James 1:1-4, No. 2
"One Reason for our Troubles"
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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

v.1 "to the twelve tribes" has sometimes been taken to mean that the letter was addressed to particular Jewish Christian churches of whose situation James was informed. Others have taken the address to mean that James was intended to be a circular letter to Christian churches generally, Jew and Gentile alike. It is certainly true that "Dispersion" was already in the first century a technical term for Jews living outside the Holy Land. From the time of the return from exile in Babylon the Jewish people had been divided between those who remained in the land God had given them and those who lived among the nations. The term *diaspora* – a version of this same word – is used still today to speak of the Jewish people outside of the land of Israel. There are certainly indications that James may be taken to have been writing to Jewish Christians. For example, he describes their meeting as a synagogue (the word the ESV translates "assembly" in 2:2). That, of course, may just be James' term – he being a Jewish Christian after all – for a Christian assembly. There is otherwise very little in the letter that would help us to identify any particular church or any problems specific to such a church which the letter was intended to address. The exhortations are general and universally applicable. We know from Acts 15 that James welcomed Gentiles as Gentiles into the church and that he regarded them as the true and authentic descendants of Abraham, as much so as Jewish Christians. The NT often refers to Gentile congregations as the *new* Israel. So, whether James was first written to Jewish believers in congregations of which James knew something or whether it was intended for Christian churches generally is a question more interesting than important.

Whoever the original recipients of the letter were intended to be, "dispersion" reminds us that we Christians are all exiles, living away from home!

v.2 Once again, "brothers" includes Christian sisters. It is a form of the generic masculine employed throughout the Bible. However it is unmistakable that Christian women are included among the brethren as they are sometimes addressed specifically as among the brethren to whom the letter is addressed. There is a fundamental equality of the sexes both taught and illustrated in the Bible from beginning to end, the more noteworthy because such high views of women and their equality with men were unparalleled in the ancient world. In that sense the term is a compliment to women and a statement of their equality all the more powerful for its being a mere form of customary address. Christian women too have a Christian life to live and are responsible to live it. "Brothers" will be the way James addresses his readers throughout (cf. 1:9, 16, 19, 2:1, 14, etc.).

The fact that James begins immediately with the trials of believers suggests that either the Christians to whom he was writing were suffering trials or that he assumed that all Christians were likely to be suffering such trials. To become a Christian in the first

century was invariably to risk difficulties of various kinds, some petty, some serious if not life-threatening. That the Christian life will be difficult is a truth taught many times in the Bible. "When you *meet* various trials" doesn't quite capture the sense. The verb suggests that the troubles overtake us by surprise. It is used of the man, in the Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan, *who fell among robbers*. So far as we are concerned the troubles simply happen, and in many cases they come out of the blue**,** but, in fact, they are the will of God.

"Count it all joy," by the way *is the first of forty-six imperatives in the letter*. James will be telling us to do something or not to do something many times in his five short chapters! But many of them are softened by his form of direct address: "my brothers." [Krabbendam, I, 203]

"All joy" means "true joy" or "pure joy," not "nothing but joy." Throughout the Bible God's people are shown capable of joy and sorrow, of pain and pleasure *at the same time*. A trial is not a trial if it is easily borne or if one can be cheerfully distracted and happy throughout. James is not talking about a "superficial gaiety." [Motyer, 30] The joy James is talking about is a deeper gladness, capable of cohabitation in the soul with a sense of sharp pain and deep sorrow. Paul, remember, describes the Christian as "sorrowful but always rejoicing." Joy in sorrow is the solid underlayment of ultimate well-being upon which rests the pain and sense of loss.

We will have reason to return to this point in a subsequent sermon, but the word translated "trial" here in v. 2 is part of the same word group that gives us "tempt" in vv. 13-14. The word can be translated "trial" or "temptation," depending on the context and must be translated in both ways in James. What trials these believers were facing is not specifically said, though the letter may suggest that many were struggling with poverty and that they were being persecuted for their faith. But James is making a general point. What the trial is doesn't matter. Trials *of various kinds* will meet us all.

v.3 "The testing of faith" could mean a process by which it is determined whether a person's faith is genuine or authentic or spurious and false. Here, however, it is more likely that the term refers to the process of refining, as the refining of silver or gold, designed to eliminate the dross until only the genuine metal remains. In other words our lives are heated in the caldron of life until what does not belong to a Christian character has been separated out and only the pure faith and holiness remain. [Moo, 13-14] This is the way Peter uses the same term in 1 Pet. 1:7.

v.4 The sense of v. 4 seems to be that the true fruit of affliction in a believer's life will be harvested only by the one who perseveres through the trial. It is when we are steadfast that our afflictions produce their intended results. Luther reminds us that trouble can make men "bitter or better." They do the latter only when people persevere through them and are not undone by them.

