ADVANCED
Bible Commentary

PRESSURE POINTS | WHEN RELATIONSHIPS COLLIDE

Fall 2013
SESSION 1
THE PRESSURE OF TRIALS

THE PASSAGE

James 1:1-4

THE POINT

Joyful trust in God will get you through any trial.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Janice and Sandy were talking during their lunch break at work. Sandy asked, “Janice, are you feeling OK today? You seemed a little down this morning.” Janice replied, “Yes, I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately.” Sandy continued, “I know our company’s merger this month has got a lot of us on pins and needles. I’m worried that some of us might lose our jobs.” Janice added, “Besides that, I’ve had some problems at home. My husband has missed a lot of work lately because of his medical treatments, and my teenager’s having trouble at school.”

The pressure you feel these days may not be the same as Sandy’s and Janice’s, but no one has a trouble-free life. Some of the adversity we face might be considered minor in hindsight, but medical, family, and financial pressures impact many of us. This session begins a series on the Book of James highlighting “Pressure Points” we face as Christians. From this week’s study we can learn that God can use life’s pressure points to transform us into His image. These trials can be opportunities for us to grow in our relationship with God.

THE SETTING

The Book of James is traditionally classified as one of the “general” or “catholic” letters (Hebrews; 1 & 2 Peter; 1, 2, & 3 John; Jude are the others). Typically these letters had a general original audience rather than a specific church or individual.
Most conservative scholars believe James, the brother of Jesus, was the author of this letter. Several people in the New Testament were named James, but most of the evidence points to James, the brother of Jesus, as the probable author. James the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, was killed around A.D. 44 by order of King Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2). Little is known about James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18). James the brother of Jesus was martyred around A.D. 66. He may have written the letter before the Jerusalem conference in A.D. 49-50. Thus a conservative estimate would place the writing between A.D. 48 and 52. The Book of James would then be one of the earliest books in the New Testament.

In the early centuries of church history some disputed James’s exact relation to Jesus. James is listed in the New Testament as one of Jesus’ four brothers (Mark 6:3; see Gal. 1:19). Some argued that these “brothers” were children of Joseph from an earlier marriage and that they had no biological relation to Jesus. Some insisted Mary remained a virgin. Some thought these men were really cousins rather than brothers. The preferred conservative view is that the brothers were born to Mary and Joseph after the virgin birth of Jesus.

The original readers of this letter were probably Jewish Christians living around the ancient world. James focused on many themes, including the trials these readers were facing.

**KEY WORDS**

*Slave*—The Greek word in verse 1, *doulos*, can be translated “slave” (HCSB), “servant” (KJV, NIV, ESV), or “bond-servant” (NASB). Millions of people were slaves in the Roman world, so James’s original readers would easily understand his use of this term. A slave was totally dependent on his master. Jesus had said we cannot serve two different masters; we must make either God or money our highest loyalty (Matt. 6:24). Jesus used both *doulos* (slave) and a related term, *diakonos* (servant), in His teaching to the disciples in Mark 10:43-44.

*Trials*—In verse 2 “trials” or “temptations” (KJV) renders a Greek word that can mean “to test” or “to tempt.” The proper translation of the word depends on the context. A *trial* is a situation in which we are tested and might grow in our relation to God. A *temptation* is an attempt to lure us into some sin. God never tempts believers to the wrong, that is the work of Satan.

*Mature and complete*—This phrase in verse 4 ("perfect and entire," KJV) suggests that the ideal outcome of our dealing with life’s pressure points is spiritual...
growth. The English word “mature” captures the meaning of teleios, the Greek word, well. The Bible does not suggest that we will ever achieve sinless perfection in this life, but we can become more mature in our relation with God. “Complete” also suggests a well-rounded relation with God.

**STUDY THE BIBLE**

**James 1:1-2**

How does James describe himself? What did it mean for James to be a slave of God? What does the Dispersion tell us about the original audience for this letter? How should a Christian respond to the trials of life?

1 James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ: To the 12 tribes in the Dispersion.
   Greetings.
2 Consider it a great joy, my brothers, whenever you experience various trials.

**Choose a Joyful Attitude.** James introduced himself to his readers in an unusual way. Presuming that he is the brother of Jesus (see The Setting), we might have expected him to highlight his close relation to Jesus. James and other family members, however, had not committed themselves to Jesus early in His earthly ministry. In fact, early in His ministry Jesus’ family thought He was “out of His mind” (Mark 3:21). John 7:3-5 reports that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in Him at that point in His ministry. James eventually encountered the risen Christ and became a disciple (Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 15:7). James then emerged as a leader in the Jerusalem church. For instance, at the great church council that met in Jerusalem after Paul’s first missionary journey, James proposed the resolution to a major conflict in the church (Acts 15:13-21).

