

“The ‘Good’ Life”
Series: “Shoe-leather Christianity”
James 1:1-12
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(Faith; Providence)

Please read:

James 1:1-12 “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. ⁹ The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. ¹² Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

A man who was a very popular Christian author for a number of years tells, in one of his books, an interesting story:

Frank Foglio’s daughter had been injured in an automobile accident. Her brain was severely damaged and despite thousands of prayers she continued to deteriorate and was finally placed in the mental ward for the terminally ill.

After seven years it seemed completely hopeless and the situation took its toll on Frank’s previously unshakeable faith in God.

On his way to the ward one day, he was complaining to God about the whole situation – “How could you be a God of love; I wouldn’t permit such a thing to happen to my daughter if I had the power to prevent it. You could heal her but you won’t.

Frank could feel his anger rising when he had the distinct impression he was being spoken to and the voice simply said, “Praise Me!”

“Knowing it was God, Frank replied. “What for?”

In response, Frank heard, “Praise Me that your daughter is where she is.”

“Never!” Frank responded. He felt God had no right to expect him to praise God when God was not doing what he could to help his daughter.

(Merlin Carothers, *Praise Works*, 1,2 – I don’t recommend this book or his other books. Even this title is obnoxious, as if praise were utilitarian. But in spite of the bad theology Carothers has built out of this idea, he has touched on one idea from James 1:2 that is important, which we will discuss in this sermon.)

The author of that book was suggesting that Christians should praise God for the bad things that come into our lives.

Several years ago, I read an account of a father and mother who seeing their children killed in a fiery car crash, knelt down by the side of the road and began to sing praise to God.

I remember thinking then as I still do in large part, “That’s crazy!”

Then I recall reading this from the book of Acts 16:22-25 “The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and **singing hymns to God...**”

They were not just reciting quotes from favorite hymns to buoy their spirits; they were singing **to God!**

Well, I’m not inclined to call the Apostle Paul crazy and I’m much less inclined to call the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures, crazy.

Which brings me back to our text for today, **James 1:2 “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...”**

Is James serious? I think he is.

But this is so counterintuitive!

It sounds absurd?

- They foreclose on my house, and I’m supposed to thank God?
- My child lies in a city morgue and I’m supposed to be grateful?
- I have a debilitating disease that plagues me every day of my life and I’m told to consider it pure joy?

Let’s first of all be certain we know what James is talking about.

What are these trials?

“Trials” is a word that also means test or temptation.

It is linked to the word for attack or our word “pirate.”

James says trials come at us in many forms; they can be the result of simply living in a fallen world where disease, natural disasters, and the evil perpetrated by others come on us as well as on others.

Trials may also be sent by God himself or they may be the attack of Satan.

So again they come in many forms; they may be a financial reversal, the death of a loved one, physical illness, opposition from others, even opposition to our faith.

And such trials come often unexpectedly.

James says, “**whenever** you face trials.”

Unlike the Apostle Peter who spoke mostly of suffering that comes as opposition to our relationship with Christ, James speaks of **all** the bad stuff of life.

So James is talking about everything from minor discomforts to major tragedies.

So we come back to the command to us Christians.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...”

And again, I say, that sounds absurd.
What does he mean, “Consider it pure joy?”

First of all the word “consider” means to think about it.

James is not saying God commands you to feel giddy and happy when something bad happens.

NO! We are not called to be masochists as in “hit me again, I love it!”

With that in mind, it is true that we are not called on to pretend that everything that happens is good.

Evil is evil, disease is disease, death is death.

Some people misunderstood the old KJV of Romans 8:28 thinking that we must somehow consider all things as good - “...all things work together for good to them that love God. . .”

The NIV gets it right when the emphasis is not on trying to pretend that all things are good but that “...in all things **God** works for the good of those who love him. . .”

So in this “considering” James is not calling us to an emotion but to a point of view; he says “consider it pure joy.”

One author writes, “Joy,” in turn, speaks of a state of being rather than an emotion. Joy proves quite different from happiness, so that this verse does *not* support the idea that a Christian must smile all the time! Joy may be defined as a settled contentment in every situation or an unnatural reaction of deep, steady and unadulterated thankful trust in God. (Blomberg, yet unpublished manuscript on James, 38)

So it isn't that we take joy in the negative experiences of life; we take joy in the outcome God is working.

