

## **Embracing Trials**

### *Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James*

James 1:1-12

Pastor Bryan Clark

(Video)

Robert:

Well, Everest was discovered in the 1850's and they realized then it was the highest peak in the world. It's 29,035 feet high. You're breathing about 30% of the oxygen that you breathe at sea level. An athlete, at maximum exertion at sea level, spends 7% of his energy breathing. At Everest, up high, you spend 30% of your energy breathing if you're not moving. What makes Everest so difficult is the altitude and you have to acclimatize for the thin air. If you took the world's fittest athlete and put him on the top of Mt. Everest in a warm heated room, sitting on a couch, he'd be dead in twenty minutes. For me it's been a life-long dream, since I was a teenager, to climb Mt. Everest. When I finally made the decision that I was going to get serious and do it, I joined a gym. I worked out for four years. The last two years I was there six days a week. I took a number of guided trips on smaller peaks. I researched equipment and did all that I could do to prepare. The preparation seemed monumental and when I'd be grinding on the Stairmaster and thinking, "I just want to stop and get off this thing," I'd realize that every moment of suffering in Lincoln, in warm conditions, would make things that much better when things got serious up high on Mt. Everest.

So, I went to Nepal. We left Kathmandu and flew to the village of Lukla on April 1<sup>st</sup>. You see it in the distance 30-40 miles away and that's one thing. But when you're standing right beneath it and you realize how big this thing is, you think, "There's no way I can climb that peak." And then you just say, "No, I can't think about that," and you put your head down and just realize this is one day at a time. I'm not climbing the whole thing at once; I've got to do it in bits and pieces and take bites at it and each day, all you have to worry about is putting one foot ahead of the other one and keep going until you can't go any further. So, you spend weeks and weeks and weeks on the mountain, climbing high, sleeping for a day or two, and then coming back down to recover, to sort of kick-start your body into acclimatizing. You grow more red blood cells; pH levels change. All kinds of things that I don't pretend to understand happen, but I know it takes a lot of time for that to take place. The going up and down really can be discouraging because you think...the time I thought it the most was when we made the last acclimatization trip up to Camp 3 at 24,000 feet and you have killed yourself to get to 24,000 feet. It took me nine hours to climb from Camp 2 to Camp 3 and I thought, "The last thing I want to do is go back down to the base camp just so I can eat and sleep, only to turn around and come right back to where I'm already sitting." And that was a difficult decision, but you know it's the right one because you don't have enough strength left. Your body hasn't acclimatized enough yet that, if you made a summit push, it would end in disaster.

You want to give up. You're thinking, "I just can't do it. It's just so hard." And then you stop and go, "No, no, don't let that thought enter your mind; just don't look at the top; it's too far away; just put your head down and walk to that next snowball or whatever you see fifty feet in front of you, and just little tiny bites, one at a time." And it was challenging, really challenging but it was worth it.

Our last day was our summit push. It was snowing and cold and the forecast called for things to get

better. In fact they ended up getting worse. My goggles iced up; I couldn't see where I was going; I fell off the trail three times. After the third time I fell, I sat down, took off my goggles, realized I could see a lot better, but my eyes started to freeze. I just realized that we were going the wrong direction. We were heading up into a storm with absolutely no hope of rescue if something bad happened. And so we went down and, within 10 minutes, I was second-guessing myself and thinking, "Boy I shouldn't have done that; I should keep on going. What am I thinking; I've come this far; I've worked this hard." But then you think, "You know the bigger picture isn't the top of the mountain; it's the bottom of the mountain. You want to get back alive and healthy." Ever since then I've been dreaming about going back. It's a goal that I've got, that I want to achieve and, as recently as yesterday afternoon, I was in the gym. I worked out for two hours, training for my next attempt which is going to probably be in 2012.

