

Come Alive in Your Circumstances

Job 5:7; Psalm 71:20; James 1:2-12; John 16:33

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- *James 1:2-4*

- **Troubles are not Punishment**

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Come Alive: Experience New Life In Your Circumstances¹

Today we are looking at the difference the resurrection makes in our lives when it comes to our circumstances. Since Easter Sunday, we have been spending time in this series looking at practical and powerful ways that resurrection life makes a difference in our lives. Our desire is that we would realize that living this resurrection life has an impact in very practical ways. Yet the fact that it is practical does not take away from it being powerful, resurrection life. This is a quality and power of life that cannot be reached without the resurrection; without the new life that Christ gives us and without his Holy Spirit within us.

In the first week, we looked at ways that we can come alive in our relationships. Next, we looked at how we can come alive in our family. Last week we saw how we can come alive in our work; that work is not meaningless, it has meaning, and it is not a curse but should be seen as a blessing, and that our work and school, no matter how mundane it might seem on the surface, it’s actually a way for us to worship God and witness for Christ. So we are wrapping it up today by looking at how to come alive in our circumstances.

As we begin, I have to admit that there’s an assumption being made here; that we are talking about not just any circumstances; we are talking about difficult ones. Most of us don’t need any help having a good attitude when our circumstances are good; it’s when they are bad that it gets tough. When things are a “zoo” around us, how do we not only survive, but thrive and grow in them? It’s an excellent question. It is possible, and in fact it is even *expected*, for believers in Jesus.

Trouble and difficulty come to everybody. It doesn’t matter how much money people make or where they live. Sickness, suffering, disease and death afflict both rich and poor. Job, the Old Testament hero, suffered deeply to the point that he cried:

“... man is born to trouble” (Job 5:7)

The psalmist went through so many difficult times that he said:

“... You have made me see troubles, many and bitter (Psalm 71:20)

¹ Main resources: J. Michael Walters, *James: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997). Message by Rev. Dan Jackson. Message by Michael O’Neill, “Consider it all joy?” C. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *James: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary*, (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2010). A.F. Harper, *Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol. 10* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1967). John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

The great thing about the Bible is that it is real; God never promised we'd have it easy. The Bible is very honest that we will have difficulties and trials in this life.

Chapter 1 of James deals with the practical problem of difficulties and troubles. Problems pile up that cause us to ask, "Why me? Why this? Why now?" James challenges us with an amazing admonition for dealing with trials. Would you please honor God's Word and stand with me as I read it to us:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 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.

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 wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

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. (James 1:2-12, niv)

There is a great deal in that passage to help us understand how to have joy in all circumstances.

But first, let me give us a little background.

Believe it or not, James' very brief introduction reveals a great deal about the character of the man who wrote it, and also sets the example of everything else in this letter.

He calls himself, "James, the servant of God." The word "servant" literally means "slave." James viewed himself as the property of God. "This self understanding was born from his deep conviction that all of a person's life is intended to be viewed and defined in relationship to God and to His purposes. This is the expectation that runs throughout his letter.

But we also learn from what James *didn't* write. James is the half brother of Jesus. (Do you understand why he was a "half brother"? He and Jesus had the same mom—Mary—but they had different fathers. James' biological father was Joseph, and Jesus' biological father was God.)

James could have leveraged his close relationship to Jesus for his advantage. He could have stated his relationship to Jesus in order to impress people and cause them to pay attention – no one knows Jesus like this guy! That’s the kind of thing we would do today; we’d name-drop in order to convince people of how important we are and why they should pay attention to us. But he didn’t do any of that. His identity was not found in his family connections; he merely identified himself as “James, the servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He did not view Christ as his stepbrother. Christ is God and therefore James saw himself as a servant to Christ. So already, we are learning that if we are going to come alive in our circumstances, we have to see ourselves as servants of God and Christ. Our identity is not in our connections or achievements; it is found in our obedience to God in Christ. We are merely his servants. This allows us to put all our circumstances into the proper perspective.

This has been written as a practical guide for dealing with life as Christ has for us, and to confront false ideas about what it means to be a Christian. So James comes right out of the gates talking about how we can deal with trials, difficulties, and temptations, because it’s something we all deal with.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds ...”
(James 1:2)

In verses 2-12 James deals with trials faced in daily life, and then in verses 13-16 he deals with temptations to evil. We’re not going to go into verses 13-16 today, but I want to at least make sure we distinguish between trials and temptations. Trials come to us as a part of life. No one is exempt.

The word “consider” is an accounting term in the sense of “count,” or “calculate.” It is a conclusion that is reached after conscious consideration and reflection. The point is that you can’t usually prevent troubles, but you do have the power to determine what your attitude about them is going to be.

