

HOW TO BE TRANSFORMED BY TROUBLE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
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Let's Begin

The great missionary, William Carey, once said, "I have God, and his Word is sure ... and though the superstition of the heathen were a million times worse than they are, if I were deserted by all, and persecuted by all, yet my hope, fixed on that sure Word, would rise superior to all obstructions.... I shall come out of all trials as gold purified by fire." No matter what came his way, he held firmly to God's promises, "I shall come out of all trials as gold purified by fire."

James opens his book unlike any other New Testament book—counting it an honor to experience a troubled faith, a tested faith. He writes, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (v. 2).

James was convinced believers could be transformed by the trouble they experience. You can; I can. The key is knowing and implementing the proper Biblical principles. James leaves us a spiritual treasure in his little book.

As he begins, he gives us four principles to understand how Christians can be transformed by trouble. Let us follow the outline below:

- I. Faith must be Examined if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 1-4)**
- II. Wisdom must be Exhibited if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 5-12)**
- III. Sin must be Explained if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 13-16)**
- IV. Character must be Established if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 17-27)**

I. Faith must be Examined if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 1-4)

James briefly identifies himself to his recipients, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greetings" (v. 1). As we mentioned in the introductory material, James is the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. Being confused about Jesus his entire early life (John 7:5), after the resurrection of Jesus, something happened to James. The risen Christ appeared to him! (1 Cor. 15:7). Whether at this exact point or later, James became a believer in the Lord Jesus. Subsequently, he also became a leader—one of the "pillars"—of the early church (cp. Acts 1:14; 15:13-21; Gal. 1:19; 2:9-12).

Almost in every thought, the author makes the Christian faith come alive through daily application.

After mentioning who he was, he quickly makes his opening statement, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (vv. 2-4). The reader is struck by the practicality of James. Almost in every thought, the author makes the Christian faith come alive through daily application. In short, James focuses on the believer's behavior.

Interestingly, James begins with the difficult times all Christians must endure. Some people have the false notion that once a person becomes a Christian, everything will always be easy. After all, God is on our side! While it is surely true God is on our side, it does not follow life will always be easy. Nor does Scripture as



a whole indicate this to be the case. Our text specifically suggests the opposite.

Note the *fact of trouble* for the believer, “count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations” (v. 2). Three facts strike the reader in this short but potent statement. The ones to whom James is exhorting to “count” troubles as “joy” are believers—“My brethren.” Next, trouble exists as a necessary part of life—“when.” James did not indicate the *possibility* of trouble. Had he wanted to make trouble a possibility, he would have said, *if* trouble comes our way. Instead he said “when ye fall,” making trouble a *certainty* not a mere possibility. Finally, the believer is to “count it all joy” when trouble comes our way. Our first reaction to this statement may be confusion. “Excuse me?” we reply. “How are we to count it joy when our lives are in a mess?”

Reflection Connection

How often do you consider the troubles you face every day as a means to grow spiritually? Is your first reaction to pray, “Why me, Lord?” Explain.

Before James answers, observe further the *function of trouble* for the believer. The Greek word translated “temptations” is *peirasmos* and means “to try” or “to prove” by a test. Hence, trials are used by God to *prove* our faith. Through intense examination, tribulation gauges our faith to see the materials of which it is made. Immediately, we may inquire why God would need to examine our faith. Is He not omniscient? Does He not know the materials out of which our faith is made? He does. Perhaps it is best if we perceive that trouble to our faith is more for our benefit than God’s. Hence, trouble informs us; trials assist us.

In short, James gives *three functions of trouble* in the life of the believer. Trouble is allowed in order to *test* us. Recall James’ words, “the trying of your faith.” Interestingly, some Bible teachers think James is not concerned with faith but only with works. However, in the very opening of his letter, he deals with faith—faith before works! Faith then works is always the Biblical order. Works could no more precede faith than the fruit of an apple tree could precede the root of an apple tree. Second, trouble is allowed in order to *teach* us. The “trying” of faith “worketh patience.” The Greek term for “patience” carries the idea of “working down through.” Trouble goes down to the depths of our being, the depths of our faith. Patience is necessary to Christian growth (cp. Heb. 10:36; cp. also 2 Pet. 1:5-7).

Finally, trouble is allowed in order to *transform* us. James writes, “let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (v. 4). According to James, trouble’s ultimate goal in our lives is to transform us, to perfect us. God desires us to be in a position where we are “wanting nothing.”

