

Count It All Joy: James 1:1-11
 Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church
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I'm excited this morning to be starting a sermon series through the New Testament book of James. The letter of James is intensely practical. It is "in-your-face" practical Christianity. James gives command after command, giving clear and bold instructions on a variety of real-life issues. Trials, wisdom, favoritism, taming the tongue, quarrels and fights, wealth, prayer. These are all things that James addresses.

Let's start with who wrote this letter.

James – Brother of Jesus, Slave of Jesus (verse 1)

There are a few guys named James in the New Testament, but the one who wrote this letter is the James who was the brother of Jesus, and who ended up being a key leader in the early church. Paul refers to this James as the Lord's brother in Galatians 1:19. But remember, during Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus' own family did not believe in Him. They were skeptical (John 7:5; Mark 3:21). But then Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection. Paul tells us this in 1 Corinthians 15:7. And then James became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church. He spoke at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and participated in sending a letter from that council to the Gentile believers.

We might wonder, though, Why doesn't James mention, here at the beginning of this letter, that he's the brother of Jesus? It would seem that James could have bolstered his authority if he began his letter by identifying himself, saying, "Hey, I'm a brother of Jesus." That was something very unique about him.

Now, just as an aside, can you imagine what it would have been like to grow up in the same home as Jesus? And to have Jesus as your older brother? That could have been really awesome. It also could have been really difficult. I wonder how many times Mary was frustrated with James, and raised her voice a bit and said, "Why can't you be more like your brother? Why can't you be more like Jesus?"

Well, later James came to understand and appreciate who Jesus is and what He had come to accomplish. And here as James begins this letter, he doesn't refer to his *physical* kinship with Jesus. He recognizes that's not the most important thing. What matters most is a person's *spiritual* relationship with Jesus. So James doesn't identify himself as the brother of Jesus. Instead, he says he is "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Your translation might say "servant" or "bond-servant," but the Greek word there is *doulos*, and it means more specifically,

“slave.” James here acknowledges his absolute dependence upon God and Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is his Lord, his Master, and James is the slave. A *doulos* is someone who is owned by his master. Someone who is completely dependent upon the master. James does not presume to have any privilege or status based on being a blood relative of Jesus. Rather, he introduces himself as a slave of Jesus.

Who is James writing to in this letter? He says, “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” I think that’s most likely a reference to early Jewish Christians who had been dispersed because of persecution. The twelve tribes is a way of referring to the Jewish people, and these Jewish believers have been dispersed among nations outside of Palestine. Acts 11:19 records, “Now those who were scattered (that’s the same root word as “Dispersion”) because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch . . .” James writes his letter to these saints who were undergoing hardships and trials and were seeking to remain faithful to the Lord in various ungodly places.

But the letter is not only applicable to those Jewish Christians of the early church. It has application for all of us who make up the church, the people of God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and in every generation. So this will be of great benefit to us, as a church, as we study through this letter over the course of the next several weeks.

Joy in Trials (verses 2-4)

This would have been a very relevant topic for the people who first read this letter. They were under persecution because of their faith, and therefore they were certainly experiencing trials of various kinds. This instruction is also relevant to us in the various trials we face. Maybe there are health problems that you are dealing with, or financial hardships. Maybe you are experiencing trials at work, or maybe your trials are at home. You may have lost a loved one, which can be a very severe trial. In various ways we all meet trials in life.

Notice that the verse does not say, “*if* you meet trials of various kinds.” It says, “*when* you meet trials of various kinds.” Trials are a guarantee. Death, taxes, and trials. You can count on these things!

The command in this verse is a bit shocking. James writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Is that a shocking statement to you? It probably is, because it sounds like some twisted delight in pain and hardship. What does this mean, to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds?

Well, it doesn't mean that we're going to experience nothing but joy when we meet these trials. For the Christian, there ought to be a deep and abiding joy even in the midst of trials, but our response may not be (probably won't be) exclusively joyful. There will be a wide range of emotions, and many of those emotions will be entirely appropriate and healthy. But underneath them all, there should be a deep-seated joy and contentment and peace in the Lord.