We read these verses and more last Lord's Day evening when introducing the Letter of James as the New Testament's only book of "wisdom." Wisdom, remember, we said is the Bible's word

for "skillful living," the skill that produces true godliness in a world uncongenial to godliness, the skill that enables God's people to reflect his character when even their own hearts are so often utterly unhelpful. We mentioned the use of *hokmah*, the Hebrew word for wisdom, in Proverbs 30 where it describes the skill that so many animals have by which they make a success of life in often hostile environments. We nowadays use the word instinct to describe animals' fabulous adaptations to their environment; the Bible's word is much better: God has given them *wisdom*.

Another way we can get a handle on the meaning of this term, so important for an understanding of James, which James introduces immediately in verse 5 (and, of course, as a Jew James would have spoken in Hebrew and Aramaic and so would have used the word *hokmah*) and refers to again in chapter 3:13-18, is by noticing that the Hebrew word for wisdom, the wisdom that is taught, say, in Proverbs, is used in Exodus 31:3 and a number of other places in the Hebrew Bible for *artistic skill*. Wisdom is the ability that God has given certain artists or artisans by which they can fashion beautiful things out of the rough materials with which they work: wood, stone, metal, or fabric. At one time Michelangelo's *David* was a huge, rough block of marble. But the great sculptor could see in that block the statue he wanted to make and with his hands and his tools was able to bring the splendid male form to life. Most of us, no matter how much instruction we were given, could never have produced anything remotely resembling such a finished product: the proportions would be off, the parts of the body would not look lifelike or be fashioned to the same scale, some chips could not be smoothed out without damaging the total effect, and so on. If I'd made the statue people would have thought David must have been a severely deformed human being! But Michelangelo had wisdom we do not, wisdom indeed that few have ever had!

Well, in the same way, the wise man or woman can *see* the truly godly life in his or her mind's eye, can see what it looks like, what true godliness is and does, and then know how to bring it into expression in the push and pull of ordinary life: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so on. That is what the Bible means by *wisdom*: the art of godly living! Again, it is more than simply obedience to the commandments of God. It is truly *an art*, the faculty of executing a plan, the creative and imaginative expertise of practicing a Christ-like life. It is one thing to know that one must not give way to sexual temptation. That is *the law*. It is another thing to know how not to do that in a world beset on every side with sexual temptation. *That is wisdom*! It is one thing to know that one should keep the Lord's Day holy. That is the law. It is another thing to know *how to do that*. A great many people have known the former but not the latter. They were committed to God's law, but they lacked the wisdom necessary to fashion a true obedience to that law in the run of weekly life. That is wisdom, this *savoir faire*, this knowing *how to do* what we are called to do.

James is interested less in the *law questions* of life – what is to be done or not to be done – and more in the wisdom questions of life: *how* ought we to keep the commandments of God? But wisdom is interested in more than simply the *techniques* of godliness, important as they are. He is also interested in that part of wisdom that concerns the fundamental and accurate grasp of the *way of the world*. How does life go in this world? What are we to expect as the children of God and as followers of Jesus in this world? It is this sort of question that occupies the preacher in Ecclesiastes, another one of the Old Testament's wisdom books, and this *insight into the ways of*

the world and of God's management of the world is the other part of true wisdom. The wise man or woman is the one who does not find the world an utterly confusing place because he or she knows what to expect. Indeed, biblical wisdom often comes from the experience of initial confusion in a believer's heart and mind. And then after the confusion comes insight, recognition, and understanding. Or, if we were to use a modern term, we might say that biblical wisdom is *perspective*! Woody Allen once said, "Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering – and it's all over much too soon!" Well true as that sentence no doubt it, its meaning absolutely depends upon one's *perspective*. Trials are an inevitable part of every human life, but it matters immensely what you understand them to be, why you understand them to be such a regular part of human experience. But they can be looked at very differently. Why is life full of misery and suffering? And why do we not want it to end? There are very different answers to those questions. Wisdom knows the truth of the matter and as he or she suffers the wise Christian thinks very differently about his or her pain.