Verse 3 makes that abundantly clear.

How can you “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds...?”

James 1:3-4 “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything

Again, I am **not** called on to delight in the difficulty;
I'm called on to think about the good that God will produce
through this difficulty.

And I'm called on to so trust him for that good that I can
thank him even before I see the good or even if I never
see it.

James says that these trials are a testing of our faith.

They are not testing to see if we will fail but testing to prove the
genuineness of our faith.

Here's the way the Apostle Peter said it in 1 Peter 1:6-7
"for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all
kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith...may
be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and
honor when Jesus Christ is revealed

In fact, James says, **these trials are what develop and
mature your relationship to God.**

The testing of our faith develops perseverance and perseverance
develops our character.

Perseverance is not just dogged determination; it is not just
gritting your teeth and coping with the situation.

Perseverance is a constancy of our actions because of
our confidence in God – it is acting with a conviction that
God will bring good through these circumstances.

And it is that perseverance, forged in the trials of life, which results in
spiritual maturity – becoming full-grown in Christ.

Or to say it differently, it is these trials that shape us to become
like Jesus.

Our men's ministry hosts several sessions each year called "Voices
of Sages" where older men share their life stories.

"Sage" means "wise through reflection and experience." (Miriam-
Webster)

When I was asked to be the pastor of this church, nearly 30 years ago, one request made of me was to tell the committee what the most trying time in my life had been and what I had learned from it.

Well I was only 19 years of age, or maybe a little older (joke!) and I didn't have a lot to say.

I didn't, then, understand the significance of that question the way I do now.

I pause here to reflect on what I consider to be a huge assumption James makes about his readers as he begins his book.

Apparently he assumes his readers want to be spiritually mature.

When James writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds," I think he has a very different agenda for life than most of us have.

He assumes I'm more interested in character than in comfort.

What's our definition of the "good" life, is it material affluence or spiritual maturity?

If you could be like any other person in the world, whom would you most want to be like?

Please notice that I didn't say whose possessions or fame would you most like to have.

Ask most kids or for that matter too many adults who they'd most wish to be like and they immediately begin listing the superstars or the superrich.

But I'm asking, when you think **not** of what they **have** but what kind of **person** they are, who would you most want to be like?

Again, I need to be clear; I'm not asking whose athletic ability or intellectual acumen you most admire.

Instead, I'm talking about personality, about character.

Would you rather be like Mother Theresa or Donald Trump?

Would you rather be witty, urbane, and sharp or wise, humble and without guile?

Would you rather be powerful or one who loves?

So again, not what do you want **to have**, but who would you want **to be like**?

Let me cut to the chase, if over the next 10-20 years you could be reshaped into the likeness of Jesus, would you want to be?

When you hear character traits such as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control,” do they sound appealing?

When you hear “temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, gentle,” approachable and content – do you really want to be like that?

The problem many of us have with James 1:2 is that we aren't striving for the same objective.

Our definition of the “good life” is so different than God's definition.

A popular author and pastor of the largest church in America encourages his readers to dream, "Someday, I'll earn more money, and I won't have to worry about how to pay the bills." "God wants to increase you financially," "Even if you come from an extremely successful family, God still wants you to go further" "Get rid of that small-minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough" (p. 11). "Many people settle for too little . . . He further explains that this quest for financial and material increase is actually pleasing to God. He claims that "God *wants* to pour out 'His far and beyond favor.' God wants *this* to be the best time of your life" You see, according to him, God particularly wants you to experience His goodness, in physical, financial, and social ways, here and now. Daryl Wingerd in critique of Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*. <http://www.ccwonline.org/osteen2.html>

Many around us and too many Christians chase power, fame and money; the Bible calls us to humility, obscurity and contentedness.

The world says **this life** is all there is so grab the brass ring; go for the gusto and carpe diem.

The Bible says **the life to come** is the objective and this life is to learn, grow, and prepare.

