

# From Self-Pity to Joy for 2021

James 1:1-27

*Halifax, Glenholme & Livestream: 27 December 2020 at 10:30*

## Introduction

Today I am going to again break from our regular sermon series in Mark to do a special seasonal sermon.

- This week, it is a sermon for the New Year.
- I hear a lot of people talking about what a hard year 2020 has been and how glad they will be for it to be over—
  - They say that they hope very much that 2021 will be a much better year.

Certainly, it is understandable why people would say this.

- I don't need to go over all the difficulties that we have experienced in 2020.
- But what I do want to do is help you learn how to look at your hardships with joy as God has commanded you to do.
  - The truth is that many Christians have way too much self-pity right now about their hardships, and we need to prepare for the New Year, not by engaging in a lot of wishful thinking, but by adjusting our attitude about our hardships.

The Scripture I have chosen to help us with this is James chapter 1.

- Please give me your attention as I read this helpful passage to you.

**James 1:1-27: James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. <sup>2</sup> My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. <sup>4</sup> But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. <sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> *he is* a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. <sup>9</sup> Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when**

**he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. <sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup> But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. <sup>16</sup> Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup> Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. <sup>18</sup> Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. <sup>19</sup> So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; <sup>20</sup> for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. <sup>21</sup> Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. <sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers**

only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. <sup>25</sup> But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of

the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. <sup>26</sup> If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. <sup>27</sup> Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord endures forever.

In this chapter, James, the Lord's brother, who was a pastor at Jerusalem, was writing to the believers from Jerusalem who had been scattered by persecution.

- Many of them had been disowned by their families and put out of the synagogue for believing that Jesus was the Messiah and for engaging in His worship.
  - In some cases, they had been reduced from wealth to poverty, losing their jobs and their businesses and their inheritances.
  - Some among them had been imprisoned and executed and many others had been forced to flee from their homes in Jerusalem and Judea.
    - It was a very difficult time.

And here is James, their compassionate pastor (and I mean that—he was compassionate) writing to them and saying by the Holy Spirit, after the briefest introduction:

- **James 1:2: My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.**
- James, or rather the Holy Spirit by whom he spoke, has written this not only for them, but also for us about the various trials that we fall into...
  - Whether they are personal matters or public matters—big trials or little trials—he says it of all kinds of hardship, and we need to take this commandment to heart.
  - It is from the LORD, so it comes to us with His authority. It is also for our good.

But how were these saints who had been through so much supposed to obey this command to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials?”

- And how are *we* supposed to do that with our trials?
  - Are we supposed to put on a plastic smile and say, “praise the Lord” about our hardships?
  - Are we supposed to become stoics who are immune to pain or some kind of twisted people who take pleasure in pain?
    - No, of course not.
- James is not telling you to turn off your feelings. You can't do that.
  - He is calling you to look at your trials in a way that is so different that it makes you glad to have them.
  - When he says, **count it all joy**, the word *count* is a word that means “to lead,” as in when you say something like, “This leads me to believe...”
    - It's a little hard to translate, but perhaps you will get the idea if I say that the call here is *to lead yourself to complete joy when you fall into various trials.*
    - It is a joy that you come to by the process of looking at your trials in a godly way... you lead yourself to see your trials in a way that produces unmixed joy.

- You will say, “But that is impossible.”
    - “How can I possibly find joy when I fall into all kinds of hardship?”
    - James tells you how in the rest of this chapter.
      - Let’s take a look at five things.
- I. First, to find joy in your trials, you need to know that they are given to make you whole.**
- Look at verse 2-4: **My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. <sup>4</sup> But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.**
- A. It is easy to rejoice in trials when you know that they have such a wonderful purpose.
1. If someone handed you thirty thousand dollars and told you to throw it to the wind, you would have a hard time parting with it.
    - But if you needed a car and they told you to go and buy a new car with it for yourself, you would gladly part with it.
      - The trial of losing thirty thousand dollars would be joyful to you because you would be getting something you want and need.
    - To use another illustration:
      - If someone dive tackles you into a mud puddle when you have new clothes, you would not like that very much until you found out that they did it keep you from being run over by a train.
      - A new perspective changes everything.
  2. James tells you here that the ultimate purpose of trials is to make you perfect and complete so that you lack nothing.
    - The word perfect (*tel-i-ous*) means that you have become everything you need to be or ought to be.
      - We ran into this word recently when I was talking to you about what the book of Hebrews says about Jesus—that He was made perfect as a priest for us through sufferings—He was made everything that we need Him to be as our priest by His sufferings on the cross.
      - So trials have a *perfect work* in that they make you *perfect*—all that God calls you to be as a person. They work to bring that about.
    - James also says that they make you complete so that you lack nothing.
      - This word *complete* means *whole*, so that nothing is unsound or incomplete.
      - It is really just a repetition of the same idea, along with the words “lack nothing,” to emphasise the idea of being all that you ought to be before God—the whole person that He has called you to be.
        - It is so remarkable that the triple emphasis is needed!
  3. Surely, if you know that trials can take you who are filled with so much that is unsound, ruined, and corrupt and make you complete and whole,
    - Trials are something to rejoice about.