James begins with this second part or dimension of wisdom in vv. 2-4, with this perspective on life.

> "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness."

Of course, it produces more than just steadfastness. It produces all of the traits of true godliness and produces them – the whole Bible teaches us - as nothing else can or does. Malcolm Muggeridge, in a letter to William F. Buckley Jr., wrote near the end of his life:

> "As an old man, Bill, looking back on one's life, it's one of the things that strikes you most forcibly – that the only thing that's taught one anything is suffering. Not success, not happiness, not anything like that. The only thing that really teaches one what life's about – the joy of understanding, the joy of coming in contact with what life really signifies – is suffering, affliction." [In *Happy Days Were Here Again*, 411]

Malcolm Muggeridge also wrote this.

> "Suppose you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be! …because everything that corrects the tendency of…man to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered." [Cited in Brian Moore, *Pulpit and People*, 147]

Muggeridge was a Christian when he wrote that, and it is highly doubtful that he would have thought that had he not become a Christian and began to look at life in a fundamentally different way. It is an insight long known to Christians and put in many different ways. Bonhoeffer put it in this way: "Pain is a holy angel who shows treasures to men which otherwise remain forever hidden; through him men have become greater than through all the joys of the world." [Metaxas, 495]

Nevertheless, as often as this point is made in the Bible, one thing we know well about Holy Scripture's teaching about *wisdom* is that at many points it overlaps the commonsensical

recognitions of people generally. As we have pointed out before, many of the proverbs can be found, sometimes virtually word for word, in Babylonian and Egyptian books of wisdom. There are many sayings we all learned growing up as Americans that are true wisdom, even if they are not specifically citations from the Bible. They tend to state in other words some of the Proverbs.

> "A penny saved is a penny earned."
> "Don't judge a book by its cover."
> "It is better to be safe than sorry."
> "Many hands make light work.
> "The pen is mightier than the sword."

And on and on. And so it will be in James. In some places, as is the case in Proverbs, James gives us teaching that is indisputably and uniquely Christian. In other places any man or woman of good sense, whatever his or her religion lack of religion, will nod assent. And that is proof, of course, that James' wisdom is genuine wisdom; that its practicality is such that most anyone can and will acknowledge it. This is very important. It is one more demonstration that the Christian life is and ought to be human life in its best, truest, and most authentic form. That is what we believe after all, is it not? That to be a Christian is to be and to live as a human being should. No wonder that creatures made in the image of God, who have stamped upon their lives the very nature of God should frequently recognize their calling and duty, if only partially and occasionally their perspective has been distorted.

And so it is that even this piece of wisdom – that troubles and afflictions are essential to the moral and spiritual improvement of human beings – is not unknown to non-Christians. So the poet, reflecting no particularly Christian conviction, nevertheless writes:

> I walked a mile with Pleasure
> She chattered all the way,
> But left me none the wiser
> For all she had to say.
>
> I walked a mile with Sorrow,
> And ne'er a word said she;
> But, oh, the things I learned from her,
> When sorrow walked with me.

There was an old Latin adage that many Christians have adopted through the years: *vincit qui patitur*, that is, "He who suffers, conquers."

But in the hands of biblical writers, such as James, the idea that suffering leads to spiritual, intellectual, and moral *depth and completeness*, is given a deeper meaning, because the cause of our suffering is always ultimately our heavenly father, and its purpose is *his* purpose, namely our sanctification. How different, for example, the simple truth that we learn from our trials – such as might be confessed by any unbeliever – from this James' like insight of Robert Murray McCheyne:

> "Your afflictions may only prove that you are more immediately under the father's hand. There is no time that the patient is such an object of tender interest to the surgeon, as when he is bleeding beneath his knife. So you may be sure if you are suffering from the hand of a reconciling God that his eye is all the more bent on you."

Or this from C.S. Lewis:

> "Though our feelings come and go, his love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins, or our indifference; and, therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to him." [*Mere Christianity*, 118]

It matters immensely, does it not, that our afflictions and trials are not simply misfortunes impossible to avoid, but are, in fact, the will of our heavenly father who seeks in them our eternal good! Now the simple point James is making is that because they are so essential to reaching the goal to which we ought all to be aspiring – a finished, Christ-like character – we should not resent our trials. To be sure he puts his point in a startling, attention-grabbing way typical of wisdom literature by saying that we should be happy for our miseries. But the point is obvious. Why should we be happy in our sorrows? Because they are the indispensable means of spiritual growth and maturity.

