

...patience

James 1:1-4

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James 1:1-4

1 James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings. 2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have [its] perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

The book of James was written to a group of believers who were apparently able to talk the talk, but failed when it came to walking the walk. That scenario requires very little stretching of our imaginations. Few in our day will rise to the defense of James or this letter in particular. For the position of James is essentially “put up or shut up.” Few among us will plant our feet on the issue of actually living like Jesus, responding to the power and dynamic of the gospel and manifesting our love for Him in our lives and in the mission that God has called us to. In fact, taking a stand here can get pretty heated. Immediately come the cries of “legalist,” “archaic,” and “old-school.” Yet one cannot ignore that God saw to it that this letter appears in our Scriptures! Yes indeed, the balance in this issue is critical. When we sway too far to the left or to the right, we lose both the spiritual power that the gospel provides, as well as the heavenly framework God intended.

The position James takes here in this letter is that if we *are indeed reborn* by the manifest power of Jesus Christ, our lives will reflect it. A car that has engaged a telephone pole will always look like it. Its *outside* will clearly speak concerning its *inside*. Examples of this truth are too numerous to even begin listing! Why then should our lives not clearly say “Christian” after a profound “head-on” meeting with the Creator of the universe? Will not everything change? Won’t every aspect of our passions, our use of time, and our priorities be profoundly affected?

The beginning of our understanding of all this is the grasp that salvation is not the redemption of the old you, as in some sort of rehabilitation. Salvation is in fact the *death* of the old you with all of its wants, its plans, its appearances, and the birth of a new you. It’s here ...right out of the gate, that many are immediately lost. Our redemption, if factual, is not a *renovation* but an actual *destruction and a rebuild* that makes you look and live very differently!

This book is written by James, the brother of Jesus. Can you imagine? How hard would *that* have been! To find out your brother is actually the Son of God and the Salvation of the world! Ironically, there are folks ...aka most Catholics, who will try to tell you that Jesus did not have brothers and sisters (hence the perpetual virginity of Mary.) But the gospel accounts bear witness: Matthew 12:47 and Matthew 13:55-56 are a couple of examples. However, James apparently spent most of Jesus’ life in the unbelieving camp (note John 7:5). What changed his mind? Most commentators believe it was the resurrection. Nothing like having your brother die and

then come back from the dead to sway your opinion of Him! James, in fact, went on to become one of Jesus' greatest backers and is even believed to have led the church in Jerusalem. Paul records having hung out with James at the churches' first "pastor's conference" in Acts 15.

But again, few books have brought more heat and debate within the greater church than this one. Luther once remarked that, "St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." I am bold enough to say factually that Luther then missed the point of the gospel. He apparently, *like many today*, was so lost in the narrow event of the cross and our gift of salvation that he effectively missed the gospel.

The fact is, any pastor or church that actually pushes holy living and sacrificial service within the realm of grace is absolutely going to run up against distracters and critics. But the fact remains that God was sure to include in His timeless Scripture both the clear teaching of His grace as well as instruction in practical sanctification, holiness, good works, and Kingdom service. Thus it would be an error, if not downright false teaching, for me as a pastor to operate and direct this church in anything short of both aspects of faith.

While the book of James is found toward the end of the New Testament, it is actually very near the beginning of events. In fact, it may have been one of the first, ...if not *the first book* of the New Testament to be penned. I bring this up because the natural and popular position is that James was answering and countering Paul's writings, especially those of grace and freedom in terms of Galatians and Romans. But the fact is, James was not answering Paul and his writings as he wrote this letter. No, he was *first*, with all of his daunting calls to purity of life and works of "applied Christianity."

This letter begins ironically, with overt humility. Many of us would actually feel better if James...right out of the gate, came from a position of pride and arrogance. It would be easier to hear the writer as cocky and elitist. But right off the bat, he says, "Hi, I'm James and I'm a servant [the real word actually means slave], a *slave* of Jesus Christ." Seriously? A *slave*? That just doesn't sit well with the frail sensibilities of modern society. Men want to come to God "with their boots on," *eye to eye*, so to speak. On our knees is just the stuff of movies, not real life!

