

The Man, the Audience, and the Problem

Humility, Hardship, and Wholeness

JAMES 1:1–4

Today we begin our study in one of the most helpful books in the entire Bible when it comes to living out our faith: the letter of James. It is helpful because it is hurtful. It is painful. James spends most of his time confronting us rather than comforting us, and he does it with the precision of a surgeon. He does not mince words. He does not care how he is received. He cares only for the souls reading his letter, and he knows that for the born again believer, truth (painful as it may be) ultimately works for our good. That is why this series is called *Truth that Hurts*. It is a fitting title. It has been said of this book that James does not beat around the bush; he beats you with the bush.

Martin Luther famously called this book an epistle of straw when he set it beside the writings of Paul, because James does not preach the gospel so much as he explains Christian ethics. Luther had been transformed by Paul's insistence that we are justified by faith alone. Then he arrived at James and read, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24, ESV), and it challenged him.

This book has challenged some of the greatest theologians in history largely because it is not theological. It is practical. There are roughly fifty commands packed into one hundred eight verses. That means this book was written to tell us what to do more than what to think. James assumes his reader already knows what to think. Because of that thrust, you will notice that he draws heavily on the Sermon on the Mount, the first public sermon of Jesus, where the ethics of the kingdom are laid out. He also draws heavily on Proverbs 1–9. For both of those reasons, this letter is often called the Proverbs of the New Testament.

The Man

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

JAMES 1:1A, ESV

James is the author of this book. There are several men named James in the New Testament, but this one is different. He is not one of the twelve disciples. He is not one of the men who trusted Jesus from the beginning and followed Him. He was not in the garden of Gethsemane. He was not on the mountain at the transfiguration. When all of those things were happening, James was a doubter. A skeptic. A man who likely resented Jesus, because Jesus was his older brother.

Can you imagine for a moment being James and growing up hearing the story of your older brother's birth? Hearing the prophecies concerning Him? Hearing from your own mom and dad's lips that your older brother is God incarnate? Some of you had to deal with a kind of favoritism growing up, where mom and dad favored one child over the others. You know what that can do to a person, how it can open a rift between siblings that never fully closes. Now consider this: James is the only person who could ever say of his older brother that their parents worshiped the ground He walked on.

Parents, you should never choose favorites, and you should never play favorites. The consequences are dire. Horrible things happen in the Bible when parents pick favorites.

The Gospels tell us that during the years of Jesus's ministry, which we have just covered in the book of John, James and his siblings did not believe that Jesus was the Savior of the world. Would you have? Probably not. It was only after the resurrection that James believed. Seeing Jesus crucified and then raised was enough to confront every entrenched position he had ever held.

James would go on to become one of the most devout Christian leaders in the history of the faith, and he would give leadership to the church in Jerusalem. Church history tells us he died a martyr. Josephus tells us he was stoned by the Sanhedrin, and a few decades later Hegesippus gave a much fuller account, preserved for us by Eusebius of Caesarea. In that account, Jewish leaders brought this widely respected Christian to the pinnacle of the temple during Passover, hoping he would publicly deny Jesus. Instead, James proclaimed that Jesus is the Son of Man seated at God's right hand. He was thrown from the

temple. As he lay injured, he prayed for his attackers with words reminiscent of his brother: “Father, forgive them.” He was then stoned. Finally a fuller struck him on the head with the club used to beat cloth, and killed him.

Let me ask you this. How sure must James have been to say that his own brother was God, and then be willing to die for it? This is the man we are talking about. If anyone has credibility to his name, it is James.

And notice how he introduces himself. Not as the brother of Jesus. Not as the most prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. He calls himself a servant, and the word behind it is the word for a bondservant: someone who belongs to another person and whose primary duty is to obey his master. It meant that a person's allegiance, life, and identity belonged to someone else. James is not saying he knows Jesus. He is not saying he works for Jesus. He is saying he belongs to Jesus.

EXAMINE YOURSELF

Do you *belong* to Jesus? Or do you only know Him?

Are you a bondservant, or an employee?

