

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

James 1:1-18

Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. The problems began when Chippie’s owner decided to clean Chippie’s cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She’d barely said "hello" when "swop!" Chippie got sucked in. The bird’s owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned. Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air. Poor Chippie never knew what hit him. A few days after the trauma, the reporter who’d initially written about the event contacted Chippie’s owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn’t sing much anymore, now he just sits and stares." Being sucked in and washed up and blown over will steal the song from the stoutest of heart.

The truth be told, there are times in life when it feels like we have been sucked in, washed up, and blown over. And its at such times we lose the desire to do what were created to do. Just like Chippie the parakeet who was so stunned by what happened to him that he no longer sang, so we who claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior can become so confused, distracted or overwhelmed by things that happen to us in life that we no longer live for the Savior who saved our souls or follow the Lord who has absolute authority over all of our lives. This is the context into which James wrote his letter in the New Testament that we will be looking at together over the next three months. His primary focus throughout the five chapters of this letter is how we might come to know a “living faith” by actually obediently and joyfully and sacrificially and humbly living out our faith in Jesus Christ - rather than knowing a “dead faith” which professes faith in Jesus Christ but whose life reflects little of the obedient, joyful, sacrificial humble commitment or activity that God calls us to through Jesus Christ. Or in other words, in our vernacular “our walk should match our talk.” James says this in James 1:22: “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*” James then reveals to us how this becomes “dead” faith in James 2:17: “*Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*”

It is generally agreed, both by tradition and modern scholarship, that the “*James*” who wrote this letter was the second son of Mary, which would make him the half brother of our Lord Jesus, who was the first son of Joseph and Mary. The book of Acts tells us that James exercised great influence among Jewish believers (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18) and even though he is not one of the original 12 apostles, Paul calls him an apostle in Galatians 1:19. Writers of the day and tradition tell us that he was known as James the Just because of his humble, righteous character and the early church called him “old camel knees” because of his incredible prayer life. Both his inward and outward life clearly radiated his “living faith” in Jesus Christ – and so its no surprise that God sovereignly used him to write a letter that would be included in the Bible about what true living “faith” is all about. James uses the word “*faith*” 15 times in the five chapters of his letter; it appropriately follows the book of Hebrews where the author used the word “*faith*” 34 times in the 13 chapters of that letter.

The word of “*faith*” is *pistis* in the Greek, which is sometimes translated as “*believe*” but neither of those words give the depth and richness of the original meaning. *Pistis* goes beyond human faith and believing because it involves the personal revelation of God through the in-working of God’s Spirit in the human heart, that persuades and convicts and then yields to God, and in utter dependence trusts God for salvation; and in humble desperation relies on God for constancy and growth and assurance of faith in and for and through all of things in life. “*Faith*” – *pistis* - is always God's work. Our faith, our believing, becomes living “*faith*” when we are so transformed by the mercy and grace of God that we fully yield our hearts to God, and then fully commit to live our lives for God.

James pressed this foundational concept of a *living faith* in Christ into the lives of a people of God who were in struggling with social conflict between the rich and the poor, and the spiritual conflict between differing factions within the church. He rebuked his readers for their worldliness and he challenged them to humbly seek God’s divine wisdom and will in working out these problems by getting their hearts right with God. James exhorted them to pursue a *living faith* in Christ because they were lacking in spiritual maturity. The reality of dynamics of our faith reveal that spiritual maturity is not a natural consequence of growing older in years or longevity of faith. But rather God’s Word defines spiritual maturity in terms of brokenness, surrender, obedience, sacrifice, commitment, love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. One prominent pastor recently said: “Spiritual maturity is still one of the greatest needs in churches today. Too many churches are play pens for baby Christians instead of workshops for the mature. The members are not grown enough to eat the solid spiritual food so they need to be maintained on milk. God is looking for mature men and women to carry on His great enterprise of redemption but often finding only children who have not even learned how to get along with one another.” May God use James to build up our faith! Amen?