To understand James 1:2 I must get my definition of the good life straightened out so that it matches God's definition – a Christ-like character.

And that I believe is what James is addressing in verse 5: James 1:5 “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

James words this statement in such a way as to imply that we are all in this condition – we all lack this wisdom.

Wisdom is not information.

Wisdom is much deeper; it is seeing things as they really are, to perceive trials for what they really are.

Wisdom is “to cease to live by what appears to be true and to live, instead, by what actually is the truth of the matter.” (Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, 44)

We look at our difficult or tragic situation and we are easily convinced there is no hope, there is no purpose, and there is nothing good that can come from it.

In that temptation to despair, we are instead commanded to turn to God and ask him for wisdom – to enable us to see with faith even while we are still blind and to know with confidence even while we still don't understand.

It is the wisdom to believe what I cannot see or even imagine.

That wisdom is a gift from God, James says.

We must ask for it and God will give it.

Warren Wiersbe tells of a former secretary of his who had had a stroke, her husband had gone blind and he was then taken to the hospital where it was assumed he would die.

When Wiersbe saw the woman in church the next Sunday he said that he had been praying for her.

She asked him, “What are you asking God to do?”

He was startled by the question and said, "I'm asking God to help you and strengthen you."

She then said, "I appreciate that, but please pray about one more thing. Pray that I'll have the wisdom not to waste all of this!" (Wiersbe, *Be Mature*, 29)

When we are sick or out of work or face a tragedy, how do we tend to pray? "Oh God change my circumstances!"

Now understand, no merit is gained with God for being in pain. It is perfectly natural and right that we should want negative circumstances to change.

Our loss is in not understanding **why** God allowed that pain in the first place **and** our carping at God **when** he doesn't change it.

Because we ought to KNOW something that others don't know - We know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

One theologian wrote: "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the Courage to change those things I can, and the Wisdom to know the difference."

But while the wisdom of James 1:5 starts there, it is more than that – this is the wisdom not only to know and accept what can't be changed but the wisdom to believe what God is doing through it.

But James does indicate **one condition** for receiving this wisdom: James 1:6-8 "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

James is **not** saying you must never question God. He is **not** saying you must have perfect faith.

In these verses he describes the kind of man who will **not** receive this wisdom when he asks for it – it is the man or woman who has **not** made up his or her mind about God.

It's the person who hasn't yet decided whether it is character or comfort that will define the "good" life for them.

It the one who has yet to decide if he will most love God or money.

And so he vacillates.

But the one who has made the decision to follow Christ,
 the one who has looked at the alternatives and sees them for cul-de-sacs they are,
 the one who has decided to throw his lot in with God –
 come hell or high water,
 this one will receive wisdom if he asks.

It is Joshua who said, Joshua 24:15 "But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

The writer of Hebrews said it this way: Hebrews 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

I don't understand God, I don't understand a lot of life, I certainly don't understand how this or that particular evil that has come into my life can be used for good, but I have made the decision, weak as it sometimes feels, that I will trust God.

The writer of Proverbs said: Proverbs 1:7 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

My awe, respect and trust are in him; that's where wisdom starts.

1998 to 2000 were the most spiritually defining years of my life and for others in my family as well.

I have several times referred to those 30 or more months as the most soul-searching as I came face to face with whether I really trusted God or not.

The boy in our home, who was to become our son, was for those early years unprotected and we feared for his very life.

I remember I was preaching in Genesis at the time and specifically Genesis 22 where Abraham is asked to offer his son as a sacrifice.

I recall that I readily admitted that I did not know how Abraham could do that.

Did I trust God enough that if he took Paris from us and especially if God allowed the horrible conditions for that boy that we anticipated, would I still trust God?

You recall your own experiences or the experiences of ones you love, and you say, "What good could possibly come from that?"

I can hear the words, "Pastor, you don't know our situation!"

Believe me, I hear you!

My own mother lay locked up for two years in an Alzheimer's ward and I can't yet even imagine how God would bring good out of that.

Maybe for you it is the death of a child, or betrayal by one you trusted, or the grinding anxiety of joblessness, or the debilitating effects of a chronic illness.

But in all of that, where can we go but to God?

