THE BENEFIT OF WEAKNESS

Humanity, with its natural tilt toward illusory self-sufficiency, will go out of its way to hide weakness and struggle. People rejoice over such experiences only in the context of clear accomplishment: sleep deprivation for the sake of a job promotion or exhausted muscles for the sake of a personal record marathon. James had a better accomplishment in mind, though: the growth of character. When faith is tested in trials, weakness and struggle are often exposed. According to James, this is a good thing.

James is so sold on the value of this experience that he encourages the brethren to “count it all joy when [they] fall into various trials” (James 1:2, emphasis supplied). Don’t just let it happen, he says. Enjoy it. This joy occurs with the understanding that “the testing of your faith produces patience” (v. 3). Pain with a purpose, like fatigued muscles for a marathon, becomes bearable, even enjoyable.

James continues, advising that when someone lacks wisdom—when they see something as beyond their ability to comprehend, figure out, or grapple with—instead of despairing, questioning their calling, or self-censuring for their lack, they should ask God for wisdom, knowing that He gives it liberally to all who ask (v. 5). This lack or weakness in wisdom should be seen as an invitation to come near to God and draw from His abundance of grace and gifts. All weaknesses, struggles, and lacking should be treated the same way.
Write out James 1:1–8 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out James 1:2–5. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
HOW TO RESPOND TO AFFLICTION

Without further credentials than being a slave of God and Jesus, James opens his letter by addressing believers who are “scattered abroad” (James 1:1). He then immediately dives into practical advice and maintains this focus for all five chapters: live this way, not that way, because of clear realities that God has revealed. While some scholars believe that James is simply a collection of abrupt maxims without a cohesive theme, other scholars agree that Jesus’ brother James wrote this to real people in real circumstances for a real purpose: encouragement and practical advice in adverse circumstances.

The author writes to an audience that is enduring deep trials, finding themselves in need of wisdom, and struggling to hold onto their faith consistently. These circumstances hold credible mirroring amidst the social turmoil and injustice of the late 40s and 50s AD. Faced with poverty, violent injustice, and no end in sight, even the most devout of Christians could have been tempted to use the weapons of the world to defend themselves. This reality deeply troubled James and drove him to write an epistle rich with relevant and practical advice.

Though his counsel is strong, James’s endearing term of “my brethren” has the effect of camaraderie and empathy. He can see the violence and suffering they are experiencing, and he knows that they can control only their response. Instead of following the examples of rage and revenge, his readers are invited to allow the growth of patience within them, to endure and persevere in Christ-like response instead of reverting to the short-term non-solutions of the world.

Wisdom was needed in these harsh conditions, and James affirms its abundant availability from God. His only counsel was for them to ask “with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. . . . He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6, 8). The tossing wave parallels the instability of someone without faith to anchor them. Thus, circumstances default to the deciding factor: when circumstances look favorable, the believer thrills with joy and peace; when circumstances look dark or trials come, the believer’s so-called faith departs from him. This mentality permeates every aspect of life and “all his ways.” Thus, James counsels, allow for faith to be tested but not taken, even in the worst of circumstances.
ARE TRIALS A GOOD THING?

When James tells the believers to “count it all joy when [they] fall into various trials,” it can sound a bit insensitive (James 1:2). In addition to all their suffering, are they supposed to be happy about it? Are they to hide their discomfort and pain behind a fixed smile? How can such an injunction be shared from Christ-like love?

It’s helpful to observe his wording in this straight counsel. Joy comes from knowing the effect of trials, not from the trials themselves; it comes from seeing the long-term effect rather than the short-term experience. Like Paul, James is not saying that all things are good, but that all things can work together for good (Rom. 8:28). Instead of focusing on the difficulties, he urges them to focus on their response (the only part they can control) and to notice the development of essential Christ-like traits within them.

Pain and discomfort often cause a hyper-focus on oneself: that is, when someone is in pain, it is hard for them to see anything else. Believers can be tempted to do whatever it takes to avoid suffering altogether; but then they would miss out on essential growth in faith and in grace, or worse, resort to causing suffering in others to avoid it themselves. Look at the long term, James urges, and do not be caught up with the various trials of the present. Lean into them for what God can do with them, and do not fixate on the trials themselves. We are not saved through relishing trials; we are saved by the One who sees us through them.

James goes on to append the guarantee for wisdom with the condition of unwavering faith, that is, faith “with no doubting” (James 1:6). Instead of prescribing an arbitrary punishment for the one who doubts, James describes the reality that faith is required in order to receive anything from God. Faith is a convicted realization, a confidence in unseen realities (Heb. 11:1). Because God does not currently walk this earth in a physical and visual form, we require faith to interact with Him and thus also to receive gifts, including wisdom.

