

Introduction

Today we begin an 11 week sermon series through the New Testament letter of James. The letter of James is often understood as a type of wisdom literature of the New Testament. Many people will draw comparisons between it and the book of Proverbs from the Old Testament. And this is a good comparison. There is a lot of practical advice in James.

However, one of the possible problems with this approach is that it tends to understand James as something of a random collection of teachings. James becomes a letter with little to no context.

But when you look at the first verse of James and begin to ask some questions, some possible context comes into play.

While many believe that James was written at a later date by James the brother of Jesus. I believe that there is good evidence that James was written very early by the Apostle James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee.

I think this is the case because I believe that James is writing about a very specific dispersion in verse 1. This would be the dispersion of Christian Jews from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution that arose against the Christians during this time.

The Apostle James was one of the chief leaders of the early church in Jerusalem (along with Peter and John). Stephen has just been stoned to death in [Acts 7](#). After this moment, the Jews in Jerusalem begin to openly persecute the young church made up almost exclusively of Jewish Christians. This persecution drives many of these Jewish Christians out of Jerusalem to the surrounding areas.

This is the audience of the Apostle James' letter. He is writing specifically to the "brothers" or leaders of these dispersed Christians. James is a cyclical letter to these congregations to encourage and guide them through such difficult times.

In our passage this morning, James addresses the fact that his audience is suffering. He writes to them about how they are to understand and work through the trials they are experiencing.

I would like to draw out four things from these verses:

1. Trials lead to maturity (vv. 2-4)
2. God gives wisdom through suffering (vv. 5-11)

3. The steadfast gain the crown (v. 12)
4. Trusting God's goodness is the only way through suffering (vv. 13-18)

Trials Lead to Maturity (vv. 2-4)

If the setting I laid out is true, then verses 2-4 represent a summary of the entire letter. These communities of young Christians are facing various trials. Their faith is being tested. If they are to grow in maturity, they must “**Count it all joy**” and be “**steadfast**” in the midst of these trials.

The trials James writes about here are not specified. You could imagine many different kinds of trials. They may be estranged from their families who are not Christians. They may have lost their property and livelihood. They may be under active oppression as persecution spreads to the surrounding region.

James speaks of the trials in an opportunistic ways. The trials are productive tests. According to James, they test the faith of the Christians. And a faith that is tested is a faith that is steadfast.

The language James uses here is very similar to what the Apostle Peter writes in

1 Peter 1:7 ESV

⁷ 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.

Trials are like the furnace for precious stones. There is pain, but the pain leads to greater purity and glory.

James is highly influenced by Matthew's gospel specifically the Sermon on the Mount. In [Matthew 5](#) Jesus says,

Matthew 5:11-12 ESV

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

James reminds his audience that their suffering should be a surprise. Jesus anticipated suffering for his disciples and told them to rejoice in it. James says “**count it all joy**”.

James knows that there is a greater reward. When your faith is tested and becomes steadfast you will be “**perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**” The word “**perfect**” has more connotations with the idea of *maturity*. When you stand steadfast through trials, this leads to

Christian maturity. James attests that it is better to go through trials and gain maturity than it is to remain immature.

If James is speaking about maturity here, it should come as no surprise that he starts talking about “wisdom” in the next section.

God Gives Wisdom Through Suffering (vv. 5-11)

This section on wisdom is a two-way street. If you are suffering and going through trials, you need wisdom. But wisdom is gained through the process of enduring suffering.

The way James brings in wisdom here reminds me of how coaches talk about training. If you’ve ever played competitive sports you have likely participated in some sort of pre-season training. If you don’t know, pre-season training is typically the hardest training of the whole season.

I played competitive soccer growing up and one of my coaches had a pre-season conditioning program that was truly brutal. But once the team went through the training, we were prepared for a long season of matches that would require much of us physically. It was enduring the pre-season training that allowed the team to gain the conditioning we needed. The way we got the conditioning we needed was by going through the hard training.

