

### God-Centered Thinking in Trials, Part 3: For God's Glory and Your Joy (James 1:5-11)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on June 7, 2009

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John Piper writes in *The Hidden Smile of God* how the various trials 'of John Bunyan [in jail] gave us *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The [inner troubles] of William Cowper gave us "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" and "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." And the afflictions of David Brainerd gave us a published *Diary* that has mobilized more missionaries than any other similar work. The furnace of suffering brought forth the gold of guidance and inspiration for living the Christian life, worshiping the Christian God, and spreading the Christian Gospel.

There is a certain irony to the fruit of these [various trials]. Bunyan's confinement taught him the pilgrim path of Christian freedom. Cowper's mental illness yielded sweet music of the mind for troubled souls. Brainerd's smoldering misery of isolation and disease exploded in global missions beyond all imagination. Irony and disproportion are all God's way. He keeps us off balance with his unpredictable connections. We think we know how to do something big, and God makes it small. We think that all we have is weak and small, and God makes it big:

- Barren Sarah gives birth to the child of promise.
- Gideon's 300 men defeat 100,000 Midianites.
- A slingshot in the hand of a shepherd boy brings the giant down.
- A virgin bears the Son of God.
- A boy's five loaves feed thousands.
- A breach of justice, groveling political expediency, and criminal torture on a gruesome cross become the foundation of the salvation of the world [to all who believe]

This is God's way—to take all boasting off of man and put it on God ... suffering fits into God's design in ways that sometimes baffle us and test us to the limit. This very baffling and testing is part of the design<sup>1</sup>

**James 1:2-12 (NASB95) <sup>2</sup> Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, <sup>3</sup> knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. <sup>4</sup> And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. <sup>5</sup> But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup> But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup> being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. <sup>9</sup> But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; <sup>10</sup> and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.**

God-centered *thinking* in trials is so important because *how we choose to think in tough times* is the key in God's Word here. Notice the emphasis on thinking:

- v. 2 "**consider** it all joy" (decision of the mind)
- v. 3 "**knowing** that ..."
- v. 5 "if any of you lacks **wisdom**"
- v. 7 doubters should not "**expect [or think]** that he will receive anything from the Lord"

- v. 8 “being a **double-minded** man”
- v. 9-11 tells the poor and rich how to think

God through James wants us to change how we think (and live as a result). I warned you that James would be a challenging study and it already has been for me, both convicting and encouraging, too.

**God-Centered Thinking in Trials** (review of last 2 messages):

A Slave Attitude (v. 1 – “*James, a slave of God...*”)

A Joyful Mindset (v. 2 – “*consider it all joy, brethren*”)

An Enduring Faith (v. 3 – “*the testing of your faith produces endurance*”)

A Submissive Will (v. 4a – “*and let endurance have its perfect result*”)

A Christ-likeness Goal (v. 4b – “*that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing*”)

Verses 5-12 give us three more keys we’ll see today:

1. A Prayerful Dependence (v. 5)
2. A Wholehearted Trust (v. 6-8)
3. A Heavenly Perspective (v. 9-12)

**A Prayerful Dependence (v. 5)**

<sup>5</sup> *But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God ...*

This is not a topical message from James, unrelated to the message he has been giving in the prior verses. In context, this wisdom is not merely or mainly guidance for wise decisions; it’s wisdom *for the various trials of v. 2*. When troubles knock you to your knees, what does God want us to do there? Pray, ask of God for wisdom.

There’s a link at the end of v. 4 where it says the end or aim of trials is that we may be “lacking in nothing.” Then v. 5 continues with the logical as well as theological reality that we all do lack something, namely wisdom. In fact, the grammar of the conditional sentence in this verse is: “if any of you lack, *and you do*, ask God,” or even “*since* you lack wisdom.” All of us when we read verse 5 should instantly think of ourselves, not anyone else. James is talking about me! If James knew me and I was in his congregation, I can picture him making eye contact with me as he says these words, “If any of you lack wisdom ...” All of us should picture ourselves in verse 5, and if you don’t, you need to ask that God would give you wisdom enough to see your lack of wisdom!

This is one of the top prayer requests for me, that God would give:

- wisdom, wisdom in ministry, wisdom beyond my years as a young pastor and father who is inexperienced in areas that many of you have more experience,
- wisdom in my use of time and being efficient in study and the many demands of shepherding a growing church,
- wisdom in balancing my care of my own family and the church family and my biblical responsibilities
- wisdom to think of and apply God’s principles in difficult counseling scenarios that no classroom can prepare you for,
- wisdom to apply God’s truth in my own life as I study so that I am not guilty of verse 22 (hearing and not doing).

I am not wise. I lack greatly. I struggle like all of us do. I am weak. I fail. I am in great need. This verse is for me ... and it's for you.

