



James 1:1-18
FaithWorks: The Book of James
Trials and Temptations

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April 19th, 2020

This morning we are starting a new series that will take us through the Book of James – and I am super excited about this series. I have a Bible where I keep track of every passage that I preach on, going back for the almost 18 years I’ve served as a pastor. And it turns out that I have only preached one sermon from the book of James! I was quite surprised and embarrassed to realize that this week, because I know I’ve preached from books of the Bible that are often ignored. I’m intentional about that. But I will say this: James tends to be neglected by Christians. Considering it’s basically the same length as some of Paul’s most beloved letters – such as Philippians and Ephesians – it’s not that it’s so tiny that it’s easy to overlook like 3rd John or Jude or something like that. It has more to do with it’s content and it’s theology. Heck, Martin Luther didn’t think it should even be in the Bible because of theological reasons – and we’ll get to more on that in a couple weeks or so. So the roots of ignoring it go back a ways, and it just has not always been the most-respected book in the Bible.

That’s too bad, because James actually is filled with practical wisdom and insight for living as a disciple of Jesus – both in good times and in unusual, stressful, fearful, pandemic-filled times as well. It’s a very “grounded” letter, meaning it’s not a theological treatise. It’s straight-forward, earthy, and easily applicable. There aren’t any grand theological statements about who Jesus is like you find in the gospels coming from Jesus himself or in pretty much all of Paul’s letters. For example there’s nothing like the opening of Gospel according to John, “In the beginning was the word and the word was God and the word was with God.” And if the book of “Romans” is head-spinning at times because of it’s expression of deep theological and historical truths and the intertwining of those things, then you’ll find James to be the antithesis of that. And in the end, I think you’ll find James, and hopefully this sermon series as well, to be quite applicable to your life.

We might wonder, “Who is James?” If you have kids of a certain age, they might answer, “He’s one of Thomas the Trains’ friends.” One of my own kids actually made that connection for me. Well, we don’t know a lot about James

the author. The opening verse says he is a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's all we know from the letter itself. Beyond that, there are five different people in the New Testament who go by the name of James. It's possible that it's a different James than one of them who wrote this, but most Bible scholars attribute it to James, the brother – or half-brother more properly put – of Jesus. We see him mentioned some in the gospels and then also in the book of Acts where he takes a prominent lead role in the early church, particularly in Jerusalem. The other Jameses mentioned in the NT are not very likely candidates simply because they are much more on the periphery of things.

James' leadership role in the Jerusalem church is interesting to note, because in the gospels, James (along with the rest of Jesus' earthly family) is not particularly supportive of Jesus' public ministry. But something in him changed either towards the end of Jesus' ministry or very soon after his death and resurrection. Probably, the resurrection itself is what changed him, much as the 11 disciples went from hiding out in fear to boldly proclaiming the name of Jesus. And a changed life should come as a surprise, of course. That's what Jesus is all about! So it shouldn't catch us off-guard at all that James would believe in Jesus and help lead the church; and because of his own transformation from skeptic to church leader and Biblical author, perhaps this encourages us in our own faith as well: God's not finished with you yet, either. You're a work in progress who he continues to transform as well.

Additionally, when it comes to *this* James as the author: the themes of this letter also fit with James' role in the church in Jerusalem, because it has a very Jewish feel to it. He's maybe writing to Jewish Christians, or at least has them in mind even if the letter went to Christians with other backgrounds as well. But that Jewish "bent" fits the James of the book of Acts who had a prominent role in the church in Jerusalem, which was mostly Jewish/Israelite Christians.

Lastly, the letter itself covers a wide variety of topics and has the feel of a collection of proverbs. It is far and away the most proverb-like, of any of the New Testament books. But it is also very centered on Jesus' teaching,

especially the Sermon on the Mount. William Barclay, for example, counts 23 allusions to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Another author finds 19 allusions to the Sermon on the Mount. And keep in mind, the book of James is only 5 chapters long. You can read it in 30 minutes or so.

Ok, so with that introduction to the series and the book of James, let's dive in, because my camera only has enough room for a 73-minute sermon today...and I just used up about 5 of those minutes. We're looking at the first 18 verses today, though we'll read it and take it in smaller chunks this morning. But this whole 18 verse passage is God's Word to you today...

