

Undivided in trials

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[0 : 00] It's a privilege and a pleasure to be with you this morning and sharing God's Word with you.

It is a difficult passage, isn't it? And please do be opening your Bibles there at James chapter 1. And let's say a prayer together.

Our Heavenly Father, we pray now that as we consider your Word on suffering, that you would give us your wisdom, that we would see these trials in your way.

Please help me to preach faithfully. And we pray that you would change our hearts. To know you, love you, and trust you in every circumstance of life.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, what difference does Jesus make to your life? What difference does Jesus make to your life?

[1 : 21] What difference does Jesus make to how you speak? What difference does it make to how you use your money? How you make decisions in life? How you respond to suffering?

What difference does Jesus make? I think it's very easy to be a Christian only in name but not in reality. You know, Christian on the outside but, well, worldly on the inside.

We do the Christian things. We come along to church. We get baptized. We go to Bible study. Maybe even we serve in a ministry. But when we compare our life to those around us, our family members or our colleagues or our classmates, it's, well, it's a bit hard to notice any discernible difference at all.

Our priorities, our speech, our temper perhaps, our desires are just like them. Well, today we begin this new series on the book of James.

And Pastor Brian has helpfully called this series Undivided because James' chief concern as he writes this great letter is to convince us as Christians to be undivided, to not just be Christians on the outside but left unchanged on the inside, not to be double-minded, not to be hypocritical, not to just go through the motions, but to be truly, genuinely changed from the inside out.

[2 : 57] Now, you might know over the years this letter of James has been pretty neglected in churches. Reformers like John Calvin, Martin Luther neglected James because he actually hardly mentions Jesus.

He only mentions Jesus two times in the whole letter and the first time is in the first verse. He doesn't really talk in depth about the death of Jesus or many other big themes in the New Testament.

And if you don't read him carefully and follow what he's actually saying, you might even think he contradicts other parts of the Bible. But that's just because we haven't listened to James carefully enough.

Of course, James believes in the death of Jesus. Of course, he believes we're saved by faith alone in Jesus. Of course, he does believe in all that theology that it's very important.

He mentions many major doctrines as he goes. But James' great aim as he writes this letter is not just to give us more theology to believe. He wants our theology to change our life.

[4 : 03] He wants us to not only believe, but to live it out. In chapter 1, he says not only to be a hearer of the word, but also a doer of the word.

In chapter 2, he will say that faith without works is dead. In chapter 3, he will say that the wise life is seen in our conduct. But in chapter 4, he will call on the readers to cleanse our hands, purify our hearts, and not be double-minded.

He wants us all to have an undivided faith, a single-minded faith. A faith where what is on the outside matches what is on the inside.

And in particular today, as he opens the letter, he wants us to be undivided in trials. He wants us to have a distinctly different perspective on our sufferings to those around us.

A perspective like Jesus. Well, James introduces himself very simply there in verse 1. He says, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 22] Well, who is James? Well, there are actually three James that are mentioned in the New Testament. Two of them are apostles. But it's unlikely that either of them wrote this letter. The first of those apostles is believed to have been executed in 44 AD.

The second apostle we know nothing about apart from that he was an apostle. But there was a third James. He is described in Matthew chapter 13 as the brother of Jesus.

The son of Joseph and Mary. And throughout the Bible we see this James. He witnesses the teachings and miracles of Jesus. 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that James saw the resurrected Christ. Acts chapter 1 tells us that James was there at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And Acts and Galatians tell us that James goes on to become the leader of the Jerusalem church. He chairs the council of elders in Jerusalem. He's there when Paul visits at the beginning of his ministry and there again at the end of his ministry. James is the leader of the church.

[6 : 32] The brother of Jesus. But it's quite remarkable how he introduces himself, isn't it? There in verse 1. Not James, the leader of the church. Not James, the brother of Jesus.

But very simply, James, the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. See what he's saying there? The way that I serve God is by serving Jesus.

And the way I treat Jesus is not as my brother whom I bully, but my king, my God. Now, if you have a brother here this morning, what would it convince you to conclude that your brother was God in the flesh?

The one that you should serve as the king of your life? I mean, to believe such a thing would be absolutely absurd unless it was true, isn't it? I mean, there's no way that James or any of us really could be deceived into thinking that our brother was God when he wasn't.