I've certainly observed this over the past year in the lives of Barbara and Gary as they've been enduring the trial of Barbara's cancer. I know they're experiencing a roller coaster of emotions, as there is encouraging news from the doctors, and then discouraging news from the doctors. There are ups and downs. There are signs of improvement, and then setbacks. And there are going to be emotional highs and lows that come with that. But I've seen in Barbara and Gary a profound and steady joy in the Lord, a confidence in Him, in His goodness and providence.

What a gift it is, that as believers in Jesus Christ, we can experience this God-given joy even in the midst of intense trials. It's a miracle, isn't it! I hope you can think of examples in your own life, of times when humanly speaking, things are not going very well for you. But deep down, you know that God is at work. And because of that, you have a sense of peace and happiness. The fruit of joy in our lives is an amazing miracle of God.

We know this is a gift of God's grace, because to be joyful in the midst of hard times is completely contrary to our sinful nature. How are we tempted to respond to trials? How does our sinful nature incline us to respond to trials? We might gripe and complain and take out our frustrations on other people. We might plot revenge against someone who wronged us and caused the trial. A very seductive temptation would be to convince ourselves and others that we're strong enough to endure these trials on our own. I don't need God. I don't need help. I'm strong enough and smart enough to get through this myself.

Another response that is also prideful, although it manifests itself very differently, is self-pity. This would be another sinful way to respond to trials, and it's another way of thinking too highly of ourselves. We think, "I'm too good for this. I don't deserve this. This trial should be happening to someone else, but not to me."

This command given to us in Scripture—that we must consider it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds—this command is contrary to our sinful nature. And therefore we need to recognize that we desperately need God's grace to live out this command.

Verse 3 speaks of the testing of your faith. Here we're given a foundation for the command in verse 2. The command in verse 2 is to count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds. Now James grounds that command with the statement in verse 3. And what is the truth of verse 3? "For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." To understand this better I want to look at another place in the New Testament where this word "testing" shows up. It's in 1 Peter 1:7, where Peter writes, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." That phrase translated, "the tested genuineness of your faith," is the same phrase in James 1:3, "the testing of your faith." And the way Peter uses this illustration is helpful for understanding what James is saying. The picture here is the refinement and purification of precious metals. These metals have to go through the fire—they have to be heated to extreme temperatures—in order to get rid of the imperfections and impurities. The process begins with ore: iron ore, gold ore, lead ore. But the ore only becomes valuable if it can be purified. You don't see people wearing jewelry made of gold ore, because it doesn't look very nice. And hopefully you don't find buildings made of iron ore, because it's not very strong. But when the impurities are removed, through fire, then the ore becomes something beautiful, something strong. That's the illustration that Peter and James are both using. Peter argues from the lesser to the greater. He is saying, If gold is so precious, and it has to be tested by fire, how much more precious is the tested genuineness of your faith!

Have you noticed that it's usually in the most difficult times of life that God teaches us the most significant lessons? It's going through the fire that removes the imperfections. It's this testing that produces steadfastness. Encountering various trials is the crucible in which our faith is refined.

I played football for many years, starting in upper elementary school and then middle school and high school and also in college. And there was some intense physical training involved with that. I remember especially in college, we would have some grueling team workouts. Some of our off-season training was the most intense. In addition to our workouts in the weight room, we also had 6am conditioning workouts a couple times a week, which seemed almost impossible for some of the guys. One of my teammates, he would actually go to sleep the night before completely ready to go, even had his shoes on, and tied, so that he could literally just roll out of bed a few minutes before 6am, throw

on a coat, and walk out into the frigid Chicago morning, making his way over to the gym.

In these workouts we were at the mercy of our coach. We entered those workouts with fear and trepidation. We didn't know exactly how long we would be there. We never knew how hard he was going to push us. But it always seemed that he pushed us beyond what we thought we were capable of.

As I look back on those workouts, which I so dreaded at the time, I can see many benefits they brought to me and to our team. In the midst of the workouts, there were times I felt like quitting. I felt like throwing in the towel. I felt like complaining. I may have disliked the coach for putting us through such pain. But over those four years I came to appreciate the benefits of all the training those coaches put us through. It prepared us to compete. It made us faster and stronger, and gave us endurance. It also created an amazing sense of community and camaraderie among the team.

