

"Trials and Testings"
Sermon Series on Faith That Works #1
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
April 3, 2016
(James 1:1-18)

Introduction.

I've entitled this new series of sermons on the book of James *Faith That Works*. One of the reasons I've chosen this overall title for the series is because I want to clear up a theological misconception. There are some people who think that the apostle Paul and the apostle James were at odds with each other when it came to the matter of the relationship between faith and works. In fact, Martin Luther was so offended by James' notion of works in relation to faith that he actually tore the book of James out of his Bible and threw it into a river!

In Ephesians 2 Paul makes the statement that we are saved by grace through faith, and it is not as a result of our good works. Picking up on Paul's statements, the Reformers said it this way: it is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that you and I receive salvation. However, James says in his letter that faith without works is dead, and that if a person claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ then works should be evident in that person's life. If there is no evidence of works, then he questioned whether the person was in fact saved.

But are Paul and James really in disagreement with one another over the role of faith and works in the Christian life? I don't think so, and I believe that a closer study of what each of these writers of the NT had to say will reveal a complimentary emphasis which is needed in the Christian life today. In answer to the question, "Is Paul right, or is James?" the answer is, "Yes!" They both are.

Over the course of our study I hope to demonstrate that real faith in Jesus Christ is a faith that works, and the faith we have in Christ needs to be a working faith. Works are never the basis of our salvation. Faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross alone is what saves us. However, genuine faith, if it's real, will result in a transformed life which shows up in the way we live. As R.C. Sproul once said, "Justification is by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone. Saving faith is not a 'lonely' faith, having no works following as a companion."

Date and Author. Most scholars believe that the book of James was probably written sometime between 45-50 AD, and the text tells us that it was written by a man named James. Now, there are three people named James who are mentioned in the NT – 1) James the son of Zebedee (one of the Sons of Thunder, as Jesus called them), 2) James the son of Alpheus, who was also one of the 12 disciples, and 3) James the half-brother of Jesus. He didn't believe in Christ during our

Lord's lifetime, but we're told that Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1Cor. 15:7), and then he came to believe that Jesus was in fact the Messiah.

It's not surprising to me that James had a hard time believing Jesus was the Christ. Can you imagine what it would be like growing up as the brother or sister of Jesus? Here's a little video by the comedian Michael Jr. about what it must have been like growing up having Jesus as a sibling.

Tradition tells us that the James who wrote the letter we are studying was indeed the half-brother of Jesus, and he became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. He also had the nickname "Camel Knees" because of how much time he spent on his knees praying. He was also called "James the Greater" because of the number of James in the NT. Tradition also tells us that James was martyred for his faith in 62 AD.

Recipients. Who was the letter written to? The epistle is addressed to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations. This is a biblical allusion which is a metaphorical reference to all believers spread throughout the world. It's a universal letter that is intended for believers everywhere in all times.

The first part of chapter 1 which we'll study today touches on several topics, but because of communion I only have time to lift out one for your consideration. I want to talk about what James says in regard to trials and testings.

Each of us has to go through hardships of one kind or another, and we all face trials at different times in our lives. Perhaps it's a broken relationship, or the loss of a loved one. Maybe you lost your job, or you have a problem with a child. Perhaps it's a besetting sin, or chronic physical pain, or an inability to stay on a diet. Maybe you've had an experience of rejection.

Testings and trials are part of the Christian life, of everyone's life, and James speaks to the reality of them in this passage. And he offers some practical advice on how to respond whenever they come our way. As we look at this passage, I want you to consider three things briefly: the Nature of Trials; the Purpose of Trials, and Our Response to Trials.

I. The Nature of Trials (2,9-11).

What exactly is the nature, or the essence, of a trial? What are we really talking about here? In verse 2, James writes, "*Whenever you face trials of many kinds....*" Let's look at the individual words of this sentence.

