

SESSION 1

Faith on Display in Hard Times



QUESTION 1:

*What's an important lesson you've learned
after coming through a tough experience?*

THE POINT

God uses trials to mature your faith.

THE PASSAGE

James 1:1-12

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The road has not always been easy for Dave Dravecky. While a pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, doctors diagnosed cancer in Dravecky's pitching arm. The ensuing surgery did not deter him; he was determined to keep pitching. On August 10, 1989, just ten months after surgery to remove the tumor, Dave Dravecky won the first game of his comeback. Five days later, however, in the bottom of the sixth inning, he delivered his 69th pitch of the night. He would not throw another.

With that final pitch, Dravecky snapped his humerus bone and fell to the ground in pain. His left arm, weakened by cancer and the accompanying surgery and radiation, could not hold up to the stress of a major league pitch. Eventually, doctors amputated Dravecky's left arm and shoulder to save his life when radiation and other surgeries failed to stop the cancer.¹

It's difficult even to think of joy in trying moments such as those Dave Dravecky experienced, yet James wrote that believers should consider trials joyous. He was not teaching that the trials themselves are joyous, but that we can live with joy even as we go through disastrous, difficult moments.

James 1:1-4

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes dispersed abroad. Greetings.

2 Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials,

3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

4 And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

KEY WORDS: The twelve tribes (v. 1)—Though dispersed throughout the world, this expression referred to Jewish Christians. The term represented true Israel reestablished through the completed work of Christ.

After a brief introduction, James got straight to the point. He called his readers and us to face “various trials” with “great joy.” To be a joyful Christian is not an option; in fact, to “consider it a great joy” is an imperative command. Happiness and joy are easy when things are pleasant and going our way, but joy is not our first reaction in difficulties. The natural tendency is to respond to trials with fear, anger, or anxiety. To have joy in disastrous, trying moments is *not* an instinctive reaction!

As he did thirteen other times in this letter, James referred to his readers as “my brothers and sisters.” That’s important to remember as we consider this unusual command. The world sees no joy in trying times because it can be a time of isolation and separation, but for those who follow Christ, we are not alone; we have fellowship with other believers. In Christ, we can have joy. Joy is a supernatural response, empowered by God, who “is compassionate and merciful” (Jas. 5:11). Out of a genuine concern, James wanted us to think about our trials in a uniquely Christian way: not complaining, whining, or grumbling, but with “great joy.”

The phrase *various trials* encompasses the shared challenges that all people face and the unique trials believers experience because of persecution for their faith (5:10-11). Christians can experience joy in everyday life challenges as well as in more serious misfortunes. Any and all trials can *test* our faith, and in the process, those trials can *strengthen* our faith. Our trials act as a certification process for the genuineness of our faith.

QUESTION 2:

What are some common trials people experience in our world today?

When James spoke of “the testing of [our] faith,” he used a word that appears in the New Testament only here and one other place. Peter also used the word to compare believers’ various trials with a refiner’s fire, which burns away impurities (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Difficult days function to refine our faith. Trials purify a believer’s faith.

The refining activity is not so much so that people will move from unbelieving to believing. James assumed his audience was comprised of believers, which is one reason he referred to them as “my brothers and sisters.” The refining activity moves faith from an idea to an action. While faith includes correct thinking, it also requires right actions. Trials may be corrective to our thinking, but James was focusing on *how* they correct our living. Trials expose where our behavior falls short of what we believe, allowing us to live out our faith.

Through trials, believers gain the ability to endure hardships. We become steadfast. Trials can strengthen our faith just as exposure to wind strengthens trees. Scientists constructed “biosphere 2,” a miniature version of earth, to learn more about how our planet’s systems work. An unexpected discovery was learning about the value of exposure to wind for trees. While trees grew more quickly in the biosphere, they fell under their own weight before they could completely mature. Without the resistance of wind, they did not

develop adequate strength.² Just as wind makes a tree stronger, giving it the strength to hold up its own weight, trials also strengthen believers, giving us the ability to bear up under the weight of life. This isn't a test of our personal strength or wisdom; rather, it is a test of our faith in the strength and wisdom of God to see us through. Faith is a muscle that must be exercised to gain strength.