The word “whenever” means that it’s not a question of *if* troubles come, but *when*. And when they do, James says, we should consider it pure joy. The original word for “trials” or “troubles” is a word that describes a ship running into a reef. In other words, these aren’t just the inconveniences that we face, but *real obstacles*. James is making it clear that Christians are not exempt from these harsh realities of life. Jesus himself went out of his way to remind his followers that they would experience trials and troubles and ship-running-aground types of obstacles. But he also said that in the midst of it, his followers would be filled with his peace:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”
(John 16:33, niv)

So knowing this, let’s start with...

1. What we need to know about *troubles*. (vs. 2-4)

Notice that in those verses that we read, there is no discussion about whether or not we should have troubles or trials. They just are.

There are those who preach and teach and think that being a Christian means that we won't have trials or troubles of any kind. If you believe that, if in your mind you think "I'm having troubles, therefore I must not be a good Christian," that line of reasoning is against the clear teaching of the Bible and of Jesus Christ himself, as well as the experience of most of the believers in history and those today outside the Western world. "The facts of life in Christ are that life is hard, that it can be filled with adversity of many kinds. But in the midst of it all, believers have the option of choosing in a significant way the effect"² that troubled times will have on them.

"This is not 'pie in the sky' thinking – grit your teeth now in hopes of a better future in heaven – nor is it what psychologists might call denial. We are not to pretend that troubles are not happening."³

So there are three truths that must be understood about troubles:

- Troubles are not punishment.

Punishment for sins comes at the end of our lives, when we are judged. The Bible says:

"For all of us must appear before Christ, to be judged by him. We will each receive what we deserve, according to everything we have done, good or bad, in our bodily life." (2 Corinthians 5:10, gnb)

But notice that that comes at the *end* of our lives. In the meantime, we *do* face natural consequences for our sinful actions. For instance, if you disobey God's command to remain sexually pure until marriage, and instead you live life with many different partners, you run the risk of contracting an STD or getting pregnant. That is not punishment; that is a consequence, and you deserve it. If you are sinning and you *don't* get those things, thank God—he's being incredibly merciful to you. But you need to change before you do suffer the consequences. That's the difference between consequences and punishment.

When we talk about troubles or trials, we are talking about difficulties we face that we did not bring on ourselves; either they are the result of living in this broken down world, or the result of someone else's choices, but we certainly don't deserve them nor did we cause them.

- Troubles are Inevitable

Notice that James says, "Whenever you face troubles," not "if you face troubles." Troubles are not electives, but a part of the core curriculum of life. There are "trials of many kinds." If you have an older Bible it might say "temptations" instead of "trials." They come from the same word, because both can serve to strengthen us, but "trials" or "troubles" is a more accurate use. They can both serve to strengthen

² Walters

³ *ibid*

us, but our enemy and sin bring on temptation, while troubles are simply a fact of life.

Then James says “of many kinds” or literally, “many-colored.” That is because we don’t know where they always come from, and because they vary in intensity and variety. They may involve the pain of a lingering illness or an untimely death. Some know the heartache of a broken marriage or a short-circuited romance. Trouble may come from a rebellious child or an alcoholic loved one. Some struggle with problems in business or with health. Others combat lingering depression or habits that seem unbreakable. Our trials are many-colored indeed. Still...

- Troubles are *Productive*

We don’t know the purpose in much of our pain. In times of trouble we even feel abandoned by God. But James says that trials are the evidence that God is at work. The Apostle Paul agreed:

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:17, niv)

Any trouble, no matter what it is, can work *for us* not *against us*. James says that productivity comes “because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (v. 3). “You know” is a progressive word, meaning that it is something you learn and then you *keep on* learning; through every trial. The Greek word for “perseverance” means literally “to remain under.” This is the ability to remain under pressure without collapsing – to cope successfully with the strain of stress. Why is perseverance so important? James says, “So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (vs. 4, niv)

In other words, perseverance helps us to be mature and complete in our faith and wisdom, in our relationship to Christ. And the thing with perseverance is that it requires time. Our growth in faith does not happen in a microwave; it happens in a crockpot. Don’t interfere with what God wants to bring about in your life. Hang in there, choose joy, trust God, and learn from it so that your life in Christ will be complete. That’s the difficult part. When life squeezes, it hurts. But *everything* shapes and molds us to mature faith – not always to give us answers, but maturity comes without answers. Our goal as growing Christians is spiritual maturity. We don’t look for troubles, but we can rejoice in them when they come because their dividends are greater than the discomforts they bring. Listen: (repeat) God is much more committed to our *character* than our *comfort*. We will eventually leave this world, and when we do, we will leave behind everything we have, *except* our character; we take with us our Christlikeness and the strength of our faith. That stays with us.