Could it be that we fail in trials not because of weakness but because we wrongly think we're strong? Grace is for the needy:

**4:6** *But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

**5:13** *Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray...*

Suffering and trials should cause us to humbly ask for God's grace and help for what we don't have and cannot do. If there's anything we cannot do without God, it's to consider it all joy when we're in various trials! If there's anything we lack, it's the wisdom to see our suffering through a God-centered joy-considering perspective like we've learned about in James 1:2-4 in our last couple studies.

I am thankful James not only tells me what to do, but how to get there. I'm glad that James not only challenges me, but he is a good pastor and teacher aware of the weaknesses in us and he knows that we will not be able to "consider it all joy in various trials" without God-centered thinking when we don't feel like it and God-given wisdom to know how to apply this when we naturally can't.

You say, "But I can't. I lack that." James 1:5 says, "You all do. So ask God for it. Ask Him to give you the wisdom to view trials rightly."

*Ask* in v. 5 is a present tense command, meaning this should be a repeated habitual continual act, discipline, prayerful dependence.

And the next phrase shows the continual characteristic of God: "ask of God *who gives*" – the Greek word order is "ask of the *giving* God" – the participle puts emphasis on God's very nature and character. God is a giver, who generously and graciously loves giving to His children and v. 5 says He does so without reproach or reluctance or reprimanding us for many times we've asked or failed. He's not making sarcastic comments as we might when we help a family member who gets on our nerves. God never gets tired of us asking for wisdom, and He delights to give graciously by His very nature.

Pagans may pray for their god to *deliver them from* trials, but only a Christian truly prays in this way for wisdom so he can *glorify God and enjoy God in the trial*, because only the Christian truly grasps that the purpose of man is to glorify God and to enjoy God.

It's been pointed out that this type of biblical 'prayer for wisdom is foreign to the view of a noted pagan [of ancient times] like Cicero:

In one of Cicero's moral books, in speaking of the things which we could properly ask of the gods, he enumerates such things as wealth, honour, or health of body, but he adds it would be absurd to ask wisdom of any god, for it would be totally out of his power to give such a thing to his worshippers ...'

Blanchard asserts, “It is characteristic of the unbeliever to see God with a clenched fist; it is characteristic of the believer to see Him with an open hand ...”

[Thankfully] “God’s generosity is measured by what He designs, not what we deserve.”<sup>2</sup>

Is asking for wisdom a passive prayer?

Proverbs 2: <sup>1</sup> *My son, if you will receive my words And treasure my commandments within you,* <sup>2</sup> *Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding;* <sup>3</sup> *For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding;* <sup>4</sup> *If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures;* <sup>5</sup> *Then you will discern the fear of the LORD And discover the knowledge of God.* <sup>6</sup> *For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

Sproul writes: ‘James’s words can be misinterpreted to mean that all we have to do is ask and we shall receive instant wisdom? James assumes we know about *scriptural wisdom*, especially the book of Proverbs. That book repeatedly exhorts us to study to know wisdom, to seek it diligently, to take every opportunity to learn it, and to desire it above all else. James is saying that God will give wisdom to those who prayerfully and diligently seek it.

Wisdom comes from two sources. The first is careful *study of God’s Word* ... The second is knowledge gained from the experience of *putting God’s ways into practice* . Often this involves tribulation. Wisdom grows with trials, if in the midst of trials we lean on God’s Word.<sup>3</sup>

John MacArthur adds: ‘the kind of wisdom James is referring to is not a detached academic knowledge or some philosophical speculation ... **Wisdom is the practical understanding of how to live life in obedience to the will and Word of God and for His glory** (Prov. 3:5–7; 4:11; 8:12; 10:8; 14:8).

In the context of suffering, therefore, we need to ask God for wisdom to help us persevere scripturally. We need His help to see sovereignty and providence working in our situation, to have a joyful attitude, and to respond submissively. This need for help dovetails marvelously with one of the overall purposes God has in allowing sufferings and trials: to make us more dependent on Him. Such dependency is synonymous with prayer, which is implied in the phrase “let him ask of God” (James 1:5).<sup>4</sup>

I like that definition: *wisdom is practical understanding of how to live in obedience to God’s Word and for God’s glory*. By those terms, one of the wisest and greatest preachers of the last century was given the same first name as the writer of this book, *James Montgomery Boice*. At the age of 29 he was called to be the senior pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia in 1968, succeeding Donald Grey Barnhouse, soon taking over “The Bible Study Hour” radio program teaching in 1969, starting the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology in 1970, founding the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1977, etc. He was a theologian who put into practice much of what the book of James teaches, including concern for poor and prejudice, which James Boice was also concerned with. He not only taught sound theology from the pulpit, but the church became ethnically diverse under his leadership, with inner-city ministries to youth, women with crisis pregnancies, the homeless, etc. Above all he was a faithful preacher of God’s Word, whose expositions of Scripture fill about 30 volumes, I believe. I read from his expository verse-by-verse sermons just about every week, and he is a minister who ministers to me, though I’ll never meet him till heaven.