The trials that all of us face in our lives, which are far more intense and weighty than sports training, the various trials we face are things that we would not choose for ourselves. We dread trials, and we're tempted to complain about them. And we may even become angry with God for putting us through trials. But God causes us to go through these trials in order to refine us and make us stronger and give us endurance and draw us closer to Himself and closer to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ask God in Faith (verses 5-8)

Well, moving on to verses 5-8, let's look at our next point, Ask God in Faith. As James begins verse 5 he still has in mind the trials he wrote of in verses 2-4. This is the context of these instructions. When we're in a trial, and we want to count it all joy, and we want to persevere, here's what we need to do. We need to ask God. That's the main exhortation of this next paragraph, verses 5-8. Ask God! Notice the connection between verses 4-5. Verse 4 ends with the phrase "*lacking* in nothing." That's the goal of our steadfastness, that we may be mature Christians, perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. And then verse 5 begins, "If any of you *lacks* wisdom, let him ask God . . ." You see, we are on this journey called the Christian life and we are striving for maturity, completion, wholeness, and yet we come up lacking. And God's Word is now telling us what we should do in our times of trial when we see how we are lacking. We should ask God.

Now, the wisdom spoken of here is not intellectual knowledge. I hope you understand, there are individuals who may have amazing minds and are utterly unwise. Biblical wisdom is not about how smart you are intellectually. It's about how you live your life. It's about righteousness. It's about holiness. It's about

obedience and submission to the Lord. It's much more than head knowledge. It's a righteousness and holiness that will be evident in the way we live our lives.

In the well-known words of Proverbs 3, we're told, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil" (3:5-7). Proverbs also tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9:10), and also that it is the Lord who gives wisdom (2:6). And this is all related to what James is writing, because during trials (and at all times) we need to see that our own understanding of things is not sufficient. We can't be wise in our own eyes. We have to turn to God and have a reverence for Him and look to Him for the wisdom we need.

I remember as a young boy my dad explaining to me Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." I was probably 6-7 at the time. There was a thin mattress that was leaning up against the wall in my bedroom, and my dad said, "Ben, this is what it's like to lean on your own understanding." And then he leaned his weight on the side of that mattress, and he and the mattress crashed to the floor. My dad is a pretty agile guy. He did gymnastics as a young man, and he's still in really good shape. Anyway, as a kid I thought that was hilarious, it was like slapstick comedy, the way he leaned on that and then fell on the floor. I asked him to do it again and again. And, obviously, the illustration has stuck in my mind ever since.

If you lean on your own understanding, on your own wisdom, if you're wise in your own eyes, there's nothing there. There's no foundation. It will all come crashing down. We need to come to the end of ourselves and humble ourselves and ask God for wisdom. And God will grant that request. God will guide us. He is so gracious and generous to do that.

Think of God's generosity. And I want us to ask the question, How is it that God can give us these gifts? How is that He can give generously and without reproach? It's so easy to take this for granted. We might think, "Well, that's just what God does." He's the kind grandfather in the sky who loves to give us what we ask for. And if we're real honest with ourselves, we might admit to feeling like God is *obligated* to give us what we want. But let me tell you, friend, that when we think that way, we are out of touch with reality. Because the only thing we deserve from God is punishment. We don't deserve any good thing from God. We have sinned against Him. We have disobeyed His commands. We have turned away from Him to pursue worldly

pleasures. And we deserve to be punished for our sins. This is why this question is so important. How can God give generously and without reproach? This is not to be taken for granted. God cannot just ignore our sins, and ignore the punishment we deserve.

The only reason God can give generously and without reproach is because 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ bled and died on a rugged wooden cross. He suffered under the punishment that we deserve. He was blameless, sinless, perfect. Unlike us, Jesus didn't deserve punishment. He deserved God's good gifts. But He died in our place. And for those who love Christ, our punishment is already paid, and in Christ we can receive these many blessings from God. Not because we deserve them, but because Jesus Christ deserves them. Therefore when you think of God's gifts, think of the cross.