James brings in wisdom in a similar way. If you want wisdom, you must be prepared to go through the process God ordains for gaining wisdom. One pastor puts it this way, “Wisdom is given through sustained trust and obedience in God in the midst of trials.” God gives wisdom through suffering.

This makes sense of what James writes about doubt in verse 6. The one who asks God for wisdom in doubt expects to be given wisdom the quick and easy way. The doubter asks God for wisdom but they are not willing to gain wisdom through the trials of life.

James is building on what he has already written. These Christians are facing trials. This will lead to maturity if they remain steadfast. But they will need to be asking God to give them wisdom. Moreover, they can trust that just as God will bring them to maturity through their trials, God will also give them the gift of wisdom through their suffering.

The final verses of this section show the temptation that was present for many of these suffering Christians. You can imagine that many of them looked at their own **lowly condition** and compared it to the strength and riches of those who persecuted them. If only they had the riches and power on their side.

But James says that this is not the way. That is the “easy way out”. Rather, the way of the steadfast and patient learns to endure the suffering and consider that the rich and powerful who persecutes will ultimately pass away.

As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...” “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” ([Matt. 5:3, 5](#))

The Steadfast Gain the Crown (v. 12)

Verse 12 is the central verse in our passage. James has echoed two beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and now he offers his own. “***Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.***”

While this verse can be read as a program for how to receive the crown of life, this verse is ultimately about Jesus. Jesus is the blessed man who remained steadfast under trial and was exalted to all rule and authority in both heaven and earth. This fact has been lurking in the background up to this point but it culminates here.

This verse expands on [Psalm 1](#) which is the Psalm about the blessed man who scorns all the ways of wicked men. Here James shows us that the blessed man doesn’t simply avoid evil, but he is able to endure evil, like Jesus.

Jesus patiently endured suffering and He was raised above every other name. Jesus was like David when he suffered the persecution of Saul. David patiently waited for God to exalt him.

What the New Testament teaches is that Christians are to follow the same path of Jesus. We are called to reign with Him. But the path to the crown of glory goes through the trial of the cross.

In this suffering we will gain the wisdom required to reign.

Trusting God’s Goodness is the Way Through Suffering (vv. 13-18)

The final verses of this passage address another temptation that is before these disciples. This is the temptation to think that God is cruel. It is the temptation that God has brought this suffering upon them in order to tempt them toward evil or to turn away from Christ. It is the temptation to believe that God is not purposeful in His fatherly discipline of his children.

This kind of questioning different from the kind of questioning you find throughout the Psalms. In the Psalms you will often read things like, “O Lord, why do you cast my soul away?”

Why do you hide your face from me?” ([Ps 88:14](#)). But in the Psalms, these laments are eventually answered by the psalmist. The psalmist confesses that God is both sovereign and good even in the midst of their suffering.

James teaches that there is no solace in denying God’s sovereign goodness in the midst of your suffering and trials. The temptation to think in these ways is the result of our own sinful desires. And as James says, “**When these desires conceive and give birth to sin they ultimately bring forth death.**”

The sin here is the sin of bitterness toward God. Such bitterness denies the true character of God. God is the generous giver of good gifts. And everything that we receive from God should be received with thanksgiving.

The gifts here are described as “perfect”. Back in verse 4 I noted that this word has to do with maturity. God gives the gift of maturity and it is a good gift, even if it comes wrapped in the form of trials. All God’s gifts are good gifts because they are ultimately for our good.

He is the Father of lights, and Jesus is the light of the world. And we are made in God’s image and Jesus says that we are to be the light of the world and like a city set on a hill. God is forming us into the image of Jesus by bringing us forth by the “**word of truth**”, who is Jesus. As His creatures, we are being made into a new and mature man.

This process involves suffering and trial. But we can count it all joy if we trust the goodness of our God even in the midst of our sufferings.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!