Rather than stressing his family relation to Jesus, however, James was inspired to describe himself as a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word slave indicates James’s total commitment to God. James’s original readers would have been familiar with the institution of slavery in the ancient world (the under Key Words). Interestingly, the Old Testament law allowed for a temporary slavery to voluntarily move into a permanent relationship (Ex. 21:2-11).

Some readers today might find James’s use of slavery terminology offensive. We might recall the atrocities associated with the enslavement of Africans earlier
in our history. One commentator noted, however, that the term *slave* “did not necessarily carry the degrading connotation attached to the word today. James was a servant who was proud to belong—body and soul—to God and to Jesus Christ.”\(^1\) The apostle Paul used slavery imagery in his description of the Christian life. When we became Christians, we moved from being slaves of sin to being slaves of God and slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:15-23). Also, James’s readers would have recalled that many of the Old Testament leaders were called God’s servants (for example, Moses, David, and the prophets).

The recipients of James’s letter were the **12 tribes in the Dispersion**. This double reference has led many Bible students to see the original readers as Jewish Christians. The patriarch Jacob, later known as Israel, had 12 children, and the **12 tribes** of Israel were the focus of much of Hebrew history. The term **dispersion** refers to the Jews who were scattered or dispersed around the ancient world after the Exile (Babylonian Captivity). Although many Jews returned to their homeland when the Exile ended, some remained in Babylon and other areas outside of Judah (John 7:35). Simon Peter used a similar word picture to portray his readers. He called them “temporary residents dispersed” in five regions of Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1) and as “strangers and temporary residents” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

How do you respond to James’s descriptions of his original readers? Do you think of yourself as a slave of God and Jesus Christ? This image reminds us that our ultimate loyalty should be to God. Our culture promotes many rival “gods,” including the gods of false religions and gods such as fame, success, power, sex, and money.

Do you feel like someone living outside your homeland? Some Christians have moved geographically from their home county to another region for ministry or career reasons. In a more general way, however, our Christian values will often be in tension with the values of the dominant culture in which we live. These points of tension between Christian values and secular values might be the pressure points you and I feel in our daily lives. Perhaps you recall the old saying that Christians must live in the world without being of the world. Our distinctively Christian behavior and values may at times bring suspicion or ridicule on us, much like James’s readers endured. We must resist worldly values and not conform to the non-Christian aspects of our culture (Rom. 12:2).

The first major topic James addressed with his readers was trials. The root Greek word can mean “to test” or “to tempt” (see the Key Words). In next week’s study we will see how Christians face the pressure point of temptation to sin. In verses 2 to 4, however, James stressed how dealing with trials can be opportunities for believers to grow in their relationship with God.
Although James did not give a specific example of a trial faced by his readers, his overall letter gives some clues. For example, he highlighted the tension between the rich and the poor several times (1:9-11; 5:1-6).

What would you count as a trial in your life? In recent years economic pressures have been intense for many families. Perhaps you have lost your job or been forced to accept lower pay to keep your job. Maybe your trial is opposition from non-believers who do not welcome your witness for Christ. Or perhaps health problems might be your trial right now. Later in this letter James mentioned Christians who were sick (5:14-15).

As a college teacher of theology classes, I might link the topic of trials to the general issue of evil and suffering. Many textbooks distinguish two types of evil and suffering. First, moral evil is suffering caused by free moral beings. We misuse our God-given freedom to hurt ourselves and others. Second, natural evil is the suffering we experience from natural forces, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, wild fires, and tsunamis. James did not identify the kinds of trials his readers faced in verse 2, but the Old Testament Book of Job, especially the first chapter, gives many examples of life’s trials. One author noted that the Book of James “is primarily a theology of suffering.”

For many readers, then and now, the most surprising note yet in James’s letter is the approach we should take whenever we experience various trials. We should consider it a great joy to deal with these trials! Whenever I face a crisis or some adversity, my instinctive reaction is not joy. Today we might respond to trials in many ways. Some might be resigned, thinking, “No one said life is fair” or “That’s just the way life is.” Others respond immediately with intense problem-solving: “I’ll get the best medical care possible” or “I’ll get another job in order to pay off this debt.”

