — and the trials you are facing today are producing even more endurance for the trials that lie ahead.

Let me ask you a question. When you are in school you take tests, right? Do those tests get easier or do they get harder? They get harder, right? Of course they do. The tests you take in elementary school aren't as hard as the tests you take in high school. The tests you take in high school aren't as hard as the tests you take in college. The tests you take in graduate school are even harder; the tests you take in post-graduate school, harder still. Each test is harder in order to prepare you for the harder test to come. Even so may our trials become more difficult as we grow.

Trials are normal. Don't fall for the so-called prosperity gospel that promises you health and wealth if only your faith is strong enough (and usually only if you donate enough money!). Take Job — he was the most godly man on earth in his day, but he had to face horrible trials like never before in his life! And take Jesus, not just a godly man but God himself, utterly sinless, yet he was mocked and beaten and crucified, all "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Act 22:23b).

Only Old Testament Israel was promised prosperity if they would keep the Mosaic covenant, and they never could keep it anyway. Like Job, like Jesus, like all the martyrs who have suffered and died, it is for us to rejoice in our trials at least as much as in our prosperity.

And by the way, when you face trials, don't make the mistake of saying, "I just don't know what I'm doing wrong! These trials are just getting harder! Maybe I'm not in the will of God. I'm just not being blessed!" That's what many Christians think.

They think that if they're facing hard trials, it must be because they haven't discerned God's perfect will for their lives. They think that if they're facing trials, it must be a sign from God that he's "closing the door" on something in their lives. They think that maybe they have chosen the wrong school, picked the wrong job, moved to the wrong town, or whatever. And so they keep trying to figure out what the perfect choices are so they can match God's perfect plan for their lives — only then will their trials go away.

That is completely turned around, upside down and backward. In our passage this morning, James doesn't tell us, "Count it a big warning when you meet trials of various kinds." He doesn't say, "Figure out what you're doing wrong when you meet trials of various kinds." No, he says, "Count it all joy!" Even when the trials keep getting harder. *Especially* when the trials keep getting harder. This is your chance to grow, to train, to develop your endurance like a marathon runner.

That doesn't mean that you have to stick with a dead-end job or a failing business. Use the head God gave you and figure out what seems most prudent. But it does mean that you shouldn't interpret trials as a sign from God that he's "closing a door."

If you want to know what the perfect will of God is for your life, look no further than v. 4. James says, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In other words, don't fail these tests. Pass each one. Keep growing. Don't grumble, don't rebel, don't turn aside. Stay faithful and rejoice that you have another chance to trust God during a hard time in your life. That is the path to being perfect, complete, whole — Christlike!

Not that we will ever be perfect in this lifetime. James isn't teaching some kind of perfectionism here. At the end of this letter he tells us to confess our sins to one another — we all still sin. Our goal of perfection lies past the finish line, in heaven.

The trials we face are hurdles on the road to heaven. Rejoice at the challenges. Rejoice that they make you stronger, no matter how terrible they are. Rejoice that they make you more and more like Christ.

Conclusion

The world doesn't understand this. When trials befall them, they get angry at God. I've told some of you before about a hospice class I attended years ago. They tried to teach me, "It's okay to die screaming at God. God has big shoulders!"

No, it's not okay to be angry at God, ever. Ever. That's pride talking — pride that thinks we are somehow entitled to more from life than we are getting.

You and I need that pride to be broken. We deserve nothing but eternal damnation because each and every one of us has sinned against our holy, sovereign God. The fact that we aren't piles of ashes right now is proof of how merciful God is. God loves us so much that he has given us his only Son to die for us on the cross so we could believe in him and become children of God. And he loves us so much that once again he has patiently brought us back to his Word.

If you are a Christian, then this is what God has done for you. And now your loving Father is helping you grow. He is giving you the trials you need so "that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end" (Deu 8:16b). If you're going to face tomorrow's trials, you need today's trials.

And the joy that will be yours if you look to God in faith and hope and love in the time of trial is infinitely greater than any wicked pleasure you will ever get from turning aside. The joy of resisting temptation is infinitely greater than any wicked pleasure you will ever get from giving in to temptation.

So count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

Rejoice in your trials!