James 1:1 - James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Let's briefly pause here. Besides James clearly stating that his allegiance is to Jesus, we also see some of the Jewish influence of this letter. And we see it in the phrase, "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." Besides the reference to the 12 tribes of Israel which goes back to the book of Genesis, "Diaspora" is the word here that gets translated as "scattered." And "Diaspora" particularly came to mean Israelites who were scattered, or dispersed, beyond the borders of Israel; so that's going as far back as the 8th Century B.C., with the Babylonian and Assyrian exiles of the Old Testament. "Diaspora" became almost a technical term for that. In fact, it's become a transliterated word in English – meaning, a Hebrew word we just use in our English language with out coming up with our own English translation of it – and Oxford Dictionary's first definition of the word is "Jews living outside of Israel."ⁱ

So, perhaps James is writing exclusively to Jewish Christians outside of Israel. More likely, he is using a term that his audience, regardless of their background, would be familiar with, and simply means to convey that he is writing to Christians wherever they may be. The church is scattered, and he is writing to that scattered church. Do you feel like the scattered church this morning as you engage in worship from your own home? I do! We are part of the 21st Century church that is scattered throughout the nations. We could not ask for a letter written with a better audience in mind for our current times. Let's keep reading...

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Do you feel like you're facing a trial right now? The whole world is! And James knows his readers are facing trials and tests. They all were in their day. There was no such thing as an easy life as a Christian in first Century Israel or any of the surrounding areas either. This should not come as a surprise about them or for us either, given that we are called to follow Jesus and become Christ-like...and he faced some pretty significant trials. The Christian life is inherently out of step with the world on many fronts. Not on all fronts – there are many points of similarity and connection. But there is much dissimilarity, and with those come trials and tests.

Not many people sign up for trials on purpose. A few do. I have a couple friends who do ultramarathon trail runs. They *intentionally* sign up for, and then train to compete in, running races on mountain trails that will be 50 mile runs or even longer. One gal I know did a 100 miler a few years ago. Those kinds of people are crazy, if you ask me. Who would want that kind of test? Of course, I know other people who think being a pastor is a test that is just as crazy. So I guess we all sign up for certain tests in life. But there are other tests and trials that come our way that we don't sign up for or desire to come our way. Can you say, "Pandemic?" Cancer, natural disasters, job loss, home-schooling sarcastic teenagers while working full-time...and the complete obliteration of organized sports and the fine arts from preschoolers to professionals. So, these tests and trials come our way sometimes.

We often ask "Why" these things happen – particularly when they are beyond human control. If we simply made bad decisions that have led to hardships – cheated on the test, cheated on our spouse, overspent our bank account – we don't usually ask "why." We can connect the dots between our behavior and the test or trial that comes our way. But not everything fits that category. For instance: Why coronavirus? Why cancer? Why a natural disaster? And James invites us to a deeper question than "why?" in those kinds of things, as well as in the things that we realize we've brought upon ourselves. He directs us

to this question: How is my faith doing in the midst of this trial? How is this test shaping your faith?

Now, he doesn't actually *write out* that question...but he gives the answer to it, as he turns to matters of faith. Our faith, through these trials, becomes complete; it is strengthened so that it lacks nothing. These things are tests and trials that can strengthen our faith. There is always a spiritual component to them. Even some self-described non-spiritual people will respond in a spiritual way. I came across a gal this past week who completely disregarded the notion that God exists. She didn't believe that Jesus ever existed and walked the face of the earth let alone was raised from the dead: and yet it wasn't that long ago that she was supporting the "Pray for Paris" movement when disaster struck there. Tests inevitably have a spiritual component to them. And that's the deeper issue.

So how's your faith being shaped by the trials and tests you face? There is clearly an opportunity here in the midst of *this* test and trial to lean into God, to lean into his word, to seek Him and trust Him even more. Quite frankly, what else are you going to trust? Do you find government leaders – whether they're our own or those of other entities – to be trustworthy? Do you trust other people at the grocery store right now? Do you trust your retirement account or your paycheck? So why not build your faith in God in this time? Why not seek Jesus more than you ever have before – maybe for the first time for someone who's joining in this morning?