Whenever you face trials. Not if, but when you face them. Everybody does, even followers of Jesus Christ. It's a universal situation, so don't be surprised when trials come your way. Someone once said, "God only had one Son without sin, but never did He have a child without suffering."

Then James writes, when you *face* trials. The word that is translated *face* here is a Greek word that is also used for falling into the midst of people or

circumstances. Luke used the same word in the parable of the Good Samaritan when he wrote about the Jew "falling into the hands of robbers" (Lk. 10:30). It was something that wasn't planned. It just happened.

Then there is when you face *trials*.... A trial is something that tests the value of a thing or ascertains the nature of it. We'll talk about this more a bit later on.

Finally, James concludes by saying, "when you face trials *of many kinds*...." There are different kinds of trials, aren't there? Circumstances, suffering, temptation, people – all of these can become a trial in a person's life.

II. The Purpose of Trials (3,12).

The two Greek words that are translated in this passage "trial" or "test" are the words *dokimos* and *peirazo*. They have several meanings, and they can be used in a variety of ways.

1. To Verify for Accuracy. *Dokimos* was used to describe the testing of coins, such as testing for sterling silver (e.g. Prov. 25:4). The purpose was to see if the coin was real or fake. So we can see how a person's faith can be tested by a trial to see if it's genuine. Do I really believe that God is sovereign? A trial comes my way to test that conviction, and I'm forced to verify the reality of my belief in the context of a trial.

2. To Make Strong. *Peirazo* was used in the world of athletics. The process of weight lifting is an interesting study. The physical dynamics in weight training are that a person actually tears down the muscles in order to build them back stronger. There's a testing and a training of the athlete to prepare for the big game.

I remember one college football team I was watching last fall, and the coach said that they conditioned their players better than any other team. In the 4th quarter of the game, all the players held up their hands, showing the number 4, to declare that, because of their conditioning, the 4th quarter belonged to them.

3. To Equip. Another way in which we can see the purpose of a trial is to equip us for service to God. Many times the Lord will test us in order to make us ready for other challenges that lie ahead. For example, Abraham was tested by God with his son Isaac in order to equip Abraham with greater faith. God called Abraham to offer his only son, who was the fulfillment of God's promise, in order to prepare Abraham for the greater work he would do for the Lord. Abraham passed that test, and the trial equipped him to be a blessing to all the nations of the world.

4. To purge. Have you ever heard the expression "trial by fire"? It refers to the process of refining metals. The purpose is to purify, or purge, the metal and get rid of the dross and imperfection in it. It's easy to see how a trial in the

Christian life does just that. It purges the dross from your faith and refines our commitment to Christ, eliminating what is impure.

The purpose of trials in the Christian life isn't to hurt or to punish us. Rather, trails are used by God to chip away our rough edges and to help build our character. They are intended to develop perseverance in us which results in greater maturity in our walks with Christ. Times of testing are allowed, and sometimes they are sent, by our heavenly Father who has our best interest at heart, and who, because of His great love, wants to purge from us anything that is less than His best.

We're all in process, and God isn't finished with any one of us yet. He is building His character and His life in us, and He wants us to reflect that character and that life to a watching world. C.S. Lewis once wrote to a friend, "God, who foresaw your tribulation, has specially armed you to go through it, not without pain, but without stain."¹

III. Our Response To Trials (2).

In verse 2 of this first chapter James writes what he thinks a believer's response to a trial should be. *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds."* Our natural tendency when a problem comes our way is to gripe and complain, isn't it? James encourages a different attitude that results from seeing things from a different vantage point.

Is James telling his readers that whenever they encounter a trial they're supposed to jump up and kick their heels together and yell, "Yippee!"? Is he calling them to have a flippant attitude toward the serious problems they face? No. Look at what James writes, *"Consider it pure joy."* In other words regard it, or think about it, in this way. He calls his readers to exercise their intellect and their will over their natural emotional response.

