

James: A Faith That Works

The Christian and Trials: James 1:1-8

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Introduction. We begin a new sermon series today on the book of James, with the title “A Faith That Works”

The book of James is one of the so-called “General Epistles” of the NT, since it was written to the church at large rather than to any particular congregation, as most of Paul’s Epistles are. It also has a very different feel to it than do Paul’s letters; one commentator described it as a set of sermon notes, and it does indeed emphasize the practical and ethical side of Christianity. This makes it a highly relevant book for our times, as the evangelical Christian church (and here I am referring primarily to the evangelical church in the USA) is fast becoming obsessed with style rather than substance. The distinguished Christian thinker Os Guinness, who spoke at the Veritas Forum here at VT a few years ago, states bluntly “The Christian faith contributed to the rise of the modern world, but the Christian faith has been undermined by the modern world it helped create. The Christian faith thus becomes its own gravedigger.” (Os Guinness, “The Last Christian on Earth”). He goes on to say that the Christian faith is now captive to the very world it helped create, and that the evangelical church is second only to the liberal protestant denominations in its accommodation to the world. If this is true, and if the poison of accommodation to the world really has infected the evangelical church as Os Guinness believes, then the Book of James is a fitting antidote, with its emphasis on practical Christian living and its debunking of the high and mighty and of worldly ways of thinking and speaking and acting.

So who wrote the book? James 1:1 simply states

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”

That is clear enough, but which James is being referred to? There are three different men with the name James referred to in the NT.

The first is James son of Zebedee, the brother of John:

Matt 4:21-22

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

This James could not have written the book, because he was martyred by Herod in the early days of the church:

Acts 12:1-2

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

The second candidate is James son of Alphaeus, another of the disciples:

Matt 10:2-4

These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

This James is only mentioned once in the book of Acts, in the list of disciples in Acts 1.

Acts 1:12-14

When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

Since this James is not mentioned again, and since the epistle of James clearly was written by a person of authority within the church, most scholars agree that James son of Alphaeus was probably not the author. The third James mentioned in the NT is James the brother of Jesus. James is referred to in Matthew 13:54-55

Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?"

Before Jesus resurrection it appears that James did not believe in him:

John 7:3-5

Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do...." For even his own brothers did not believe in him.

But after his resurrection James and Jesus other brothers became believers:

Acts 1:12-14

When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present ...all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

It is probable that Jesus made a special post-resurrection appearance to James:

1 Cor 15:3-8

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ...Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This James became one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, so that after Paul's conversion and time of reflection in Arabia, he reports back to both Peter and James in Jerusalem:

Gal 1:18-20

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles-only James, the Lord's brother.

And it was James who made the key decision in the Council of Jerusalem, where the question of how Gentiles should be welcomed into the church was resolved:

Acts 15:12-19

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me.....It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

And he was the person Paul made a point of greeting at the end of his third missionary journey:

Acts 21:17-19

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.

So most evangelical scholars agree that the book of James was written by James, the brother of our Lord. He had an excellent reputation in the early church; he was called “camel-knees” because he spent so much time kneeling in prayer that his knees became calloused. This fits with him as the author of the book, which has several references to prayer in it. James was also known as “the Just”, and the book sets out a high standard of righteous conduct, as we shall see.

We do not know when the letter was written, but James was martyred sometime around AD 62, so it must have been written before then. It could have been written as early as 40 AD, but the fact that James mentions rich Christians in chapter 2 and the apparently settled nature of the churches he is writing to suggests a date around AD 60, although we cannot be sure about this.

So to whom is James writing? His opening statement reads simply:

James 1:1

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:*

So he is writing primarily to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the known world, but it also applies fully to those of us who are not Jews, since Paul reminds us:

Gal 3:26-29

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So let us look now at what James has to say.

James 1:1-8

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:
Greetings.*

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

The primary emphasis of this first section is on trials in the Christian life and how to handle them. Trials are never pleasant things to endure, but it seems that they are a necessary part of not just our Christian lives but also of life itself.

From 1991 -1993 a number of scientists sequestered themselves in an artificial environment called Biosphere 2. Inside their self-sustaining community, the Biospherians created a number of mini-environments, including a desert, rain forest, even an ocean. Nearly every weather condition could be simulated except one, wind. Over time, the effects of their windless environment became apparent. A number of acacia trees bent over and even snapped. Without the stress of wind to strengthen the wood, the trunks grew weak and could not hold up their own weight. Without trials and the discipline they bring, we are likely to grow spiritually weak.

In this passage James jumps right in with both feet to tell his readers how to face trials. The key to turning trials into triumph is to obey four imperatives:

1. Consider - 1:2
2. Know - 1:3
3. Finish - 1:4
4. Ask - 1:5-8

Let us look at these four thoughts in order.

1. Consider

James writes:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

This is not exactly what most of us want to hear! We would much rather hear words like “peace be with you” or we are likely to whine and complain when we run into troubles and difficulties on our lives. In this respect we are like the children of Israel in the wilderness; we hanker after the soft life, and we grumble at the difficulties in our paths. But notice that James does not say “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, IF you face trials of many kinds”, but “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, WHENEVER you face trials of many kinds” And this is not just James speaking; Jesus says the same thing:

John 16:33

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

And so do Paul and Barnabas:

Acts 14:21-23

They (Paul and Barnabas) preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

Notice also that the trials that come are “trials of many kinds”. They are many kinds in their nature; some are sickness and other forms of physical suffering, or they can be emotional trials such as the disappointment of failing organic chemistry or more seriously the death or serious illness of a loved one, or the loss of a job. They can even be spiritual trials where we are tempted to doubt God’s goodness.