- Of course you need to recognise that change is needed and that the change is good, but as a believer, you are at least well on your way to seeing that already.
  - Because if you are a believer, you have come to Jesus Christ to be saved from your sin and you know that your sin was bad enough that He had to die on the cross for your forgiveness and to work in you by His Spirit for your transformation—
    - And now James is here informing you that trials are one of the things God uses to make you whole as a person.
    - Even through you are largely blind to how much you need to change, you at least know that you do.

B. James describes a two-stage process here.

- First there is patience, and then there is wholeness.
  1. In verse 3, you are told that patience comes through the testing of your faith by the trials that you experience.
    - As Christians, we are taught to call our hardships trials because they are trials or tests of our faith.
    - The test is this—when we are serving God and a lot of things go wrong, will we keep on serving God or not?
      - In Numbers 11 that we read earlier today, we saw that Israel got tired of serving God because of the hardships in the wilderness and concluded that it would be better to go back to Egypt.
      - They did not consider it worthwhile to bear all the trials that were involved to become perfect and complete in God’s service, so they bailed out.
        - They did not trust that what God was doing in them would be worth the trouble they were going through.
        - They were like Esau who thought filling his belly with some stew was more important than his birthright from God.
        - Like Esau, they did not have faith.
  2. But how does it produce patience when your faith is tested by trials?
    - It is like this:
      - Every time your faith is tested, you have to decide what you really believe—is it more important to escape the hardship or to serve God?
      - And to make that decision, you have to weight out how much your relationship with God is worth to you—and every time you do that, you look more closely and more fully at God and His calling and how wonderful He is and how wonderful your calling is!
      - This deepens your faith.
    - The faith of the men of faith in Hebrews 11 is described this way.
      - Noah chose the hardship of building an ark because he believed God.
      - Abraham left his homeland because God promised to bless him and give him a city whose builder and maker is God.

- And Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God for forty years in the wilderness rather than live in the palace of Egypt because he believed that it was far better to come to God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.
  - He grew into that understanding as he went on and God worked in him.
- Each time you are brought to a place where your faith is tested, it forces you to reconsider just how valuable a thing it is to walk with God.
  - And each time you do that, you see a little bit more how good a thing it is to come to God and to receive the blessing that He promises you in Christ.
  - And each time you see that, it increases your love for Him and for His salvation and makes you more and more perfect and complete.
    - You thrive more and more in your walk with God!

TRANS> The more you know how much the trials help you to become whole, the more you are able to count it all joy when trials come.

- But sometimes you are not able to see clearly that it is worth it to bear the trial—to keep on serving God.
  - When you can't see that, it means that you have a problem with wisdom.
    - When you are wise, you are able to see what is most important.
    - Wisdom begins with the fear of God—which means that you can see clearly that serving God and growing in Him are the most important things of all.
  - But sometimes you are feeling sorry for yourself.
    - You want to vent your anger by erupting to show how unhappy you are with what God is doing.
    - Or you want to indulge in porn or in an affair because of that spouse that God has given you—you feel that you deserve it.
    - Or you don't want to serve others or go to church because you are unhappy with the way life is going for you.
    - Or your finances are tight and you want to get some relief by resorting to a little dishonesty...
  - You are lacking wisdom.
    - You are not seeing how much better it is to serve God and endure the trial than to escape the trial.
    - This brings us to the second thing you need to find joy in your trials.

## **II. Second, to find joy in your trials, you need to pray for wisdom.**

- James speaks about this from verse 5 through verse 11.
- A. In verse 5, he begins by saying, “if any of you lacks wisdom.”
1. He knows that there will be such times as I have described when you just don't see the value of serving God.
  2. So James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.”
    - When you do not see things clearly, ask God to help you see them as they are.
    - Sometimes we have to wrestle in our prayers, asking God to show us how important He and His kingdom really are in comparison to everything else.
- B. James assures you that God will be most willing to answer that prayer.

