

James Series: Pastor Tim Dodson, Jesus Fellowship of Believers

#1 - The Testing of Your Faith

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The Book of James was written to a group of believers that were apparently able to talk the talk, but failed when it came time to walk the walk. *That* scenario requires very little stretching of our imagination. You may have noticed along the way that the defenders of grace are often a very vocal bunch, and such is certainly a needed defense in the midst of a humanity that invariably and inexplicably saddles up to rules and regulations. We *claim* we hate legalism, but yet we continually embrace it in our hearts due to our often lack of spiritual and positional security.

Yet on the other hand, few will rise to the defense of James. For James kinda of gives us the “put up or shut up.” Few amongst us will take a stand and call upon themselves as well as the greater church to actually *live* like they love Jesus: to respond to the power and dynamic of the gospel, and manifest its affect in our lives and the mission where God has called us. Taking a stand on such can get pretty hot. Immediately and invariably come the cries of “legalist” and “archaic” ... “old-school.” How I love the fact that God saw to it that this letter appears in our scriptures! For 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 that God intended.

The position that James takes here in this letter is that if we are indeed reborn through the manifest power of Jesus Christ, our lives will reflect such. A car that has been involved in a serious accident will always look like it. Its outside will clearly speak to that reality. The fact that a man lifts a lot of weights will be evident. People who are crazy in love invariable show their affection. Such examples are too numerous to even begin! Why then should our lives not clearly say “Christian” after a profound and ‘head-on’ meeting with the Creator of the Universe? Will not *everything* change? Won’t every aspect of our passions, our time use, our priorities, be profoundly affected? Perhaps we fail in this truth because we do not really grasp the magnitude of the power of the gospel...the truth and the fullness of just what began that day on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

Salvation is not the redemption of the old you. This isn’t an issue of rehab. Salvation is the death of the old you with all of its wants, its plans, its appearances, and the birth of a new you. One with new motivations and wants and directions. Thus, your redemption...if factual, is not a renovation but a destruction and rebuild. That makes you look and live very different!

This book is written by James, the brother of Jesus. How hard that would have been! To come to the truth that your *brother* is actually the Son of God and the salvation of the world? It was no doubt a difficult journey for the siblings of Jesus to acknowledge that fact. And please note that despite what the Catholics try to tell you, Jesus *did* have brothers and sisters! Just flip through the gospels and that becomes very evident. 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.

Again, few books have brought more heat and debate within the greater church than this one. Luther once said “*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, 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 down right *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. In fact, it could be it was *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 the cross...(I.E. Galatians, Romans) But the fact it, 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.”

Let's look at where this letter begins. It begins with an overt humility. We would feel better if the words that follow were coming from a position of pride and arrogance. That the writer was cocky and elitist. But right off the bat he says "*Hi...I'm James...and I'm a servant...(and the real word means rather slave)...a slave of Jesus Christ.*" Seriously? A slave? That just doesn't sit well on 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. But James is taking the spiritual position...right from verse 1, that he's just a *slave*...(albeit by choice).

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. There really was no debating with the master of the house. In 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*. So immediately the tone of this letter is given, and the lines of separation are presented.

Why is what follows in this letter possible for James and how can it be possible for us? It is here in verse one. 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, *to serve the master*? Even 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...*"?

Again, notice the precision of the language. The careful use of the word "lord." James didn't use the term 'boss' or "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 really knowing what that in totality means. The word "Lord" means master and thus implies full obedience. Do we say "no" and call Him "Lord" in the same sentence? If we could and would embrace the understanding and the magnitude of just what this means to see Jesus as Lord, we would not...we *will not*, have an problem accepting and even embracing where this letter goes as we move on through the chapters.

But in actuality, this letter is bound to make many of us very uncomfortable. Through this thing, we're going to leave some services 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 folks often 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 faith gives birth and motivation to our works. But they cannot be separated. If you attempt such, then you are emasculating the gospel. You are messing with the very gospel of Jesus Christ...sacred ground...rendering such powerless to change and powerless to motivate.

