

James' Letter

1: Perseverance, Prayer & Perspective

Introduction

The letter of James was written to instruct all followers of Jesus on how to practically live out their faith and obedience to Jesus as Lord. The original audience of this letter was not a specific church in a specific region (like most of the New Testament letters) but rather all Christians dispersed throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding regions. It was written by the brother of Jesus and has more references to Jesus' teaching per page than any other letter in the entire bible.

The letter begins with a two part introduction that sums up the letter's main ideas and key words. And then the remaining four chapters contain twelve different teachings on how to wholeheartedly walk the talk of following Jesus in our everyday lives.

In this first study, we will look at the first part of the letter's introduction which addresses three different themes that are addressed in more detail throughout the letter. They are perseverance in testing, prayer for wisdom and the right perspective on wealth.

Perseverance in Testing (v. 1:2-4)

James is writing to followers of Jesus that are suffering rejection and oppression from the society in which they live. There are two ways that followers of Jesus can respond when their faithfulness is tested:

- We can come together and help one another endure the pressure
- Or we can give in to the pressure and compromise with the culture

This was the reality of James' original audience, and this has been the reality of every follower of Jesus ever since. All of us face moments where our faithfulness to Christ may cost us something. It may cost you criticism or awkwardness with the people around you. It may cost you your job or certain opportunities within your workplace or community. Or it may cost you your life and the life of your family.

No matter how simple or how severe the cost, Jesus warned us and James is reminding us that at some point in your life your faithfulness to Christ is going to cost you something.

Will you give in to the pressure and compromise your allegiance to Christ in order to fit in with the culture? Or will you stay faithful to him no matter what and endure whatever your faith in him might cost you?

James urges us stay faithful no matter what by describing the unique benefit of having our faithfulness tested. He says to, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." (v. 1:2-3)

According to James, the testing of our faithfulness to Jesus is a good thing because it produces steadfastness — a *persevering patience* in high pressure situations that makes us more like Christ.

The Greek word used here for this persevering patience literally means **“an abiding under.”** It means that you reach a point in your faith where you are so fully submitted to God’s authority over your life that nothing can shake you. James says that this kind of steadfastness makes your faith perfect and complete — it leads you to become just like Christ.

This is not something that you can just obtain or receive. It is something that God has to produce in us, and the way that he does it is through trials in life that put our faithfulness to the test. Therefore, we must learn to view trials in life as opportunities to fly our flag of faith in Christ. We must learn to embrace the perspective expressed by the apostle Paul:

I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.¹

Suffering is kind of like the squat rack of spiritual growth. Nobody likes going to the gym and getting on the squat rack, but at the same time squats are one of the most effective ways to build strength and a solid foundation for your body. In the same way, nobody likes having to endure things that test our faith, but they are the very things that strengthen our faith and build a solid foundation for our lives spiritually.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:10

Many of us need to realize that God cares more about our spiritual growth than he does our physical, mental or emotional comfort. There are times where he may allow us to be hurt if that's what it takes in order for us to grow closer to him and to become more like Jesus.

Prayer for Wisdom (v. 1:5-8)

Some of us are going to struggle more with the testing of our faith than others. But James reminds us that, "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him." (v. 1:5)

Whenever we get overwhelmed with the circumstances that we may be facing, James encourages us to pray and ask for wisdom.

Now notice that he says to ask for *wisdom*, but he doesn't say to ask for *answers*. That is an important distinction. Demanding answers from God is essentially a demand to know everything that God knows. Wisdom is the ability to take what we do know and then translate that knowledge into a faithful response to God despite what we don't know.

God may not give us the specific reason for why our faithfulness is being tested, but wisdom helps to remind us that it is definitely not because God is unloving or indifferent towards us. Wisdom is the ability to think about what the cross of Christ tells us and to see from it that no matter what we may be experiencing, we can rest assured that it cannot be because God doesn't love us or have a plan for us (Romans 8:28-39).

And so, whenever we are struggling to remain faithful to Christ, James reminds us to humbly pray and ask for wisdom. We must not come to God trying to manipulate the situation in hope of getting answers or special treatment. We must ask in faith; fully trusting the goodness and sovereignty of God in spite of situations that might suggest otherwise.

Perspective on Wealth (v. 1:9-11)

James has told us that the testing of our faith is a good thing that helps us grow spiritually. He has advised us that when we are tested we should humbly pray and ask for wisdom. And now lastly, James warns us of the foolishness of spending all of our time in pursuit of wealth.

All of us are born wanting wealth, success and status. And as long as we feel like these things are in our reach, we will spend a great deal of our time, energy and focus on pursuing them.

Think of how this pursuit plays out in the game of baseball. You begin by wanting to be the best player on your team. Then as you get older you want to play in college or professionally. Then you get drafted, and you want to play in the big leagues. Then you make it to the big leagues, and the next goal is to stay long enough to reach arbitration. Then you start thinking about free agency or a long-term deal. Then you sign the long-term deal, and now the goal is ten years of service time and full pension. You're making more money than you ever dreamed of, but the pursuit continues because you'd love to be an All-Star or World Series champion. You make the All-Star team and win a World Series, but now you start thinking about how to maintain this status after baseball.

And so, you end up accomplishing all these things and retire from the game, but then what?

You live another 40-50 years if you are fortunate and then you die. Your legacy fades away right before your eyes, and sadly you are only a few generations away from being almost completely forgotten.

It is foolish to spend so much of our time, energy and focus on the pursuit of wealth because in the end *death* is the great equalizer.

James writes,

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.” (v. 1:9-10)

No matter how much you have in this life or how little you have in this life, we all die and take nothing with us into eternity. All of us will stand face to face before the Lord, and it will not matter one bit how much money you made, success you had or status that you accumulated for yourself. All that will matter is whether or not you were faithful to Christ as the Lord over your life.

That is why James urges all of us (rich, middle class or poor) to consider that moment we will exit this world and enter into the presence of the Lord.

Thinking about the day that we will see our Lord face to face has an equalizing effect — it keeps the poor hopeful and the rich humble.

And so, as we close out this first study of James' letter, it would do us well to consider how these three themes played out in the life of Christ.

We must never forget the wealth that Jesus possessed and the status that he held as the Creator and Lord of the entire creation. However, instead of pursuing more or simply trying to maintain what he had, he willingly stripped himself of all of it and became a man of no significant reputation. ***He spent his time, energy and focus on doing the will of God.***

As soon as he began his ministry, he was immediately rejected by his own family and was labeled as someone who was making false claims about God. His faithfulness to his Father's plan was tested over and over again, but ***he consistently humbled himself in prayer*** asking for the Father's help to only do what his Father wanted him to do.

And despite everything that he had to endure, ***he remained steadfast*** until the end. And now God has exalted Jesus as the eternal King who reigns over all of his redeemed people.

Jesus has commanded us to be perfect like our Father in heaven, and Scripture tells us elsewhere that we are to grow up into becoming more and more like Christ. This will only happen when we embrace living our lives like Jesus lived his. Focus on the day that we will meet our Lord face to face and then live your life in light of that reality. Learn to see things that test your faith as opportunities to fly your flag of allegiance to Christ. And devote yourself to praying for the wisdom that you need to see God's goodness and sovereignty in the midst of all situations.