This James, he was there. He was there at every point in his life. In fact, you must feel a bit sorry for him as he gets disciplined by Mary and Mary says to him, Look, James, couldn't you just be a little bit more like Jesus?

[7 : 56] But as he watches Jesus from his birth, his childhood, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his conclusion, his brother was God, his king whom he serves.

And verse 1, we see who James writes to. He says, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. That language ought to remind us of the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament, God's people.

But now he's applying it to the church. We know from Acts chapter 8 that a great persecution broke out when Stephen was martyred, led by Saul.

The Jewish Christians were scattered. They were sent out all over the Roman Empire. And they took the gospel with them as they fled. And so now James writes to these suffering Christians. Poor, displaced, persecuted, outcast. And that explains why James writes this letter with such warmth and concern over and over again.

[9 : 03] He says to them, My brother, my brothers, my beloved. James is a pastor writing to his suffering church members.

And he wants them to live out the Christian faith because he loves them. And so God has given us this treasure of a letter because he loves us too.

He knows that we are all dispersed in this broken world. A world full of disease and division and distress and death. At times we will be mocked.

At times we will be rejected and persecuted. We will face sicknesses. We will face tribals and many trials. We long for heaven.

And in the midst of our suffering, here is Pastor James bringing God's word in love. But his first word is rather striking, isn't it?

[10 : 09] He wants to encourage them, first of all, to find joy in suffering. He opens in the most remarkable way there in verse 2. He says, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters.

Whenever you face trials of many kinds. You can hardly think of a more emphatic way to begin the letter. In the midst of suffering, what are the questions we normally ask?

Does God exist? Does God love me? We get angry with God. We get bitter with God. We ask God, Why me?

Why now? Why this? And here comes Pastor James. And he says, No matter what kind of suffering you're going through, if you've lost your job, if you're struggling in your marriage, if you've received a bad diagnosis, if you've lost a loved one, if you've failed an exam, if you're desperately lonely, whatever it is, here comes James saying to us all this morning, we need a distinctly different perspective, consider it pure joy, overwhelming joy, all joy.

Now what does he possibly mean? I mean, what on earth could possibly make us feel joyful when all we feel is pain?

[11 : 48] Now, we have to understand James correctly here. James is not saying suffering is good. That when God created the world, there was no suffering.

In the new creation that he has promised, there will be no suffering. Suffering is not good. Suffering is a result of the fall. Suffering is a result of humanity's rejection of God and us being cast from the garden.

And in this fallen world, our suffering is painful. It's right that we shed tears. It's right that we feel grief.

It is painful. It is sad. It is difficult. And it is not meant to be. James is not telling us to be joyful because he thinks suffering is good.

He's saying here that we can be joyful, not because suffering is good, but because of what suffering produces. Do you see that there in verse 3?

[12 : 56] He says, For you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. So what James is saying here is that no matter how bad it may be and how difficult it may seem, our suffering is never pointless.

Suffering, we're told here, tests our faith. It shows whether or not our faith is real or it is not. We mentioned this morning that the UPSR exams are coming up and some of us have children sitting those exams and then we will find out whether they really studied the material or not.

See, the examination will show up reality. And so if I only trust God when things is going well, if I only thank him for his goodness when I feel his blessing, but when things go bad and I give up following him when it gets tough, what does that show about my faith?

If I suffer and I keep trusting God, it's going to develop steadfastness, stability. It's going to show that my faith is real and if I can persevere in the worst of times, I can persevere in any time.

Now, suffering is a test, not in a negative sense. Suffering will show whether our faith is real or not.

[14 : 32] But more than that, we're told that God uses suffering for good. Look at verse 4.

He says, Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. Now, I think we kind of understand this naturally.

Training is designed to build up strength. I absolutely hate the gym. I mean, you can probably tell, right? I've got more fat than muscles. I don't know. I don't really understand it.

The idea of, you know, running around and, you know, lifting up weights and inflicting pain on yourself, it doesn't really appeal to me. I don't know about you. Why do people go to the gym?

It's not because it's pleasant, I take it. It's because of its effects, surely. And so is suffering. Suffering is difficult.

[15 : 35] Suffering is painful. But God, like the personal trainer, if you like, is using it to form our character. He is using it to teach us to love him and trust him and to be satisfied in him, to treasure him, to pray to him, to speak to him, to be thankful for everything that he has given us.

