

## **RULE # 1 FOR TRIALS: SAY “WELCOME!”**

### **James 1:1–4**

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The letter of James is found near the end of the New Testament. Today, we’ll be looking at the first four verses of this letter.

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:1–4, NIV).

James is a little letter that deals with the practical dimensions to the Christian faith, so to speak, where the rubber hits the road. You remember from church history that Martin Luther, the great reformer, didn’t think much of this letter of James. He called it a “right strawy epistle” in comparison to Paul’s letters. The reason he thought so little of it was that he was protesting against an approach to Christianity that said one is right with God on the basis of what they do rather than receiving salvation as a gift through faith from God. But isn’t it encouraging to know that even great people can be wrong? And that only God’s Word can speak unerringly to us, and people make mistakes. There is no tension between James and Paul. Paul himself, writing in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, says that he commends them for their work of faith. And where there is relationship of faith, it will produce behavioral changes. Faith isn’t just cognitive. It is not just intellectual. It not just checking off the items of a creed and saying, “I agree with that,” as if agreeing with that would make any difference in how we live or how we talk or how we behave. James says, “If it’s real faith, it will affect us dynamically in our everyday life.” So James, along

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with Paul, teaches us that we are saved by grace through faith. But James and Paul both point us in the paths of Christian living.

There are five people in the New Testament that bear the name “James.” There is James the son of Zebedee. There is James the son of Alphaeus, who is probably also the son of Mary. There is James the younger and there is James who is the father of Judas Thaddaeus.

This James that writes this letter is the fifth James of the New Testament. Most believe that the writer of this letter is the earthly brother of the Lord. He grew up with Jesus in Nazareth. He did not initially believe in Him. In fact, one time, he came with his brothers and sisters and mother and wanted to take Jesus away, because they thought he was “beside himself” or mad (Mark 3:21). Somehow, he comes to believe—perhaps after the Resurrection—that His elder brother, Jesus, is the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus, according to 1 Corinthians 15, made a personal appearance to James. James was present in the Upper Room, in Acts 1, when the Spirit is first poured out. He is one of the one hundred and twenty. As we see from Acts 12 and Acts 15 and Galatians 1, he becomes the leader of the church at Jerusalem. He is called, in church tradition, “Old Camel Knees.” The reason why he got that title is because it is said he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became leathery. It is a little easier, I think, to receive advice from someone whom we know to be a person of God.

He identifies himself in a very unique way as he opens the letter. Simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ .” (verse 1). Notice he does not say, “James, the brother of the Lord.” Nor does he say, “James, the pillar of the church.” Those would have been true titles he could have used about himself, for he was the brother of the Lord and he was called by Paul and others a pillar of the church. But he doesn’t refer to himself that way, because true Christian humility does not depend on earned titles or honorary titles. The word that is appropriate for

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Christian character is the word that James employs here when introducing himself. He simply says, “I’m a servant.” The word in the biblical period simply meant “slave.” It had more intensity than the word “servant” has. A slave. One wholly owned by another and under the total direction and command of another. I would submit to you that when we are looking at self-concepts that are highest on the list, as a Christian, we should seek to identify our own selves in such a way. If you ask me who I am, just count me as one who is owned by another, under another’s direction and control. A slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Greetings,” he says, “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1). That word “scattered” in the Greek is the word *diaspora*, which we’re familiar with in history—the dispersion, the Diaspora. It means “scattered seed.” Israel was scattered away from its land among the nations, beginning with the captivity of Assyria in the eighth century before Christ, and the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century, and continuing to this day. Three out of every four Jews in the world is still a Jew in the Diaspora, the dispersion away from Israel.

But James takes this word used of Israel and takes the title “twelve tribes of Israel,” and does what Saint Paul did. Paul, in Galatians 6:16, calls the church the “Israel of God.” So James is not writing to fellow Israel. He is now writing to the redeemed body of Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, the new Israel of God. He is saying to them who are scattered among the nations, not because they had sinned as ancient Israel had. But scattered because that’s where they lived and that’s where the gospel was. “Scattered among the nations” we are today.

James, in the first three verses, the early part of his letter, starts talking to us about trials. That occasions the body of this message today and the title for this message: “Rule Number One for Trials: Say ‘Welcome.’” You’ve got to be kidding! Trials! We use several different words in the English language for trial. We may use “trial.” We may use “test.” We may use “temptation.” In

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fact, it is translated that way in James 1. On one occasion, you’ll find the one word translated as “trial,” another time as “test,” another as “temptation.” For us, temptation has kind of a sinister, negative meaning. Therefore, it is probably not the right word we should employ when talking about what is in James 1. Generally, when we think of temptation, we talk about being sucked under. About being pulled down. About falling into sin. The Greek word for “trial” or “test” is a word that speaks of someone who is going to come through a time of testing with triumph, who is going to emerge stronger and purer as a result of the tests. The idea is not one of seduction into sin, but of being proven. If we understand tests right, that’s what they’re for. Like a young bird “testing its wings.” This test is going to give you something you haven’t had in your life before—a new strength and new power. In these short three verses, James tells us seven things about tests.