The testing of our faith works effectively to accomplish something specific. God's ultimate goal in testing is that our faith becomes "mature and complete." Through the trials we experience, He is developing "endurance"—staying power—in us. The word *endure* means "to remain under." We sometimes call it perseverance, faithfulness, or steadfastness, but it is God's work of developing our spiritual muscles and resolve to stand firm. We therefore become unswerving from His purpose even during the greatest trials and sufferings, and our faith will then lack nothing.

QUESTION 3:

What are some normal responses of people to problems, hardship, and natural disasters?

ENGAGE

When trials come my way, I typically respond like:

A barking dog
A bulldozer
Other:

A juggler
A hermit

An Olympic athlete
A brick wall

How has your faith in God helped you endure trials or hard times?

James 1:5-8

5 Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.

6 But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

**7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord,
8 being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.**

Trials lead some to think that their suffering is punishment for wrongdoing. Sometimes friends add to this impression by implying or outright accusing those going through various trials that they deserve the suffering they are experiencing.

That is what happened to Job. Job had three friends who came to his side soon after they heard about his calamity “to sympathize with him and comfort him” (Job 2:11). But then they started talking. Job’s friends gave long speeches that blamed Job for his problems. According to his friends, Job’s suffering was his own fault. He deserved what he was getting (Job 4–25). Job’s friends were outspoken with their criticism. But even if the accusations are more subtle or implied, it can be easy to get the message that we deserve our suffering. Compounded by the weariness of the trial itself, the accusations can start to wear us down. Before long, we become discouraged, spiraling into self-doubt and defeat. Certainly, our trials sometimes are the results of poor decisions and immoral behavior, but not all trials are corrective punishment. It takes discerning wisdom to know the difference.

During trials, we do not need worldly judgment; we need the wisdom of God, wisdom that He generously gives. Believers do not need to be hesitant; we can approach God boldly. When we approach Him, we can ask for wisdom with full assurance that He will provide it. God does not give His wisdom because we are either worthy or innocent. We can approach God, asking Him for wisdom because of God’s character. He invites us to come to Him

and ask, seek, and knock. “For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:8). God is a generous giver of wisdom; He will not belittle those who need it.

God is also faithful. He will not keep wisdom from believers who ask with unwavering faith. Solomon is a fitting example; his name is synonymous with wisdom. Solomon did not become wise simply by studying the decisions of others or learning from his own mistakes. Solomon was wise because he asked God for wisdom (1 Kings 3:7-9), and God generously gave it (vv. 10-12; 4:29-31).

Even people who believe in God can become paralyzed by a ceaseless, internal argument that makes them spiritually seasick. In one moment, they trust that God will respond to their request; in the next moment they do not. Tossed back and forth by the swelling waves, they have no solid footing. They believe God exists, but they do not trust Him to respond to their request.

God will respond, but only if their request is accompanied by a firm, unwavering confidence in Him—a firm belief that God will supply wisdom. Those with wavering faith will not enjoy the fruit of God’s faithfulness. This wavering faith does not doubt the existence of God; it wavers because they doubt the faithfulness of God.

QUESTION 4:

What might keep us from approaching God for help during a trial?

DIGGING DEEPER

James: All We Know

For more information about the Book of James, see the article on p. 24-27.

James 1:9-12

**9 Let the brother of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation,
10 but let the rich boast in his humiliation because he will pass away
like a flower of the field.**

**11 For the sun rises and, together with the scorching wind, dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful appearance perishes. In the same way, the rich person will wither away while pursuing his activities.
12 Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.**

If you saw a well-dressed woman with several department store bags strolling past a homeless, unkempt man clothed in tattered, filthy clothes, who would you think was currently going through a trial? Most of us would assume it was the homeless man. It would seem that the abject poverty experienced by the homeless person would be far greater than any comparatively insignificant difficulty a wealthy shopper could be experiencing.

However, appearances can be deceiving. A casual glance might not reveal something about their health conditions or what is happening spiritually in their lives. A deeper look reveals that both could be experiencing a wealth-related trial. One because he has no money, the other because she has too much. Poverty and riches can both be a trial. “Give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the food I need” (Prov. 30:8).

Poverty is a trial for obvious reasons. People need clean water, nutritious food, adequate shelter, and warm clothing. If they do not have these things, they suffer. Yet James commanded “the brother of humble circumstances”—the poor believer—to “boast in his exaltation.” What do the poor have to boast or rejoice about? How in the world are poor folks exalted? Their poverty is a constant reminder of their dependence upon God, providing them with nonstop opportunities to exercise their faith.

