

## **James: Practically Real Faith A Great Joy**

*James 1:1-4*

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 21, 2024.**

### **Bold Book of James**

The thought of a sermon series throughout the book of James in which we turn the pages together and work through the text, is both challenging and highly inviting. It is challenging because James does not mince words. He is direct, to the point. But it is inviting for several reasons.

For starters, it was apparently written before the Council of Jerusalem in 49AD, which means it is very likely the oldest book in the New Testament. This means that what James writes represents Christian teaching at its earliest stages. Also, 49AD means that James's letter could also precede all of the Apostle Paul's letters. This means that James discusses faith and works independently of Paul's teachings on the subject.

As we read through James, it is crucial to note that James and Paul do not contradict each other when teaching about faith and works. Their writings are complementary and supplementary. James teaches us subjectively about faith, focusing on our trust in the Lord and the certainty we can experience in Him. Paul teaches us objectively about faith. Paul teaches that faith is the means by which a Christian is saved.

One of the greatest benefits of James is his writing enhances and enlarges our capacity for a practical understanding of faith. He teaches how to have practical, real faith. James doesn't waste any time in diving head first into the practical aspects of faith. It is a constant stream of practical, relevant bits of wisdom. All of them leading to one main conclusion: Genuine, authentic, real faith works. It works out practically in our lives. It leads us to actions, concrete actions. Real faith is faith that works.

The faith that James describes is one that people can see. It informs our actions. It isn't some secret belief that we never act upon. This sort of faith stands out because of its practicality in such a broken world. There are fifty four imperatives in James. This is a "do this and do that" sort of book. If we read, consider and apply James to our lives, we will absolutely not be the same at the end of this series.

I invite you to James 1:1-4 as we are introduced to James and jump right into his practical wisdom. (read text)

### **Meeting James**

James was a blood-relative of Jesus, a half-brother. We read about him a few times in the gospels of Matthew and Mark and John. Apparently, he was not a believer in Christ until the forty day period between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Jesus appeared to James and he believed. Acts 1 places James in the upper room praying with the rest of the disciples and his mother. We also presume that James was present for the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost. When Peter was released from prison in Acts 12, James became the leader of the Jerusalem church. He would go on to oversee the Council of Jerusalem as the early church determined how to merge together Jews and Gentiles in the faith.

Consider this as you read through the book. James knew the Lord Jesus in a way that no other author of the New Testament, save Jude, could. They ate together, played together, grew up together. They shared the same house, went to the same places. James saw Jesus grow up. After his conversion, James was known as James the Just. He was a man of deep faith and committed piety. Early church historian Eusebius recorded the testimony of Hegisippus, who claimed that James "used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people." His knees wore the wear and tear of living, active, practical faith.

Have you ever stood up or sat down and heard your knees pop? Sometimes, it sounds like I am walking across those packing sheets, my knees pop so much. When was the last time you heard that pop when you were kneeling for prayer? When was the last time you made the extra effort to assume that humble posture before God? Our knees could certainly do well to be a little more calloused in prayer.

### **How James Introduces Himself**

Have you ever been introduced to someone and then, after talking to them and moving on, find out that you were actually talking to someone important without realizing it? They had carried themselves so humbly that you had no idea they might be considered important.

When my wife was pregnant with McKinley, she and Jackson headed home one afternoon and were turning off of the highway and were a few seconds away from the driveway. A young lady was not paying attention and slammed into the back of the car. Thankfully, Jackson was fine and we took Danielle to the emergency room in the ambulance to make sure everything was good with her as well as with the pregnancy. I called a friend of mine, and he came and prayed with us. While he was there, he noticed an older woman from his church who was there with her mom. This older woman was Oklahoma legend and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Wanda Jackson.