#### **I. The first thing he says about tests or trials is that they are inevitable.**

They’re going to happen. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). He does not say *if* you face trials, but *whenever*.

I would like to be able to stand up before you and say to you that there is going to be an invisible plastic shield that’s going to descend like a bubble on your life if you become a Christian. All the microbes of sin and danger and disease and death are going to be kept outside and you are going to live in this marvelous free environment, where nothing can ever penetrate the shelter of your success and security. I’d like to tell you that. But I can’t.

*Whenever*, not *if* you face trials. And not “whenever you face trials, because there’s sin in your life or you haven’t had faith.” It’s just the fact that trials are inevitable. They’re going to come. They’re going to happen to every one of us.

#### **II. Two, trials come in many different kinds.**

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“Whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). The Greek word here is a word which means “many colored,” “variegated,” “diversified.” When you face trials of all kinds. There are many different kinds of trials. Some of the trials are generic to the age group you’re in. It doesn’t matter what age we’re at, we’re having trials.

Sometimes, the many trials seem to come all at once. You find it true that when it rains it pours. If it isn’t one thing, it’s a whole bunch of things all at one time. James is saying God has grace for every trial. “All the many colored trials of life,” whether the trial is black or red. Whatever the color of the trial is, there is a grace from God for it. Trials come in many different kinds.

### **III. A third thing that James says about trials is that they arise unexpectedly.**

“Whenever you face trials.” The English word “face” kind of says it like we would say it, but the literal word here is a word which means “to fall.” “Whenever you *fall* into trials of many kinds.” The same word “fall” is used in a story that Jesus tells of the Good Samaritan, the man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves (Luke 10). He didn’t wake up in the morning and say, “I’m going to go down the road today and I’m going to get mugged.” It didn’t happen that way. He didn’t know it was going to happen. He fell into it. And trials, most of the time, happen in life to us quite unexpectedly. Even when trials are developing gradually and we see a few of them coming, we seem powerless to avoid them. We’re helpless. So we really fall into those times.

### **IV. That brings us to a fourth thing about trials that James says. Trials test faith.**

“You know that the testing of your faith...” James says (James 1:3). What do we mean by testing? To test means to prove something. The way that the word was used in James’ day was mainly in regard to metals. To test whether a metal was a pure metal or whether it had alloys and impurities mixed in with it. James says that trials do that for us. They test whether our faith is

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genuine or not, whether we’ve simply been wearing our Christianity as though it was something that was convenient when times were good. But if the faith is genuine, the tests will bring out the faith. Trials test our faith. The Bible fortunately gives us the Book of Job to let us know that there are occasions when we are so in pain that God lets us scream and protest and even impugn Him and say, “God, you’re not fair to be allowing this. You let the wicked get away scot-free and you let the righteous suffer. What kind of justice is there in this?”

There is a way, though, that genuine faith works through those times. It’s not just an easy answer. I don’t understand, but I know that God will somehow bring us through. Storms do test faith. When we’ve gotten through the storm, we maybe never have had an answer to why it happened. But we find that we have a deeper hold of God and God has a deeper hold of us. I can’t explain that by means of books. I can’t explain that by means of theological arguments. I can only explain it by experience. Walking through deep waters is a process that God does not abandon us in. But He walks with us and leads us. Real faith shines through.

It’s the difference between a diamond and a cubic zirconium. The test is going to prove it’s real. That’s what James is saying about faith and about tests. The test is going to determine whether you were in it for the right reasons. Whether you have rock loyalty to Jesus Christ or whether you were in it for a momentary ride or a momentary fantasy or a momentary feeling. Or whether it’s real or an illusion. Peter says the same thing as James, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6–7).

**V. The fifth thing James says about trials is that trials develop staying power.**

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“The testing of your faith develops perseverance” (James 1:3). This is my favorite word in the New Testament. “Perseverance”—a word that means “to remain under,” “to abide under.” It’s the idea of a person who stays long past the time when they should have left. It’s the idea of a person who keeps holding the load long past the time they should have set it down. It’s staying power. It’s the idea that all of us carry a load in life and when we have a trial, we pray, “God, take it off our back.” But if He doesn’t take it off our back, then He gives us perseverance, the ability to hold it. The strength to keep on going. Trials produce that staying power. Trials are the pulleys, the barbells and the bench presses of the soul. As we pick them up, we acquire greater strength to deal with more.

Paul sounds the same theme in Romans 5:3, where he says, “We rejoice in our sufferings, for we know that suffering works staying power.” Perseverance, endurance. A missionary in China wrote home, sharing some of the difficulties he and his family were enduring. “These trials of faith are to give us patience or staying power. For patience can only be worked as faith goes into the pressure chamber. To pull out because pressure is laid on and to start fretting would be to lose all the good that he has in it for us.” Faith goes into the pressure chamber.

