

# First Light

James 1:2-4 NIV

[2] Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, [3] because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. [4] Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Sometimes, it's all in the way you word it. For most of us, it would be a bit unnatural to use "joy" and "trials" in the same sentence. But that's what James selects as the introductory thought to his letter. When you think of "joy", you tend to see images of happiness, smiles, fun times, celebrations, vacations, family, and friends... but the word "trials" brings up connotations of examinations, tests, pain, persecution, stress, and anxiety. It almost seems that no two words could be more polar opposite of each other, but in fact, we are encouraged to view one as being a product of the other. Those who received this letter and read its words were experiencing more than just a challenging test or a rough day. Because they were disciples of Jesus, they had been forced to pack up their families and their belongings and leave town at night to avoid drawing the attention of authorities. Leaving homes and workplaces and becoming a refugee for their faith created all sorts of tensions and worries. But James selects his words carefully and initiates his letter with the admonition that every difficulty faced while staying faithful to Christ is a launchpad upward on the mountain of spiritual maturity.

This paradoxical concept of joy amidst trials requires that we remodel our perception of both. When we act in faith to Christ and are scrutinized for it, there is access to a supernatural extension of our energy and "guts" to then face the next slightly higher hurdle to our faith. Each challenge and difficulty we face has an additive effect on our total strength not unlike adding miles every few weeks allows a runner to eventually reach marathon distance successfully - the long race actually begins many months earlier with one challenging step to walk the first hard mile. Joy also can be redefined as not so much only those "happy" moments in our photo album, but rather instances in which we bring pleasure to our Father in heaven. If pleasing God is high on our to-do list, then our perspective of joy moves to that arena of life events that do exactly that. With time, James suggests, we are able to scale newer and more challenging heights in our quest to bring joy and pleasure to our God. Then, with a mature and completed faith, we've come full circle.

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Prayers for trials have never been very heartfelt, but when we reflect on the strength and faith we were given yesterday to endure its challenges, we can be emboldened to see today's struggles as spiritual wind-sprints. These train us to accept life's hardships with a strange satisfaction (joy) that comes from the heart as we start to see a little more complete picture of what God genuinely wants us to be.

- What difficulties this week could be turned into advantages to please God?
- Is my joy based on how happy I am or on how I am bringing pleasure to God?
- What trials am I facing that are related to the practice of my faith?
- Who can I encourage in their struggles, trials, or hardships?