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We are getting deeper into a study of the letter written by James, the younger brother of Jesus, to Jews who accepted Christ as the Messiah, and were being persecuted for their faith and needed encouragement. People around the world continue to be persecuted for their faith in Christ and need both prayer and encouragement.

God's word is timeless and ageless. James' message to these Christian Jews is also for us; we too are **exiles**, living away from our eternal heavenly home where we naturally belong.

In the first 8 verses of James' letter, we read, trials are **predictable** (when not *if* you face trials); trials can be **problematic** (don't take it lightly - when trials happens, it hurts); trials are **purposeful** (they test our faith and help develop stamina to go through life). James suggests a paradoxical relationship between the stress of going through trials and difficulties, and our mental and emotional well-being.

Normally, we would "*count it all joy*" having gone through trials and tribulations, but James suggests we consider it pure joy when we face all kinds of trials and tribulation, head on.

Today we read, trials and difficulties are also **beneficial for everyone!**

James uses two groups of people to illustrate his point: one are those **in poverty**, the other are those **with plenty**.

We the Church in the world, have done society a great disservice because we come down hard on certain groups of people, which creates an atmosphere of **them-and-us**.

The Church does itself no favours by laying into anyone who has wealth on the one hand, and on the other the Church promotes the theology of the "prosperity gospel".

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Before we examine this, let's understand this: by adding our own interpretation/understanding to a Truth, does not make the whole statement, true.

The prosperity gospel says, *To do well materially, is a sign of God's blessings.* This part is true. Not everyone who is materially blessed has received it from God, but material plenty is a sign of God's blessing for those who know and love Him.

Then comes the distortion. The prosperity gospel adds, *Therefore, if you are poor and struggling, then you must have done something bad, not to deserve God's blessings.* This is a distortion of Truth.

Culture reinforces this message. Remember the Sound of Music in which Julie Andrews sings:

Perhaps I had a wicked childhood  
Perhaps I had a miserable youth  
But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past  
There must have been a moment of truth.  
For here you are, standing there, loving me  
Whether or not you should  
So, somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good.  
Nothing comes from nothing  
Nothing ever could  
So, somewhere in my youth or childhood  
I must have done something good.

The lyrics reinforce the prosperity gospel, *I must have done something good in my past, because God has blest me with Captain von Trapp's wealth in my life, because if I had not done something good in my past, I would not be enjoying the good life with Captain von Trapp!*

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Culture reinforces our misconceptions, and it is encouraging when we read of people who realise this mistake! The evangelist and author Joyce Meyer recently admitted, her views on the "prosperity Gospel" were "out of balance." She shared on Instagram:

"Every time somebody had a problem in their life, [I thought] it's because they didn't have enough faith. If you got sick it's because you don't have enough faith. If your child died, it's because you don't have enough faith. Faith doesn't ensure that everything will be perfect, rather it means simply putting your trust in God, in **all** things."

To illustrate his point that everyone encounters trials and difficulties of all kinds, James refers to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, at which Jesus said, *"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbour' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in Heaven. **For He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike.***

Similarly, God does not differentiate between the lowly person and the rich person, says James. Both are *like the flower of the grass which will pass away, because the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower perishes and its beauty fades (v.11).*

The Gospel creates a level playing field; it does not differentiate between people. Travelling though Jericho one day, Jesus met two men on the same day: one was impoverished, the other had plenty. To Bartimaeus, the poverty-stricken, blind beggar on the roadside, Jesus said, **"rise"**. To Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector who had climbed the tree, Jesus said, **"come down"**.

James stresses two points: **first**, social and economic standing does not determine the type, nor intensity of trials and difficulties you go through in life.

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**Second**, trials and difficulties in life are not a foe; when understood with a Bible focused lens, it can become a friend, i.e., trials can be beneficial for those who have learned to deal with them.

As we learn more of the character of God, we discover He wants us to work **with** Him, not **for** Him; God wants us to join Him doing what He wants done, and not we want to do for Him.

But there is one thing which distracts us from doing what God wants done, and that is **temptation**, which is any distraction that takes our eyes off what God is doing, to pursue our own.

God is not the cause of temptation, because God cannot be tempted, nor does He tempt anyone. The cause of temptation is not found in the world around us, nor is it found in God, in the devil, or in the circumstances of life.

Each of us is tempted says James, when we allow our thoughts and desires to linger in places they shouldn't (v.14), and its not restricted to the commonly attributed, sex, drugs and rock 'n roll!

The first man and woman allowed their desires and thoughts to linger on the possibility, **Did God really say...**

The real purpose of temptation is always to deceive.

James skas emphatically, "**Don't be deceived**" (v.16) about the person of Jesus, who He is, and the incredible value of His work on the cross. *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows"* (17).

God's supernatural gift "from above", is to prepare us for life in eternity, for eternity.

Michael read the key verse in this section: *Blessed is the person who remains loyal and faithful when facing trials head-on, because when this*

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*person has gone through the trials of life and emerged victorious over it, each one will receive the crown of life, which God promised to those who love Him.*

The Crown of Life is waiting for you. It has your name on it. Don't let it gather dust on the shelf in Heaven. It's yours to claim, so accept with joy, the preparation for eternal life, when you go through trials, tribulations and difficulties of all kinds, because these prepare you to stand at the door of eternity and be crowned with the crown that is rightfully yours!

**AMEN.**