Some believers might even be angry at God for allowing bad things to happen to them. A strong belief in God’s sovereignty and omnipotence would incline us to think of God as being in charge of all of life’s circumstances. Several biblical characters expressed their frustration at life’s difficulties by blaming God. Job certainly focused on God’s role in his suffering. Readers of the Book of Job know about the role of Satan in causing Job’s suffering, but Job addressed his concerns to God. In many of the Psalms the psalmist questioned God about life’s injustices. Habakkuk was concerned about the injustices he saw in the world of his day (Hab. 1:4). The prophet Jeremiah often questioned the sufferings he endured in delivering an unpopular message from the Lord (see, for example, Jer. 11:18-20).

Contemporary Christians might at times find it hard to respond with joy to life’s pressure points. C. S. Lewis, the noted 20th century Christian apologist, was dev-
astated by his wife’s death from cancer. In the midst of his grief he began to ques-
tion God’s goodness, even calling God the “Cosmic Sadist” at times. Eventually
Lewis moved through his grief and anger at God to a fresh appreciation of God.

James did not say everything that happens to us is good. What he said was that
we can consider it a great joy when we face trials. The word consider suggests
the need for us to put our adversity into a larger context. Christians should be
able to see how God can accomplish good for us from our life’s challenges. The
great joy (literally, “all joy,” KJV, NASB, ESV; “pure joy,” NIV) comes from learning
that our lives fit into God’s larger plan for all of history. Jesus, for instance, noted
that we can rejoice when we are persecuted because we know about our heaven-
ly rewards (Matt. 5:11-12). The author of Hebrews reminded us that Jesus endured
the crucifixion because of “the joy that lay before Him” (Heb. 12:2).

The joy we can experience in dealing with our pressure points is not the same
as ordinary happiness. My happiness level fluctuates with my moods and life’s
ups and downs. Joy is the steady awareness of God’s presence in my life, no
matter whether I’m having a good day or a bad day, experiencing good things
or bad things.

What are some lasting truths in James 1:1-2?
1. God wants us to choose a joyful attitude.
2. Our Christian values and behavior will sometimes conflict with the domi-
nant values in our society.
3. Christians should acknowledge that their ultimate allegiance is to Jesus
   Christ.
4. Christians should expect to face trials in this life.

**James 1:3**

*What is a testing of your faith? What does a testing of your faith produce? What are
some biblical examples of faith in God being tested?*

^3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

**Trust God’s Loving Heart.** One reason we can “consider it a great joy” when
we experience trials is that we realize our faith is being tested. The Bible offers
many perspectives on the origins of suffering in our lives. One of the most popu-
lar views is that our suffering results from our sins. Certainly much of my own
suffering comes from my disobedience of God. What about you? Although there
is often a clear link between sins and suffering, one danger is jumping to the con-
clusion that all adversity is due to sin. Job’s friends, for example, presumed that he had some unconfessed sins in his life (Job 4:7). When Job confessed those sins, they thought, his suffering would end.

James knew that some suffering is due to our faith being tested. Job, for example, was perplexed about the cause of his problems. Even as he suffered, however, Job acknowledged that his suffering was testing him: “Yet He knows the way I have taken; when He has tested me, I will emerge as pure gold” (Job 23:10). God had not caused Job’s problems as punishment for his sins. God had allowed Satan to afflict Job to demonstrate the depth of Job’s faith. Later on in his letter, James used Job as an example of faithful endurance during testing (5:11).

The Greek word peirasmos James used in 1:2 can mean either a temptation to sin or a test to prove someone’s character. But in verse 3, by using dokimion, James clearly meant that God allows our faith “to be tested.” (The next session will focus on the temptation to sin.) Even though my college students may not enjoy the tests I give them, my intent is to see what they know about the subjects we have studied together and for them to pass the test.

The Bible includes several examples of people who suffered not as punishment for sin but as a testing of their trust in God. For instance, God instructed Abraham to kill his first-born son Isaac. Although I’ve often wondered what thoughts went through Abraham’s mind as he and Isaac traveled to the mountain, the author alerted us to God’s intent—“After these things God tested Abraham” (Gen. 22:1). Abraham passed his test by demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

James noted that the testing of our faith produces endurance (“steadfastness,” ESV; “worketh patience,” KJV; “develops perseverance,” NIV). We need endurance for any long-term challenge. If all our problems were simple and short-term, a little enthusiastic problem-solving might be enough to face them. James realized that his readers faced concerns that would not go away quickly. Endurance is not, however, a natural tenacity in the face of adversity. The God who tests us is also the One who will help us face our pressure points faithfully.