Bryan:

Several weeks ago I grabbed a lunch with Robert. I just wanted to know more about his trip to Nepal and the climb and all that went on there. It's just an amazing story. I think what Robert accomplished is remarkable. When I made that comment last night, my daughter Ashley turned to Patti and said, "You think dad's thinking about doing this?" (Laughter) And the answer's, "No, I don't think I could." I think it's remarkable what Robert accomplished, but out of all the stuff that we talked about, one of the things that struck me most was the level of discipline and preparation necessary just to survive, not only here in Lincoln, but after they got to Nepal and working their way up and acclimatizing and all of that—just to survive the conditions.

Well this morning I'd like to use that climb as a metaphor of our Christian lives. So think of the top of the mountain as being complete in Christ—as the Crown of Life. Getting to the top of the mountain at the end of your life and looking back and knowing that you lived for what matters, that you invested yourself into the things that will last forever, that you really did make a difference and then all that it takes to endure the journey to get there. The question that we would raise is, "What is it for us, as Christians, that prepares us, that builds our endurance, that gives us what we need, so in that moment of truth on the mountain, we'll continue to go forward and not quit and go back?"

That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to James, Chapter 1. This morning we begin our series through the book of James which will take us all through the fall. If you don't know where James, if you can find Hebrews—it's quite a bit bigger—James is the next one: Hebrews, James. There's quite a bit of background in verse 1 so we'll start there. Chapter 1, Verse 1:

**James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings. (\*NASB, James 1:1)**

James identifies himself as the writer of the book, but that still needs to be cleared up because there's James as in *Peter, James and John*; there's James as in *another one of the apostles* and there's James, *the half-brother of Jesus*. Almost everybody agrees—scholars agree—that it was James, the half-brother of Jesus, which makes for a very interesting story because we know, in reading the gospels, that James, the half-brother of Jesus, did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and I think it's important to cut him a bit of a break. Can you imagine what it would be like to come to grips with the fact that your brother is God in the flesh? How many times did James hear Mary and Joseph say, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" (Laughter) —maybe a bit of resentment there. We also know that, when Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his half-brother James and James believed and his life was radically changed. He was a dynamic, powerful leader in

Jerusalem. He quickly became the leader, the pastor of the Jerusalem church, which quickly rose to over ten thousand people. You look at Acts 15; he presided over the Jerusalem Council. History tells us that he had such a remarkable, such a powerful testimony for Christ, that the religious leaders just couldn't take it anymore and one day they drug him out of the temple, and on the steps of the temple, they beat him to death with clubs. What's interesting about that is that is the heartbeat of this letter. James is talking about how, in the most practical ways, to live out our faith. Some of the letters like Colossians, Ephesians: they're deep and rich in their theology. Others, like James, are really dealing with the most practical issues in our walk: what does it, practically speaking, look like to be a Christ-follower? So that's the title of our series through James: *Practically Christian*.

James calls himself a slave of God and says the recipients of the letter are the twelve tribes who are dispersed, meaning the believing Jews who are dispersed out of Jerusalem and living outside of the city, and in many cases outside of the Land of Promise. It's most likely that these Jewish believers were part of the Jerusalem church. When Stephen was martyred, they considered it just too dangerous to stay in the city and they dispersed out. If that is indeed true, then James knew these people. He had been their pastor; he had been their friend. So he's not writing to strangers; he's writing to people he knew who have fled the city and it's to them he writes this letter. Most people think this letter was written like in the late 40's, maybe 50's, at the very latest, so it's worth noting that this would have been written less than twenty years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. So these people would have all been contemporaries of the apostles and Jesus Himself. They very well could have been eyewitnesses to the resurrection; they certainly had access to eyewitnesses to the crucifixion and the resurrection, which just again, adds more and more credibility to the story.

