

The Letter of James
Week 1 Trials, Temptations and Growth
James 1:1-4; 12-15
September 2, 2018

We are going to spend the next several weeks walking through the *Letter of James*.

Let me tell you why it is important to pay attention to this:

First, these are some of first words written by a Christian community, years before the gospels were written.

And not just any early community, but the Jerusalem church which James led alongside the disciple Peter.

Uncontaminated by later church dogma, this letter was addressed to all the new churches springing up around the Mediterranean and Asia.

James 1:1 *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:*

Second, it summarizes the teachings of a universally respected founder and leader of the Jesus movement.

Why was James so well-known and respected?

Because he was the oldest of Jesus' four brothers and an unknown number of sisters.

So, reading this letter is like chatting with someone who knew Jesus from the time he was a child, who shared daily games, chores and meals with Jesus ... we don't have anything else like this in scripture.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 15 says that the Resurrected Jesus specifically appeared to James, an appearance that likely got James on board with the Jesus movement.

Remember, during his lifetime, James was at odds with his brother's claim be the Son of Man.

Some scholars think that the writing itself may have been done by someone with more formal training in Greek than James from Galilee, but nonetheless, it represents the teaching of Jesus' brother.

And one more reason to pay close attention to this letter is that it is very practical and down-to-earth: It's our earliest "how to" guide for daily life as a Christian.

James spends very little time "theologizing" – he offers no Christology, no theories about why Jesus had to die, no hypothesizing about heaven and hell.

Rather, it is like he is saying to us, "Look. I know Jesus ... I grew up with him, and I am now experiencing a community filled with his spiritual presence, so let me share what I've learned about how to live with integrity, godly wisdom, and joy.

Let's get started by looking at the recurring themes - the building blocks – of James' teaching.

Number one, God alone is the provider of all good and perfect gifts.

James 1:17 *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights,*

He repeatedly says, Don't be fooled by promises of worldly gifts.

Number two, prayer is our essential connection to God.

James became known as "camel knees" because he'd developed so many knots on his knees from hours of prayer.

James 5:13 *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.*

Number three, you can depend on God because He never wavers, always cares, and always provides.

He concludes verse 17 (*God*) *does not change like shifting shadows.*

Number four, the universe is divided into competing realms.

God's Realm is under constant attack by the realm of the world with its alluring promises that lead us away from God's design for His creation.

God will guide you to choose where to place your allegiance, but warns that the devil himself will always try to seduce you away from God.

James 4:7 *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

Number five, it's not enough to receive God's help and blessings – we are to carry those blessings into the world.

Faith and works go hand-in-hand.

James 2: 26 *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.*

Surprisingly, this later became a contentious issue as some leaders feared that people would think they could be saved just by their good works.

Martin Luther went so far as to advocate removing the Letter of James from the Bible.

Number six, there is no middle ground: we are either friends of God, or friends of the world ... and we cannot be double-minded and have divided loyalties.

The double minded, he writes, have little power in prayer, and project discord onto their families and communities.

He told members of these earliest churches that they couldn't just go to worship on the Sabbath and then go back to life as usual on Monday.

James 3:11 *Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?*

Number seven, consistency and patience are the hallmarks of spiritual maturity.

James 1:12 *Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life.*

What a contrast that is to people who live as spiritual yoyos.

They are up or down depending on the circumstances of the day.

Something that feels good comes along and they're all, "Praise the Lord! Thank you, Jesus."

Something that feels bad comes along, and they're all, "God has really let me down this time".

And let's be clear: James wasn't living in a safe, secluded monastery.

He was under constant pressure and attack.

In fact, within a couple of years of writing this letter he was martyred by Jewish leaders who threw him from the roof of the Temple and then stoned him.

Turning to the text now, in just the second verse, James jumps right into the question of what to do with the trials and temptations that inevitably crop up.

He's seen many followers derailed from their faith by problems or hardships, old hurts, habits or hang-ups and discouragement.

But James insists that God will use all these things for our good and growth as long as we are patient and faithful.

James clarifies the differences between trials and temptations

Trials

James 1:2-4 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

First, notice that James wrote *when you face trials*.

He didn't say "if" you face trials, but "when" you face trials.

And see that he said, trials of any sort – so, he's including whatever you are going through right now.

So, you go to church, you're doing your best to live an upright life when your doctor frowns at the x-ray, your boss hands you a pink slip, your credit card is maxed out because of an unexpected roof repair, or your mate says there's someone else.