Ok, let's continue on: **5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.**

So here we go, right? Turn to God in faith. Seek Him. Ask him for wisdom about whatever the test or trial is you're facing. Do you know what wisdom is? It's not just knowledge. There's a difference between knowledge and

wisdom. Knowledge, for example, is knowing that tomatoes are a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put tomatoes in a fruit salad. We could probably make a similar analogy about country music...but we'll let it go. 😊

We want to be wise, and wisdom comes when we not only *know* Jesus and his word, but when we do the right thing with what He says. That's what Jesus himself said to do. The person who build his house (metaphor for his life) on the rock is a wise person, the person who builds his house on the sand is the foolish person. And Jesus says the wise person is the one who builds their house on the rock is the one who listens to Jesus' word and does it, while the foolish person is the one who *also* hears Jesus' word, but then doesn't do it. That person has knowledge, but lacks wisdom...lacks faith...doubts Jesus...lacks stability in life, just as James writes of here. So the wise person turns to God in the midst of the trial, in the midst of the storm, and keeps building his or her life on what Jesus says.

Let's continue on with verse 9...**9 Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. 10 But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. 11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. 12 Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.**

Here James is encouraging the poor and warning the rich, but regardless, they both can persevere through their tests in pursuit of Jesus. Are you poor? Take heart, because in Jesus you have a high position. He will lift you up and you also get a crown. Are you rich? Be careful, because it's easy to trust in our paycheck, or our bank account...but that's what a foolish person trusts in. He then alludes to and even paraphrases Psalm 103:15 about the beauty of a flower that ultimately is destroyed.

Whether rich or poor – which is probably the most common lens through which we value and judge other people – our earthly lives all meet the same

end, and if we think our wealth is going to save us, or if we think that because of poverty we don't stand a chance, then we are the greatest of all fools. But if we persevere – not with worldly stuff, but with our faith as James wrote of earlier – if we keep loving Jesus, then we receive the crown of life that Jesus promises. And that promise is backed up by His resurrection that we celebrated last Sunday. Let's continue with verse 13...

13 When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Ever since the dawn of humankind, we have sought to blame others for the sin in our lives. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and we keep looking for scapegoats ever since. Isn't "take responsibility for yourself" one of the things we parents drill into our kids?" All of us parents are hammering it home now as our kids are doing school from home as they are tempted by Youtube, Netflix, video games, and Lucky Charms. As I saw online this week about teaching kids at home during the pandemic: "You can either have a nice day or you can help your child with their math homework. You can't have both." That little Proverb is attributed to Coronations 3:30. 😊 Learning accountability and responsibility is hard, and so is teaching it. We tend to look outside of ourselves for something or someone to blame for the temptations we fall to.

In fact, some people have even sought to blame God when it comes to temptation and sin. James is clear here, however, that God has nothing to do with temptation, which happens through our own evil desires. "Evil" might sound like a strong word, it might even sound a bit repulsive to our ears – as though our desires aren't evil compared to the desires of other people. But any desire that pulls us away from God and His will is evil. And when we let those thoughts get a foothold in our minds, and when we let them sit there and begin to take root, it gives birth to sin. And sin leads to death: death of relationship, death of holy living, death of goodness, death of the fruit of the spirit, death of Jesus on the cross. It's our sin that put Jesus there, and he died

for you and me, so that our sin might no longer separate us from God and people.

OK...Let's get to the last few verses and wrap this up: **16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.**

So...don't be deceived about where temptation comes from. It's not from God. God gives good and perfect gifts. God works in us to form our faith and help us to persevere in the trials and temptations. God is the author of life...it's the crown of life he gives as we saw a few verses earlier and we see here that He gives us birth – birth into life, life abundant, life eternal...and he does so through his Word. That's where we seek Him out. That's where we gain wisdom. That's where we are encouraged in perseverance so our faith would be strengthened and would mature and come to completion. And God reaches into our lives to do all this even when we face trials and tests and when we are the Diaspora, when we are scattered....when we are the socially distanced.

So keep leaning into God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the midst of the pandemic and in the midst of whatever other trials and tests you may be facing in your own personal life. Keep leaning into His Word, building your life and your faith – like a wise home builder – on that solid foundation of His Word, and not any other thing that might tempt us to make it the foundation of our lives. And when we do that we will live with wisdom, and be able to resist whatever temptations might come your way, and ultimately bring glory to the name of Jesus who will crown us with an everlasting crown. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/diaspora>