In one sense, the book of James belongs with the wisdom literature/books of the Bible. This sort of literature was common to the writings of the Old Testament but James is the only book of this genre in the New Testament. Wisdom literature is characterized by general instructions for successful or skillful living, and also contemplates the perplexities of human existence answering such questions as: “Why are we here? Why things are the way they are? What are we to do about it?” The great reformer Martin Luther dismissed the book of James as theologically a “book of straw” – but he did not dismiss its spiritual pragmatism. The book of James is the most intensely practical book in the New Testament: it rebukes pretense and hypocrisy, insisting that conduct must conform to creed, that profession must be matched by performance. For as Christians, what good is the truth of God if we don’t live it out? With its 54 imperative verbs (commands), the book of James, from beginning to end, is a passionate, urgent demand that we live out the reality of our living faith in Jesus Christ.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.
James 1:1

James opens his letter by first stating his name. And then, *despite* being Jesus' brother, James appeals to his authority for writing his letter to the fact that he was "*a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The word "*servant*" here literally means "slave/bond-slave." Here we see the depth of James' spiritual character in that the only claim he made for himself was one of being owned by God in Christ, reflecting the words of the apostle Paul from 1 Corinthians 6:20: "*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God!*" James then addresses his letter to "*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.*" The phrase "*twelve tribes*" was a synonym for the nation of Israel, and "*the Dispersion*" was a technical term used for the Jews who were scattered over the Gentile world outside of Palestine. Though James was principally writing to Jewish Christians, he most likely also meant the letter to be read on a wider scale. Though this letter was intended for messianic or Christian Jews, it would receive wide circulation in the early synagogue; the center of the Jewish community. Many early Jewish believers still attended synagogue for they had not separated from the other Jews yet, and so the letter would still have influence within the Jewish community – which also had influence to differing degrees with the Gentiles who came in contact with Jews.

This is how our most sovereign God providentially spread the gospel in days that James lived in. God purposely scattered the Jews to prepare the culture, then used the Messianic Jews to scatter the seed of the gospel. God often does the same today, as he scatters followers of Jesus Christ around our continent, and then throughout the world. This is what Jesus meant when he said: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:19-20). We must take care, brothers and sisters, to not fall into the habit of gathering together in comfortable holy huddles within our church rather than *dispersing* ourselves to be a gospel witness in the world around us. Jesus calls us to follow him (Matthew 16:24) to the front lines of the battle for the souls of men, women and children. And when we do, Jesus tells us: "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18). Amen!

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4

James is telling us here that when we join our Lord Jesus on the front lines of the battle for the souls of fallen humanity, the reality of the depth of our living "*faith*" will be put to the "*test*" with "*trials of various kinds.*" This would have been strange news for Jewish Christians *because* as Jews they would have been inclined to expect God would *bless* them in response to living for Him, based upon God's covenant promises with Israel we read of in (Deuteronomy 28-31. We read of this mindset in the book of Job as Job's friends insisted his suffering was the result of some sin he had committed, whereas we as readers know that Job was being tested with adversity because of his devout, living faith in God. The truth be told, I know of many who claim Christ who also see the catalyst for their won trials, struggles, and adversity as being either the sins of others or as God's punishment in their own lives for a wrong they have committed. Yet God's Word today tells us the opposite is true. If we are truly saved by the blood of Christ, God will providentially send and/or allow "*trials of various kinds*" to come into our lives to test our faith and build up our faith in Christ. Jesus spoke of this in John 15:1-3: "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*" This is what happens in the life of a born again follower of Jesus. Notice James tells us that when it comes to truly living out our faith in Jesus Christ that trials, struggles and adversities are the rule, rather than the exception. He does not say, "*Count it all joy*" *IF* "*you meet trials of various kinds*" but rather "*WHEN you meet trials of various kinds.*" 1 Peter 4:12 says: "*Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*"

Notice James also tells us to ‘*Count it all joy*’ that the trials, struggles and adversities that we will face in the ‘*testing*’ of our faith will be ‘*of various kinds*’ – spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, financial and intellectual. How many ‘Amen!’ do I hear for that? Well, *we should joyfully shout ‘Amen’ for that because this is the way God builds up our faith into a living faith: ‘Know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.’* The original Greek word translated as the English word ‘*steadfastness*’ literally means ‘cheerful, hopeful, patient endurance.’ We see this meaning fleshed out in Paul’s words in Colossians 1:10-12 as he exhorted us to ‘*walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.*’