It was exactly 9 years and 1 month ago, while in the prime of his ministry, James M. Boice mounted his pulpit for the last time on Sunday, May 7, 2000.

‘He announced to his stunned congregation that he was rapidly dying of cancer. He said to them: “Should you pray for a miracle? Well, you’re free to do that, of course. My general impression is that the God who is able to perform miracles – and he certainly can – is also able to keep you from getting the problem in the first place ... Above all, **I would say pray for the glory of God.** If you think of God glorifying himself in history and you say, ‘Where in all of history has God most glorified himself?’ the answer is that he did it at the cross of Jesus Christ, and **it wasn’t by delivering Jesus from the cross, through he could have ... And yet that’s where God is most glorified.**”<sup>5</sup>

A week from tomorrow marks the anniversary of his death, just a few weeks after his diagnosis. He had a big view of God, a God big enough to glorify Himself even when He doesn’t take the trial away or give us the outcome we might desire. God’s purposes are bigger than our health and natural desires, and He wants us to pray not just for what we want, but to ask for *wisdom to know what God wants* and how we can *glorify and enjoy God in our various trials*.

*John 14:13 “... ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.”*

*John 16:24 “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.”*

It’s not just the chief purpose of man to glorify God and enjoy Him, but the chief purpose of man’s prayer is that we might glorify God and enjoy God more. *Asking* is a conduit of grace that enables us to consider it all joy in trials if God’s glory is our focus. God doesn’t need us and could accomplish His purposes without us, but in His kindness and grace He chooses to give to His children when they ask for wisdom, giving God glory and us joy. God is glorified much in our trials when we find much joy in Him in much trials. We might even say God is most glorified in us when we are most joyful in Him even in the most difficult times of life.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Key to God-Centered Thinking in Trials: Wholehearted Trust (v. 6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> *But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.*

God is not a vending machine that we put our prayer into and out comes whatever button we pushed. This is no “name it and claim it” heresy, where whatever we ask for we get as long as we have faith. This is no blank check that we can write whatever we want and expect God to back it up. But when God’s children do pray with biblically informed faith in the Lord, and in the name of the Lord, that is, consistent with the character of the Lord, based on how the Lord taught us to pray, and for the glory of the Lord, the Lord does give what He promises and what is best when we ask.

A good cross-reference is Romans 4:20, where it says Abraham “*with respect to the promise of God ... did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.*”

Same terminology as James 1:6; “in faith,” and even the same Greek word for “doubting,” which it translates “did not waver.” This is a wholehearted trust, unwavering faith, and I like how again it says that our faith ultimately is for the glory of God. Our faith is for God’s glory, our prayer is for God’s glory, or joy is for God’s glory, and Jesus said “Abraham **rejoiced** to see my day, and he saw it was glad” (John 8:56). He glorified God *and* had joy in God (or *by* having joy in God).

When James writes in verse 6 we must ask “in faith, without any doubting,” he may be recalling when his half-brother Jesus also used the same phrase “faith with no doubting” in Matthew 21:21 in the context of prayer, with the point that the humanly impossible will be done (which certainly includes James 1:2). This word for “doubting” is the same Greek word his blood-brother Jude uses in v. 9 of Jude’s epistle where it’s translated as “disputing” or “contending.” In Acts 11:2, it’s translated as “taking issue with.” So it can have the connotation of taking issue with or disputing God, in this case God’s will or wisdom as to how He answers.

When we ask for wisdom, we need to have faith, trusting that how God answers is best, not being unsure we really want what God has to say to us from His Word. We might never say it out loud but we often doubt God’s wisdom in the various trials He gives to us.

James knew experientially what it was to be a doubter – he had doubted who his half-brother Jesus claimed to be for some 30 years of his life. He also was well familiar with the image in this verse of waves at sea, which v. 6b says the doubter is like, since James grew up near the Sea of Galilee and was familiar with the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. When he says “like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind,” he had undoubtedly experienced being in boats driven and tossed by the wind and waves as his brother had. In modern times, when I read “surf” I picture a surfboard with no one on it, at the mercy of the wind and waves, back and forth, tossed and driven. More precisely, the word

- Can refer to the swell of the sea, the idea that it’s always changing with variations in wind direction and strength.
- The image indicates a lack of stability, lack of direction, first going one way, then another a little while later
- The water has no inner stability to withstand outside forces and neither does the doubter who is very unstable

<sup>8</sup> *being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

The unstable man wobbles around like a spiritual bobble-head doll, his head going in different directions. The text calls him double-minded – his mind is not stable and as a result his ways are all unstable, all of them, not just some of them. He’s consistent in being inconsistent. As a man thinks in his heart, so is he. Verse 7 says the spiritually unstable are unable to receive from God and should not expect to receive from Him. Remember, this is not a mere mental confusion, this is a moral problem (4:8 is the only other place in Scripture that uses this term “double-minded” and it’s synonymous with sinner). There is a duplicity here that James warns against, and God does not bless us when we ask for help with one open hand while our other hand is behind our back holding onto our favorite sin. God doesn’t answer those prayers (see Psalm 66:18).