What are the ramifications of embracing such a label? Well, there is the aspect of no pay, or no *regular* pay, anyway! Also, such is a relationship of absolute obedience, total surrender, and complete loyalty. In an attempt to gain some "street cred," James could have claimed the status of "brother of Jesus," or perhaps, "leader of the church of Jerusalem." But he chose rather the *status* of ...and the *label* of ...a **slave**.

How is this possible for James, and how can it be possible for us? The answer is here in verse one. In Christ, are you an employee or are you a slave? Are you into this whole Jesus thing for something... for some sort of payback? Or are you simply in the game now to bring glory to Jesus, to advance His church and Kingdom, to worship God, and to serve the Master? What if He never gives you another thing in your lifetime after the gift of eternal life? Can you say as Job did, "*Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him?*"

Note the language...the use of the word "Lord." James didn't use the term boss, employer, or buddy, not even Creator or Savior. Of all the titles He could have used here, He chose the specific moniker of "Lord." This tells us the honest relationship he had with Jesus. How often we are so quick to use the term "Lord" without knowing what it really means. The word "Lord" means master, and thus it implies full obedience. Are you apt to say "no" and call Him "Lord" in the same sentence? If we could honestly see Jesus as Lord, we would not, we *will not*, have any problem accepting and even embracing where this letter goes as we move on through the chapters.

But in truth this letter actually makes many of us very uncomfortable. I'm willing to bet that this journey through James will have us at times leaving some services and not feeling too good about ourselves. I have to believe that is the point. Because frankly, too many of us feel too good about ourselves now. We have accepted salvation. We think we are pretty good people. We think because we say we love Jesus and we go to church and maybe even serve some around here, that such makes us fine Christians. Maybe. Depending upon your definition. But does it make you a slave?

The book of James forces us to examine the relationship between faith and works. Contrary to some folks' oft knee-jerk reaction to James, the focus is on more than just works. James uses the word "faith" 14 times in this book! It's not faith *or* works. It's about a faith that gives birth and motivation to our works. However, the two cannot be separated. If you attempt it, then you are emasculating the gospel. You are messing with the very gospel of Jesus Christ, IE "sacred ground," rendering it powerless to change or motivate.

One of the first things that James deals with, *and we will no doubt acknowledge it in our own lives*, is that even when we want to exercise the works of God, we are often deterred *or perhaps feel justified in not pursuing such* because of our own trials, difficulties, and burdens. Yet check this out: James throws down in the second verse of his letter saying, "*Count it all joy when you face all your trials.*"

Can you imagine taking that position when counseling someone who is really under it? An individual who is dealing with a heavy burden and testing and you just say, "Hey! Just smile and be happy, man!" That would go over well, don't you think? I mean, is James really serious? How does that work? What in the world does this mean? Who would say that? What kind of person would say, "*Hey, bro, I know the wheels are falling off right now, I know life is tragic for you, but be joyous. This is the sweetest time in your life. Just embrace it*"?

I wish that our thinking on this matter could be adjusted with a tweak or a nudge. We like that kind of theology, don't we? It would be lovely to come to a church service and receive guidance on how we can tune our lives slightly one direction or another to gain that needed clarity and smooth the ride of our life's journey. But I am afraid that is not reality. The fact is, the reason the direction here in James is so alien and so distant to our thinking is that, for many of us, nothing short of a complete overhaul to both our thinking and our living will encompass it. Because while we may reject the popular, *albeit blasphemous*, "prosperity doctrine" that is being sold in many churches today, we still tend to hold to a "prosperity light" ...that which essentially says that if we are "good Christians" and live right and moral lives, that good things will happen to us. Many of us think that is what the gospel teaches. I am sorry to say that this just isn't true. Tell that to the desperately poor Indian Christian or the severely persecuted Iranian believer! And further, if you insist on holding to that principle, there will inevitably come a day where you will stand at a stark crossroads in your life. A crossroads where many, many such believers turn away from their church, their community, and often from God too.