Now, most of you have no clue who Wanda Jackson is. That's fine. I expect that from you uncultured barbarians. To those who don't know, she is the Queen of Rockabilly, she had some big hits in the 50's and transitioned into country and gospel. She also dated Elvis Presley. And I grew up listening to her. My friend introduced me while they were getting ready to send us home. Wanda is very small, but extremely kind. I explained to her why we were there. I fanboyed out for her and I think she appreciated it. As we were leaving, Danielle was exhausted, nerves shot, and she was ready to get home and see Jackson and decompress. As we were headed to the car, Wanda said, "Goodbye. I hope your feeling better, honey." She said that to Danielle! How many of you have ever been well-wished by someone who smooched Elvis??? And Danielle, completely disinterested sort of grunted and waved her off. I was mortified. We got in the car and I said, "Don't you know who that is?" She didn't. Apparently, Wanda did not come across like rockabilly royalty. She did not introduce herself as a pioneer in music. She was just a sweet, older lady.

Despite how easily it could have been for James to go "big time" in his letter, he was humble. He introduces himself as simply a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine what he could have written? "James the Just. From the blessed womb of Mary. Brother of the Lord." Instead, he simply identifies himself as a servant.

### **James as Pastor**

He does write in a pastoral sense to the Jews scattered around the Roman Empire. Beginning back in 722 BC, when the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes into captivity, Jews had been spread all over what would become the Roman Empire, from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, on into Asia Minor and Europe and into Northern Africa. Some of the largest cities in the world, such as Alexandria in Northern Africa, had a large

Jewish population. After Stephen the deacon was martyred, Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and eventually to these Jewish regions all over the Empire. Sadly, these Jewish Christians were not welcomed into these new places by their kinsmen. Because of their conversion to Christ, Jewish Christians were rejected and even persecuted by their own people.

Further, because they were in these Gentile countries that believed in pagan religions, the Jewish believers in Christ were exploited by these Gentiles. Without the protection of the pre-existing Jewish community, these Jewish Christians were vulnerable. They were homeless and disenfranchised. They had all of their possessions stolen. They were often hauled into court on trumped up charges and then would be forced into servitude. They had less protection than slaves and were often treated much worse.

These people were from the church that James led. He saw many of his flock flee and yet he still has a pastoral heart to help shepherd them. The only way he can connect with them is through the written word delivered to all of these various places. Just like livestreaming on the internet expands our church's care and reach, writing letters was the livestreaming of James's day. To shepherd these people that he loved, he wrote. He wrote to encourage, comfort, and challenge his mistreated ex-parishioners.

### **His Irrational Call**

With all of this background information about what his former parishioners were struggling with, all of the hardship, all of the brutality and unfair treatment, he wastes no time getting to his first imperative. Shoot, even the Apostle Paul would have some kind words of introduction like, "I thank God whenever I think of you." But not James. Do you see James's icebreaker? "Greetings." And then a cannonball into the difficult deep end of living faith that works.

What does James write to a group of rejects that are being mistreated, abused, and abandoned? "Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials." He is saying that they should see how difficult and hard their lives are, that they should consider all the terrible things that are said and done to them, that they should weigh all of the injustice and the insults and come out joyful.

This sounds irrational. Have you ever stopped to consider how each culture, including the one we currently live in, has worked so hard to insulate itself from trouble and protect itself from pain? People go to extremes to avoid minor discomfort. It makes James's words sound crazy. Sadly, for many within the church, it comes across as irrational.

What does James really mean? Well, let's first consider what it does NOT mean. He is not demanding that his readers enjoy their trials. That process is hard and difficult. He is not telling us to enjoy pain and suffering. He is also not saying that our trials are joys in and of themselves. They are not. Trials are not joys. They are hard. Difficult. He is also not ordering up some sort of all-encompassing joyful emotion during difficult times. He is not telling us to "put on a happy face." James knows as well as the writer of Hebrews that in the moment, discipline seems painful. (Hebrews 12:11)

James is not telling us to throw a party when we do not get the promotion at work. He is not teaching us to laugh and sing when we hear a negative diagnosis. He is not exhorting us to exult upon a broken marriage. What James is doing instead is exhorting us to embrace and take on a Christian perspective and understanding of life that brings joy into the trials that come because of our Christian faith.