If you had the pedigree of James, how would you introduce yourself?

The humility of that one line should strike us hard, and it sets the tone for the whole book. You are not hearing hard truths from a hard heart.

ii.

The Audience

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

JAMES 1:1B, ESV

That word *Dispersion* is helpful context for everything that follows. The Jewish people had been removed from their land and scattered into other nations many times over. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans all conquered their land throughout their history. As a result, the Jews were still living largely in exile. Many never made it back to Jerusalem. Many were still stuck where they had been carried. Time had not been kind to them. They were scattered, displaced, and living as strangers.

But James is not writing broadly to the Jews of his day. He is writing to Jewish believers, those who had accepted that Jesus is the Messiah of their own Jewish faith. This group had extraordinary persecution coming at them. Both the Jews and the Romans were seeking to displace any outspoken Christians they could find, and so, particularly in Jerusalem, believers scattered and went wherever they could hide. That persecution sets the tone of the entire letter. The hardship they faced is nearly immeasurable. They suffered extraordinarily, and it is in that context that James speaks.

So you have to ask a question. If James is writing to people going through the hardest days of their lives, why is his letter instructive and corrective rather than gentle and encouraging? Because James knows what we so often forget: it is in trial that we find out what we are really made of.

Your faith is merely theory until it is tested.

We are most apt to neglect our walk when things get hard. We are most apt to backpedal in our faith when life gets difficult. James knows this, and his answer is to press on, stand up, and pass the test. That is the reason for his next sentence.

iii.

The Problem

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

JAMES 1:2-4, ESV

Everyone in this room has been through some hard things. Some of you have been through the hardest life can throw at you, and so these words can almost sound offensive. *Count it all joy*. Let me be clear about what James is not saying. He is not communicating that trials should make you happy. By definition, if you are happy with it, it is not a trial.

To count something as something is to evaluate it, to reckon it, to think about it a certain way. It is a perspective shift. It points to the ability to think before we feel rather than simply to feel. When trials hit, we typically feel first and think later. James wants us to think first and get the right perspective. And what is that perspective? Joy. God will use this trial. He will redeem it. He will do something with it that produces joy somewhere down the line.

Then James explains what that something is. Trial produces steadfastness, and steadfastness makes you perfect and complete.

THE PROGRESSION

Trial > Testing of Faith > Steadfastness > Maturity > Completeness > *Lacking Nothing*

How many of you have experienced this before? You went through a trial, your faith was tested, and you came out of that season stronger in your faith and more mature in your walk. He redeems every trial and

every hardship, and every ounce of pain He uses for your benefit and His glory. For a son or daughter of God, suffering is not for nothing. It is redeemable.

But James adds a statement at the end that I want to work through: *that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*. That word *perfect* means whole, or complete. And in using it, James implies a problem we have to address, a problem he will spend his whole letter addressing. It is a problem we are aware of but often lose sight of. We are not whole. We are not complete.

We, yes, the Christian, are often fragmented and fractured and broken on the inside. We are frail. We fail more than we admit. We are more carnal than we would like to think. The truth is that many Christians are filled with inconsistencies, with trauma, with pain. Many who are truly born again carry a deep internal conflict with themselves, because our lives do not line up with our beliefs. When they do line up, it is often inconsistent.

What James is seeking to accomplish is that we would be perfect and complete: wholehearted and single minded rather than half hearted and double minded. I told you at the beginning of this sermon that James does not really do theology in this book. He is not explaining a set of beliefs. He is informing us of how those beliefs should cause us to live. That is ultimately where we are fractured.

The gap between what we believe and how we live should get smaller every day.

So what is the first thing he says? Trials are a good way to shorten that gap. They are good for the soul. Trials and testings help us become whole. They are a good tool to produce in us character that mirrors Christ and fruit that mirrors the Spirit. And ultimately, that is the rest of the book of James. We are fractured and broken because we believe one way and live another. James is all about mending the brokenness, healing the inconsistencies, and calling us to whole hearted devotion rather than half hearted religion.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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