The recipients of this letter were likely impoverished, blue-collar Christians who were being beaten up by a new reality in their lives. They were having to deal with not only trials and persecutions, but the new clarity of just what this Christian thing was going to cost them. Because this was such a new baby church at that time, many of these were brand new believers, new converts to Christianity, probably very immature in a lot of ways in their faith. They apparently had been blindsided by the difficult time they're having in living this Christian thing out. Life was getting difficult, and they were no doubt wondering what the deal was. They were discovering the Christian life wasn't as easy as they thought it was going to be...that following Jesus Christ was costing them more than they had realized.

So they, *like many of us*, began to think to themselves, "Man, I don't get this. I'm a Christian now. I'm following Jesus Christ, the One who's sovereign over everything, and now all of a sudden my whole world seems to be turning upside down." In the midst of a trial, you and I begin to suffer the same temptation wherein we think, *"Man, this thing is so difficult. Maybe God has forgotten about me. Maybe God doesn't love me as much as I thought He did. Maybe I've done something wrong and God is judging me because I've done something and He has brought this upon me as this affliction. I know all these other people out here who don't follow Jesus Christ and they seem to be flourishing. Here I am following Christ, and the wheels of life are falling off right now."*

My mind can think of many examples of this, but one in particular. I remember a young man of great spiritual promise and natural potential. His life in Christ was clicking along splendidly when he came to that crossroads. I will never forget some of the last words I remember him saying before he left the church, and from what I understand, turned his back on God completely. He said, *"It's not supposed to be this way. This isn't what I planned."* Despite appearances, he manifested that he had a wholesale misunderstanding of faith and Christianity, and in the end, he 'walked.' Such stories are so numerous they cannot be counted. That is why it is absolutely essential that this fellowship and this pastor teaches clearly what the gospel really means, what living in faith really encompasses, and what being a Christian really costs.

Look at verse two. The first thing he says is, *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds."* Notice, *first of all*, what he didn't say, "Count it all joy, my brothers, IF you meet various trials." What does he say? WHEN. The idea of trials in a Christian's life, ...*the idea of trials in anybody's life*, ...is that they are a required course in God's economy. They are **going** to come. It's **going** to happen. James shows us none of us can escape a life of testing, a life of trial. Notice again the word "various" there. It's a word that means "plentiful," meaning trials won't just be "one and done." It's not as if you just have this one trial and then your hope is, *"...now everything is going to be easier."* You're going to have all sorts of trials, a variety of trials, an abundance of them. How many single people around here have the idea, "I just cannot wait until I get married because then life will be so much easier." Yeah, marriage will resolve everything. And hey, if it doesn't, there's always parenthood! Some translations say, "When you encounter trials." The Greek word literally means to walk into, meaning you don't have to go looking for it. You're just going to walk right into it. Trials are out there, they are waiting for you. In fact, sometimes it seems they will hunt you down.

So how are we to receive passages like this? Are we seriously to get giddy about trials and hard times? Are we to adopt a weird masochistic position, being happy about our pain? NO. That's not what is being presented here. Notice the imperative in verse two. It doesn't say, "Act joyous in the moment you encounter trials," but rather, "Count it as joy." Some translations say, "Consider it as joy." What James isn't doing here is dismissing the emotion of trials. He's not telling you when trials come you just need to put on a smile and say, "Sweet!" He's not dismissing the emotion. This isn't mind over matter. He's not dismissing your grief and pain. What we need to grasp is our purpose as believers post-salvation. What is God's purpose for us? We know we are called to worship, to give and bring glory to God. How is that done? God's purpose for all of us is to continually mature in the faith, to grow up in understanding and our grasp of the adult aspects of our calling. Our text says, *"...that you may be perfect [or mature] and complete, lacking nothing."*

But the fact is, that is rarely our thinking when dealing with trials. Our thinking is to get out of the trial as fast as we can. To fix what's broken at any cost in order to relieve ourselves of the pain and discomfort. If that is our goal, then we are going to have a very difficult journey. Because let's face it, life doesn't roll that way. Things, so often, do not work out smoothly. Situations do not end to our advantage. Sometimes we do not come out the other side in glorious emancipation. And even if we did, there is sure to be another thing waiting around the next corner to hit us again, and the process starts all over.