#### Verse 2

**Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

(Vs. 2-4)

Verses 2, 3, and 4 basically are the cornerstone of this opening text so I want to just make sure that we fully understand them. We'll pick apart several of the words. **Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.** It's not *if* you encounter; it's *when* you encounter. James reminds us that that is a part of life. The prosperity preachers seek to convince us that what God wants for you is a life of health and wealth and prosperity, but that's not what Jesus said. It's interesting, when I listen to them teach on television, that they almost always make their case from obscure texts in the Old Testament. They find obscure texts that nobody really knows about and they pull verses out of context. They rarely go to the New Testament and they would avoid, like the plague, a text like this because it's clear **...when you encounter various trials.** It is going to happen. The idea of various trials is a Greek word that means multicolored. In other words trials come in all shapes and sizes. They come in all different ways into our lives. **Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.** The word...**encounter**...is a Greek word that's used in the gospels. For example, when the story of the Good Samaritan is told and a Jewish traveler is out and about and the robbers suddenly jump out and he *encounters* them. It's kind of the nature of the word. It carries the idea that we're going through life and everything's fine and then a trial jumps out of a dark alley and mugs us. It reminds us that these are trials that are just part of life. I think all of us understand sometimes we bring on our own trials. We make bad decisions; we make poor choices; we respond poorly and we turn something into a trial. We walk right into it ourselves.

But what James is talking about is the fact that we just encounter trials. That's part of life. They jump out of the back alley and they mug us when we least expect it.

With all of that in mind, let's go back to the beginning, then. **Consider it all joy...**when you encounter various trials. Now, come on, what a strange thing to say. What is he saying there? Hey, celebrate it when the bottom drops out of your world because it's so much fun! That's not what he's saying. He is not saying the trials are not painful. The whole point is trials are trials. What makes them trials is they are painful; there's no denial of that. Sometimes life gets really, really hard. He's also not saying that I should be *happy* that I'm in the middle of a trial. He's not saying that either. The text gets a little bit confusing because the translation says **...Consider it all joy...** which makes it sound like, "Consider everything to be joyful". That's not what he's saying. **All joy** is a Greek word that means the *fullness* of joy—a *depth* of joy. So, in the midst of trials, we can experience the fullness of joy—all joy. That's what he's saying. But still, what does he mean by that? Well he tells us it's on the basis of what we know...**knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance**. This is the answer to our question. What is it that will be necessary to give me what I need to be strong enough, to be fit enough, to be ready to make it all the way to the top of the summit? Answer: trials...**knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance**. The testing of your faith doesn't carry the idea of testing your faith to see whether it's real. It carries more the idea of exercising your faith—testing it, making it strong, making it better, giving you what you need to be strong enough to make it all the way through the journey. The word **endurance** there, in the King James, is translated *patience*. When we think of *patience*, it's a fairly passive term so it's a bit misleading. It carries more the idea of something aggressive. We would use words like *toughness*, *staying power*, *the ability to endure*, *to persevere*, *to keep going*. So what he's saying is: "It's the trials in life that produce the strength we need to keep moving forward, to make it to the top of the mountain."

**And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** (Vs. 4)

That's at the *top* of the mountain: to be perfect, to be complete, to be everything that God has called us to be, to get to the end of our story and know that we have invested our lives in the things that matter, that we have made a difference in this world, that we fulfilled the purpose for which we are created. That's all captured in that idea of making it to the top of the mountain and knowing that you did it right, that you lived for the things that matter.

One more word I want to talk about before we move on, and that's the very first word in verse 2, **Consider**. What makes that word really important is the verb tense. It's not in a present-tense verb, which would mean *constantly* considering; *every time* you go through a trial, you have to reconsider. It's actually in a past-tense; it's an aorist form verb that means *once and for all settle it*. Consider this; settle it—once for all time. Basically that's based on what we know. Think of it like this. You go all the way back to Genesis, Chapter 3, and God lays out the consequences of sin and basically what he says is: From conception to birth, to the sustaining of life, it's going to be really hard. Why? Because people made in the image of God have a tendency to believe we can be our own god. So I go to the foot of the mountain and I think, "I don't need any help; I don't need a guide; I don't need any preparation; I can do it myself." And obviously that will end in disaster. So life is really hard in order to knock that idea out of us—that I can be my own god—in order that we might submit ourselves to the one true God.

