

James 1:1-12  
Psalm 12  
Isaiah 40

“Faith and Wisdom”

January 28, 2018

Isaiah speaks of the return from exile –  
the day when the LORD would bring his people home.

Verses 6-8 sit right in between two announcements of the coming glory of the LORD’s return.  
Look at the middle of verse 6:  
All flesh is grass, and its beauty (its *hesed* – its steadfast love)  
is like the flower of the field.

Remember, we are not talking about *grass* – we are talking about *all flesh* –  
we are talking about *humanity*.

All flesh is grass – there is no steadfast love – no enduring faithfulness – in man.  
The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it.  
Surely the people are grass.

*We* are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

The same tone is found in our psalm of response, Psalm 12.  
Psalm 12 says that the godly one is gone.  
The faithful have vanished from among the children of men.  
“Everyone utters lies to his neighbor;  
with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.”

Double hearted people are those who say nice things,  
but then stab you in the back.

In verses 5-6 (stanzas 3-4),  
the LORD declares that because the poor are plundered –  
because the needy groan –  
“I will now arise. I will place him in the safety for which he longs.”

And again, there is the same confidence in the *word* of God.  
“The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground,  
purified seven times.”

So, as we sing Psalm 12, let us believe God – let us believe his word –  
and let us trust that he will do all that he has promised!

Sing Psalm 12  
Read James 1

What is faith?

And, no, I'm not asking for a dictionary definition.

I'm asking for a practical definition.

In other words, let's get *inside* faith and see it for what it is at its root.

What is faith?

Faith is not merely intellectual assent to certain concepts about God and salvation.

Even the demons "believe" in that sense!

Faith includes a certain sort of confidence – a trust – or, perhaps better,  
a loyalty to a *person*.

Believing in Jesus Christ includes a *resting* on him – a confidence in him –  
a loyalty to him.

And really, the book of James all about the nature of genuine faith.

We're going to see over and over again

that James is concerned to see a faith that works by love – to use Paul's term!

Today, we are looking particularly at verses 1-12 –

and these verses are tied together by the use of the word "steadfast"  
in verses 3 and 12.

Throughout his letter,

James is going to talk about what genuine faith looks like.

Genuine faith remains *steadfast* in the midst of trials –  
because we *know* where these trials are going.

### **Introduction: James and the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion (v1)**

*James, a servant<sup>[a]</sup> of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,*

*To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:*

*Greetings.*

James starts by introducing himself.

There were many people named James in the NT era

(James is simply the Latin form of the name Jacob).

There was the apostle James, the brother of John –

but he was killed by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD – so he probably did not write this.

There was the other apostle James, James the son of Alphaeus –

but we don't know much about him.

Then there is the James who presided at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 –

James, the brother of Jesus –

*this James* is the only James who was so prominent

that he could title a letter

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Josephus (who wrote in the late first century) tells the story of "James the Just"

the brother of Jesus – who was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem –

and how he died at the hands of Jewish mob around the year 62.

All of this fits well with the character of the book of James.

The author plainly knows the OT very well,  
and speaks with the simple authority  
of one who is known and trusted by the recipients of his letter.

He identifies himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

When a Jew uses the terms God and Lord together,  
“Lord” almost invariably refers to the Yahweh of the OT.

And particularly, when a Jew refers to himself  
as a “slave” or “servant” of God,

he would never include someone *other* than God in that identification!

So to say, “a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ,”  
is to say that Jesus is God.

Jesus is God – but Jesus is also the Christ – the anointed one – the long-awaited Messiah.

Sometimes we tend to talk as though “Jesus Christ” is simply his name.

Yes, *Jesus* is his name – but *Christ* is his title – his office.

He is Jesus *the* Christ –

the Anointed One, who restores the throne of David.

Of course, James the Just was the *brother* of Jesus.

But James does not emphasize his kinship with Jesus.

*That* is not important.

What is important is that James is a *servant* of Jesus – a *slave* of Jesus.

Even here in the greeting of his epistle

James will demonstrate the sort of humility that he calls us to!

Do not exalt yourself.

Humble yourself before the Lord (Jesus), and *he* will exalt you!

And James writes “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.”