"Count it a great joy" is a specific statement. It means that we are to make the careful, deliberate choice to be joyful when you find yourself in times of trouble. It is a mature decision, not easy to make, yet not impossible. The Apostle Paul would tell the Corinthian believers that he was overflowing with joy in all of his affliction (2 Corinthians 7:4).

Luke tells us in Acts 5 that the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem, called in the disciples, beat them, and charged them to not say a word about Jesus. As they left the council, Luke tells us that they were rejoicing because they were counted as worthy to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Later in Acts, Luke tells us that Paul and Silas, after being severely flogged and in severe pain, were in prison and around midnight were singing praise songs to God. (Acts 16:25). This is our example to James's teaching.

James does not say, "Count it a great joy IF you experience various trials." He says when. This means that these sorts of things are a part of the Christian experience. These were not just *diaspora* experiences back then.

We have our own diaspora moments today. We will feel alienated, disenfranchised, and unpopular. We will have moments when there is difficulty and tragedy in our life that seems unrelated to our Christian faith. Even then, we are to experience joy. To others, this joy may seem disconnected to reality and irrational. But in Christ, this joy is rational and possible.

### **The Why Behind the Call**

James tells us that we should count these trials and difficult seasons as a great joy because each trial we face brings spiritual value. James points out the two-step process in which trials raise us up and deepen our faith.

The first step is realizing that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. Essentially this means “staying power.” James tells us that the testing of our faith produces toughness. Not hardness against life. But a strength of faith in our souls.

We develop this toughness, this fortitude, this staying power, by being tested in our faith and prevailing. The more tests we pass, the stronger we become. The longer you play the guitar, the more callouses form on your fingers making it possible to then play even longer. The more matches a boxer has, the tougher and smarter and wiser and more experienced he becomes. You cannot develop toughness without troubles and trials. Endurance does not come overnight and it does not come without some pretty painful receipts.

When my children were younger, and they had to deal with someone being mean to them, as a parent, I wanted to step in and take care of it and protect them. But I also knew the importance of them experiencing those moments and becoming stronger through them. If you free a butterfly from its chrysalis, not allowing it to experience the struggle of breaking free of its cocoon on its own, you destroy its life because it could never develop the strength it needs to fly.

Whenever God looks into our lives and sees a lack of strength, when he sees a deficit in fortitude, he sends difficult circumstances into our lives. This is a time-tested remedy called “the testing of your faith.” God will allow hard times and difficult seasons to strengthen you. When this happens, count it as a great joy. God is not getting you or smiting you. He is strengthening you in specific areas through strategic pain.

James's rationale becomes clearer when you consider the second step: endurance produces maturity. "And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing." Spiritual endurance produces a vibrant and dynamic maturity within a believer.

James is teaching us that our character becomes full as more and more parts are added through various trials. Maturity is a dynamic state in which so many different parts are brought together and are then honed and shaped, tempered and added to each other, resulting in this sense of dynamic wholeness or fullness.

Trials do not bring maturity. Strength and endurance through times of testing bring maturity. It is still possible for us to experience trials and react with anger, selfishness, or self-pity. But enduring difficult trials of persecution for our faith, illness, financial stress, disappointments, criticisms, pressure at home, and relational struggles means that multiple facets of our lives are touched with grace.

We live a graced life when we are strengthened to maturity, fullness. We develop tenacity and perseverance. We develop this spiritual toughness and this an identifiable marking of true faith.

There is an idea out there that when we become Christians, we somehow get it all together and don't have to endure hard times. That is not true. It is also not biblical. James is clear. Life will always be full of various trials and tests. They do not lessen with time. They do not diminish the longer you are a believer. And remember, trials are NOT a sign of God being unhappy with you. They are specific opportunities to help you persevere in the Lord.

Testing develops spiritual toughness. That toughness develops a dynamic maturity. The toughness and maturity are possible through various trials.