Some of you in this room may have never truly come to the Lord, although maybe you've prayed in the past, God hasn't heard. Say now "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Your cross I cling." Don't cherish your sin, unwilling to give it up, clutching it in your hands. Don't bring in your hands your righteousness either, any trust in your own works or efforts. Come to Jesus on the cross and trust Him and Him alone.

Keys to God-Centered Thinking in Trials:

1. A Prayerful Dependence (v. 5)
2. A Wholehearted Trust (v. 6-8)
- 3. A Heavenly Perspective (v. 9-11)**

*<sup>9</sup> But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; <sup>10</sup> and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.*

What is this talking about and how does it fit with this context? One observation that helped me make sense of the contrast is the word "brother" in v. 9. When verses 9-10 mention "the rich man" twice it doesn't use the word brother, so only verse 9 is explicitly talking about Christians (arguably in contrast to the rich man of verses 10-11). The original Christian Jews reading this letter had been dispersed abroad from their homeland, and as a result were often in humble circumstances for a change, with lowly finances, seen as lowly in the eyes of others, especially the rich. The temptation for these Christians would be to focus negatively on their lowly position, to mope. But v. 9 commands them to exult in, rejoice, glory in their high position in Christ! Boast in the Lord!

They could consider it all joy if they fixed their focus on eternity as heavenly-minded citizens of a celestial city, even as we read from Christopher and Mary Love last week that perspective.

We may not have much money, but we are rich in Christ, storing treasures above. Where your treasure is, your heart will be also.

The lowly one in Christ will be exalted, but the high one apart from Christ will be brought down. Verse 10 says the rich man is to glory in his humiliation or his low position or that he is made low. If this is referring to the unbelieving rich, it seems to be saying their only boast is in this temporary life which will soon past (cf. Paul: "their glory is their shame"). This verse is a little difficult to understand, but if you keep reading it goes on to explain that the focus is on the future: "*like a flowering grass he will pass away.*" This is an image from Isaiah 40 where God speaking to those who think they're really something big down here on earth, God humbles them, brings them down, saying:

*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades ... (Isa 40:6-8)*

James 1:11 explains further that the rich's high position is only for a season. Like flowers will fade and fall off, and the beauty of their appearance to others will be gone in time, James says here that those whose pursuits are only in this world will also soon fade.

The contrast between rich and poor will be developed in future studies through this book, but in this context for today we need to see that a future perspective is critical in trials. A heavenly view, setting our minds on things above, on the eternal not just the temporal, is vital to considering joy in our trials here and now.

There is a blessed joy we can have as we endure trials that we know God intends for our future good and His glory, giving in His wisdom whatever makes us more like Christ.

*I asked for strength and God gave me difficulties to make me strong  
I asked for wisdom and God gave me problems to solve  
... I asked for courage and God gave me danger to overcome  
I asked for love and God gave me troubled people to help  
I asked for favors and God gave me opportunities  
I received nothing I wanted and I received everything I needed*

Joni Eareckson Tada, as most of you know, was paralyzed from the neck down in a diving accident when she was 17. She wrote this later about her various trials (*Joni* [Zondervan], p. 154):

God engineered the circumstances. He used them to prove Himself as well as my loyalty. Not everyone had this privilege. I felt there were only a few people God cared for in such a special way that He would trust them with this kind of experience. This understanding left me relaxed and comfortable as I relied on His love, exercising newly learned trust. I saw that my injury was not a tragedy but a gift God was using to help me conform to the image of Christ, something that would mean my ultimate satisfaction, happiness—even joy.

That is God's wisdom on how to endure a major trial with joy! She did not get that wisdom from the world. She did not make it up herself. It came from God, through His Word. If you need God's wisdom for how to endure any major or minor trial with joy, ask Him in faith and He will give it.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Piper (2001). *The Hidden Smile of God : The Fruit of Affliction in the lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> D. Edmund Hiebert, *James*, p. 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul (1994). *Before the Face of God : Book four: A Daily Guide for Living from Ephesians, Hebrews, and James*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; Ligonier Ministries, p. 372.

<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur (1995). *The Power of Suffering: Strengthening your Faith in the Refiner's Fire*. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

<sup>5</sup> E. Michael and Sharon Rusten (2003), *The One Year Book of Christian History*, Tyndale House Publishers, p. 256-57.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/042405M.pdf>