James may say that God can use hard things for my good, but honestly, when I get bad news, my first reaction is usually not to see it as a gift.

For the most part I've moved beyond the "catastrophizing" I used to do, but I'm not yet fully where I need to be.

Each of us has particular trials that panic us.

For you, it might be money, or maybe feeling rejected, or worries about your children.

That's natural, but James says hold on, be patient, give God a chance to do His work.

It's hard to be patient when life turns against you.

Maybe you wonder why God won't just make your problem disappear.

I was in our back yard the other day when I noticed a cluster of mushrooms had sprouted up.

Have you noticed?

Mushrooms spring up overnight.

But they are fragile.

I effortlessly picked them up and tossed them in the trash.

But we also have trees that are so strong and deeply rooted that they have stood for decades, and are still growing.

God wants you to be like a deeply rooted tree, not a fragile mushroom – and that takes time.

While preparing for today's message, I started down a rabbit hole of scientific studies that relate faith to resilience.

Study after study shows how faith helps us survive and thrive through tough times, like divorce, loss of a loved one, and job loss.

One study from the University of Birmingham, England dissected how faith helps us.

First, it says, faith helps us makes sense of hardship because we see the big picture.

It's not all about us, it's not all about this temporary setback.

Through faith we see that God wants to use this experience for our growth.

God is more concerned about our character than our comfort.

A raw opal often starts out looking like a rough piece of sandstone, but as the hands of a craftsman work the surface with abrasives and polishing rags, he smooths the stone until a deep, multi-color luster emerges.

Second, the study shows, we are able to see how God is assisting us through the tough experience.

We aren't alone.

The more our faith grows, the more we trust God's presence, the more we see opportunities and help that we'd otherwise miss.

And third, faith allows us to look back with gratitude for what the experience contributed to our life.

Even in the midst of his own difficulties, James insisted that temporary pain would lead to his greater good.

If God needs to teach you how to forgive ... He may use a hurtful experience, like a betrayal.

Maybe God needs to teach you how to love ... so, He places someone in your life who requires your sacrifice and patience.

Or maybe God needs to teach you how to rely on prayer, so He'll remove all the ways of coping you've trusted before.

Temptations

Trials come from outside – the stuff of life.

James says temptations come from within our own heads, sometimes egged-on by the devil.

James 1:14-15 ... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

And the devil plays with our head.

Like Job's wife, he'll tempt us to curse God.

He'll tempt us to return to old unhealthy attitudes and behaviors that we thought we had outgrown ... in other words, he will try to derail us from what God is trying to do for our good.

But remember, temptation is not sin.

How you respond to temptation can be sinful - but temptations are just thoughts.

Have you ever had angry, lustful, even violent thoughts just pop into your mind?

You go, "Whoa, that's disgusting, where did that come from?"

Everyone is tempted by an array of sins.

1 Corinthians 10:13a No temptation has seized you except what is common to everyone.

You can pray and read your bible every day, and go to church for forty years and still be tempted.

Even Jesus was tempted.

Hebrews 4:15 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.*

Jesus has been there, so he understands.

Temptations are just thoughts, but you choose whether to act on them.

As we mature in faith, we experience how God can walk us beyond our temptations.

1 Corinthians 10:13 continues *And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

Temptations particularly come in times of stress.

You might be tempted to play the victim role, to blame others when you slip, or numb the pain.

Maybe you've known an addict who is thirty or forty years old but who has the emotional maturity of a teenager.

That's because they've numbed away decades of growth and wisdom.

So, look, trials and temptations will come – we just choose whether to bring God into the picture, trusting that ...

James 1:3-4 *testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

In 1979 the tugboat *Cahaba* was headed down the Tombigbee River in Alabama.

The current was flowing fast as it approached a draw bridge that did not have time to lift open.

The pilot put 1800 horsepower twin engines into reverse to get away, but the boat was pulled sideways and slammed into the bridge.

The current was so strong that it pulled the boat down under the water.

To the astonishment of onlookers, it passed under the bridge fully submerged but then popped out of the water like a cork, upright, with the engines still going and the pilot at the wheel, on the other side of the bridge.

Why did it come back to the surface in an upright position?

Because it was ballasted with a three-foot thick lining of cement on the bottom of the hull.

It strikes me as a vivid reminder that life can often go horribly wrong, but if we have the right “ballast” – our faith in Christ – then we can get through it and emerge upright on the other side.