Think of the man or woman who knows he or she needs to lose weight. In the ordinary run of daily life what that means for most people is that they will have to get used to being hungry. It is no fun to feel hungry much of the time, but if one really wants to lose weight there is no better feeling than hunger. It means the body isn't getting the food it wants, which is precisely what weight-loss requires. I know fifteen or twenty of you are going to come to me after the service to tell me that you can lose weight without feeling hungry. You lie!

Or, more seriously, we are now all too well acquainted with how awful many of our medical cures have become. Chemotherapy, radiation, major surgery may well cure us of the disease we have, but as we are nowadays wont to say, the cure can be worse than the disease, at least it can feel worse than the disease, all the more nowadays when diseases can be detected before any symptoms appear. There are a great many people who will tell you that they suffered more from the cure than they ever did from the disease.

James doesn't say *how* trials do this for us, perhaps because there are so many trials and they work in very different ways. But it is not that difficult for us to see how they work to foster our spiritual maturity. There are certainly unending examples of trials that have humbled proud men and women. They reveled in their success until it was taken away and they were left with the realization that they were, in fact, small, powerless, and utterly dependent upon the good graces of God, exactly what a real Christian ought always to know and feel in his or her heart. Think of a Chuck Colson, for example, from the White House to prison and all of his humiliation reported day after day in the newspapers and pictured on the screen of every American's television set. If humility is the bottom grace of the Christian life, as virtually any Christian authority will tell us it is, then it is not hard to see how trials, before which we find ourselves helpless, are not only useful but often essential to the cultivation of humility. Rich, healthy, successful people are

rarely as humble as they ought to be or realize the extent of their dependence upon God. I have had this experience of being humbled by my troubles and I know you have as well.

But it is not hard to see, surely it is not hard to see that every Christian grace can be increased through trial and testing. Faith in God and Christ is never really practiced in its purity and power until all that one has left is his confidence in the faithfulness of God and in the love of Jesus. When everything else has been lost to you and only the Lord remains, how clear it becomes to a Christian man or woman that Christ is our only hope, which conviction, we must never forget, is the foundation of *everything else* in the Christian life. As Samuel Rutherford once put it, "Faith's necessity in a fair day is never known aright."

The evil of sin is rarely grasped even by serious Christians until one is made to see its doleful effects in life, until one's nose is held in its stench. And that is what afflictions do, especially those that follow and result from the commission of sin. The glory of heaven is rarely appreciated fully until life on this earth is made to appear sad, and dark, and foreboding, even disgusting as it is so often when our circumstances turn against us. I can say that as more of my loved ones have died, the less attractive this world seems to be to me and the more ready I am to leave it. I'm sure many of you have had the same experience. The darkness and the loss that death visits on our life has a peculiar power to shape our perspective on life in this world. Similarly, the reality of God, the power of prayer, the meaning of divine grace, the bitterness of pride, true sympathy with others, and a hundred other fundamental convictions are taught, nourished, and implanted deep in the soul by the afflictions of our lives and, many saints would say, by *nothing else* so powerfully or permanently. Indeed, there is a sense in which the power and truth and beauty of the Word of God is never seen so clearly by a Christian as when he or she is suffering in the throes of some affliction.

John Bunyan, in his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, recalls of the time of his imprisonment:

> "I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now; those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before, are made in this place and state to shine upon me; Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen him and felt him indeed…. I never knew what it was for God to stand by me at all turns…" [Paragraphs 321, 323, 327]

But, alas, the world and the church are full of people who have suffered trials but whose intended benefits they never realized because they didn't persevere through them and didn't count it joy to suffer them. They didn't have this perspective on their trials. They never looked to see or prayed to feel God's own hand upon them, never realized that this trouble was intended to mature them, to perfect them, to complete them.

In the face of tragedy and human sorrow our first instincts are two: to blame someone for the pain that we are experiencing and to seek in some way to lessen our pain. But what if the real importance of that trial, at least for us, is the training of the soul? In such a case, in our two concerns – fixing blame and finding a way out – we have missed what really matters. The great opportunity that has been given us, the testing of our faith to strengthen and purify it, is then lost.