1. He says that God gives liberally and without reproach.
  - He knows your weakness and hates it when you pretend that you have it all together, but welcomes you when you come looking for help.
  - James assures you that God will give you the wisdom that you seek.
    - The problem is, we don't usually humble ourselves and bother to ask.
2. But James does add that our prayers must be genuine:
  - In verse 6 he says: **But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.**
  - James does not mean that you have to have your faith all worked out when you ask—otherwise, why would you need to ask?
    - He means that you need to be sincere in really looking for help and that when God shows you the value of serving Him, you will serve Him.
    - You won't keep going back and forth even after He has opened your eyes.
      - It makes so much difference when you simply say, "This is not an option," and stick with that.
3. In verse 9-11, James describes what it looks like to embrace the wisdom that God gives you.
  - **Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation...**
    - He had come to see that his lowly status in the world does not matter because he has so many riches in Christ.
  - **Let the rich brother glory in his humiliation...**
    - He has come to see that his high status in the world is not what makes him—he glories in being brought down in the world because God has shown him that what he has in Christ is the only thing that matters.
    - His riches would have all perished anyway, so instead of turning back to them the way a doubleminded man would do, he will stick with Christ.

TRANS> So now we have seen two things needed to find joy in trials.

- That we see that the purpose of them is to make us perfect and complete.
- That we ask God for wisdom when we lack it.
- And now, the third thing that James tells us:

### III. To find joy in your trials, you must get a right perspective on temptation.

- There are two things that make up a right perspective about temptation:
  - A. First, you need to realise that life comes through enduring temptation and death comes by giving in to it.
    1. Verse 12 explains that the blessing of life comes to you when you endure temptation—that is, when you do not give in to it.
      - **Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.**

- This is a reiteration of what we saw back in verse 3-4 where we were told how temptation makes us whole—perfect and complete.
  - Here, that is describes as being blessed with the reward of life.
- 2. But in verse 14-15, we are told that when we give in to the temptation, it leads to death—instead of making us whole, it disintegrates us, it destroys our relationship with God and isolates us from Him.
- 3. This is one of the most helpful things of all to see when you are tempted...
  - Ask yourself, do I want to destroy the relationship that I now enjoy with God, or do I want to enhance it?
  - Do I want to ruin my life by giving into this temptation, or do I want to become more complete and whole by enduring it without caving in?
  - Do I want to wreck my relationship with my family by venting my anger, or do I want to strengthen it by enduring for God and responding to please Him?
  - Do I want to wreck my conscience by doing what I know to be wrong, or do I want to strengthen and grow in it by doing what pleases Him?
  - Do I want to destroy my witness to others as a Christian so that they mock my Saviour, or to show them how much better it is to serve Him?

TRANS> You can rejoice in the trial when you see temptation as an opportunity to enhance your relationship with God.

B. Second, you need to understand where temptation comes from.

- In short, temptation does not come from God, it comes from your own sinful heart.
- 1. Verse 13 says: **Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.**
  - That’s right.
  - In His providence, God brings trials into your life—every one of them is designed by Him.
    - But when He does and you are tempted to depart from Him and sin, He is never the one who tempts you—
    - When you are led to think that sin would be a good thing to do, that is never an inclination that comes from God.
      - In the trial, He always calls you to be holy—to flee from sin—to come to Him and be blessed with life instead of departing from Him and destroying your walk with Him.
- 2. The temptation to sin never comes from Him—it always comes from you.
  - Verse 14 & 15 says: **But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.**
  - It is because you still have in you that which is drawn to sin and rebellion that you are drawn away from God in your trials.
    - That’s why you need the trials—to root out the corruption that is in you that is exposed by the temptation—as you choose life instead of death, God instead of sin, suffering with Him rather than indulging in ease without Him.

- That is what we need in this world that we might become whole—perfect and complete so that we lack nothing.
3. If you think that temptation comes from God, it will keep you from rejoicing in your trials because you will see them as God trying to lure you away from Him.
    - As ridiculous as that is, that is what our twisted minds often conjure up.
    - We entertain the idea that God is trying to destroy us when in fact He is at work in us to make us whole.

TRANS> And that brings us to the next thing you need if you are to rejoice in your trials.

#### **IV. You need to gain a right perspective about God and His goodness.**

A. You need to see that He is the giver of good gifts—every good thing that comes to us.

1. Verse 16-17 say: **Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup> Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.**
  - His business with us is to enhance our lives, to bless us and make us complete.
  - He is not in the business of luring us away, of giving us what would harm us or destroy us.
    - He is consistently the giver of what is good and holy.
2. Surely this is proven by the fact that He has given us salvation—in accordance with the good pleasure of His own will (even when we were not willing).
  - Verse 18 says: **Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.**
    - He brought us forth to be whole—that we might come to Him and live—that our lives might be filled with beauty and holiness like Jesus.
    - He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son—full of love, full of service, full of holiness and all that is lovely.