Now, Paul writes in Romans chapter 5, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

And Paul is saying there that our sufferings produce character and hope and we will never be shamed because we know God's love. We can look to the cross and we can know for certain that no matter what suffering we are going through, God loves us because Jesus hung on that cross for us.

Now, one of the main people who was responsible for sending me here to Malaysia was a man in ministry named Richard Chin and he's actually a Malaysian but he lives in Australia.

[17 : 03] And back in December 2009, his wife was diagnosed with a terminal pancreatic cancer. At the time, he had four children all below the age of 15.

She was given six months to live. Before she died, she wrote an article entitled, I Thank God for the Gift of Cancer.

This is what she writes. I don't like being in pain and I don't like having terminal pancreatic cancer. I would like to grow old with my husband and see my kids grow up.

She goes on, Why has God given me cancer? All I know is that God has given me this gift of cancer to use for his glory.

We pray daily for the cancer to miraculously go away but if God chooses to say no, we can trust him nonetheless. And she concludes the article like this, I thank God for the gift of cancer because he is good and he's using it for good purposes.

[18 : 20] The plans of the Lord are perfect even though I don't know the reason for everything. All I know is that soon I will be with the Lord forever because Jesus alone has saved me.

Now those are the words of a woman who has faced enormous suffering beyond what many of us will ever have to face.

And yet it's remarkable, isn't it, that she faces it with trust, hope, joy, wanting to serve her God and love her God even in the midst of it.

And when you see someone speak like that, you know that their faith is real, don't you? And you know that her faith has formed into Christian character.

You can see it shining through. You can see her dependence upon God. You can see it fuel her hope. And sometimes it's only when we recognise what God is doing in all of our suffering that in the midst of all the tears and all the grief and all the pain, we can still count it joy because we know God is using it for our good.

[19 : 43] Now, I don't know about you, but this mindset is not easy to adopt. And it may well be that because of our suffering, either in the past or perhaps even in the present, that right now we could never possibly believe that God is bringing good from it.

And so James urges us next to pray for wisdom. It's because if we are lacking anything as we think about suffering, this is what he thinks it is.

He goes on in verse 5, If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given you.

And so if we struggle to count suffering joy, James says we need to pray. If we don't know how to make a God-pleasing decision, James says we need to pray.

If we don't know how to fight that sin that we keep struggling with over and over again, we need to pray. We need to pray for wisdom. There is no substitute.

[20 : 52] He says unless we ask God, we will never have this perspective on our suffering. More likely we'll be trapped in our regret and our bitterness and our anger and our resentment.

It's certainly not joy. We need wisdom. The kind of wisdom only God can give. And the wonderful news here is that God wants to give it to us.

We're told that God gives generously to all without finding fault. He's picking up on that chapter from Proverbs chapter 2 we read at the start where the writer there says, if you seek wisdom with all your heart, God will give it to you.

It's saying here, God is not double-minded. God is gracious. He gives without reserve. He doesn't show favoritism. There's no exceptions with God.

There's no one who's outside of the grace of God. No one whose prayers he doesn't listen to. He is the creator of all. He loves all. He wants to hear the prayers of all.

[22 : 00] And he promises wisdom to anyone and everyone who will ask him. Now later on in this chapter, in verse 17, James will write, Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

He's saying, God is gracious and God doesn't change. If we will acknowledge our needs and pray to God, he will hear our prayer.

And so if you're suffering here this morning, can I encourage you? Pray. Not just for God to take away the sufferings. Pray that he will help you to see them in a new light.

Pray that God would give you the wisdom to see these trials as he does. But notice this promise to give.

[23 : 16] It's only if we ask God rightly. Did you see that in verse 6? He says, But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt. Because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea blown and

tossed by the wind.

That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. We must not be undivided in our prayer.

You know, when you say one thing with your lips, but in your heart you believe another thing altogether. It's very easy, isn't it? Instead of trusting God's wisdom in our sufferings and believing in God's goodness in our sufferings, that we start trying to see things with our wisdom and our ways. And very soon we doubt his love. We doubt his goodness. We doubt his control. We don't pray. Or we pray and think he'll never answer or he's not good anyway.

Of course that doesn't mean that you kind of have to whip up enough faith and only then God's going to listen to you. I think over the last 100 years there's been generations of preachers, false teachers saying, look, just name it and claim it.

[24 : 32] If you just believe it strongly enough, it will happen for you. Just believe. You'll get a promotion. You'll get cured. You'll get married. You'll get rich. Whatever it is. Just have enough faith.