Just as a wave whipped about by wind provides no stability, neither does a heart and mind without faith in God’s character and His power. Faith means to be convinced of both His existence and ability as well as His willingness to reward “those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

With faith, the believer can benefit from various trials, lean on the Source of wisdom, and have an abiding joy in God all the while.
What relationship do the following verses have with the background of the letter to the Hebrews?

James 3:13, 17
1 Corinthians 1:30
Romans 5:3–5
1 Peter 4:12–19
Romans 8:18
1 Peter 1:6–9

What other verses come to mind in connection with James 1:1–8?

Review your memorized verse from James 1:1–8.
JESUS KNOWS

When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, He commissioned them with practical instruction, including this principle: “‘A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master’” (Matt. 10:24). His disciples had already seen the religious leaders’ harsh treatment of Him, and He reminded them not to expect anything different. If they treated the Master this way, won’t those bearing His name be treated the same? (v. 25). He ends this warning with encouragement, though: do not be afraid in these experiences, because all truth of the matter will be known in the end (v. 26).

Many experiences of suffering are only known by those going through them. Some resort to wearing their suffering as a badge, seeking validation and affirmation for their “patiently born trials.” Others hide their trials out of a desire to not appear ungrateful, weak, or in discomfort. No matter if the experiences are exaggerated or hidden, there is One who sees all things as they are.

Words fail, human sympathy wanes, and it can be difficult to bring another into a full understanding of one’s own suffering. But there is One who needs no words, whose sympathy is abundant, and who can come into a full understanding sans articulation. By the trials endured at the hands of those He came to save, starting in being hunted as a child and culminating in a shame-ridden public death, Jesus has associated Himself with the most mistreated of humanity. Jesus knows what it’s like to endure unmerited ill treatment, to be misunderstood by those closest, and even to be watched at every turn for an opportunity for ruin.

His encouragement for the twelve remains for those today: the experiences that seem to be secret will be known. Even when no other human heart can know, Jesus knows. This too can inform the joy that James calls us to: we take joy in knowing that nothing is wasted (Rom. 8:28) and that God is overwriting the trials to work out eternal benefits of character (James 1:3, 4).
THE DISCIPLINE OF SPIRITUALITY

Life is disciplinary. While in the world, the Christian will meet with adverse influences. There will be provocations to test the temper; and it is by meeting these in a right spirit that the Christian graces are developed. If injuries and insults are meekly borne, if insulting words are responded to by gentle answers, and oppressive acts by kindness, this is evidence that the Spirit of Christ dwells in the heart, that sap from the living Vine is flowing to the branches. We are in the school of Christ in this life, where we are to learn to be meek and lowly of heart; and in the day of final accounts we shall see that all the obstacles we meet, all the hardships and annoyances that we are called to bear, are practical lessons in the application of principles of Christian life. If well endured, they develop the Christlike in the character and distinguish the Christian from the worldling.

There is a high standard to which we are to attain if we would be children of God, noble, pure, holy, and undefiled; and a pruning process is necessary if we would reach this standard. How would this pruning be accomplished if there were no difficulties to meet, no obstacles to surmount, nothing to call out patience and endurance? These trials are not the smallest blessings in our experience. They are designed to nerve us to determination to succeed. We are to use them as God's means to gain decided victories over self instead of allowing them to hinder, oppress, and destroy us. . . .

Let us remember that Jesus knows us individually and is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knows the wants of each of His creatures and reads the hidden, unspoken grief of every heart. If one of the little ones for whom He died is injured, He sees it and calls the offender to account. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He cares for His feeble, sickly, wandering sheep. He knows them all by name. The distress of every sheep and every lamb of His flock touches His heart of sympathizing love, and the cry for aid reaches His ear. . . .

Jesus cares for each one as though there were not another individual on the face of the earth. As Deity He exerts mighty power in our behalf, while as our Elder Brother He feels for all our woes. The Majesty of heaven held not Himself aloof from degraded, sinful humanity. We have not a high priest who is so high, so lifted up, that He cannot notice us or sympathize with us, but one who was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, 344–347.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

- When is a time that you felt especially weak, and God saw you through? Share.
- What is a difficult experience you endured and can now see how good came from it? Share.
- What can be said to those who have not seen any good?
- How can you ensure that you respond to afflictions in a Christ-like way rather than a worldly way?
- Why do you think James focused on receiving wisdom in the main passage this week? Why not courage or strength?
- Why is faith necessary to receive the promises of God?
- What is the difference between having faith in God’s promises and “supposing” He will give?
- How does patience “work in us”? Why that attribute specifically?