

OPPORTUNITY FOR JOY

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It is common to view the difficulties in our lives, primarily, as problems to be fixed. The faster the turnaround on fixing them, the better, we believe.

We imagine that we are meant to enjoy a problem-free existence, and without realizing it, we find ourselves fighting against God's purposes.

That's right! God has a purpose for the difficulties you stumble into, and it is not to beat you up. His purpose is good. If only you would let Him show you.

Even if they don't enjoy riding on the ocean, most people love to watch it—reflecting the light of sun or moon. Maybe you like to wade along the beach, or swim, or surf in the glistening water. Or maybe you could spend hours just watching the waves crashing on the shore or the rocks. I could. How about you?

As he opens his brief book, Apostle James used those waves to teach us a vital lesson.

James 1:2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶ But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

Let me unpack this passage for you.

I love that James begins his letter with the words, “*Dear brothers and sisters.*” One time, the Holy Spirit captured my attention with those words, explaining to me that they were more than formality; they were a declaration by the author of the centrality of our relationships in the Church.

The command that Jesus gave us was to “love one another,” as He had loved us. That simple greeting is one way of keeping that command at the forefront. I even use a similar greeting in my emails (though many people would deem that overly formal), because that's the relationship I want to express and encourage in the Body of Christ.

By using this greeting, the apostle immediately identifies with his readers as family. He does not talk down to them, or preach at them, but with deep respect and compassion he reaches out to them with encouragement.

“When troubles of any kind come your way” describes the scenario he is concerned for. Troubles, indeed, come in many kinds—from without, from within; minor troubles and major difficulties.

I am particularly interested in his use of the phrase “come your way.” It is a word that means “to fall into.” These are accidental troubles.

It’s the same word Jesus used to describe the plight of a man who was walking from Jerusalem down to Jericho, who “fell among thieves” and was robbed and beaten and left for dead at the side of the road. That man did nothing to provoke the incident; it just happened to him.

When such things befall us, we are inclined to wonder, “Why?” “Why this?” “Why me?” “Why now?” “Why did God allow it?”

Did you ever stop to think that for God to disallow it, to prevent it from happening, He might have to infringe on someone else’s free will? If God stopped everyone who was set on sinning, there would be no freedom of choice or speech or action.

Of course, to give one person freedom to sin, means that someone else may be impacted adversely. It just happens. Freedom and total control cannot coexist.

But to those who trust in God, He remains a close companion, even through their trials. And He promises to *“work all things together for good”* (Romans 8:28).

So James urged us, *“consider it an opportunity for great joy”* (rather than groaning and complaining). Instead of imagining it is a punishment, or a curse, or a spiteful calamity, consider it as an opportunity for something good to come.

The trial itself may not be good, but the end result can be. That is the promise of God!

“Great joy” is literally, “all joy,” full and unmixed (not “some” joy mixed with much grief). Remember, that’s referring to the final outcome, not the immediate process.

Most people count it joy when they *escape* trials, but through the apostle the Holy Spirit is encouraging us to see our difficulties as stepping stones, instead of stumbling blocks.

This consideration, then, is an intentional mental effort—a mental exercise of faith. But it is a down-to-earth act, with good reason.

“For you know” points the reader to his own past experience—more than intellectual knowledge derived from a book or someone else’s testimony, this is knowledge gained from personal experience—from having “been there” and “done that.”

“When your faith is tested” describes what’s really going on beneath the surface. On the surface, you’re having a bad day, but underneath that, God is testing your trust, your stamina, and proving your faith. This is how He uses your troubles and turns them to good. What the devil meant for evil, God turns to good.

If you refuse to cast aside your confidence in God, if you cling to Him in faith—even when it doesn’t feel good and you cannot see the point (the purpose, the outcome), something good grows inside of you: perseverance.

“Your endurance has a chance to grow.” The Amplified Bible calls it “steadfastness and patience.” It is the “staying power” that takes you through the storm to the other side.

