

# Count It All Joy

James 1:1-8

The twelve tribes scattered in the diaspora faced loss of liberty, property, and sometimes life. In this they followed in the footsteps of Jesus who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.

## Summary of the Text

James gives hearty greetings to the diasporan tribes (v. 1). These brothers will fall into diverse trials, and when this happens they are instructed to count it all joy (v. 2). This is done with the knowledge that the testing of faith produces patience, and patience arrives at its perfect work when they are mature and complete, lacking nothing (vv. 3-4). If they lack wisdom in trials, they must go to the one who provides it. Ask God who gives to everyone generously, who is glad to hear it, and you will receive, just as Jesus said (v. 5; cf. Matt. 7:7). He adds an important stipulation, that the requests must be made in faith, doubting nothing (v. 6). The doubter is tossed like a wave in a windy sea, and he'll receive nothing from the Lord (v. 7). He is schizo-minded, unstable in all ways (v. 8).

## When Trials Come

Recall that soon after Pentecost, after the stoning of Stephen, Jewish Christians were persecuted in Jerusalem and scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, and beyond (Acts 8:1, 11:19). One of the reasons Jesus was crucified was because the high priests feared He would get them in trouble with the Romans, "*and [they] will come and take away both our place and our nation*" (Jn. 11:48). Hence the solution was to kill one guy for the benefit of the nation, Caiaphas prophesied. The disciples believed Jesus could overcome the Romans until He didn't—hung by Pilate on the cross between two capital criminals. But when He rose from the dead, appeared to a multitude of eyewitnesses, and sent His disciples to make the same kind of trouble, now they would face the treatment He received. A good portion of the New Testament was written to instruct and encourage believers dealing with persecution that arises naturally from being a Christian out loud in public. "*Woe to you*", Jesus said, "*when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets*" (Lk. 6:26). These brothers bore witness that Jesus is the Christ and therefore the powerful in Israel wanted them silenced. It's no different today in families, friendships, and among people in power of our post-Christian culture. James says not "*if*" but "*when*" you fall into various trials (cf. Matt. 5:11-12). Trials are not limited to persecution. The word can be translated "*temptations*", and temptations come in countless forms: health problems, financial trouble, conflict in relationships, losing loved ones, ongoing disappointment, career struggles, sin in yourself or others against you and so on. The temptation is to lose faith, to doubt the goodness of God, His sovereignty, or your ability to thrive and honor Him. The very thing that presents a threat to your happiness and stability is to be a reason and occasion for joy, for knowing this is how God grows you and advances His kingdom. Luther said the church converts the whole world through blood and prayer. This could hardly be more counterintuitive.

## Grounded In Knowledge

We are to count, reckon, consider and trust God for joy when trials come because we know how He will use them to bless us. It's helpful to understand what it looks like to faithfully "*count it all joy*." Does it mean smiles and constant cheerfulness? That we should never cry? Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus and over Jerusalem, knowing it would be judged and destroyed (Jn. 11:35; Lk. 19:41). Paul and the Ephesian elders cried after he exhorted them and departed (Acts 20:37). The joy James describes is deeper than grief and sadness, dwelling at foundational level of faith in God. As he details the breadth of his ministry, Paul says he was "*sorrowful, yet always rejoicing*" (2 Cor. 6:10). Joy at the low-bottom of your heart is a fundamental

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disposition and confidence in God that knows the testing of your faith produces patience, and patient endurance is the pathway to maturity in Christ (v. 4). How did Jesus know what to say in response to accusations? How could He speak the words of life, call people to repentance, restore them to God, confront lies and oppression, endure slander, and open the eyes of the blind? Amidst the present trouble, He knew the Father was blessing and preparing Him for greater things: *“though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him”* (Heb. 5:8-9). Jesus never sinned, but the pathway to maturity as a true man was through trials and suffering. This is what James refers to when he says patience has its perfect work so that you may be mature and complete (v. 4). We don’t ever get to a point this side of death of being sinless (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8). But we do reach deeper levels of maturity, and there are no shortcuts, no cheat codes to get there. Christians who do all they can to avoid trials altogether instead of striving for faithfulness only prolong the inevitable. A father or mother who shelters a kid from all conflict, or assumes the kid is always innocent, sets him up for failure in the world. So it is with believers who are unprepared to face trials and don’t know this is the means of maturity—of stronger faith, deeper wisdom, and greater fruitfulness in God’s kingdom. What makes something a trial is that you don’t feel up to it. You’re not sure you can handle it given you are and what you have. Paul asks the Lord three times to take away his thorn in the flesh, and is told no: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Given that trials are for our ultimate good, should we pray for them to come? The church father Tertullian said we should seek out afflictions. This misdirected zeal explains some monastic eccentricities, but Jesus requires us to pray *“Lead us not into temptation.”* When trials come, we count it all joy. But wisdom and humility don’t ask for trouble.

## Wisdom Without Doubt

God gives wisdom liberally to all who ask, but the one asking must do so in faith, free from doubt (vv. 6-7). Jeff Meyers says this is better understood as “faithfulness”, that is, asking with willingness to do what God requires. Trusting God is an act of obedience; as James will say, *“I will show you my faith by my works.”* Augustine once prayed, *“Lord, make me chaste, but not yet”*, demonstrating his unwillingness to be chaste now. Often trials are tied to our specific sins, and regardless we need to have courage and strength to believe the Lord and act on the wisdom He gives. The gambler can’t truly pray for relief from debt without being willing to quit gambling. So not doubting means believing He exists and rewards those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6), and being willing to obey His answer. The one who prays to many gods or pray to the Lord as an activity to check off the list prays in violation of the 1st Commandment. He alone is God and must be revered as such. The Lord won’t bless double-mindedness. But if you pray to Him knowing He can relieve your burden, as well as choose not to for now, and ask Him for wisdom on how to deal with the situation, He will give it. We are wicked but know how to give good gifts to our children. How much more does our heavenly Father know how to give good things to those who ask Him (Matt. 7:11)? Ask Him to teach you how to count it all joy when you fall into all kinds of trials, knowing that He will use your troubles to make you more like Christ, fuller of the love of the Father.