The last couple of weeks we've been talking about—from Luke, Chapter 12—this idea that if we believe that life is found—happiness is found—in the things of this world: in the accomplishments of this world, in the money of this world. If our dream is a *Bag of Money and a La-Z-Boy*—if that's the American dream—every trial is a roadblock to that dream. Every trial is going to disappoint; every trial is going to discourage; every trial is keeping me from getting to that which will make me happy. Jesus comes along and says, “But if you believe that life is found in Me, life is found in fulfilling the purpose for which you were created, life is found in living for that which matters, then you will seek first the kingdom.” And if you believe that, then you'll believe that every trial comes through God's grid and He allows it into my life in order to give me what I need, in order that I might endure and fulfill the purpose for which I was created. If I understand that, then I can accept the trials in my life. It doesn't mean that I like them or that they make me happy, but I do believe they are what is necessary to give me the endurance to make it to the top of the mountain. So what he's talking about here is that I settle this once and for all. Am I going to live my life for a *Bag of Money and a La-Z-Boy*? Am I going to live the American dream and be disappointed and discouraged by every trial that gets in the way? Or am I going to settle this thing and say, “I'm going to seek first the kingdom and His righteousness and live for the things that matter so that, at the end of my life, I can know I actually made a difference and I fulfilled the purpose for which I was created. In that case, knowing that I settled the trials coming through God's grid and I somehow needed them to guide me, to correct me, to make me strong, to give me what I need to make it to the top of the mountain, you say, “Well still, that is really hard to do!” Yes, it is!

Verse 5:

**But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.**

James quickly acknowledges, “This is hard”. *So if you lack wisdom, all you have to do is ask and God will give it to you. He gives it to you generously.* Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. Wisdom is the skillful application of knowledge. Wisdom is skilled living. So in the midst of my trial, I'm not exactly sure what to do; I'm not sure how to respond; I don't know what the next step needs to be, so I ask God. “I need some skill here; I need some wisdom; I need to know the right thing to do.” And the text says, “God doesn't scold me for that.” He doesn't say, “How many times do I have to tell you?” But rather He responds, “He gives wisdom generously.” He delights in that prayer.

**But...** Verse 6:

**But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (Vs. 6-8)**

**But he must ask in faith without any doubting.** The idea of faith is not the idea that I close my eyes and grit my teeth and believe so hard that I bring it to pass. That would be faith in faith. Biblical faith is as simple as believing God tells the truth. Do you believe that God tells the truth when He says that life is not found in this American dream, that your security is not found in a bank account, that that's not what's going to make you happy, that life is found in seeking first the kingdom, that life is found in Jesus, that life is found in living your life for that which matters forever? Therefore He allows trials in order to give

me what I need, in order that I might endure and make it to the top of the mountain. Do you think He's telling the truth when He says that's what you need to make it? Because the one who doubts is like the waves of the sea; the wind blows him this way and the wind blows him that way.

The word *endurance*, that we looked at before, is a Greek word that literally means "to stand against the wind." Imagine a 60 mph wind and it's crashing against you and you have to kind of brace yourself to stand against it. So imagine on your way up the mountain, you encounter this tremendous wind and there's a risk of it blowing you off the mountain. What is it that's going to cause you to stand? What is it that creates this wind? In simple terms we would say it's the world and the flesh and the devil. It's all of that that's coming to bear on us while we're trying to make it up the mountain. It's trying to blow us off the mountain; it's trying to discourage us; it's trying to get us to go back. What James is saying is: *If you doubt that God tells the truth, then that wind just blows you this way and it blows you that way.* You become unstable. It's a Greek word used to describe a drunk staggering down the street. You're just staggering around through life; you're going this way and that way; there's no stability. He says you've become **double-minded**. That's probably the clearest explanation for what he's saying here. He says that person should not expect that he will receive anything from God.