The Dispersion – or “diaspora” – refers to the Jews who had been scattered by the exile –  
after the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions 6-700 years earlier.

For centuries, the “Jews of the Dispersion” lived on in Babylon, Alexandria,  
and elsewhere –

waiting for the day when the Lord would restore the fortunes of Zion –

when the throne of David would be restored –

and the Lord would judge the nations.

James does not go into great detail regarding these themes

of the eschatological restoration of the Kingdom of God –

but they are the glue that holds his letter together.

In chapter 1, you see it in verse 12 – “he will receive the crown of life” –

and in verse 18 – where we are “a kind of firstfruits” of the harvest.

In chapter 2, the Lord Jesus Christ is “the Lord of glory” (v1),  
and in chapter 3, wisdom produces a “harvest of righteousness” (v18).  
In chapter 5, “the coming of the Lord is at hand” (v8-9).

But James seems to assume that his readers already understand these things.  
His purpose is not to teach the basics of the faith.  
Rather, his purpose is to encourage the *life* of faith.

This suggests that when he says “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion”  
he is not writing to Jews in general.  
Rather, he is writing to Jewish Christians –  
to those in the Diaspora who have followed Jesus –  
and perhaps more particularly, to those who were scattered from Jerusalem  
by the persecution in the days of Herod Agrippa.

But there is nothing in the letter that would *only* apply to Jewish Christians.  
Gentiles, after all, have been grafted in to Israel.  
Acts 15:14-17 tells us what James the Just thought about Gentile Christians:  
“Simon [Peter] has related how God first visited the Gentiles,  
to take from them a people for his name.  
And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written  
[quoting from Amos 9]  
“After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it,  
that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.”  
The influx of Gentile Christians is precisely what the OT had promised!

And as we go through the book of James,  
we will hear nothing that is not just as directly relevant to us  
as it was to those who first received this epistle.

And we see this from the opening line in verse 2:

**1. Joy in the Midst of Trials: The Importance of Genuine Faith (v2-8)**  
**a. What Is the Purpose of Trials? “That You May Be Perfect and Complete”  
(v2-4)**

<sup>2</sup> *Count it all joy, my brothers, <sup>[b]</sup> when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

The word “trials” here in verse 2 is the same word as in verse 12  
(the one who remains steadfast under trials).  
It is the same root as the verb translated “tempted” in verses 13-14.

This is just one of those challenges of translation!  
The Greek word has a range of meaning that includes “trial, test, temptation.”  
But if you try to use the same English word every time it appears in our text,  
then you’ll miss the point that James is making!  
The English word “temptation” is very closely associated with “sin” –  
or at least with doing something that I shouldn’t do  
(I was really tempted by those cookies!).

But, as we’ll see next week, James says that God *tempts* no one.

There is a different word – the word translated “testing” in verses 3 and 12 –  
that suggests that what God is doing in these “trials”  
is testing the genuineness of your faith.  
Someone who is *tempting you* is trying to get you to fall.  
(And God is *never* trying to make *anyone* fall!)  
But God may well test the genuineness of your faith – of your commitment to him.

When your desires are out of whack –  
God may well offer you precisely what you want –  
NOT in order to make you fall,  
but in order to ask you – *which matters more*:  
ME – or your desires?

Let me give you an example.  
There was a divorced woman who *knew*  
that her divorce was for the wrong reasons.  
But she wanted to remarry – and so she asked God for a sign:  
if God wanted her to remarry, would he send a man  
who would approach her in a very particular way.  
A few months later, at a conference,  
a man approached her with the very words that she had asked for.  
Over the next few weeks, she discovered that this man was a con artist –  
but she married him anyway –  
because God had given her a sign!

They visited me on their honeymoon, and she told me the story.  
She now had real doubts about the wisdom of her decision,  
so when she asked me “Why would God have sent him?”  
I replied,  
“What did God do when Israel asked for a king?  
He gave them Saul.  
They wanted something good – but they wanted it in the wrong way.  
So he offered them what they wanted  
in order to find out: do you want to follow me,  
or do you want to follow your own desires?”

God did not tempt Israel – nor did he tempt my mother.  
He didn't want them to sin!  
But when he tested the genuineness of their faith,  
they failed the test.