Wealth can also be a trial. James did not instruct the wealthy brother to boast in his wealth; instead, he should “boast in his humiliation.” Wealth has many outward advantages. For example, those with plenty of money most likely will never have to worry about life’s basic necessities. However, they can still have deep needs that money cannot meet, or their money may have created problems they never had before (5:1-6).

Gillian Bayford learned about the trials of wealth the hard way. She thought all her problems were over when she won 148 million pounds in a British lottery in 2012. Fifteen months later, her marriage was over. She said the wealth tore her family apart. Instead of the happiness she expected to find, Gillian said her marriage ended and she no longer spoke to her parents or her brother. Money does not fix everything. It breaks some things.³

The wealthy make a dire mistake if they think their greatest resources are what they own. Those resources are temporary, at best. Even if financial wealth happens to survive the next economic downturn, nobody takes their money with them to the grave. The wealthy are not to boast in what they have because their wealth will wither and pass away—just like the grass and flowers. The wealthy need the grace of God. Only as they realize their great need will they be led to seek and find eternal riches in Christ.

The ultimate reason for both the poor and the wealthy believer to celebrate is not found in this life, but in the life to come. The trials we face in this life are temporary—they will not last forever. Just as wealth fades into eternity, so do our problems. But faith endures. Faith is permanent. In this world, trials strengthen our faith, and that faith remains with us as we live with Christ for eternity.

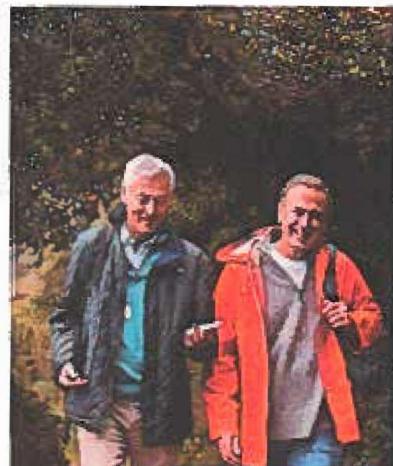
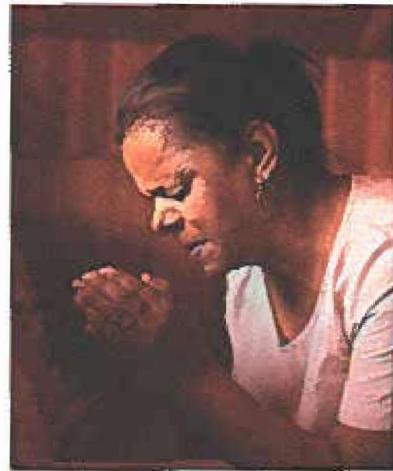
QUESTION 5:

How does a view of eternity change the way you respond to trials?

LIVE IT OUT

How will you live out the truth that God uses trials to mature your faith?

- ▶ **Pray for strength.** In whatever trial you are facing, cry out to God for help. “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call to him while he is near” (Isa. 55:6). Our Lord has experienced trials just as we have, and He is sympathetic about our human weaknesses (Heb. 4:15).
- ▶ **Ask for help.** It is easier for most believers to offer help to others than it is to ask for help. If you are experiencing a difficult trial, reach out to a close friend, your Bible study leader, or pastor, and ask for their help. They will be willing to help carry your burden (Gal. 6:2) just as you are willing to help others carry theirs.
- ▶ **Look for the ministry opportunity in your pain.** After his career-ending amputation, Dave Dravecky and his wife began a ministry, endurance.org, to minister to people who are facing their own trials. Find a way to use your pain to benefit others.



END NOTES

1. Joe Lemire, “DAVE DRAVECKY,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 13, 2009, <https://vault.si.com/vault/2009/07/13/dave-dravecky>.
2. Anupum Pant, “The Role of Wind in a Tree’s Life,” *Awescl*, <http://awescl.com/the-role-of-wind-in-a-trees-life/>.
3. Steve Robson, “Lottery winner Gillian Bayford who scooped £148million weeps as she says jackpot has torn her family apart,” *Mirror*, May 3, 2016, www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/lottery-winner-gillian-bayford-who-7885137.