These verses also give us a picture of the one who doubts, and there's a warning not to be double-minded. For the person who is not looking to God in faith, but rather is doubting, there's no anchor. No rudder. Nothing to keep this person on course. He or she is driven and tossed by the wind. It makes me think of a time years ago when I had an opportunity to go jet skiing out along the coast of Florida. We started out in a bay where the water was calm. We saw some dolphins swimming alongside us, which was really cool. But then we headed out into the open sea, and we were jumping the waves, which were pretty big that day. I remember there being some consideration of whether we should go out there at all, due to the conditions on the water that day. Well, then one of our jet skis lost power. I forget if it ran out of gas, or malfunctioned in some way. But it was being pushed by the waves closer and closer to the huge rocks at the shore. Our friends had to throw a rope and pull us, slowly, away from danger and eventually back into the calm water. That was not a good feeling. And it's not a good thing to go through life without an anchor and without power to resist the wind and the waves that want to push us around and threaten to destroy us. That's what happens in the life of the doubter. There's a lack of an internal moral compass. And without that, the doubter is susceptible to every wind and wave.

This verse is not so much talking about intellectual doubts that a person might have concerning the claims of Christianity. The problem here is a moral one. It's an issue of trusting that God will do what He has promised to do. And it's an issue of obeying what God has commanded us to do. So, like wisdom, this is not so much a matter of the intellect. Rather, it's a matter of faith and obedience. The one who asks God for wisdom in the midst of a trial, and asks in faith, will be given the faith and perseverance to grow through that trial. But the one who doubts will be driven and

tossed by the wind, and he shouldn't suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

We could think of verses 6-8 in contrast to verse 4. They're like two sides of the same coin. Verse 4 is stated positively, the command to be steadfast. And then in verses 6-8 there's a warning against doubting, which is the opposite of faithful steadfastness. James describes this in a unique way in verse 8, "he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." This is a word that James probably coined himself. It's only found in one other place, and that's in James 4:8, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." This word that James created is literally "double-souled." It's the picture of having two souls, and being divided between them. And I think this is explained pretty clearly in the rebuke of chapter 4:4, where James writes, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." This is the double-souled person. The double-minded doubter. The one who wants to be a friend of the world and a friend of God. Well, you can't have it both ways!

We recognize there's some level of double-mindedness that exists within every one of us. We still live in a sinful world, and we're still tempted by sin. We need to fight against those temptations. We need to let steadfastness have its full effect, and as we ask for wisdom we must ask for it in faith. This is a struggle that we all face. Therefore this warning should be an incentive to all of us in the fight of faith.

At the same time I think there is also a very stern warning here for those who are fundamentally divided between their allegiance to God and their allegiance to the things of this world. I want you to consider this morning if that may be you. It could be that you are the double-minded doubter who is driven and tossed by the wind. And if you are in that condition, this text says, you must not suppose that you will receive anything from the Lord. That's not a good way to live. And I wonder if some of you are recognizing right now that's describing how you've been living your life.

There was certainly a time in my life, during my teen years, that I would describe myself during that season as being double-minded. I was involved in the church youth group, listening to Bible lessons, attending worship services and hearing sermons. That was the Sunday "Ben" and the Wednesday night youth group "Ben." But then there was often a different "Ben," I'm ashamed to say, who would go out on Friday and Saturday nights, doing things I knew I shouldn't be doing.

What a relief it was, and what a joy it was, when by God's grace, He convicted me of that double-mindedness and brought me to a place of wanting to be whole-heartedly devoted to Him. Of course we all still have our struggles, and we continue to feel tugged in different directions. But I hope today, if you're sensing that you're fundamentally divided in your life, in your heart, in your soul . . . I pray that the Spirit will do a work in you today that will cause you to repent of that double-mindedness and that you will look to Jesus in faith, trusting Him for the forgiveness of your sins. And I pray you will experience the excitement of following Him wholeheartedly.

Eternity Is the Great Equalizer (verses 9-11)

Moving now to our final point, and the remaining verses we'll cover today. Eternity is the great equalizer. When we look at ourselves and others in light of eternity, we all stand on level ground. The world may think more highly of those who are wealthy, those who have powerful jobs, those who are well-educated, those who live in nice homes. But eternity is the great equalizer. Because in eternity we won't be comparing salaries, or careers, or education, or houses. Each one of us will either be in heaven basking in the wondrous glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, or suffering the eternal punishment of hell. That is our eternal destiny—heaven or hell. And in eternity it won't matter whether we were wealthy or poor, whether we had a high-powered career or not, whether had a good education or no education, whether we had a nice house or no house. None of that will matter.