If God only sent you tests that you will pass,  
then they aren't really "tests."

But James calls you to "count it all *joy*" when you encounter various trials.

Notice that he doesn't say "*enjoy* the trial!" –  
but rather that you should *count it* –  
upon reflection and mature consideration  
you should rejoice in the midst of these trials.

We're going to see this over and over in James.

The instinctive reaction of your desires will get you in trouble!

1:14 – "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires."

1:20 – the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God

4:1 – what causes quarrels and fights among you?

Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?

We need to consider the teaching of Scripture before we act (chapter 2);

we need to think before we speak (chapter 3);

we need humility to calm our passions (chapter 4).

None of this is going to happen automatically!

In the Christian life, there is no "auto-pilot."

In this respect, James and Paul are exactly on the same page.

Think of how Paul says it in Romans 5:3-5

"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,

knowing that suffering produces endurance,

and endurance produces character,

and character produces hope,

and hope does not put us to shame,

because God's love has been poured into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

James uses the same sort of language here.

Indeed, "steadfastness" in James 1 is the same word translated "endurance" in Rom 5.

The term translated "steadfastness" (*hupomone*) is a common term in the ancient philosophy.

The Stoics used it to describe the one who *endured* trouble with an even keel.

Both James and Paul use it to refer to the importance of "staying the course"

in the Christian life.

We are called to endure – to persevere – in faith, hope, and love.

The difference between the Stoic view of endurance and the Christian view

is found in verse 12.

The Stoic endures troubles simply because life is like that.  
The Christian endures troubles because we see the end in view:  
the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting –  
“the crown of life.”

I suspect that many of you have seen or read portions of Rachael Denhollander’s testimony  
at the sentencing of the doctor who sexually abused her.  
She well-exemplifies what James is saying.

There is nothing *good* about what the doctor did to her.  
But the testing of her faith has produced steadfastness – endurance –  
perseverance in faith, hope, and love.

But please note – it is not that *suffering* produces endurance.  
After all – we have all known people who suffered greatly –  
but who became hard and bitter and full of rage!  
But James does not say that *suffering* will produce endurance.  
Rather, the *testing of your faith* produces endurance!  
Suffering and trials of various kinds  
will only produce endurance for those who respond in *faith*.

As Dan McCartney puts it:

“Trials are the means of testing, which provide opportunity for patient endurance,  
which brings one to be perfect or mature.  
Thus, James regards suffering as something to rejoice in  
because it moves one toward the eschatological goal  
of completion or perfection.” (p296)

What does it mean to be perfect?

To put it simply:  
it means to be what God intended humanity to be.

And so you can view suffering – you can view these trials and temptations –  
as an opportunity to let steadfastness have its full effect –  
or to use the King James – “let patience have her perfect work” –  
that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The perfect work of endurance is that *you* may be perfect.  
That you may be complete – that you may be whole –  
that you may be what God *made* you to be!

The word translated “complete” is a word used in the OT to refer to how the sacrifices  
had to be “whole.”

The testing of our faith produces an endurance that perfects us –  
an endurance whose perfect work is to make us a fit offering  
(perhaps connecting with Paul’s language of “living sacrifices” in Rom 12).

And because steadfastness has its perfect work of perfecting us –  
the result – the goal – is that we lack nothing.

Of course, we all fall short (James himself will say in chapter 3,  
“we all stumble in many ways”) –  
and James even knows what is the thing that we *most* lack:

**b. What Do We Most Need in the Midst of Trials? Wisdom from God (v5)**

<sup>5</sup> *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*

Why does James focus on wisdom?

Well, James uses a lot of wisdom language in his epistle.  
There are lots of proverbs and wise sayings scattered throughout –  
together with a lot of references to both OT and Jewish wisdom literature.  
But unlike the wisdom literature,  
James is not really interested in a “quest” for wisdom.  
James knows *exactly* where wisdom is and how to get it.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God.”

Wisdom has to do with knowing *how* to live in God’s world.  
If our problem is that our passions cause us to react improperly to trials and temptations,  
then what we need is *wisdom*.  
And wisdom is more than just knowing *what* to do.  
Wisdom is more than just knowing *how* do it!  
As James will say later, “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable,  
gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits,  
impartial and sincere.” (3:17)

Wisdom, for James, is very much connected to Paul’s language  
of the “fruits of the Spirit.”