We still suffer the pain, but to no one's benefit, especially our own. The trial has been for nothing; it has accomplished nothing in us. And the saddest thing is that we will never get back that opportunity, never realize the spiritual gain that was there for us to obtain. Believe me, if such spiritual insight, if such power of faith, if such deep conviction were possible to obtain without pain and trial, there would be much less trial in a believer's life. What do we read in Holy Scripture?

> "…but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve the children of men." [Lam. 3:32-33]

And

> "In all their affliction he was afflicted…"

We must never take a statement like the one James makes in 1:3-4 to mean that God does not feel the pain or appreciate the sorrow we must endure, or that our afflictions are to him simply a naked calculation of pain and reward. We are prevented from ever thinking that the Lord doesn't care about our pain since he is accomplishing something good by it, by the suffering of the Lord Jesus, who bore greater afflictions that we ever shall and was made by them our merciful and sympathetic and understanding high priest. If suffering – and his was terrible suffering – was necessary for even perfect man to grow into maturity in mind and heart, how much more must they be necessary for sinners such as ourselves. But we are told in the Word of God that it was for the joy set before him that he endured the cross. He knew it was to be the means of the greatest conceivable gain for a vast multitude of people.

May I say, as an aside, that a trial or affliction often, if not usually, involves others beside ourselves. God may have many purposes in a trial, he may be doing many things in many lives at the same time. But in a Christian's life, whatever else the trouble may be doing, it is a testing and purifying of our faith. It is always that for a Christian, whatever else it may be.

So take James' point: there is both a truth here and a summons. Wisdom requires that we remember, always remember that our trials have a purpose – many purposes perhaps, but always our growing deeper in Christian faith and love – and that we must accept them, therefore, *in a spirit of hope and expectation* that we will become better Christians than we have been before. And in that understanding, with that perspective, with that wisdom we must endure them, persevere through them, looking for what God has for us in them.

Many of you know John Newton's wonderful poem, *These Inward Trials.* It is a poetic reflection on James 1:2-4.

I asked the Lord, that I might grow
  In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
  And seek more earnestly his face.

I hoped that in some favored hour
  At once he'd answer my request,
And by his love's constraining power
  Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel
  The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
  Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more; with his own hand he seemed
  Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
  Blasted my [hopes], and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
  'Wilt thou pursue they worm to death?'
"Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
    I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ
  From self and pride to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
  That thou may'st seek thy all in me."

John Newton was speaking of what he had himself learned in the course of his life. And if it were true of *his* life, how much more yours and mine. There is a world of wisdom, of heartbreak to be sure, but of true wisdom in the opening words of the letter of James. And there is great hope for us. We live in a world full of trials and afflictions. We cannot escape it. But how wonderful that in those trials, in that sorrow, in that pain, we have the hope of a greater and deeper godliness and faith and love. The result of standing fast in a trial is to conquer in still harder battles to come. And those battles will come; they cannot be escaped. [Barclay in Krabbendam, 217] So let's win them. And we shall if we endure each trial as it comes, looking up to God from whom it comes to sustain us and to use the trial to complete and perfect and to mature us, keeping our eyes always wide open to that truth, ready to be changed by it. It all depends on one's wisdom, that is to say, one's perspective.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the little Dutch boy who lived on a dyke near a great windmill, whose long arms swept so close to the ground that they endangered anyone who carelessly strayed too close to them. His parents had, of course, forbad him to go near the windmill and had tried to frighten him by telling him of what would happen should he be caught by one of those great blades, carried into the air, and beaten to death by its ceaseless strokes. But he was not a particularly obedient boy and one day, heedless of their warning, absorbed in his play, he strayed too near the dangerous arms. Perhaps he was half conscious of the danger but suddenly he was violently struck from behind and found himself swung up into the air, his head downward and blows hitting him swiftly and hard. And all he could think was he was caught in one of the

windmill's great blades and now was going to have the life crushed out of him. It had come then! The danger his parents had warned him of had now overtaken him and he was lost. In terror he twisted himself about and looking up saw, not the immeasurable expanse of the heavens above him, but his father's face. It is all the difference in the world to know that your troubles, your trials, your sorrows, your pain are not the result of some impersonal, blind and careless force, but actually have come to you from the hand of your Heavenly Father, God himself. The boy melted into tears, not of fear, but of relief. He had not been caught by the grinding power of a machine, but by the hands of a loving Father. Perspective! Wisdom! [Taken from B.B. Warfield, "What Fatalism Is," *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. ii, 395-396]