

FAITH UNDER FIRE
Jas 1:1-18
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On October 21, 2002, in Washington, D.C., an archaeological announcement was made. A first-century limestone burial box—20 inches long, 10 inches wide, and 12 inches high—was revealed to the public. The box, known as an ossuary, carried an Aramaic inscription that read: “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” Some scholars believe that the box held the bones of James, described in the New Testament as the brother of Jesus and leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Of course, absolute certainty is rare when it comes to discoveries of this type. Experts who examined the ossuary concluded that the inscription dates to about A.D. 62 or 63, which—according to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus—is the time period for the death of “one James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ.” The Discovery Channel is producing a television program on the burial box to air sometime this year.¹

James, the brother of Jesus, is probably the author of the Epistle of James found in the New Testament, which letter he wrote perhaps sometime in the middle A.D. 40s, but certainly before his death in A.D. 62. James’ letter takes the form of moral exhortation: there are some 59 imperatives in its 108 verses. James delivers a lot of advice and demands a lot of action. James is so straightforward in forcing a choice where most people would prefer a compromise.

Few books of the New Testament are better known or more often quoted than James. It may be one of the two or three most popular New Testament books among Christians. Why? Why is the Epistle of James so popular? Three characteristics of the letter seem to provide the answer:² it is practical, it is pointed, and it is picturesque.

¹Jeffery L. Sheler, “A Discovery and a Debate: Who Was ‘James, Brother of Jesus?’” *U.S. News & World Report* 133 (November 4, 2002): 50-51; and Gordon Govier, “Stunning New Evidence of Jesus: Experts Link Jerusalem Bone Box to Early Church Leader James, Brother of Christ,” *Christianity Today* 46 (November 18, 2002): 38.

²See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Eerdmans/Apollos, 2000), 1-2.

First, James is practical. It is a book about doing. James gives us what may very well be the most famous command in the New Testament: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22, NLT). The purpose of the letter is not so much to educate as it is to motivate; not so much to inform as it is to transform. If you are searching for specific guidance in the Christian life, you will appreciate the practical nature of James.

Second, James is pointed. It is a book that packs its punches with precision. James rarely develops his points at any length, but seems content to make his point and to move quickly on. As a result, it is not easy to find a pattern of organization. However, while you may not see the pattern, you will feel the punches.

Third, James is picturesque. It is a book of images and illustrations. The billowing sea, the withered flower, the reflection of a face in a mirror, the bit in the horse’s mouth, the rudder of the ship, the destructive forest fire, the pure spring of water, the arrogant businessman, the corroded metal, and moth-eaten clothes—all are pictures that make the letter’s teaching easy to understand and to remember.

Now, let’s read the first eight verses of the Epistle of James.

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

²My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; ⁴and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ^{7, 8}for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord (1:1-8, NRSV).

Why does God allow the righteous to suffer? This is one of the most disturbing and difficult questions that God’s people can ask. James does not give us a complete answer. But what he does give us is given with the conviction that the suffering of Christians is always under the providential control of a God who wants only the best for His people. The “testing of faith” of which James speaks is not a test intended to determine whether a person has faith or not; it is a test intended to purify faith that already exists. Such testing produces “endurance” or “perseverance.” Perseverance, however, is not itself the final

goal of testing; rather, James instructs believers to “let endurance have its full effect.” As believers, we must allow endurance to do its intended work; and that is, to develop within us complete Christian character. James confronts us with the ultimate goal of faith’s testing; he is not claiming that we will attain the goal. But we must not “lower the bar” on the expectation James sets for us. Nothing less than complete moral integrity will ultimately satisfy the God who is Himself holy and righteous, completely set apart from sin.

After encouraging his readers to embrace trials for the potential they have to spur spiritual growth, James exhorts them to pray in undivided faith for the wisdom that a gracious God is anxious to give to those who ask. Just as God gives with singleness of purpose, so we must ask with singleness of purpose. We must not waffle or waver by wanting wisdom from God one day and then wanting the wisdom of the world the next day. We must know what to do and do what we know. We must not be double-minded. “Double-mindedness” is what we might call “spiritual schizophrenia.” It denotes a division in the soul that leads to thinking, speaking, and acting that contradicts one’s claim to be a Christian. It describes the Christian who wants to walk with God and walk with the world *at the same time*. James says, “Don’t be a fence-straddler.” This idea is illustrated by John Bunyan in his *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678-1684) by the character “Mr. Facing-Both-Ways.” It is also portrayed in real life by Augustine’s prayer, “O Lord, grant me purity, but not yet.”³

Returning to the first chapter of James, verses 9, 10, and 11 read as follows:

⁹Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, ¹⁰and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away (1:9-11, NRSV).