But the way that you obtain this wisdom is simply by asking!  
Jesus told us that God gives good gifts – he gives the Holy Spirit –  
to those who ask!

So if you need wisdom –  
if you need the ability to make sound judgments and speak the right words –  
then ask God, and he will give it to you.

Wow!

That sounds easy!  
But then verses 6-8 immediately zeroes in on the necessity of *faith*.

**c. Faith and Doubt: the Danger of Being Doubled-Minded (v6-8)**

<sup>6</sup> *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.* <sup>7</sup> *For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything*



*from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

When you hear “with no doubting” – what do you hear?

We often think of ‘doubt’ in terms of intellectual questions about God or life.

But that is *not* what is in view here.

The word translated “doubt” is a verb meaning to distinguish – to separate – or to divide.

In the NT, you often see it translated as discerning

or judging or wavering between things.

For instance, this is the same word used

when Paul talks about “discerning” the Lord’s body.

For that matter, it is the same word that James uses in the next chapter,

when he warns against “showing partiality.”

The closest parallel in the NT is Romans 4:20,

where Paul says that Abraham “did not *waver* [same word]

concerning the promise of God,

but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

This is why we used Isaiah 40 and Psalm 12 –

two passages that James cites in our text –

both of which have a strong emphasis on *trusting* God’s word!

Because James is *not* talking about whether you have any doubts generically speaking.

We could paraphrase it, “let him ask in faith,

without equivocation – without flip-flopping in his mind

whether God will be faithful to his promises”

“He loves me, he loves me not...”

James is saying – *if that’s the way you think about God and his promises,*

*then you should not expect to receive anything from the Lord Jesus.*

I think Dan McCartney is right to say that doubting is

“a lack of full commitment to God’s promises.” (268-269)

Faith means that you are fully committed to God and his promises.

You are not double-minded – you are not two-faced.

As far as we know, James is the first author to use the term “double minded” –

but it has echoes of the “double heart” of Psalm 12, that we sang earlier.

The double-hearted man of Psalm 12 is one who “utters lies to his neighbor,

with flattering lips and a double heart they speak.”

The double-hearted man is one who looks good on the outside,

but is corrupt on the inside.

This is very much in keeping with what Jesus taught –  
“No one can serve two masters.”

And that is James’ point as well.

The “double-minded” will return in chapter 4 –  
“Cleanse your hands, you sinners,  
and purify your hearts, you double-minded.  
Be wretched and mourn and weep.  
Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.  
Humble yourself before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” (4:8-10)  
You cannot remain double-minded and expect to see the Kingdom of God!

The Venerable Bede said it well in the 6<sup>th</sup> century:

“A man is double-minded when he wants to have fun in this world  
but also reign with God in heaven.” (Bede, 9)  
“Such a person has no clear vision of the future and no sure grasp of the present  
but rather drifts about here and there,  
grasping at whatever he can.” (Oecumenius, 9)

Someone might say,

“But pastor, I am double-minded!  
I flip-flop. I waffle. What about me?!!”

Think of the poor father in Mark 9,  
who cried out, “Lord, I believe – help my unbelief!”

That is the cry of faith!  
That is the cry of one who understands that his *only hope*  
is the Lord Jesus.  
There is no middle ground between *faith* and *unfaith*.  
Even if you only have a *little faith* –  
a little faith is still *faith!*

And to the one who has even a little faith,  
God gives generously – God gives “singly” – God gives without reproach.  
He does not discriminate – his gift is sincere, open handed, and free of hidden motives!  
The double-minded only give if they think that they will get something in return!  
But God gives to all who come to him in faith.  
To all who come to him – trusting and resting in him!

So how do you get wisdom?  
Simply by asking *in faith*.

In verses 9-11, then, James turns to a particular temptation of the rich.  
Those who have material comforts  
must remember that life is fleeting!

## 2. Pride and Wealth: The Transience of the Rich Demonstrates the Futility of Trusting in Wealth (v9-11)

<sup>9</sup> Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass<sup>[c]</sup> he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> 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.

Later, James will have much harsher words for the rich.