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II. Wisdom must be Exhibited if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 5-12)

It is not enough just to know the troubles we face are designed for our benefit. Instead we must learn to act wisely and honorably during our most difficult moments. James writes, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (vv. 5-8).

Some people have a great deal of knowledge; however, at times the very same knowledgeable people are short on wisdom. In other words, unless one knows how to implement the knowledge, what value does knowledge have for the daily grind of life? More than any other New Testament book, James speaks about wisdom. In fact, being a Jewish believer, he was steeped in the Old Testament *wisdom literature*—Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and especially Proverbs.

In dealing with wisdom, James first explains the shortage of wisdom. As indicated earlier, wisdom is not intelligence. It has nothing to do with an IQ score (cp. Job 32:9). Nor is wisdom about knowledge *per se*. Knowledge is knowing data; wisdom is taking the data and applying it properly to daily life. Neither is wisdom what we normally reference as “common sense.” In fact, sometimes to be wise is to be uncommon!

So, what is wisdom? Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. Wisdom is not mental prowess but spiritual perception. Wisdom is the ability to apply heavenly judgment to earthly situations.

Even so, James is clear that a shortage of Biblical wisdom exists—“if any lack wisdom.” All of us in some way lack the wisdom from above. And, there remains only one way to fill the void. Hence, *James secondly explains the source of wisdom.* From what origin does this necessary wisdom come? James leaves no suspense, “let him ask of God.” To get wisdom, we must be rightly connected with God Himself, for He is the source of our wisdom.

Without question, God remains the eternal *fountain* of wisdom. Wisdom—at least the Biblical wisdom about which James speaks can never be found in this world. Paul indicated the Greeks desperately sought for the wisdom of this world (1 Cor. 1:22). In addition, he indicated the entire world in its sinful condition professed itself wise, and in doing so, became foolish (Rom. 1:22). Why? Because to obtain spiritual commodities, one must go to spiritual sources. Whether it is grace or peace, God is the source of both. God exists as the giving God, a God Who “giveth to all men liberally.” The fact is, God desires to give wisdom to His children. And, He wants to give wisdom both “liberally” and *lovingly* (“upbraideth not”; cp. Eph. 1:17; Col. 1:9).

Finally, James explains the secret of wisdom. Why, then, do we not automatically have wisdom? First, James insists we must request wisdom. Hence, wisdom

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is never automatic. Even more, when we request wisdom, we must request it within certain parameters. For example, James indicates we must not request wisdom with a *doubtful mind*; rather our petitions for wisdom must be “in faith” (cp. Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24).

Additionally, when we request wisdom, we must not possess a *divided mind*—“double minded man.” No person should expect God to bestow wisdom who requests it with a divided mind, which, in essence, is a divided loyalty. The picture James paints is of a person pulled in two opposite directions. What makes a mind divided? A double mind comes from an unclean heart (cp. Ps. 12:2). No wonder the divided minded person is “unstable” in all he or she does.

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James moves from explaining wisdom to illustrating it. He writes, “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways” (vv. 9-11). The contrast is between a poor brother on one hand and a prosperous brother on the other. He is clear that dangers lurk on both sides of the economic spectrum. While there definitely are dangers with material wealth, no less is the poorer Christian tempted to miss wisdom by coveting his neighbor’s prosperity out of sheer jealousy.

III. Sin must be Explained if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 13-16)

Moving from the discussion of wisdom, James begins to explain sin. He writes, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren” (vv. 13-16).

Notice James use of “tempted” (five times in two verses). While the Greek term translated “tempted” comes from the same root word translated “temptation” James earlier used (v. 2), it is important to understand James as employing the terms in two very different senses. In the first instance (v. 2), James is clearly speaking about tests to our faith, tests which have their origin in God Himself. God personally issues tests to prove our trust in Him. On the other hand, while God issues tests to solicit *good* from us, James speaks in the second instance of temptation designed to bring *evil* from us, a motive James flatly denies can be attributed to God.