B. You desperately need to see that God is good.

1. Do you know what happens when we are tempted?
  - We are deceived about the goodness of God (James began in verse 16 by saying, “Do not be deceived”).
  - We think, as Eve did long ago, that following God will be the way that is harmful and destructive and that following the temptation will be good and life-enhancing.
    - We question the goodness of God—and we are so wrong about Him when we do that—so wrong.
2. And that wrecks us when trials come.
  - You act like God is doing you wrong because He has withheld something you want or that you think you need.
  - You have a little pity party—you feel sorry for yourself and suppose that God, who is working to make you whole, is withholding what you deserve.
3. Tell me, is self-pity not at the root of almost every sin?
  - Here are a few I thought of this week:



- Ingratitude and lack of praise—because you think God has done you wrong.
- Envy and covetousness—because you think God has not given you what you deserve.
- Indulgence in gossip and slander—because He has given others more than you think they deserve and you are displeased about this.
- Sexual immorality—porn and such—because you are unhappy with God has given you in that regard and feel you deserve it—a famous Christian apologist apparently was guilty of that very attitude.
- Idolatry—because you don't like the way God wants to be worshipped.
- Refusal to bear the cross—because you think God is asking too much of poor little you.
- Complaining and whining for the same reason.
- Disobedience to authority, because you don't like those God has placed over you and think that they are unjust and unfair to you.
- Excuse making—I did this because...
- Bitterness—which defiles others.
- Angry outbursts—you blow up because you feel you have been wronged—what a wimp you are!
- Theological error—because you don't like the truth
- Fighting—because others displeased you.
- Laziness—because you deserve a break—
- Excessive drinking and drugs—prescription or otherwise—because life is too hard.
- Gluttony—at least you can find pleasure in stuffing yourself.
- Spending spree—because you have been deprived.
- Withholding tithes or proper payment of others, refusing to help the poor—after all, God, you think, has not given you enough.
- Apostasy—because you are done with following God—it is not worth it.
- Witchcraft—because you want more power.

TRANS> Self pity is such a disgusting destructive thing—and it is all built on the lie that God is not good and that He has wronged you.

- In the remainder of the chapter, James tells you how you should proceed since God is good and does good.

**V. In short, you will find joy in trials if in them, you entrust yourself to your gracious Lord to shape you as He pleases through the trials.**

A. In verse 19-20, James tells you how to operate since in fact God is good and is giving you good things, not things that will be harmful to you.

1. He tells you not to be angry with God about your trials, for He has done no wrong to you as you pretend.
  - Instead be eager to learn from Him—He is ready to fill your life with good things and you should be eager to embrace them!
2. Here are James's words:
  - **James 1:19-20: So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.**

- Believe what James says here: being angry with God and claiming that He has wronged you will not make you righteous.
  - It will not give you an excuse that will stand up in the day of judgment.
- 3. Instead you should be eager to listen to God—swift to hear and slow to speak.

TRANS> And what does God tell you to do when you put away your anger and are swift to hear?

B. Verse 21 is the key to all:

- Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.
- This is how James puts it:
  - **21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.**
- 1. The goal is to lay aside the filthiness and overflow of wickedness.
  - That is repentance—God is at work, not for harm, but to cut out the corruption and sin—and there is a lot that needs to be cut away.
    - That’s the reason that the trials are needed to make you whole.
    - God is a master craftsman and He is cutting away all that is offensive.
      - Yes it is painful, but it is good.
      - Submit to the knife.
- 2. And along with repentance, James tells you to **receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.**
  - The implanted word is gospel of Jesus Christ.
    - You look to Him (with meekness) to do the saving as He has promised.
    - His word of promise is the word that is able to save your soul.
    - Don’t fight against to Him...bow to Him.

C. The passage continues (verse 22-27) with a call to put His word into practice.

1. As He works in you through trials and difficulties, you will see what you are and you will see what you lack... your sins will be exposed.
  - You are warned not to forget what you have seen, but to make the changes that are needed...
    - Verse 23-24 warn you about seeing your shortcomings and walking away without making the changes that are called for.
2. But you are not to do this as one who is condemned for those shortcomings.
  - You are to do it as one who is being shaped by the hand of Jesus Christ our Saviour that you might be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.
    - That is what James means when he speaks in verse 25 of looking into the law of liberty—the law that does not condemn, but leads you in beautiful living for God by the gracious working of Christ—by the implanted word that is able to save your soul—the power of His gospel.
3. The changes will be visible and tangible when God is at work in you.
  - When self pity goes out and faith in our saving God comes in, your religion will be real.

- Verse 26-27: **If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.** <sup>27</sup> **Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.**

**Conclusion:** So are you ready for a new year?

- Are you ready to put aside the self-pity and to turn to our gracious Lord and submit to His chisel and hammer to make you perfect and complete, lacking nothing?