The author Warren Wiersbe says, “Our values determine our evaluations. If we value comfort more than character, then trials will upset us. If we value the material and physical more than the spiritual, we will not be able to ‘count it all joy.’ If we live only for the present and forget the future, then trials will make us bitter not better.”⁴

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Mature* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978), 22

Next, then is...

2. What we need to **do** about our troubles. (vs. 5-11)

Remember this old song from the nineties: (whistle to “Don’t worry, be happy”). What was that song? What a bunch of bad advice! Don’t mistake that song for what James is saying here. James doesn’t offer mindless advice to just “grin and bear it,” and neither does he call for some kind of stoic resignation. He actually makes four specific suggestions for dealing successfully with trouble:

- Live **Joyously** – (v. 2)

“Consider it pure joy. . .” Our hurts and difficult circumstances are part of the way God helps us grow. We should thank Him for what they do in our lives. Life is difficult. Suffering is inevitable. But *misery* is optional! You can choose your attitude.

The athlete can endure and find joy in the rigor and pain of his training as long as he keeps the goal of winning the race in view. We as Christians can find joy even in trials when we see those trials as a means of achieving Christlikeness.⁵

Years ago, when Shelly and I first got married, our friends were having children, and she began to get that look in her eye. So I bought her a kitten, thinking that would buy me some time.

About the same time, and completely unrelatedly, I went to the doctor's office to be tested for allergies. My doctor wanted to find out what allergens triggered my symptoms. So the nurse came in, drew a grid on my back with at least 30 different places where she cut my skin and then inserted drops with different things in them that people are allergic to. Then she said, "Don't scratch." It was like Chinese water torture. I had to resist the urge to scratch the itch for 15 of the longest minutes of my life! Think of a bear scratching its back on a tree. That’s what I desperately wanted to do!

But testing for allergies isn't a pointless exercise in cruel and unusual punishment, even though it sort of felt like it. It is a form of reverse engineering. My doctor wasn't satisfied with treating my allergy symptoms. He wanted to discover the root causes of my reactions. And the solution isn't just avoiding those things I'm allergic to. The cure was actually exposing me to them in small doses. So when they figured it out, I was given a vial that was a concoction of the stuff I'm allergic to, I got a bag of hypodermic needles, and after training on an orange, I was sent home to inject my own leg with the very things that cause my discomfort. In other words, I not only was supposed to inject myself with what bothers me, I had to do it with a needle stabbed into my thigh. I was allergic to several things, but guess what the big one was? Yep, cats. So I came home and Shelly said, “What did the doctor tell you?” She asked me as she was petting our cute little kitten. When I told her, I could tell by the look in her eyes that it was going to be me or the cat, and I didn’t like my chances. We had that cat for 15 years. I guess it built my character.

⁵ (Beacon Bible Commentary, vol 10, pg 194)

We don't like trials. But – they hold the key to gaining strength to overcome things. The cure for the fear of failure is not success. It's failure. The cure for the fear of rejection is not acceptance. It's rejection. You've got to be exposed to quantities of whatever you're afraid of or need to grow in. That's how you build up immunity and strength. So when you face trials with *that* attitude, you can choose joy.

- Live ***Expectantly*** – (v. 5)

In verse five, James says:

“If any of you need wisdom, you should ask God, and it will be given to you. God is generous and won't correct you for asking.” (James 1:5, cev)

James uses “wisdom” in the Old Testament sense. Wisdom is truth acted upon; knowledge applied practically, the ability to live life successfully in the midst of difficult circumstances. Wisdom is not just “knowing” something is right; it is knowing AND doing it. That's why James says again later:

“Are any of you wise or sensible? Then show it by living right and by being humble and wise in everything you do.” (James 3:13, cev)

Wisdom is living in a way that acknowledges God and is willing to understand His character. James says that God “gives generously to all” without earthly limitations. In Greek the word translated “generously” meant “simply,” or “straightforwardly,” indicating that God gives with a single-minded, unhesitating concern for us; not in a condescending way but out of love for you and his desire to help you grow in the troubles, just like a good father. He yearns to give you the wisdom to make pure choices. Live asking for and expecting His benefits. That is how we live wisely and can have joy.

- Live ***Submissively*** – (vv. 6-8)

James goes on to say:

“But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” (James 1:6-7, niv)

The double-minded person is stuck between two opinions. He is literally “double-souled” with one soul declaring, “I believe,” while the other shouts, “I don't!” It's not a matter of wondering or questioning or trying to figure things out – that's okay, and actually very good for your growth. But doubt is knowing what's right and still choosing not to do it. Indecisiveness makes a person ineffective in every aspect of his or her life. It means a person who is unwilling to submit to God. It means someone who hasn't yielded total allegiance to the Father. That's why James' example of himself sets the stage for the entire letter. We are servants of God and Jesus Christ.

