

James 1:1-6

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James 1:1-6

Glen Chambers was saved in college and fired up about Jesus. Got disciplined, went to seminary, graduated, and told everyone that he was going to be a missionary in South America; Ecuador, specifically. He raised his support and finally the day came to leave. He told his parents goodbye and got to the airport to take off. While at the airport he wanted to send his parents a surprise note, so he tore off a corner of a page in a magazine and wrote: dear Mom and Dad, thanks for all of your love and support. This isn't possible without you. And sent it off and got on the plane. In the middle of the night a mountain reached up and pulled that plane out of the sky and he died. He never made it to the mission field. All that training, risk, fundraising—he never made it.

A couple weeks later the letter came in the mail after they already buried their son. The world would call it coincidence. Christians call it providence. His Mom opened up the letter and pulled out the corner of the magazine that had three big letters printed on it: WHY.

That's the question that sounds off the loudest, weighs down the most, and hurts more than anything. I want to look at perhaps the best single passage in all of the Bible that helps us address the question: why suffering? Turn with me **to James 1:1-6**.

¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Two things to notice here: 1) James is writing to Christians that are under intense suffering. They are a part of the "Dispersion"; meaning that they are not in their homeland and most likely facing intense suffering from the place they are occupying. 2) James is writing to Christians. James is often referred to as the New Testament Proverbs because of his proverbial wisdom throughout the book and how often he refers back to the literal book of Proverbs. What's fascinating is that the book of James reads like a sermon manuscript more than a book. This is intentional because James does not want us to be mere hearers of the word, but doers of the word. So, what he has to say here about suffering is extremely practical.

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

I want you to notice four phrases here:

- 1) **"Count it."** This means to be specific in acknowledging something. Just as you must be intentional to acknowledge each head in a room when taking a head count, so James wants us to be specific in counting our trials.
- 2) **"all joy."** One man defines joy as a supernatural delight in the Person, purposes, and people of God. I think that's a good definition. James wants us to specifically see each trial that we face with supernatural delight in Him and His purposes.
- 3) **"trials."** These are the things that James wants us to count as **"all joy."** What are trials? I think **v. 3** provides a helpful definition: **"the testing of your faith."**

Anything that tests your faith can be considered a trial. James uses the examples of a rich man and a poor man being under a trial simply because one man is rich and one man is poor. This means that there are varying degrees of trials.

- 4) **“of various kinds.”** This is one word used in classical Greek that is used to mean “complicated, diverse, complex.” It’s the same word used to describe Joseph’s coat of many colors and it’s used in **1 Peter 4:10** to describe the variety of gifts God gives His people. Trials are like snowflakes; they might appear similar, but they are all different.

Why do we face these trials?

³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Our trials are used by God to produce a steadfastness. What does that mean? The word “steadfastness” can be translated to mean, “staying power.” The ability to withstand something. God sends trials into our lives to test our faith so that we might be able to stay the course and run the race of faith until we go home to be with Jesus or Jesus comes back. Here’s the thing: suffering has a way of assuring us of our salvation.

Listen to the words of scholar Alec Motyer:

“We say that we believe that God is our Father, but as along as we remain untested, how can we be sure? This is why God uses the day when circumstances seem to mock our creed, when the cruelty of life denies his fatherliness, his silence calls into question his almightiness and the sheer, haphazard, meaningless jumble of events challenges the possibility

of a Creator’s ordering hand. It is in this way that life’s trials test our faith for genuineness.”

When we endure our trials with a cheerful joy, **v. 4** happens...

⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

What’s interesting here is that the words **“be perfect and complete”** can actually be translated to say “a mature work.” In other words, if God had a tool belt with tools He uses to chip off sin from our lives and make us more like Jesus, the most well-worn tool in His belt would be a tool named suffering. And at the end of the day, this is what causes Christians to count their trials with “all joy.” The world treats suffering like a jumble of puzzle pieces with no purpose. The Christian treats suffering like a jumble of puzzle pieces that God is putting together to make a complete picture of His Son.