They can also be “trials of many kinds” in their origin. Some suffering is the result of our own sin, as when the children of Israel forsook God and worshiped the Baals, and God judged them by taking them into captivity. Some suffering is the result of someone else’s sin, as when a person is killed by a drunken driver or when David Metzler and Heidi Childs were shot to death in the Jefferson National Forest last year. And some suffering comes to us because we are Christians: as Paul says

2 Tim 3:12-13 *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted"*

But some suffering cannot be explained in either of these ways, and can only be understood when we realize that we are living in a fallen world which is groaning for the return of Christ.

So James writes *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds."* This is not just a command, but it is a command that was exemplified by the apostles:

Acts 5:41

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

Rom 5:3-4

we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

So step one in handling trials is to adopt a joyful attitude

But how do we do this? James goes on to tell us

2. Know

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you KNOW that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

How do we know this? We know it on the basis of God's word. He has promised us so much; His gift of eternal life through his Son Jesus, his presence with us through His Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of our sins, and the list of God's blessings goes on and on. And so we can also accept his gift of trials as past of his good care and grace towards us.

The key to considering trials with joy lies in knowing that God is in control and that he can and does use trials to strengthen us spiritually, just as fire purifies gold. My wife and I visited a gold mine in South Africa many years ago, where one of the demonstrations was to take an ingot of gold and melt it in an electric furnace, and pour it into a mold. When the gold came out it was a little bit purer than when it went in; the heat had refined away some of the impurities.

There is an old fable that says the gold objected to the heat of the furnace and asked how long it should be expected to endure such heat. The answer was, "As soon as the refiner's purpose is accomplished." "And when will that be?" asked the gold. The answer was, "When the refiner can see his own face in you."

So trials help us to mature; as the sign over the gym door reads "No gain without pain"

And the specific virtue that suffering and trials bring is **perseverance**. Sadly perseverance is not one of the great American virtues; we are a nation that wants instant gratification. So we have instant rice and instant oatmeal and instant text messaging and instant downloads of movies etc. Yesterday in preparing this message I became frustrated at the slowness of the internet; my "instant downloads" were now taking 30 seconds or a minute. What frustration! So we are all affected by this need for the instant results.

Paul also speaks of the benefits of suffering in producing perseverance:

Rom 5:3-5

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we KNOW that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

So although perseverance is not a popular virtue, it is a most necessary one. It is the virtue that enables a wife to care for and continue to love a husband with an incurable disease; it is the virtue that enables a parent to care for a handicapped child with love and affection. It is the virtue that enables a Sunday School teacher to continue serving our Lord and preparing lessons each week when he or she would rather put their feet up and watch TV. And ultimately it is perseverance that enables us to continue walking with our Lord when trials do come. I like Eugene Petersen's title for his book on the Psalms of Ascent "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction"

3. Finish

Jas. 1:4

Perseverance must FINISH its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

This verse again reminds us that there is no “instant perfection” in the Christian life; the process of growth in grace in the Christian life, what the Bible calls sanctification, is just that, a process. Let’s talk about this briefly, to make sure that we are all on the same page here.

There are two major words used to describe our spiritual lives; they are justification and sanctification. Justification takes place when we accept Christ as our Saviour; at that point we are justified and ransomed and healed and restored and forgiven; we have been “made righteous” in God’s sight by the blood of His Son. It is a one-time event; perfect and complete. We are saved and justified by God’s grace alone:

Rom 3:22-25

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:7-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast.

But then the second big word comes into play. Having been justified, having been saved, we are then called to “work out” our salvation; that is, put the new life we now have into practice in all aspects of our lives. This is called sanctification, and it is a continuous process that will not be complete until we enter the presence of the Lord.

Phil 2:12-13

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

So we are also told to “work out” our salvation. Note that this does not mean “work to earn your salvation”, because we cannot do that; the Bible is clear that we contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin that we need to be cleansed from. When Paul tells the Philippians to “work out” their salvation, he is saying that our sanctification, our growth in grace and in our Christian life, is a process, and it is one we need to work at. We do not become mature Christians by some sort of osmosis.

And what James is telling us is that a part of that growth, a part of our sanctification, comes as we endure and learn day by day to trust our Lord through good times and hard times. And we can and must trust Him, because He is our loving heavenly Father, and He knows what is best for us. In fact the trials He brings into our lives are evidence that He loves us:

Heb 12:7-11

For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may

share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

True in my own life; example of non-tenure at SUNY.

Letting perseverance have its perfect work is not easy. It certainly requires wisdom which enables us to see the value of our trials.

4. Ask - 1:5-8

James 1:4-8

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

What is the wisdom spoken of here? It seems that there are two possible interpretations. The first interpretation is that the wisdom referred to is the wisdom to understand the nature of our trials and to persevere through them. This seems to me to be the primary meaning. But there is also a secondary meaning, in which these verses apply to seeking wisdom from God in a general way.

So if we lack wisdom, God has promised to give it generously, and without reproaching us or finding fault with us for making our request. In fact God is pleased when we come to Him to seek wisdom, as the example of Solomon tells us. When God appeared to Solomon in a dream at night, and told Solomon to ask whatever he wanted, Solomon replies in part:

1 Kings 3:8-9 *“So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”* and then we read 1 Kings 3:10 *“The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.”*

Note that what is promised here is wisdom, not knowledge. The spiritual wisdom promised is the ability to make good and God-honoring choices in our lives, and especially the ability to use the trials that God sends into our lives and to turn them into spiritual growth.

This wisdom comes only through believing prayer.

Conclusion

1. The key to turning trials into triumph:

- a. Having the knowledge and perspective that adversity can accomplish much good
- b. Letting the patient enduring of adversity accomplish its work
- c. All the while using the wisdom God gives in answer to prayer to help put it all together

When we do these things, then God promises a wonderful reward:

James 1:12

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.