### **VI. The sixth thing James says about trials is that trials need to be responded to properly.**

They must finish their work. Perseverance must finish its work. There’s no escapism. There’s no taking a quick check-out. There’s no deadening the nerves of our psyche and emotions when we are hurting and saying, “I’m checking out. I don’t have to put up with this. I don’t have to take this.” That’s the tremendous difference between a Christian mentality in this world and the world mentality which we’re facing today. The Christian somehow, by the grace of God, needs to ask for an extra special shot of God’s strength when going through a situation, whereas a non-Christian would simply say, “chuck it!” Perseverance must finish its work. Don’t check out of

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your trial on your own before God is ready for you to check out and gives you a way of escape. Don't take that way of escape yourselves. That's what this Scripture is saying. “Let it finish its work.”

Andrew Murray, the great devotional writer, had a four-point formula for trial. He said, “One, say, ‘He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this narrow, hemmed-in place, and in that fact I will rest.’ Two, ‘He will keep me in His love and give me grace to behave as His child.’ Three, ‘Then He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends for me to learn.’ Four, ‘In His good time He can bring me out again. How and when He knows.’ So let me say, ‘I am: one, here by God's appointment; two, in His keeping; three, under His training; and four, for His time.’”

### **VII. Seventh, trials properly responded to make us productive.**

Three words are used to describe this productivity so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. “Mature”—a beautiful word, sometimes translated “perfect,” which means someone who has arrived at a goal. Someone maturing. I want to be more mature. Life's adversities have a way of mellowing us and maturing us. It is the hard blows of life that are chipping away at us until the full face of Jesus emerges out of the block of our life. Maturity. completeness. No disfiguring or disqualifying blemishes. Not lacking anything. Obviously all that is a process. Not like a mushroom springing up in a night that's quickly gone, but like a great oak that grows but a few inches a year, yet lasts on and on through time. God is at work, making His character in us.

So rule number one for trials is, “Say ‘welcome.’” Count it pure joy. “Count it”—that means have a settled conviction decided in your heart when the trial comes. I think James would allow me to say that when a trial first hits, it's hard. Obviously we weep. We sometimes pound on

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things. And we have an initial flush of denial or anger. But when that gets washed out of our system and we sit down and think level-headedly about what has happened to us, James says, “Let that be your first response.” When you’ve gotten past the emotional stage, “Count it, consider it pure joy.”

I think that what James is saying is not only scripturally and spiritually sound, but it’s obviously psychologically sound to have that kind of attitude toward life’s adversities. We’re all going to go through adversity. We’re going to go through it one of two ways: We’re either going to make the best of it or it’s going to undo us. We are to have a settled attitude in our heart of how we’re going to face these things. The benefit we receive from trials depends, on a large degree, on how we look at them and the spirit in which we handle them. If we go into them and continue in them with a defeatist attitude and an “Oh me!” attitude or “Poor me” attitude, and an “I’m going to get you!” attitude, our trials will undo us. But if we can say “With God’s help, I will rejoice. Not because the trial is fun but because when I see through the long stretch, I am going to emerge from this with God’s help a stronger and better person.” Count it all joy when you fall into trials. Not because you’re masochistic. Not because you say, “Oh, good! The pain really hurts. It’s wonderful.” Not because you’re a pain-denier. Slam the hammer against your thumb and say, “It feels good.” Christians are not masochists. And they’re not reality deniers. But there is an attitude where we know that adversity tests character. And that test is designed so that we can pass it and emerge more powerfully and more godly and better in our life when it’s complete. J. B. Phillips, who first paraphrased the New Testament into modern English, has this marvelous translation of these verses. “When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don’t resent them as intruders. But welcome them as friends.” Rule number one for trials: “Say, ‘welcome.’”

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### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we're very conscious of the fact that friends in this room have gone through various and serious trials. Even most recently. It is natural and it is all right in the Scripture for us to weep. In fact, we're told to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15). So, Lord, when we talk about rejoicing, we're not talking about denying pain or denying hurt. But we're talking about when we have to finally get on with life and get on with our attitudes and get resolution for what we've been through. You want us to see that trial, not as a cul-de-sac, but as an open avenue. You want us to see the trial, not as some isolated room from which there is no escape, no windows and no doors. But You want us to see that trial as a hallway into a wider room. So, Lord, we remember You, who practiced what Your younger brother James has told us, “Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despised the shame and has sat down at the right hand of the majesty upon high” (Hebrews 12:2). For we know as Christians that life never ends in defeat. A resurrection always follows crucifixion. That's true in our own life. There is no night so dark that Your light will not illumine it. There is no way so hard that You will not give us strength to walk in safer and more gentle places. For Your hand will lead us through. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4). We are going through. For a friend who has come here today with a trial and who feels like that's the end, Lord, let Your Word come today with power. It is not the end. It is a way, and they are going through. Whatever our level of trial, whether it is the test of a new year at school or whether it's a fight of life, whatever the test, we need Your strength and we count it all joy, for we know that that test will produce Your character in us. We will bless You and we will thank You, through Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.