What makes these verses especially hard to understand is the problem of identifying the “one who is rich.” Is this rich person a Christian or a non-Christian? We cannot know for certain. What does seem clear is that Christians must always evaluate themselves by spiritual and not material standards. The connection of these verses with

³*Confessions* viii.7.

what has gone before and what comes after seems to be that James sees poverty and wealth as a “test” for Christians: a test that may cause us to be double-minded. In the words of Jesus, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [money]” (Matt 6:24, NRSV). In my study for this sermon, I came across a statement made by a wealthy non-Christian who was speaking of his friend, a poor Christian: “When I die, I shall leave my riches. When he dies, he will go to his.”⁴

Back to James 1, let’s read our final section for this lesson, verses 12-18.

¹²Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; ¹⁵then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved.

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures (1:12-18, NRSV).

I offer this translation of verses 12 and 13 in the hope that it will help in understanding James’ argument.

Blessed is anyone who perseveres under trial. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. No one, when they are being put to the test, should say, “God is tempting me”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.

Every trial brings temptation. Financial difficulty can tempt us to question God’s providence in our lives. The death of a loved one can cause us to question God’s love for us. The poverty of the righteous and the luxury of the wicked can tempt us to question God’s justice. Testing almost always includes temptation, and temptation is itself a test. But while God may test our faith in order to strengthen our faith, He will never tempt us to sin in order to destroy our faith. God seeks to strengthen us for salvation; He does not seek to seduce us for destruction. It is our own desires that doom us. According to James, temptation, in and of itself, is not sinful. Only when desire “conceives”—is

⁴John Blanchard, *Not Hearers Only*, 3 vols. (Word, 1971-1973), 1:68. Cited by James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1976), 66.

allowed to produce offspring—does sin come into being. Furthermore, we must not be fooled into thinking that God Himself is tempting us to do evil; on the contrary, He is the giver of good gifts to His children. Unlike the constant motion of the heavenly bodies, the Heavenly Being—God—does not change. He gives good gifts to His children, and the greatest gift is that by His grace we have been “born again” to be His children.

Temptation always wants to twist something that we desire into a bad result. John Knowles’ powerful novel *A Separate Peace* (1959) portrays how sinister and sneaky temptation is. There is a river scene in which a young boy is tempted by older boys to make a jump from a tree because they have told him it is an initiation rite into their club. They know that the small lad cannot make the distance of the jump from a high tree to the river, but they tempt him with the offer of group acceptance—he can become one of them. This means a lot to the lonely lad. He jumps, and he is seriously injured. On the surface, it looks like he harmed himself by a poor choice; but at a deeper level the readers of the novel know the whole terrible truth: that he was tempted to harm’s way by a larger evil designed by the older boys. His desire for acceptance gave the tempters a deadly doorway into his personality and gave them the power to cloud his good judgment. As a result, the young boy lost the perspective of wisdom that he should have had. If he had been wiser, he would have stayed away from the initiation rite, because he would have perceived the evil plotted by the older boys. Through the doorway of desire, temptation—if we allow it to—will work its way into our soul, cloud our common sense, and seduce us to self-destruct. James warns us, “Do not be deceived, my beloved.”

Life is not easy. Trials and tribulations are inevitable. And yet, such tests can make us or break us. The first step is that we must make up our mind as to where we will go for wisdom. Will we seek the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of God? Once we, with single-minded commitment, go to God for wisdom, He will graciously grant our request. Armed with God’s wisdom, we face the satanic temptations that lurk in every trial. And by God’s grace, we turn trials into triumphs, becoming persons of maturity and moral integrity. Having been victorious, we ultimately are rewarded with the crown of life. As the saying goes, “No pain, no gain.” Or to put it into more spiritual words, “No cross, no crown.” I want that crown. Yes, I *really* want that crown. What about you?

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