Now this is what he's saying. If you do not believe God tells the truth and you're blown away by the wind of this trial and the wind of that trial, you're unstable in all your ways. It looks like this: As long as everything's good, you think God is good. You praise God; you lift your hands; you worship Him; you're just a really good Christian. Then the bottom drops out of your world and suddenly God isn't so good. He's unfair and why does it have to be this way and I don't know why this had to happen to me and you fall into kind of this pity party. "Poor me and God is so naughty to me!" Suddenly there's this sense in which you don't think God is so good and He's being unfair and this isn't right. We fall into this mindset that, if I do my part, God should do His part. "God, I've been having my quiet time; I've been giving my money; I've been serving in church; *check all the boxes!* I've done my part so your part is to make life easy." And God says, "Whoa, wait a minute. I never made that deal; I never said that's the way it would work. You just have to trust Me." The reason that person should not expect to receive anything is because, in your trial, you're not asking for wisdom. You're wanting out; you're wanting the whole thing to go away; you're thinking this is all unfair. You can't understand why God would do this to you and, if that's your mindset, you're never really going to have skill from God to navigate your way through the trial. It's only when you believe that God tells the truth and, for reasons I may not understand, God has allowed this trial into my life. There's something I need to know; there's something I need to learn; there's a way in which I need to become stronger; there's some way in which I need to be corrected; I've gotten off the trail. But God has a reason. I accept that and I believe that and so my prayer is, "God, help me understand what is it I need? Do I need to be stronger? Do I need to get back on the trail?" But I'm asking for wisdom, I'm asking for skill to respond rightly in the midst of this trial. That's what he's saying there. Verse 9:

**But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass; and its**

**flower falls off, and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. (Vs. 9-11)**

He's looking at two scenarios: the rich and the poor. To the poor he says, "You need to glory in your high position." These dispersed Jews would have had a very difficult life. They would have been basically subjected to just surviving. Oftentimes, when we're going through trials, especially those trials that last and last and last, it affects every area of our life. It affects our health; it affects our pocketbook; it affects us emotionally and it often can affect even our ability to pay the bills and keep going. There is a reminder in the midst of trials to the poor that, "Aren't you glad that ultimately what matters is not the stuff of this world; what matters is not how big your car is; what matters is not how big your house is; what matters is not how much money you have in the bank; what matters is who you are in Christ. What matters is that you're seated with Christ in the heavenlies; what matters is that your future is more glorious than I could possibly describe; what matters is that God promises in Psalm 113 that you'll be seated in the throne that's reserved for princes." Aren't you glad in your moments of trial that what really matters, you have, and you can never lose it? So he says, "*Glory in your high position because, at the end of the day, that's all that really matters.*"

To the rich, he says, "*Glory in your humiliation.*" He doesn't mean like shameful humiliation. It's more the idea of humbleness and brokenness, because there's a reminder that no matter how much you have, no matter what your title, no matter how much of a big shot you may be in this life, there are no big shots on the other side. There's no rich and poor on the other side. None of that stuff makes it to the other side. So what matters is who you are in Christ. So he says all that stuff—the flower and the grass—all of that fades away, just like the rich man, and he stands by himself when he stands before God. Therefore he glories in his humiliation. He's not saying there's anything wrong with being rich. The problem with riches is they tend to make us believe that we can be self-sufficient—that I can trust in myself because I have this much money, because I have this kind of car or this kind of a house; I have this much in my bank account. But somewhere along the way rich people finally discover that my money cannot save my marriage; my money cannot make the cancer go away; my money does not bring a rebellious child home. At the end of the day, money does very little of value. Those rich people that come to that conclusion realize, in their brokenness, in the midst of trials and the midst of suffering, that their money's not cutting it and it's then that they turn to Christ; it's then that they find life in Jesus. So the idea of glorying in your humiliation is the idea of glorying in the fact that it was a trial that brought you to the point where you recognize your need for a savior—that you might have that which lasts forever. Verse 12:

**Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.**

The word **blessed** is a Greek word that means to be happy, but to be *deeply* happy. It's very similar to the word in verse 2—all joy, deep happiness is for the one who perseveres, is the one who endures, is the one that makes it to the top of the mountain. And there awaiting him or her is this crown of life, which I think is just the fulfillment of our salvation. Verse 12 is like a hinge. It hinges this text to the one that we're going to talk about next week. So we'll talk a little bit more about verse 12 to kind of hinge into our discussion next week.

I'll be honest with you; I don't want trials. I don't want them. I'm not some sort of a martyr that thinks they're fun. I don't delight in them; I don't enjoy them. I really wish that I could go to Nepal in shorts and a t-shirt and tennis shoes and stroll to the top of the mountain. It'd be awesome! It just doesn't work that way. Most people that draw breath will take the easy road. Jesus said that. "Wide is the road that leads to destruction and many are those who will follow it. Narrow is the road that leads to life." Narrow is the road that leads to the top of the mountain. "Few there are who will find it." There is a part of me that would like life to be simple and easy—just make it all happy. But there is a bigger part of me that wants more than that. There is this relentless passion within me—to live for that which matters. I understand I can't afford to waste a single day. I don't know that I have another day. I want to live for that which matters. I want to get to the top of the mountain and look back and know I made a difference. I don't want trials but if trials are necessary to give me what I need to endure, to make it to the top of the mountain, then bring them on—because I want that crown of life!

*Our Father, we're thankful that You love us. You don't bring trials into our lives because you're mad at us, but because You love us. Without trials we just wouldn't make it. Lord, I pray that You would help us to understand that, that in the midst of the most difficult circumstances, there would be a deep and abiding joy, knowing that, at the end of the day, you have given us that which really matters. Lord, that we would be faithful, we'd be diligent to stay on the trail 'til that glorious day when we stand before You and we receive the crown of life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,  
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission  
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512  
Copyright 2010 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.



**Embracing Trials**  
*Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James*  
James 1:1-12  
Pastor Bryan Clark

**Opening Discussion**

1. Can you think of something you did that you had to prepare or train for? Why was that preparation necessary? What would have been the consequences if you had not properly trained or prepared?
2. What do you think would be the result if our Christian lives were always easy? When you really think it through, is that really what you want if you know the result?
3. At the end of the day, what do you want to define your Christian life?

**Bible Study**

1. Read James 1:1. What do you know about the background of this letter? Who is the author? What do you know about him? Who are the recipients? How was life for them in the Roman Empire?
2. Read 1:2-4. Why should you consider it joy when you encounter trials? In these verses, what is the “peak” of the mountain or the summit? What do you have to have to get there? How is that produced in your life? So what’s the summary of these verses?
3. The word “consider” is in a verb tense that means settle the issue once and for all. According to 1:3 that decision is based on what we know. What do we know? What are we “enduring” or standing firm against? What’s the real danger for us?
4. Read 1:5-8. Why do we need wisdom? What is wisdom? How do we get it?
5. James says we must ask for wisdom in “faith without any doubting.” Faith is believing that God tells the truth. What do we believe God is telling the truth about, and what would be doubting? Why does doubting make us unstable in all our ways?
6. Read 1:9-11. How do trials give both the rich and the poor a right perspective?
7. You might say that 1:12 is a summary of the summit. It’s where we want to end up. Summarize this whole text (1:2-12) as it relates to trials.

## **Application**

1. Why are trials necessary? What is the difference between enjoying trials and considering it all joy when we encounter various trials?
2. Are you going through a trial right now? Are you willing to share it with the group? How does this text help you process your trial?
3. Can someone share a time when you went through a trial that produced endurance that you need to get to the summit?