What, then, may be said about sin and how a correct understanding of sin helps us in understanding how Christians are transformed through trouble? First, James reveals the *cause* of sin (v. 14). Sin is caused not from anything from

Reflection Connection

If God never tempts us, what are we to make of those passages of Scripture which appear to indicate He does tempt us (Gen. 22:1ff).



outside us; rather sin is an *inside* job. In other words, sin begins in the human heart. James refers us to “lust,” which calls up the idea of desires, cravings, and longings. Certainly not all desires are sinful or immoral. Instead desires become corrupt when we seek to satisfy normal desires in unbiblical ways. For instance, in order to physically survive, we must fulfill the cravings we all have for food. But gluttony, the Bible pronounces, is clearly an abuse of our natural (and healthy) desire for hunger.

Again, the Bible places a high regard for human sexuality. Contrary to popular opinion, God invented sex! However, we clearly abuse our sexuality when we attempt to satisfy our desires by fulfilling them outside the Divine institution of marriage. Lust corrupts the human heart. According to James, we become “enticed.” We listen to the tempter who hurls one temptation after another to trap us in sin (cp. Matt. 4: 1-11; 1 Cor. 10:13).

Certainly not all desires are sinful or immoral.

Second, James reveals the *course* of sin (vv. 14-16). As we mentioned earlier, he speaks about *lust*. Elsewhere the Bible speaks concerning our lust (1 John 2:16; 2 Tim. 2:22). It also speaks about the way to defeat lust (Gal. 5:16). In addition, he speaks about the *lure* of sin. Lust entices us, lures us into betraying our allegiance to God, similarly to the way both Eve and Adam were lured away from loyalty to their Creator (Gen. 3). Finally, once *lust* has *lured* us into the snare, we take the sinful *lunge* into the deep.

Hence, the only *cure* for sin, is God Himself. He does not cause it, but He can cure it. Why? As James says, “God cannot be tempted with evil” (v.13). How did He cure sin? By sending His own Son, He saves the sinner. Through Christ, we are made new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

IV. Character must be Established if we are to be Transformed by Trouble (vv. 17-27)

Before James finishes his explanation about Christians being transformed by trouble, he pushes his readers toward a very practical conclusion— the bottom line is *Christian character*. One the one hand, the difficulties we face strengthen our character, and, on the other hand, our character determines how we respond to life’s bitterest moments. In short, we are transformed by trouble when our character is established.

James begins by developing how the Christian’s character begins: *it begins with God’s free gift of eternal life*. James writes, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (vv. 17-18). We are delivered from sin by means of the gift of His Son. Through the Father’s will by means of the Father’s Word, He “begot” us because of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.



Consequently, we now have an empowerment in character we never had before we were believers. Hence, James exhorts us to be “slow to speak, slow to wrath” (v. 19). The Word of God, after all, is planted in our hearts. We now are “doers” of the Word and not “hearers” only (v. 22). Those who do not serve the Lord Jesus demonstrate they do not have a living faith but a mere reflection (v. 23), a “dead faith” as James later indicates (2:20, 26). The Word must be practiced in the believer’s life. They must be “doers of the work” (v. 25).

Only then will “true religion” be proven (vv. 26-27). *Superficial* religion exists in the real world. Superficial religion is *unreal* religion, and unreal religion is both *unrestrained* (“bridleth not his tongue”) and *unreliable* (“vain”). In contrast, *real* religion—*supernatural* religion—is marked in three significant ways. First, *real* religion is marked by *conversion*. As we noted above, our transformation begins when the Word of God penetrates our sinful hearts, and we place our trust in Christ. Our transformation by the Word of God places us in a position to be transformed by our trouble. Conversion is the first mark of real religion.

In addition, *true* religion is marked by *compassion*. Again, James zeros in on the practical—“visit” (v. 27). He is not indicating the “fatherless” and “widows” are the only ones toward whom our compassion should be directed. Rather he uses some of the most despised classes to demonstrate our love should extend to the most neglected in society. Finally, *real* religion is marked by *consecration*; that is, to keep one’s self “unspotted” by the world. Moral purity remains a foundational plank in establishing character.

Golden Greek Nugget

James speaks of the “engrafted” Word of God which God uses in securing our salvation. The Greek term translated “engrafted” is *emphytos*, which means “to implant” or “to germinate.” The picture is that of a seed which is planted in good soil and springs up into life. Or, it could be the form of life beginning as a result of grafting one limb into another as James indicates. Either metaphor is acceptable. God gives life as a result of His life-giving Word.

Wrap Up

James challenges believers to be transformed by the trouble we all face. Explaining four principles from chapter one, we are now in a position to face our daily struggles with faith and courage.