And what is there to believe, but the Providence of God. "The providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action."

James then uses the rich and the poor to illustrate the universality of this principle of dependence on God.

Both the rich and the poor are greatly tempted to put their faith in riches and social status.

The poor want it and the rich want to hang on to it.

There is probably no other issue of life where we are more tempted to compromise our relationship with Christ than over the issue of money.

So instead of trusting God, we truly trust more in mammon.

But James says, the wise Christian man or woman who is poor, in the eyes of the world, glories in his rich relationship with Jesus.

And the man who is rich in the eyes of the world glories in his absolute dependence on Jesus.

Being rich or poor is not what life is about.

Wisdom from God enables us to see life **as it really is** rather than seeing it merely **as it appears**.

Whether we think James' command is absurd or not probably depends completely on our definition of the good life.

So again I ask, "If, over the next 10-20 years, you could be reshaped into the likeness of Jesus, would you want to be?"

If you would, then James' words make great sense:

James 1:1-5, 12 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him... Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

Other Notes:

Hebrews 12:5-11 "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes

you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.” ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Last December, I was speaking on the Romans 8:28 text where it says that ““And we know that **God causes** all things to work together for good...” (Dec 9, 2007 www.Soundliving.org)

One man wrote, “All things work together for good for the saints because God presses them into His service. God uses every event of our lives for the express good of his people.” “Paul is not talking about some sort of general principle of the universe. You know, when our football coaches tell us it takes the hard times to make the good times, no pain, no gain; that’s not what Paul is saying. He is not saying, “You know, going through suffering makes you a better person.” It’s far grander than that. It’s far more purposeful. This is not just a mechanistic principle in the universe. This is a specific activity of the sovereign God on behalf of His children whom He has drawn into a saving relationship. By Max Forsyth

<http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/sermons/romans/romansvol3to4/28bRomans8.28to30.htm>

Wisdom: “the endowment of heart and mind which is needed for the right conduct of life.” In Blomberg p 42 quoting F. J. A. Hort, as quoted in Raymond B. Brown, “The Message of the Book of James for Today,” *RevExp* 66 (1969): 418.

Wisdom is seeing things as they really are. “To cease to live by what appears to be true and to live, instead, by what actually is the truth of the matter.” (Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, 44)

“Wisdom in Scripture is inseparable from allegiance to God and moral living. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This assertion is best known from Pr 1:7 Blomberg 58

“James’ use of “wisdom” (v. 5) gives the lie to so many worldly definitions of the concept, both ancient and modern. Not a mere intelligence quotient, accumulation of knowledge, critical acumen, practical expertise or life experience, wisdom from a biblical perspective begins with following the God who has now revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It then proceeds with godly living. A person who does these things is truly wise, whether any of the commonly-held attributes of wisdom are present or not. Conversely, the smartest, most skillful and critically-honed person who rejects the Lordship of Jesus cannot be said to be wise in the fullest sense of the word.” Blomberg 59

“Generously” – *aplos* – without reservation, liberally, with a single intent, without hesitation,
This single intent contrasts with the double-minded man in the next verse.

“Without finding fault” – denounce, rebuke, insult – God won’t belittle us for asking for this wisdom. He won’t treat us as ignorant or shame us for asking.

Double-minded - It thus seems to mean “being uncertain about the truth of someth[ing], *doubting, hesitating*, lit. *double-minded*,” depicting someone Ropes describes as having their “soul divided between faith and the world.” This echoes Jesus’ statements in Mt 6:24 (par. Lk 16:13) that no one can serve two masters. Blomberg 46

“James, then, exhorts both the poor and the rich Christians to remember that the sole basis for their confidence is their identification with Jesus Christ. The poor believer, insignificant and of no account in the eyes of the world, is to rejoice in his relationship with the Lord who has been exalted to the highest position in the universe. The rich believer, well-off and secure in his possession, with great status in the eyes of the world, is to remember that his only lasting security comes through his relationship with the ‘man of sorrows’, ‘despised and reject by men.’ Both Christians, in other words, must look at their lives from a heavenly, not an earthly, perspective.” (Moo, TNTC, 69)