Amy Carmichael was a missionary to India for many years in the early part of the last century. She was also a wonderful writer and a poet. In her book *Learning of God* she writes,

"Everywhere the perpetual endeavour of the enemy of souls is to discourage. If he can get the soul 'under the weather,' he wins. It is not really what we go through that matters, it is what we go under that breaks us. We can bear anything if only we are kept inwardly victorious...."

"If God can make His birds to whistle in drenched and stormy darkness, if He can make His butterflies able to bear up under rain, what can He not do for the heart that trusts Him?"²

Ultimately the attitude James urges us to cultivate is to look at the testing or the trial from a heavenly perspective. We're urged to remind ourselves that, as the

apostle Paul put it, *"God is at work both to do and to will according to His good pleasure."* Trials are God's means of perfecting us and bringing about our sanctification. It's the way He chips away our rough edges of and takes us deeper into His heart of love. James calls us to think about our trials from another point of view, from God's point of view. He urges us to rejoice that the Father loves us so much that He won't let us settle for mediocrity in living for Christ. He wants us to be the best we can be for the Lord.

Think about a time in your life when you encountered a test or a trial. What did it do to your faith? Most people say that the times they have grown the most in their walks with Christ have been during a season of hardship or challenge. It's when they hit bottom they started looking up, and it's when they reached the end of their rope that they found God was there to catch them. The testing of our faith is what helps us develop perseverance, patience, and maturity in the Christian life. These qualities we all need to cultivate more.

Conclusion/Application.

Where are you this morning? What trial or test are you dealing with? How do you look it? In what ways can you see this trial producing in you the life and character of Christ? What would it take for you to consider it all joy today?

Last Wednesday we held a memorial service at the church for one of our long-time members – Neva Barnhardt. Neva was married to Gene for over 60 years, and Gene grew up in this church and has lived here all his life. Neva was also the mother of Wilson who is on our staff and has worked at our church for over 25 years.

Many of you knew Neva better than I did. By the time Lorie and I arrived in Winston-Salem 3 ½ years ago, Neva's MS had taken a toll on her body and she wasn't able to get out of the house much, and she required constant care. Nevertheless, I could still see that Neva's shining spirit continued to shine through her personality and her character. It was always a blessing to be around her, and she was a constant witness to Jesus Christ in spite of her infirmities.

In 1988 Neva was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Four years later she developed an infection in the lining of her heart, and she nearly died. She recovered from the infection, but it made her MS worse. And all this took its toll. Her husband Gene told me that after she recovered from the infection, Neva went to her home in Beaufort, NC, where she was from, in order to wrestle with God about her illness. She left Gene with the kids to be by herself, and Neva stayed there several days and she wrestled with the Lord. Gene said that when she returned, she came back settled. She had made peace with God over her disease, and from then on she never let it define her.

The source of Neva's courage and contentment was her relationship with Christ. He meant everything to her, and she sought to nurture her walk with the Lord by spending time reading her Bible, singing hymns (she was a music major in college), and reading her Upper Room daily devotional. Neva cultivated the character of Christ, and she was a living example of a person devoted to God and yielded to His purposes.

When Mary Wingert presented to Neva the Life Member Award on behalf of Presbyterian Women back in 1994, she said the following in her presentation, "Allow me this one more personal note. [Neva] recovered from a very serious illness in August of 1992. Having been one of her very close friends for many years, I wanted to do whatever I could to be of help to her. Not once have I been to see her, hoping to offer spiritual, moral, or even physical support, that I didn't come away being the one who was uplifted! Her gracious spirit and her gentle and generous heart are always foremost. While she has withstood many storms during her life, she has faced them all with grace and dignity and without feelings of being denied, but of being blessed."

What a wonderful and last tribute to a remarkable and gracious woman who had a determined spirit of courage and contentment despite the trials she faced. Neva Barhardt learned to put into practice what James wrote in his letter here:

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers [and sisters], whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (Jms. 1:2-4). Amen.

¹C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, (2 September 1949), para. 2, p. 219.

²Amy Carmichael, *Learning of God*, p. unknown.