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

This verse seems like James is just moving on. But I think the point James is getting at is that it is often hard to know how to endure suffering. It takes wisdom. Wisdom from God. And the way we get that wisdom is by asking God.

I must admit, I have often skipped past **v. 5** when reading my Bible because it seems so simple. But, no surprise, after studying it for the first time I found that this verse is full of theology and encouragement. Let’s look at the sentence phrase-by-phrase:

“If any of you lacks wisdom...” Pretty obvious meaning here. If you are in need of wisdom you should...

“let him ask God...” This could be translated to say literally, “let him ask the giving God.” This connotes that God doesn’t just give, but that God is a giver. When we give, we are making a volitional decision. But God gives because that’s who He is. It doesn’t take God any effort to give wisdom.

“who gives generously...” This is amazing. The word “generously” here is the same word in the original language that means single or exclusive preoccupation. What does that mean? It means that when God gives wisdom, He gives it to each of us as if we were the only concern He had in the world. Here’s how one commentator put it:

“God gives with a selfless, total concern for us and with an exclusive preoccupation as if he had nothing else to do but to give and give again.”

Here’s why that’s encouraging: we often feel like we are just have one need in a sea of needs. Or, we believe that our needs are too small for God to concern Himself with. But James tells us that God bends His ear to every need we have—no matter big or small. He gives to us exactly what we need—especially when it comes to wisdom. If you need wisdom, ask God. He’ll give you exactly what you need today.

“to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” In other words, God gives us wisdom even though we don’t deserve it. He holds nothing against us. What grace.

So, how does this all relate to suffering?

1. Trials are hard, but never wasted.

Our trials are, indeed, multi-colored. They come in all shapes and sizes, but custom made for each of us by God. Therefore, we should seek to sympathize with those around us who are suffering. Some of us are better at this than others. So, real quick, ten things you shouldn’t say to someone in a trial:

1. “This must be happening to you because you committed some great sin.”
2. Don’t focus on the loss of things instead of people (e.g., a house that burned down instead of a person who died in the fire).
3. Don’t speculate about what unforeseen problems this suffering may be sparing them (e.g., “Your boy might have grown up to be a rebel”).
4. If they have a fatal disease: “Well, everyone has to die from something. You just know in advance what it is.”
5. “I know how you feel.” What is important is that you care.
6. “You aren’t spiritually mature until you’re happy about this.”
7. “Well, Romans 8:28 says that God works all things together for good.”
8. Don’t assume that they are seeking an answer to the question “Why?”

9. When people ask “Why?”, don’t assume that they are looking for a long, sophisticated answer.
10. “You are continuing to suffer because you are lacking faith in God.”

Instead, remind people (and yourself!) that God uses every trial in our life—no matter the size— to conform us into the image of Jesus (**Romans 8:28**). He is always working in the fire while we are walking through the fire.

2. Knowing Christ gives us an unquenchable joy in the midst of suffering that nothing else can.

Our hope is not set in good health, lasting bodies, or stable minds. Our hope is set on Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. And when that is true of us, we will have an unquenchable joy. As Calvin once said, “All our feelings are averse to the thought that we can be happy in the midst of evils.” We have to fight against those feelings and remember that our joy is in God.

3. We often want deliverance from trials while God often wants endurance.

I don’t mean to say that God never grants deliverance or even that He takes delight in our suffering. But I am saying that God wants to help us endure through trials with a tangible joy. And it is through enduring trials that we grow in Christian maturity. To put it another way: we spend a lot of time trying to get out of what God has put us into.

4. God is more ready to give us wisdom than we are to ask for it.

The reason why we often don’t ask for wisdom is that we don’t think our issue is that major or that God wouldn’t want to help someone like us. God is a giving God who loves to give wisdom to His kids.