Here he focuses solely on the transience of the rich.

Notice that it is not the transience of *wealth* –

but the transience of the *people* who are wealthy.

You are going to die.

And your wealth can do nothing to stop it.

James is not bothered by the fact that they are rich.

As McCartney puts it,

he objects “that they fail to act responsibly with their wealth  
and even oppress the poor.

It is because economic and social responsibility is indispensable to faith (2:15-16)  
that James is concerned with such responsibilities.

James is interested in the genuineness of his readers’ faith.

Thus, although the community may have had both rich and poor in it,

James is concerned not with the political dimensions of social justice,  
but with a sense of familial connectedness in the church

and the believers’ active compassion for those who suffer.

Economic poverty, or wealth for that matter,

is viewed as another ‘test’ for the Christian,

an opportunity to demonstrate faith

by being ever cognizant of the eschatological reversal found in the gospel.” (295)

In the life of faith,

the lowly brother will boast in his exaltation –

he will boast in the Lord – how Jesus has made him an heir of the Kingdom!

And the wealthy brother will boast in his humiliation –

he will boast in the Lord – how Jesus has made him the equal of the poor!

(since it is the *poor* who will inherit the earth!)

And that is the “eschatological reversal” of the gospel.

In our day – as much as in James’ day –

it is easy to see wealth and success as a sign of God’s favor.

You see a wealthy Christian, and it is easy to say, “Wow, God has blessed him!”

But James calls us to question that attitude.

After all, he says in 2:5 – “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world

to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom,  
which he has promised to those who love him?" (2:5)

After all, Jesus was the one who set aside the riches of heaven  
to become poor – to become one of us!

The only way that you can gain the riches of the kingdom  
is by losing everything in this life!  
For some, that may mean doing exactly what Jesus told the rich young ruler to do:  
“sell all that you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me.”  
For others that will mean using your wealth in the service of the kingdom.  
But no one will be able to keep their wealth!  
“So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.”

It's not that your *wealth* will fade away.  
*You* will fade away.  
One day – you will die.  
Your car will still be there in the driveway.  
Other people will go on living in your house!

But *you* will fade away.

There *is no way*  
to avoid that day of reckoning!

But, whether rich or poor:

### **3. The Blessing of the Steadfast: The Crown of Life (v12)**

<sup>12</sup> *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.*

Verse 12 brings us back around to the opening theme of verses 2-3.

It shows us how this first section of chapter 1 fits together.

What are some of the trials that we face?

We lack wisdom.

We don't know what to do – we don't know what to say.

And in that trial – we need to learn to trust God –

to ask him *in faith* – not standing in judgment on God's promises,

but *trusting* God's promises –

that he *will* give generously to all – because God does *not* discriminate!

And we face trials with respect to our material possessions.

It is so easy to trust in our stuff.

Why ask God for wisdom, when you can just buy everything you need or want?!

So the lack of wealth is a form of testing.

Will you trust God in the midst of poverty and suffering?  
But also the transience of wealth is a form of testing.  
How do you think about your wealth in the face of death?

But in whatever form your testing comes –  
in whatever trials you have been tested –

James pronounces a blessing on the one 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.”

Older translations sometimes rendered this “happy is the man” –  
but nowadays, “happiness” has become a much more flimsy term.

We don’t use the word “blessed” very much in modern English –  
except in religious settings.

In the scriptures, a blessing is not particularly focused on the present – but on the future.

You see this not only in the blessings of the patriarchs –  
but also in the benedictions at the end of many NT epistles!

The blessed man is the one who endures to the end.

Yes, there are benefits in this life!

We begin – even now – to taste the heavenly gift!

But the blessed hope of the believer

is not found in this life!

We look for the crown of life –

which God has promised to those who love him.

If you are trying to find a hope *in this life* that will sustain you –  
you are doomed to fail!

You will be *double-minded* – tossed by the wind – unstable in all your ways.

The crown of life is the eschatological reward for those who endure to the end.

So why should you choose to rejoice in the face of trials?

Because you see what God is doing.

It’s not that you enjoy the trials!

It’s that you *know* that the testing of your faith

is designed to produce steadfastness – endurance –

the very thing that you need in order to *make it through to the end!*