

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

EXPERIENCING JOY IN TRIALS

Read James 1:1-8

Introduction

James is a book written to help Christians take their faith to a higher level. Based on the text, it's written to people who already have a faith in Christ, possibly of Jewish heritage, and who understand the fundamentals of Christianity; but they're having problems putting it into practice. James spends little time on things like Christ's deity, baptism, or the nature of the church. Rather, this is a letter about putting faith into action. It speaks to what Christian living looks like in practice. It's about owning our faith and making it a part of who we are — not just a name we wear.

Which James?

“James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...” (v1a)

There are several men named James mentioned in the New Testament, but reliable tradition assigns this book to the one called James the Just, the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) and the brother of Jude (Jude 1), who led the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).

Other men mentioned in the Bible named James include:

- James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, the first apostle martyred and also known as James the Less (Matthew 10:2, Mark 15:40, Acts 12:2).
- James the son of Alphaeus, another of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10:3).
- James, the father of the “other” apostle Judas (Luke 6:16).

The writer of this letter is the same James who received a special resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7). This was probably the cause of his conversion, because up to that time the brothers of Jesus seemed unsupportive of His message and mission (John 7:5).

An early history of the church says that James was such a man of prayer that his knees had large and thick calluses, making them look like the knees of a camel. It also says that James was martyred in Jerusalem by being pushed from a high point of the temple. Yet the fall did not kill him, and on the ground, he was beaten to death, even as he prayed for his attackers.

Knowing that this James was the half-brother of Jesus makes his self-introduction all the more significant. He did not proclaim himself “the brother of Jesus” but only a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was more than James' brother; more importantly, Jesus was his Lord.

The Twelve Tribes

“To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.” (v1b)

What James meant by this reference to the twelve tribes is difficult to understand. The question is whether James wrote a letter to only Christians from a Jewish background or to all Christians. Certainly, this letter applies to all Christians; yet James probably wrote his letter before Gentiles were brought into the church, or at least before Gentile Christians appeared in any significant number.

“The twelve tribes” is a Jewish figure of speech that sometimes referred to the Jewish people as a whole (Matthew 19:28). Paul referred to our twelve tribes in his speech before King Agrippa (Acts 26:7). The

concept of the “twelve tribes” among the Jewish people was still strong, even though they had not lived in their tribal allotments for centuries.

In many ways, we listen to the book of James because it echoes the teaching of Jesus. There are at least fifteen allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in James. A man who knew the teaching of Jesus and took it seriously wrote this letter.

The salutation “Greetings” was the customary Greek way of opening a letter. Paul never used it; he preferred to salute his readers with the words “grace and peace”. Here James used this more customary salutation.

Patient Endurance in Trials

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (vv2-4)

James regarded trials as inevitable. He said when, not if you fall into various trials. At the same time trials are occasions for joy, not discouraged resignation. We can count it all joy in the midst of trials because they are used to produce patience. When we are brand new Christians, we have genuine faith, sure enough, but our faith is innocent, untried. As faith is tried, it deepens and matures, and is able to flourish in all sorts of circumstances. And as we know God's faithfulness in various places of testing, we develop the boldness of faith that only a tried and tested faith can possess.

Faith is tested through trials, not produced by trials. Trials reveal what faith we do have; not because God doesn't know how much faith we have, but so that our faith will be evident to ourselves and to those around us. If trials do not produce faith, what does? Romans 10:17 tells us: *“So, then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* Supernaturally, faith is built in us as we hear, understand, and trust in God's word.

We notice that it is “faith” that is tested, and it shows that faith is important and precious — because only precious things are tested so thoroughly. “Faith is as vital to salvation as the heart is vital to the body: hence the javelins of the enemy are mainly aimed at this essential grace.”

James did not want anyone to think that God sends trials to break down or destroy our faith; therefore, he will come back to this point in James 1:13-18.

Producing Patience

Trials don't produce faith, but when trials are received with faith, it produces patience. Yet patience is not inevitably produced in times of trial. If difficulties are received in unbelief and grumbling, trials can produce bitterness and discouragement. This is why James exhorted us to count it all joy. Counting it all joy is faith's response to a time of trial.

The work of patient endurance comes slowly and must be allowed to have full bloom. Patient endurance is a mark of the person who is perfect and complete, lacking nothing. The Message Translation puts it this way:

“Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colours. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work, so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.” (vv2-4 MSG)

The word variously translated "perseverance" (NIV), "steadfastness" (ESV), "endurance" (NRSV, NASB), and "patience" (KJV) is the Greek word "hypomonē", "the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty, patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance." The verb means "to remain behind, stand one's ground, survive, remain steadfast, persevere and also to wait." Trials and temptations build a maturity and completeness in us.

The natural tendency of trouble is not to sanctify, but to induce sin. A man is very quick to become unbelieving under affliction: that is a sin. He is quick to murmur against God under it: that is a sin. He is quick to put forth his hand to some ungodly way of escaping from his difficulty: and that would be sin. Hence, we pray when our faith is tried so we don't end up in sin.

Receiving Wisdom

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (vv5-8)

Trials bring a necessary season to seek wisdom from God. We often don't know we need wisdom until our time of difficulty. Once in a time of trial, we need to know if a particular trial is something God wants us to eliminate by faith or persevere in by faith. This requires wisdom.

In trials, we need wisdom a lot more than we need knowledge. Knowledge is raw information, but wisdom knows how to use it. Someone once said that knowledge is the ability to take things apart, but wisdom is the ability to put things together. To receive wisdom, we simply ask of God — who gives wisdom generously (liberally), and without despising our request (without reproach).

When we ask people for wisdom, we often hear judgment instead: "I told you so." But not with God. And we have a very clear promise: "It will be given to him."

There is a condition to the promise, however. We must ask with a clear commitment and faith. Unless we deal with our mixed motives and sins, we won't be able to hear wisdom even if God speaks to us. Coming to God without repenting of and forsaking the sin that divides our allegiances won't work, either. Adversity and trial have a way of clarifying the issues and highlighting the decisions we need to make. Faith flourishes where we come to a place of a single mind about the things of God, a place where doubt and indecision do not disable action, but where clear, single-mindedness enables it.

Double-Mindedness

The one who doubts and lacks faith should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. This lack of faith and trust in God also shows that we have no foundation, being unstable in all our ways.

To ask God but to ask Him in a doubting way, shows that we are double-minded. If we had no faith, we would never ask at all. If we had no unbelief, we would have no doubting. To be in the middle ground between faith and unbelief is to be double-minded.

The man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) was not double-minded. He wanted to believe and declared his belief. His faith was weak, hence the statement: "help my unbelief."

Do you believe that God can give you wisdom, and that he will do so if you ask him? Then, go at once to him, and say, 'Lord, this is what I need.' Specify your wants, state your exact condition, lay the whole case before God with as much orderliness as if you were telling your story to an intelligent friend who

was willing to hear it, and prepared to help you; and then say, 'Lord, this is specifically what I think I want; and I ask this of You believing that thou can give it to me.

Simple!