Did you know that endurance grows? Did you know that it *needs to grow*? And when you hang in there, endurance has a chance to do so.

Have you noticed that some difficulties that once threw you for a loop, are no longer as threatening? That you are now capable of handling (with grace) more than you used to? Has your resilience grown? Well, this is why, and this is how. Because you didn’t give up. You didn’t quit. You didn’t cave in.

And here you are. You survived. Some scars may remain, but you have increased strength, too.

“So let it grow.” The New International Version says, *“Let it finish its work.”* The Message urges, *“Don’t try to get out of anything prematurely,”* but “endure until your testing is over” (God’s Word translation).

“When your endurance is fully developed” implies that it might remain underdeveloped. What then? What should we expect if our endurance is weak? James’ plain suggestion is that we would remain spiritually immature, imperfect, incomplete, and needing many things.

“When your endurance is fully developed” (“finished in every part”) a BIG change will have taken place in you:

“You will be perfect and complete, needing nothing”—“not deficient in any way,” but mature and full grown. How to achieve spiritual maturity is the major theme of James’

letter. And from the beginning he taught that spiritual maturity and fulfillment are *by-products* of perseverance (that's how we get to them!).

Of course, "perfect and complete, needing nothing" is not describing an abiding condition in this life, but in the life to come. Here and now, we need many things, and above all, we need God's wisdom, especially during our trials.

"If you need wisdom," if you don't know what you're doing, or what you should do, ask God. More to the point, James said, *"Ask our generous God (Amplified Bible: 'the giving God who gives to everyone liberally and ungrudgingly') and He will give it to you."*

Without reprimand, and without finding fault. We've all had the unpleasant experience of being helped by someone who thought their aid earned them the right to first criticize and scold you for being in such a condition in the first place. (Parents, take note: Don't be that person!)

But James added a crucial warning: *"Be sure that your faith is in God alone"* or, as the New Jerusalem Bible renders it, *"with faith, and no trace of doubt"*—not vacillating, faltering, or giving up on God.

"Doubt" is a word that trips up many Christ-followers. In everyday use, "doubt" and "uncertainty" are often used interchangeably. But in the Scriptures, there is a big gap between the two meanings.

Uncertainty is common to all of us. I may never have exercised my faith without a measure of uncertainty at the same time. That is natural, because we do not see the end from the beginning, we do not know what tomorrow may bring. Uncertainty is normal, and is not threat to genuine faith, unless we let it lead us.

But (Biblical) "doubt" is a very different animal. Doubt refuses God's help, preferring some other source. Doubt asserts, "God can't," or "God won't." Doubt assails the goodness of God, accusing Him of not wanting or caring enough to help, or of being powerless.

James helped us to see this by using words like *"divided loyalty... divided between God and the world."* This may mean wavering between two opinions, or keeping your options open. But it certainly means sometimes trusting God, and in the next moment retreating to trusting in the world's so-called knowledge and methods.

Such are people who "worry their prayers"—who make their requests known, but as soon as they rise from their knees, begin to fret and worry and scheme a resolution of their own (just in case God says "No" or doesn't come through).

The word James used literally means, “two-souled.” That’s a divided heart at work. Leading a double life.

Why does such a person get nothing for their trouble? Because they never stay in one place long enough to collect on their faith. They are “*unstable in everything they do,*” living like an unsteady, staggering drunk, inconsistent in every activity.

Apostle Peter was in complete agreement with James on this subject.

1 Peter 1:6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. ⁷ These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

Trials are a reason for rejoicing because of the wholesome effects they produce, whether difficulties from without, or moral tests from within.

Here are three things I hope you will take away with you today, for the next time you face an unexpected and unwanted trial:

- **Bring the right attitude** (See an opportunity for God to create real joy.)
- **Understand the advantage of a trial** (God uses them to develop enduring faith.)
- **Know where to obtain help** (God is ready and willing to help, if you will trust Him wholly.)

James concludes the passage with this:

James 1:12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

What a hope we have in Jesus!