Trials, struggles and adversities are the stress tests that pushing us up to and beyond our limits, *so that* we will recognize our dependence upon God. The truth is that we have nothing to offer God, and that we need everything from Him. Whenever we think that we are sufficient in and of ourselves, we deceive ourselves. God brings/sends/allows trials, struggles and adversities into our lives to show us our need for God, so that we would then humbly and desperately look to God to supply all our needs. The Christian life is a process of recognizing our deficiencies, and seeking God’s mercy and grace for our needs. The process of building up our faith into a living faith - which is the meaning of sanctification - is never, ever fully completed in this life. But in the moments when we start becoming more complete, we will lack nothing, because God has amply provided for our every need. To resist and reject trials, struggles and adversities is to resist and reject the sanctifying and perfecting work God in our lives. We should rejoice over His perfecting work within us!

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double- minded man, unstable in all his ways. James 1:5-8

James now tells us of the divine *resources* that God has made available to us to help us when we face times of trials, struggles and adversities that are meant to sanctify us, to build up our *living faith* in Jesus Christ. The first resource is to ‘*ask*’ God for ‘*wisdom*.’ The Bible teaches that God is the source of all wisdom, which reveals that wisdom is much more than knowledge and intelligence. It is practical discernment given by the spirit of God, the ability to make wise decisions in light of God’s Word and will in difficult circumstances. We as Christians need God’s wisdom so that we might see our trials with God’s insight and His purpose through them. The ‘*wisdom*’ that will equip us to meet the ordeals of life is not acquired by reading nor from human teachers. Because the ‘*fear of the Lord*’ is the beginning of God’s wisdom - it can be only learned be learned on our knees in prayer.

The second resource James speaks of is that we are to ‘*ask in faith*.’ Faith is the essential condition of prayer and so we must pray with a complete trust in God that our requests will be granted according to His divine will. To ‘*ask in faith*’ means we seek God’s help with the full and complete confidence that He can and He will deal with whatever trial, struggle or adversity that is before us. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that ‘*without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*’ We ‘*ask in faith*’ when we approach with confidence in His character, not ‘*doubting*’ His ability and His willingness to grant us exactly with everything that we need at that very moment. God will give when we humbly ‘*ask in faith*.’ James also warns us to not be ‘*double- minded*’ in our faith. His point is that is that its not enough to ‘*ask in faith*’ for ‘*wisdom*’ - we also must be willing to validate our faith in God by being willing to surrender to and obey God so that God could give stability to our lives. James gives us an illustration that we would understand by comparing someone who asks in faith for God’s wisdom without obeying God’s will is just like an object that is tossed about by the wind and surf of the sea.

The essence of the doubting heart is caught by visualizing someone who straddles a fence. This person is drawn in two directions and reveals instability in every direction. Since the rule of their heart is divided, it will affect the whole conduct of life in all that they do. Doubt and indecision leads to an indecisive walk with God – which then leads to a lack of commitment, which then ultimately leads to a dead faith, as James 2:17 tells us that, “*Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*”

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. James 1:9-11

Here James moves from a general discussion of trials, struggles and adversities and now speaks to us of the two most common examples of the testing of our faith: the test of *poverty* and the test of *prosperity*. The reality is both rich and poor Christians face trials, struggles and adversities. The word “*lowly*” suggests one who is poor and oppressed, with a seemingly unimportant earthly status. Both Nancy and I grew up in homes that were somewhat reflective of such words. When money is scarce there is a temptation to brood and resent and envy those who do have. Early church records show many of its members were from the lowest economic levels of society. But Jesus became their hope in their dismal situation *because* when one becomes a Christian they become an heir of God and a joint heir with Christ. As new creatures in Christ, we become bearers of the divine image, partakers of the divine nature with the inexhaustible treasures of God available to us. Though we may possess little or nothing of earth’s honor or treasures, we have a high position and riches of glory that all of earth’s treasures can not compare. James tells us that those who are poor will not to be depressed when they see poverty as an *opportunity* to prove the faithfulness of God in their lives.