The apostle Paul, for instance, was faithful to God, yet he suffered much (Acts 9:16). At times Paul wanted his problems to go away, but God did not take them away. God did assure Paul that His grace was the resource Paul needed to deal with his adversities (2 Cor. 12:1-10).

In the Old Testament Joseph’s experience in Egypt might also illustrate how God used suffering to test faith. After being sold as a slave, Joseph rose to power in Egypt and provided food for Joseph’s family. At the end of the story Joseph acknowledged how God had brought good out of an evil situation (Gen. 50:20).
What have you learned from your suffering? Was your suffering a test of your faith or a punishment for your sins? Trials today can be learning opportunities for God’s people. Several times I’ve learned through my trials that my faith was not as strong as it should be. I’m tempted to try to solve problems on my own, trusting in human ingenuity rather than in God. God wants you and me to trust in His goodness. His tests remind us of His concern for our spiritual development.

What are some lasting truths in James 1:3?
1. Some suffering is a punishment for sin.
2. Some suffering is due to God testing our faith.
3. God will help us endure our suffering.
4. God wants us to trust His loving heart.

James 1:4

How can a Christian become mature and complete? Is sinless perfection possible in this life? What resources can help us benefit from our trials?

4 But endurance must do its complete work, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Yield a Surrendered Spirit. A long time ago I heard someone say that suffering can make us bitter or better. Although that’s not a biblical quotation, there is an element of truth there. Some people allow suffering to embitter them toward God and life in general. Ideally, Christians will become better Christians because of their suffering. James addressed his readers as “brothers” (1:2). We should not expect non-believers to have the same spiritual benefit from suffering as we can experience.

James indicated that our endurance of our trials is a kind of work. Perhaps your trial has been grieving over the loss of a loved one. Grief is a process that lasts a long time for many people. Although grief can involve emotional, spiritual, and physical pain, the end result can be a deeper faith in God.

For James, the end result of our endurance is that Christians be mature and complete. Although “perfect” is a permissible translation of one of these Greek words (KJV, NASB, ESV), James did not mean that we can achieve sinless perfection in this life. Only Jesus was sinless. Christians have been delivered from the bondage to sin that characterized our life as non-believers. John warned us against claiming we do not sin (1 John 1:8-10).
If our trials require our endurance, what resources do we have to help us deal with those trials? God expects us to yield a surrendered spirit to Him. Like James, we need to be a slave of God, giving Him our ultimate loyalty (1:1).

Another basic resource in our response to trials is the Christian community, the church. The author of Hebrews noted that we can encourage one another (Heb. 10:25). When my wife learned she had breast cancer, a long-time friend sent her an encouraging e-mail. The friend quoted a verse that had helped her in difficult times: “Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). Job’s friends tried to comfort him, but they wound up being his adversaries. Ideally we participate in a strong, caring Christian community that will support us as we deal with life’s pressures and difficulties.

If we endure, as James suggested, we will rely on God’s wisdom as well. James noted that as mature and complete Christians we will be lacking nothing. In verse 5 James specifically identified our need for divine “wisdom.” God is generous to us, giving us the wisdom we need to face life faithfully. We must approach God in faith, not in doubt, to receive God’s gift of wisdom. The Book of James often resembles Old Testament wisdom literature, and in a later session we will focus on wisdom again.

James reminded us that when we endure our trials with the help of God and Christians friends, we will be “blessed” (1:12). We “will receive the crown of life” as well.

James’s teaching on having a joyful attitude toward our trials will sound strange to our non-Christian friends. Contemporary culture promotes a pain-free, problem-free life as the ideal. Our joyful, patient response to life’s pressures and difficulties can be a powerful witness to our world about our faith in Jesus Christ.

What are some lasting truths in James 1:4?
1. God wants us to be submissive to Him when we suffer.
2. Suffering can produce spiritual maturity in our lives.
3. Christian friends and relatives—the church community—can support and encourage us when we suffer.
4. When we struggle with life, we can ask for God to give us the wisdom we need.

LIVE IT OUT

As you reflect on this lesson, respond to the following questions:
What are the most serious pressure points or trials in your life? ____________
What is a way God can use a trial to help you trust Him and grow strong?

When have you felt tension between your Christian faith and the values of contemporary culture?

How do you demonstrate you are a slave of God?

How can you discern whether your suffering is punishment for sin or a testing of your faith?

**PRAYER OF COMMITMENT**

*Lord, help me trust You when I suffer adversity. I need Your help and the help of Christian friends to endure my suffering. Help me to become a more mature disciple. Amen.*