One of the first things that James deals with and we will no doubt acknowledge in our own lives, is that even when we want to exercise the works of God, that we are often deterred or perhaps feel justified in not pursuing such because of our own trials, difficulties and burdens. But check it out...James throws down in the second verse of his letter, saying "count it all joy when you face all your trials." *Excuse me?* 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 this is 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 be explained how we can just tune our lives slightly one direction or another to gain that needed clarity or smooth the ride of our life's journey. But I am afraid that is not the case on this matter. The fact is, the reason this direction is 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 the ilk being sold in many churches today, we still hold to a 'prosperity light' that essentially says that if we are 'good christians' and live right and moral lives, that good things will then happen to us. Many of us think that that is what the gospel teaches. But I am sorry to say that such 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 turn away from God too.

The receivers of this letter were likely some 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 seem to have been blindsided by the difficult time they're having in living out what it was they believed. Life was getting difficult and they were no doubt wondering what the deal was. Early on 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 probably originally had intended.

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 trial, you and I begin to suffer the same temptation where we go, "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...because I know all these other people out here who do not follow Jesus Christ and they seem to be flourishing. Here I am following Jesus Christ, and the wheels of life are falling off right now."

My mind can think of many examples of this, but one in particular. A young man of great spiritual promise and natural potential. His life in Christ was clicking along splendidly, when he himself 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 Christendom, and in the end, he walked. Such stories are so numerous they cannot be counted. That is why it is absolutely essentially that this fellowship and this pastor teaches clearly what the gospel really means and what living in faith really encompasses.

Look at verse 2. 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 in verse 2. 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 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, "If I can just get through this trial, then everything is going to be easier." You're going to have all sorts of trials, a variety of trials, an abundance of trials. How many singles around here have the idea of "I just cannot wait until I get married because then life is going to be so much easier on the other side." Ya...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. They are out there, they are waiting for you. In fact, 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 where we are to take joy in our pain? NO...that's not what is being presented here. Notice the imperative in verse 2. It doesn't say, "Act joyous in the moment that 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 that smile and say, "Sweet!" He's not telling you that. He's not dismissing the emotion. This isn't mind over matter. He's not wiping away your grief and pain. What we have to grasp in the onset 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 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 so "that you may be perfect(or mature) and complete, lacking nothing."

But the fact is, rarely is that our thinking when dealing with trials. Our thinking is to get out of that trial...to fix what's broken at any cost in order to relieve ourselves of the pain and discomfort. If that is our goal, then you are going to have a very difficult journey. Because let's face it...life doesn't roll that way. So often things do not work out smoothly. Situations do not end at our advantage. Sometimes we do not come out the other side in glorious emancipation. And even if it did, there is sure to be another thing waiting around the next corner to hit you 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. You have to calculate. You need to consider. You need to count what is happening to you 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 your hardship in such a way that doesn't allow your mind to come to an endpoint of hopelessness and despair, to assume that because what's happening to you there is just nothing else that could result accept hopelessness and despair.

I wonder how different things would be if in the trials....*remembering that we are in fact slaves to the master Jesus...knowing that He*

is in control of even the elements of and the issues of that trial, that we took the position of "I want to know you in this process." 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 more and experience you fuller."

Back in Hebrews chapter 12, we see that Jesus not only taught such a message but *lived* that message. Hebrews 12:2 "...(*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 great questions of our walk in Christ is: *how will our faith react under trial?* For 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 is our real goals as believers. Are such God centered and glory pursued? 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 our word (gr) "ginosko", meaning a "coming to know through experience." Corrie Tenboom 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 in essence *our* servant that brings us what we want and smoothes 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 he's simply trying to shape the perspective a Christian is to have concerning trials, 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 3 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: *it produces 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 or 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 4, 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 shape away those things. 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 becomes the divine chisel that takes away what ought not be, both in helping us wean from unhealthy attitudes and actions that would not portray the image of Christ needing to be manifest in us, but also weaning us from our own propensity to look to ourselves for our own 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 made this famous quote saying, "*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 and receive trials instead. We fail to realize that this *is* 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 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. For "in Christ" we are whole and complete!