So how are we to think? We, as Christians, must have a different perspective than the rest of the unbelieving world. We have to calculate. We need to consider. We need to see what is happening to us through a completely different lens. It's viewing this trial through a different lens than the rest of the world. It's having a theological view of our hardship that doesn't allow our minds to fall to hopelessness and despair, ...to assume that there's no way out.

I wonder how different things would be if, *in the trials*, we remembered that we are slaves to the Master, Jesus, knowing that He is in control of even the *elements of* and the *issues of* the trial we are under. If we took the position of, "*I want to know You in this process.*" For our trials can be a joy when God is our goal, when our heart is, "Good or bad, hard or easy, I want to know You, God, even more and experience You more fully."

Back in Hebrews 12, we saw that Jesus not only taught such a message, he lived that message. Hebrews 12:2 says, "...[look] unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

One of the grand questions of our walk in Christ is: *How will our faith react under trial?* In such periods of testing, certain elements of our relationship with God are made manifest. Without them, we would never see the truth of who and what we are, and further, what our real goals are as believers. Are they God-centered, in pursuit of his glory? Through these life battles, we truly find out not just what we are made of, but even more, what God is made of (1Pet 1:5-7)!

In verse three, the text says, "Knowing this" which is the Greek word "gnosko," meaning a "coming to know through experience." Corrie ten Boom once stated, "You will never know that God is all you need until God is all you have." The fact is, without trials coming into your life, you will never really know God. We would only ever grasp a candy-coated Santa Claus Jesus. That is, OUR servant that brings us what we want and soothes over the disappointments and discomforts.

Having heard the call of faith of the previous book of Hebrews, we are reminded that if we live by sight, then circumstances are certain to overwhelm us. But if we live by faith, we bow to the will and plan of God. We surrender to the God of the "big picture," even if we do not see or understand that picture.

What James is trying to do is to simply shape the perspective a Christian is to have concerning trials. To get you to come to know that you can have an attitude of joy because God is working something out in you and through you that maybe you can't see right now. James says in verse three that one of the goals of trials in our lives is to produce steadfastness, or in some translations, endurance or perseverance. The book of James is all about what the Gospel produces in our lives. And the "trying of our faith" produces something: **patience**. It produces faith and essentially our endurance. We must realize that true Christianity is not just believing **of** God, but **in** God!

The Greek word found here is hypomone, which means to abide, to cling, or to sink deeply over the long haul. James says one of the purposes of trials is to bring you to the place where you can trust God in a whole new category, in a way you couldn't have otherwise before. The ultimate goal, James says in verse four, is to make you complete. To "perfect" you, so you lack nothing. It's to work out within you the character of Christ. Trials are meant to mature us into the likeness of Christ Jesus so we lack nothing in our demonstration of who He is to the world around us. It's God using trials as a divine chisel to chip away the things that hold us back. When Michelangelo was asked to create the statue of David, many asked him, "How in the world can you take that big chunk of marble and make David out of it?" Do you know what his response was? "That big chunk of marble is David. I'm just chipping away what ought not be."

In many ways, trials, in God's economy, become the divine chisel that takes away what ought not be, both in helping wean us from unhealthy attitudes and actions that would not portray the image of Christ, but also weaning us from our own propensity toward self-sufficiency, and instead cling to Christ for His sufficiency. And not just for a season, not just to make it through this trial, but over the long haul. That's what steadfastness is. James paints a picture for the Christian here to view trials with joy as an act of faith for what God's divine plan is working out in our lives, to produce in us what we could not produce on our own.

C.S. Lewis famously stated, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Note that our text says, “LET patience...” It says nothing of produce, make, or even BE patient. Rather it tells us to allow the natural work of patience to have her “complete work” in us. Because the choice is ours: to allow God to teach us the lessons He longs to through the “trying of our faith,” or to spend our lives striving against them. Each day we decide to either live in submission and peaceful faith or in rebellion to God. Often we pray for patience and growth, yet receive trials instead. We fail to realize that this IS His answer...God’s method to “complete” us, to mature us, to answer our prayer. In doing so, we are able to be used to a greater degree in the Kingdom of God.

All of this is designed to leave us “wanting for nothing.” Few believers can claim such a description for themselves. But when we are “finished” by the Lord, we are truly full, and this world can offer us nothing. In Christ we are whole and complete!