The challenge for us in this life and in this world is to have an eternal perspective in the midst of the here-and-now. This is part of becoming a mature Christian who is steadfast and not double-minded. We need to view things in the way God views things—not in the way our culture views things.

These statements are contrary to our common perceptions, and they show how the kingdom of God is totally opposite to the kingdom of man. The world tells the rich person to boast in his exaltation and the poor to grovel in their humiliation. But God's Word tells the poor brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich to boast in his humiliation. God's kingdom is upside-down according to the world. It would be better to say the world is upside-down according to reality.

James is communicating a very similar message to both groups, but he's telling each group specifically what they need to hear. He's saying to the poor Christian, "Don't be depressed because you are poor in this life. Instead, rejoice because you are rich. You have an inheritance in Christ that is more valuable than

all the money in the world.” And James is saying to the Christian who is materially wealthy, “Don’t think that your earthly riches make you more important than anyone else. Don’t boast in your money. It’s not going to last. Instead, boast in your lowly position. Boast in the fact that you are a hell-deserving sinner whom Jesus Christ saved by His grace.”

James is telling both groups of people to focus on eternity. Eternity is what gives rich and poor alike an appropriate perspective on earthly riches. Whether you have money or not, look to eternity. Look to what matters. Look to what is truly important. And then live accordingly.

Verses 10-11 give us a vivid illustration of the brevity of life, and the fleeting nature of earthly riches. “like a flower of the grass he will pass away.” Your life on this earth will end. You’re not going to be here forever! This life is passing away. And then verse 11 continues the illustration even more vividly. “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.” I think at the end here he’s making a general statement about wealth. If you are pursuing riches, you need to realize that earthly possessions are fading so quickly. Don’t be blinded by the material things of this world. Don’t let them blind you to the things that really matter! It’s so easy to inflate in our minds the value of all the material things around us. But it’s going to be gone so fast.

This is why we need to spend time regularly in God’s Word. This is why we need to look to the cross, focus our attention on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to keep perspective. Things can look very different depending on how you’re looking at it.

I think of how you can stand at Station Square and look up at the buildings downtown. And from that vantage point, there are 2 or 3 buildings that you might assume are taller than the US Steel Tower. But then you go up to Mt. Washington, or better yet, you go right up here to the West End / Elliott Overlook, and you get a different perspective. Things are not always as they appear.

That’s the lesson that we need to learn from these verses. Don’t view wealth from the perspective of the here-and-now. That view is deceiving. It’s false. And it will lead you astray. You have to view wealth through the perspective of eternity. And when you do that, whether rich or poor, you will find true satisfaction in Christ and you will glorify Christ with your life.

It glorifies Christ when there are poor Christians who feel like they lack nothing, because of the joy they have in Him. It also glorifies Christ when wealthy Christians see that the pleasures and

prestige of money are fleeting, and that Christ's kingdom is forever.

This morning we've talked about trials, about wisdom, about poverty and wealth. All of these are themes that will come up again in the letter of James. Let's pray that God will continue to teach us and grow us in the weeks to come as we study this portion of Scripture together.

Discussion Questions

- 1) James was the brother of Jesus. Imagine what it would have been like growing up in the same home as Jesus. How did James and the other siblings view Jesus during His earthly ministry? See John 7:5; Mark 3:21.
- 2) After the resurrection, James came to believe, and he became a key leader in the early church. See 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 15:12-21. Would it have been more fitting for James to describe himself as "brother of Jesus"? Notice that, instead, he introduces himself as "slave/servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." What can we learn and apply from this?
- 3) Reflect on personal times of suffering you've experienced, in the past or present. What have you learned from these experiences? How is it possible to have joy in the midst of trials?
- 4) In what ways do trials expose our need for wisdom? What do we learn about God in verse 5? What are some means of grace that can help us avoid being double-minded?
- 5) Reflect on the counter-intuitive statements of verses 9-11. How does this highlight the radical difference between an earthly perspective and an eternal perspective? How should these truths practically impact the way we think about money and the way we use our money?