God will give it to you. Of course that's not what James means here. Now later on in chapter 4, he says, you don't have because you don't ask God.

You must ask. But verse 3, when you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is enmity?

With God, this is not a blanket promise here that if you just have enough faith that you can force God to do whatever you want. It doesn't work like that. God will answer our prayers according to his will in the way that he deems best.

And that might be yes. It might be no. It might be wait. But there is one prayer here that he does promise to answer, isn't it?

[25 : 43] If you ask for wisdom, he will give it to you. And the point that James is making here is if we don't really trust that God will do anything, well, why should he bother?

If you're anything like me, I find this rather convicting. It's so easy to be like this, isn't it? You know, you're praying for your non-Christian friend or relative, but you never actually expect they're going to become a Christian.

Or you're praying that God's going to help you to resist that sin, but you don't ever expect that anything's going to change. James says if we're like that, if we're double-minded, or literally, if we have two souls, we're like a ship that's been set loose on the ocean, will be tossed here and there. This week I was reading of a ghost ship that turned up in Myanmar. It went missing in Japan nine years ago and it turned up at Myanmar just a few weeks ago with no one on board.

It's been floating for nine years. Now, it didn't have ghosts on board. I mean, it was empty, right?

And James says that's what we're like.

[27 : 05] If we don't really believe that God is good, we don't really trust that he will hear our prayers. Well, we're just like an abandoned ship being tossed to and fro, unstable, double-minded.

And James wants us, even as we face suffering, to be single-minded with our faith, to really trust him and so to pray for the wisdom to do so.

Pray that we'll see things God's way, that we'll have an unwavering faith that is real, a faith that will bring joy even in the most difficult and dark of times.

Well, thirdly, James tells us we need to pray for this wisdom so that we look on every circumstance with this God perspective.

He says there in verse 9, let the lonely brother burst in his exaltation and the rich in his let the, yeah, sorry, verse 9, believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position but the rich should take pride in their humiliation since they will pass away like a wildflower for the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossoms fall and its beauty is destroyed in the same way the rich will fade even while they go about their business.

[28 : 44] And James' point here is not that Christians must be poor and not be rich. James' point here is that whatever our physical circumstances are, we are to, with godly wisdom, look beyond just the immediate and the physical and see things in God's way.

And so if we're poor, if we're marginalized, if we're struggling, if we don't know where the next meal is coming from, then what we should focus on and what we should rejoice in or boast about here is not our poverty, it is not our lack, but the fact that in Jesus we are spiritually rich.

We have a glorious future that we're looking forward to. We have treasures in heaven that no one will take away. We will be exalted with Jesus one day.

And on the other hand, if God has blessed us with riches, then, well, we must beware of the temptation to boast and rejoice in our riches.

and with that at the status and the position and the influence, James says, no. If you have godly wisdom, you will see things differently. The rich should boast in their humiliation.

[30 : 04] They should recognize their spiritual poverty before God. They should recognize that money can't stop death, that our money can't save us, our money can't get us closer to God.

Our money can't get us to heaven. He reminds us, verse 10, of the brevity of life. The rich man will pass away like a wildflower.

The sun rises with scorching heat, withers the planet, blossoms, falls, it's destroyed. The same way the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. From time to time I buy my wife flowers, not as often as I probably should because it, I sometimes feel it's a bit of a futile exercise, don't you think?

I mean, you go and you buy the flowers and in KL they cost a fortune, right? They're maybe like 50 or 100 ringgit and they last for about three days and then they wither and they die and you think, well, maybe we should have bought 10 bowls of Sarawak laksa or something.

It would have lasted a bit longer. But that's life, isn't it? We're here one day, we're gone the next. Life is so short, isn't it?

[31 : 25] Where did the last 10 years go, the last 20 years go, the last 30 years go? Seems like yesterday. And so we need this wisdom, we need this godly perspective, we need to see it God's way and not just focus on what's right here before me now, whether I have money or I don't have money or whether I've got married or I haven't got married or whether I've got a nice car or I don't have a nice car or whatever is the problem that I'm facing, I've got a job or I don't have a job.

We get so caught up with what is right here in front of us and we forget eternity. But we need God's wisdom to live differently.

