

WHEN TRIALS ROCK YOUR FAITH

James 1:1-4

Things happen to Christians that rock our faith in God. Cancer, fires, car accidents, persecution for the faith. Trials can make or break our relationship with God. How are we to respond to our trials?

This morning we begin a study of a letter written by a pastor to members of his church who were suffering trials of various kinds.

MAKING A GOOD START IN OUR STUDY

Whenever we study a book of the Bible, there are key questions we need to ask such as...

Who wrote the book? / When was it written? / To whom was the book written? / What prompted the writing of the book?

WHO IS THE "JAMES" OF VERSE ONE?

The evidence both within and outside the Bible points to James, the half-brother of Jesus as the author. Prior to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, James did not believe Jesus is the Messiah, but after His resurrection Jesus met one on one with James, and James came to faith (John 7:2-5; 1 Cor. 15:3-7). James became the leader of the Church of Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19; Acts 15:13-21, 21:17-26). In 62 A.D. James was martyred for his faith.

TO WHOM DID JAMES WRITE?

The second half of verse one tells us... "...To the twelve tribes in the dispersion..." The "twelve tribes" refers to the twelve tribes of Israel. James wrote to Messianic Jews, that is, Jews who believed Jesus is the Messiah. The phrase "the Dispersion", is a technical term referring to Jews living outside the land of Israel (John 7:35; 1 Peter 1:1). In about 33 or 34 A.D., shortly after the resurrection of Jesus, Stephen, a deacon in the Jerusalem Church, was stoned to death. That event ignited persecution against the Church of Jerusalem. Members of the church family scattered to Judea, Samaria and beyond the borders of Israel (Acts 8:1-3; 11:19). These believing Jews were those whom Saul hunted down before his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

WHEN WAS THE BOOK OF JAMES WRITTEN?

If the persecution recorded in Acts 8 occurred in late 33 or early 34 A.D., then the book of James could have been written any time between 34 and 48 A.D.¹ This makes James the earliest book of the New Testament.

WHY WAS THE BOOK OF JAMES WRITTEN?

Persecution. James wrote this letter to strengthen the faith of his persecuted church members. As you can imagine, persecuted people face a great temptation to walk away from the faith. James wrote his scattered flock to encourage them to be faithful and to continue to live righteous lives in the midst of persecution.

¹ Cf. Wallace's discussion. Zane Hodges argues for a date of 34-35 A.D. Hodges, Zane C., *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Irving, Texas: Grace Evangelical Society, 1997), p. 10.

TRIALS, FAITHFULLY ENDURED, PERFECT US (1:2-4)

The key word in these opening verses is “trials”.² It is very broad and, although it includes persecution, it is not limited to persecution. As we see from verse 3, a trial is an event or experience that challenges your confidence in God’s love or God’s power.

A trial is an event or experience that seriously challenges my confidence in God’s love and power.

A “trial” is not the painful consequence of disobedience to the Laws of Man, Nature or the Law of Messiah. A “trial” is not the same as divine discipline such as was experienced by Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and carnal members of the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 11:27-32). The people to whom James was writing were not under God’s discipline; they were being persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

Having said what “trials” are not, I am not saying people who suffer consequences for bad decisions are to be rejected or shunned. We are called to love one another in each and every circumstance though some circumstances require extraordinary wisdom.

Truth is, we will all experience “trials” over the course of our Christian lives. The good news is, as James explains:

Trials, faithfully endured, perfect us.

This is where we will pick up in our next study and unpack what this means.

Until then, I encourage you to read through James at least once this next week. You could even read it all the way through with your Home Group and begin to make observations of your own.

² “A state of trial in which God brings His people through adversity and affliction in order to encourage and prove their faith and confidence in Him.” Zodhiates, Spiros. In *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000.