James says a person “must believe and not doubt because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” Every shifting wind of doctrine or spiritual ideas influences that kind of person. Each storm of opposition or trouble

threatens this person's loyalty to God. Without an unwavering confidence in God, adversity creates doubt rather than submission. To James, faith is a commitment to the character of God. You may have heard the story about the mountain climber who slipped and fell, grabbing a branch in the rock to stop his fall. Since he was climbing alone he was utterly helpless. He began to cry, "Help! Somebody help me!" To his surprise he heard a voice saying, "This is God. I will help you. Trust me and let go!" There was a long pause, and then the climber called, "Is anyone else up there?"

When God doesn't operate on our schedule, or his plan doesn't align with ours, we tend to look for another plan. But God gives only to those who want whatever he gives. Are you willing to receive whatever he gives you? It may mean continuing in a difficult job situation or remaining unhealed for some time. Maybe you lack wisdom, because you're not sure if you really *want* God's answer. Would you make a commitment to obedience – in advance – not even knowing what God wants you to do? Will you say to him:

"Lord, I commit myself to do whatever you want, even if I don't know what it is yet"? Remember, that's what Jesus did when he was praying the night before he was crucified. He said, "My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want." (Matthew 26:39, gnb)

If you are willing to, and make this commitment, then you will find all the grace you need to handle the demands of your life, and God's wisdom will be available to you.

- Live *Humbly* - (vv. 9-11)

This is important to having joy. If we are prideful, we will think life owes us something, or that God owes us something. So when troubles come, we will think we don't deserve it and we'll start getting angry or impatient.

James said:

"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business." (James 1:9-11, niv)

Life is so uncertain that tragedy and despair can strike at any time. It is foolish to trust in anything—like wealth—that may be lost in a moment. It is only wise to trust in things that cannot be lost. "The rich man" himself "will fade away even while he goes about his business" (v11). In the midst of his busy life the end will come and all his wealth will make no difference. That's what we talked about last week. God will bring that person low in the end unless he humbles himself now. The poor who are Christian have a high position in God's view despite their low state in the world. This is a complete reversal of status.

James calls for a proper attitude toward material things. He understood the true nature of riches. They are so impermanent, like a flower blossom so quickly destroyed by the burning sun and desert wind. The posture for such prayer requires

humility. Wisdom is sought as we cultivate the perspective of eternity. In financial adversity, the poor brother humbly says, “How rich I am!” And with all his wealth, the rich brother must say, “How much I need the Lord!”

Finally, see that there is a...

3. Reward for the troubled.

Nothing is wasted on God; no situation in life is lost on Him. He will work to turn everything, all the time, into something good for you. That’s why the Bible says:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28, niv)

That doesn’t say “some things” or “a few things.” It says “ALL things.”

James said:

“Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” (James 1:12, niv)

Trials are the ordeals a Christian must face with steadfast courage—such things as illness, unpopularity, financial loss, sorrow, or even persecution. Those who persevere are approved— they stood the test! The word for “Stood the test” (dokimos) was a word that appeared on pottery tested in the kiln and approved. The dokimos approval was like the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.” If a pot cracked while being fired, it would be inscribed with adokimos, “disapproved” and sold at the outlet mall or something. God’s approval produces real happiness and real living. “Blessed” is the word for genuine happiness. This is more than a superficial joviality. It is an inner quality that endures even in times of trouble. Jesus said:

“Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:12, gnb)

That’s what James is talking about when he says that we can receive “The crown of life.” It’s not just an unclear reference to an uncertain future. Jesus constantly spoke of the ultimate prize as a new quality of Life, life with a capital L. He said:

“I came that they might have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance—to the full, till it overflows” (John. 10:10 tab).

That’s why we can have joy in all circumstances.

One of Australia’s greatest natural attractions is the Great Barrier Reef. Colorful corals stretch hundreds of miles along the northern coastline. At points the coral in close to the coastline is nowhere near as vibrant and colorful as the coral on the ocean side of the reef. There’s a very simple reason for this. The coral on the coastline side is in still water. With no challenge for its survival it dies early and turns white. The coral on the ocean side is constantly being tested by wind, waves,

and storms - surges of power. It has to fight for survival every day of its life. As it is challenged and tested, it changes and adapts. It grows healthy. It grows strong. And it reproduces. It becomes a place teeming with life, sustaining all kinds of other life, too.

That is how it is with us. Challenged and tested, we come alive. Like coral pounded by the sea, we grow.

Count it all joy.

Pray