He gathers everything together in verse 12 to help us think about our sufferings. Have a look at verse 12. Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Now we're reminded here, isn't it, that God doesn't promise to take away all our trials in life. It would be wonderful if he did, isn't it, but then again, I guess we would be in heaven. Right? Just yesterday at the Sunday school conference, I was explaining to someone how I have this autoimmune disease which means that I can't eat gluten.

Don't worry, it was no one from this church. Right? And she pronounced that God had said to her I was going to be healed. Now, of course, God could do that if he wanted to and I'd be very thankful if he did.

[33 : 30] But I reminded her, even as I thought of this passage, God never promises to take away our trials in this life. But we can keep going.

We can keep rejoicing because this world is not all there is. there's a whole new world to come of perfection.

Now, we know that there's a judgment day coming. We know that there's an eternal destination that we're headed to. And God's promise is that if we persevere, if we continue trusting him, come what may, and so it is seen that our faith is real if we continue to love God and serve God and treasure God, then we will receive a price.

We will receive a crown of life, eternal life. The rich man will pass away with his pursuits. The one who trusts in his wealth will get nowhere. The one who trusts in Jesus, counting trials of joy, gets everything.

Everything in the end. Now, I'm aware this morning that some of us here today are going through some very intense suffering.

[34 : 59] It's helpful to remember these are God's words written in love for you as his child. What we see here today is that our sufferings are very painful, but they are not meaningless.

They are full of grief, but they are mixed with joy. They seem unending, but there is a kingdom to come that we can look forward to.

A place where death, disease, division, disaster will be destroyed forever.

a place we're told in Revelation, God will wipe the tears from our eyes. And I, what greater comfort could there be for us this morning than to know that God loves us in the midst of our sufferings? Sometimes we might have doubts, isn't it? And it's then we need to look back again at the cross. We remember that we serve the suffering God.

[36 : 20] He's not the God that's up there in heaven just laughing at our misfortunes. He's the God who came down, who dealt with our sin once for all on the cross, who's adopted us into his very own family.

In his sovereignty, he's showing our faith is real. And he has a home prepared for us. Our God, be assured, he is gracious.

He is good. He promises what we need, most of all, wisdom, if we would just trust him.

So the challenge for each one of us this morning is to think, what will we do in our trials? Will we express faith or not?

Will we run to our Father in prayer? Will we trust him to work out his purposes through our pain?

Will we set our hopes on the world to come?

[37 : 31] Or will we instead be consumed by our desires, overcome and be overcome by our bitterness, come by our bitterness, engrossed with the present and get angry when it doesn't go how we want?

There's only one path in life to peace and joy and the other path is a path of misery. Our choice this morning is which path will we take?

Will we trust God in our trials? James wants to ask us what difference will being a Christian make in your time of need?

Now for me personally it's been about seven years now since my mum passed away from cancer. She actually had cancer three times and each time you can imagine as she was diagnosed the doubts sometimes the anger bitterness grief all mixed together as she tried to come to terms with her suffering and her pain.

Now in the third cancer in her final six months she finally grasped and believed the gospel and it was so amazing to see how it transformed her life.

[39 : 07] She was still very weak. She was still in a lot of pain but she had a joy and a hope in her suffering.

And in the end it is the Christian and only the Christian who can have that kind of joy and hope in suffering. In every other religion people follow prophets or teachers who are dead.

But we serve the suffering king who not only died but was risen, who ascended into heaven, who lives forevermore, who is bringing us to an eternal kingdom.

It is the Christian, it is only the Christian who can count suffering joy. Because we know God is using it for good and he is bringing us to glory.

The question this morning, will we persevere in trusting Jesus these brief days of our life? And let me also say, if you're here this morning as someone who is investigating the Christian faith, or maybe you've sat in a church like this most of your life and you realize you've never made a personal response to Jesus.

[40 : 42] It's just on the outside only. It hasn't affected you inside at all. Then can I again urge you to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior this morning.

Know his love for you at the cross. Trust your life into his hands. Will you pray with me? Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can draw near to your throne of grace with all of our weakness and all of our suffering and all of our pain.

And we can know for sure that you understand and that you care. Lord, we thank you that you sent your son into this world to suffer in our place on that cross.

we thank you for his resurrection that gives us such hope in the face of trials. And we pray, Father, please give us your wisdom.

Help us to see your goodness. Help us to see your love so that we can trust you in every circumstance of life, whether we have much or little, healthy or not.

[42 : 22] Lord, help us to glorify you until you bring us home. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.