James then speaks of the “*rich*” who need to realize that their condition is one of “*humiliation*” instead of “*exaltation*” like the “*lowly*” (poor) because the “*rich*” is that someday they will “*fade away*” like “*a flower of the grass*” - and so will their wealth and their social prominence. The rich’s “*humiliation*” is the fading away of their earthly “*exaltation*” because the rich do not need to depend upon God for the basic and daily necessities of life. Money can create real problems in attaining true spiritual maturity. Those who are wealthy are not pressed to seek their daily bread from God and therefore constantly reminded to thank Him for it. Physical life can be pleasant and enjoyment can be found in the worldly things his wealth provides instead of in the joy of the Lord. The test of prosperity is also that riches can make a person significant and accepted in the world’s eyes, which can create the temptation to be satisfied with this acceptance and not be moved to find acceptance and significance through their relationship with Jesus. James reminds the rich that life is brief and uncertain and encourages them to maintain a humble attitude in spite of their plenty. The rich are not to delight in his worldly wealth and possessions but to rejoice in the opportunity to prove their inferiority to true riches of God through Jesus Christ. But whatever earthly circumstances in which we live – rich or poor, it’s all temporary. We are all called to live for what is eternal. Amen.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12

This verse is James’ encouraging conclusion to his instruction that began back in verse two about the trials, struggles and adversities we face in pursuing a living faith in Christ. James closes his teaching on times of “*testing*” with a promise for those who are suffering under trials, struggles and adversities *by reminding them* that God rewards those who remain faithful in their pursuit of a true living faith in Jesus Christ. He tells us first of all that God blesses those to “*remains steadfast under trial.*” While we already have heard that that blessing will ultimately be “*the crown of life*” – we also know that the Word of God clearly speaks of the blessing of God’s power and God’s presence and God’s preeminence that is with us in Christ through the Holy Spirit in times of trials and testing.

And we need that blessing because “*trials*” will come to those who pursue a life faith in Jesus Christ – and the mere experience of trial will not necessarily bring a blessedness to into our hearts and lives. The reality is that sometimes we come out of the difficulties of our trials, struggles and adversities not softened and tempered but hardened or brittle. It’s hard to see that testing, that trial as a blessing. But if we are pursuing a true living faith in Jesus Christ, we will see and embrace the blessing of the trial as a testing of our joyful endurance of the trial so that we might better know and love and serve and live for Jesus. “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial*” could make us look like one of those gnarled, twisted tress along the shores of Ucluelet, whose branches are blow backward from the sea until they are permanently shaped like Medusa’s hair. But we in Christ, like those trees, can withstand the winds of seas because we are grounded in the solid rock of God. The outcome our patient, faithful, joyful endurance in the pursuit of living faith in the fire of trials, struggles and adversities is worthy of great reward. This is picture of gospel of Jesus Christ, who sacrificed his life on a cross for us so that someday we will be rewarded with eternal life: “*For when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*”

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

James 1:13-18

James closes this section of his letter by writing: “*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*” It isn’t difficult to see a connection between temptation and trials, struggles and adversity. In the midst of trials, struggles and adversity we may be tempted to think or act in a sinful manner. Many people wrongly conclude that times of stress somehow justify ungodly responses. There is a sinister dimension to the words, “I am tempted by God.” It is one thing to say, “The devil made me do it;” it is quite another to lay the blame on God. But James tells us that when we see God as the source of our sin, we have been terribly deceived. God is not the source of any temptation because He is the source of any and all and every truly good gift. The God who does not tempt and who gives good gifts is *God who never changes*. As James puts it, “*there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” The God who is good and never changes is also sovereign; it was through God’s initiative that we were offered us and given us new life, through the instrument of His Word: “*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.*” If there is any basis for the stability in our faith, it is in knowing that God is good, unchanging, and sovereign. And that Philippians 1:6 tells us that, “*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*” And someday God is going to redeem all of creation back to Himself through Jesus just as he did for us. Colossians 1:18-20 tells us Jesus “*is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*” The true test of faith is the test of whether we will joyfully embrace all of the trials, struggles and adversities that God brings/sends/allows into our lives as good gifts from God - a God who is good, unchanging, and sovereign over all things - in order to give stability to our faith and to build up faith so might live out a living faith, through the in-working of God’s Spirit, which is the perfecting work of God within us, which will not only bless us with His power, presence and preeminence as we go through trials, struggles and adversities - but will also reward us with the crown of life in heaven. When we pass the true test of faith, we will know the fullness of Romans 8:28: “*We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*”

2016-04-03

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church