

OVERCOMING TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

James 1:1-18

Key Verse: 1:5

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.”

The book of James has been called “Proverbs of the New Testament.” There are many exhortations and warnings--over 50 imperatives in 108 verses. Frankly, we can feel overwhelmed by all of the commands that are given. But in fact, it is full of practical wisdom for godly living. It challenges us to examine our hearts for elements of hypocrisy which should be removed. It encourages us to have genuine faith which gives us many spiritual blessings and true happiness. This faith will influence our families, friends, fellow workers and even our city and nation. Some people wonder if the book of James is contradictory to the teaching of salvation by faith alone. It is not; it is complementary. It is true that we are saved by faith alone; this is an unchanging Biblical truth. However, after being saved, that is, justified, we must also be sanctified, which is an ongoing process of growing to be like Jesus. Sanctification comes as we live by the Spirit and obey the word of God in our practical lives. As Martin Luther said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” This means that genuine faith will be accompanied by good works. This is what James emphasizes. He deals with many practical issues, such as trials, poverty and riches, favoritism, social justice, taming the tongue, boasting, patience, and prayer. He helps us examine ourselves to see if we practice our faith in real issues of daily life.

In today’s passage James focuses on how to overcome trials and temptations. The words “trial” and “tempt” are repeated seven times all together (2,12,13[4],14). They are from the same Greek root “*peira*.” This means they are intricately connected. In the time of trial, temptation comes also. Christians are not exempt from trials and temptations. Each of us must confront them, and success or failure depends on how we deal with them. Why do they come? How can we overcome them? What consequences follow? Let us learn from this passage.

First, how to go through trials (1-12). Verse 1 tells us who the sender and recipients of this letter are: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings." James does not introduce himself as an apostle, or the leader of the Jerusalem church, or a brother of Jesus--although he was all these. Rather, he calls himself "a servant," which meant a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. "The Lord Jesus Christ" means that Jesus is God, the promised Messiah, and the Lord. As a servant of God and Christ, he writes this letter with apostolic authority. The phrase "the twelve tribes of Israel" refers to Christians as the true heirs of the faith of Israel. When these believers held onto their faith, they were persecuted. As a result, they were scattered throughout the nations, especially Syria and Asia Minor. Wherever they went, they formed Christian fellowships and preached the gospel. James began by simply saying, "Greetings." Then he immediately got to the point.

In verses 2-12 James offers pastoral exhortations to scattered believers who were undergoing many kinds of difficult trials. It was not easy for them to leave their homeland and make a new start in a foreign land. They faced language and cultural barriers, not to mention hostility and persecution. Most of them were struggling just to survive, while some had managed to overcome adversities and become successful and wealthy. What they had in common is that they all faced trials--small or large--which led to frustration, helplessness, pain and sorrow, and anxiety. How did James counsel them? He did not say, "I am sorry that you are suffering so much." He said, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds..." (2). Usually people regard trials as burdens, but believers should consider them pure joy. What is pure joy? It is not mere human and temporal happiness, but rather spiritual, enduring, complete joy, which comes from heaven. This is a mysterious joy that believers can experience in any circumstance. When trials come, we should consider them pure joy. "Consider" means "to hold a view or to have an opinion." How we see things or what opinion we have makes a big difference. When trials come, how do you see them? What is your opinion about them? Depending on our attitude, they can be a stumbling stone, or a steppingstone.

How, then, can we consider trials pure joy? Verse 3 says, "...because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance." James said that these trials are for the testing of our faith. Usually people think trials are meaningless sufferings to be avoided. But they are given to "test" our faith, which means to prove the genuineness of our faith through a thorough examination. Genuine faith is free from impurity. Sometimes our faith is intermingled with false hopes, worldly desires or passions, or impure thoughts. When our faith is impure, we are not joyful or Spirit-filled or vibrant; we are like a sick fish floating downstream with no strength to swim. What can make our faith pure? God is incredibly wise. He does not argue with us or contend with us; he just gives us trials. In his great patience, he does not punish us as our sins deserve. He gives us trials to purify our faith so that we may have real joy. These trials are of many kinds: trouble with children, sour relationships with others, financial difficulty, health issues, or a pandemic or wildfires. Actually, these are times to experience God's love. Through trials, our faith is purified, just as gold is refined in a fiery smelting furnace (1Pe 1:7). When we see trials from God's point of view, we can have pure joy.

The fruit of purified faith is perseverance. Perseverance is not a passive submission to circumstances, but a strong, active challenging response. It enables us to confront and overcome all kinds of difficulties. In fact, perseverance is one of the most valuable traits a person can have. It is the driving force of success in every area of life: academics, athletics, business, and politics. How much more this is true in spiritual life. Perseverance enables us to live a godly life. Verse 4 tells us the outcome: "Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Perseverance produces godly character which is mature and complete (Ro 5:3b-4). This is God's goal in our lives: to conform us to the image of Jesus (Ro 8:29-30). As Jesus is humble, loving, compassionate, holy, merciful, righteous, and just, truthful, trustworthy, and gracious, so we become like him. We cannot be perfect until Jesus comes again and fully transforms us by his power. But we can grow in his likeness. When we are growing spiritually, our souls are satisfied, and full of joy, and we feel that we lack nothing. With this in mind when trials come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, not problems.

Though we know the spiritual benefits that trials bring, still, we may feel unequipped to deal with them when they come. Then we become frustrated or confused and wonder why the trial has come upon us. We may think that God is punishing us, or doubt that he loves us and have an ominous premonition about bad things which may soon happen to us. We may not know what to do. In fact, we lack wisdom. How can we obtain wisdom? Through Google? If you ask Google about wisdom, you will be directed to many Christian sites which quote Bible verses. Shall we call a friend or mentor? That is helpful, but not sufficient. What should we do?

Let us read verse 5. "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." We should come to God directly. This is the best way to get true wisdom. This is the great privilege given to each and every child of God. God is pleased when we go to him for wisdom instead of going somewhere else. The reservoir of his wisdom is infinite, and his wisdom is perfect. In military conflict, the army which has satellite surveillance has a great advantage. They can see the whole battlefield and deploy troops in the best way. But this is limited in time, space, and scope. However, God is infinite and unlimited. God sees everything--past, present and future. God knows everything, inside and out. God is almighty and nothing can hinder him from carrying out his will.

Even though God has great wisdom, if he was stingy, like Mr. Grinch, we might hesitate to ask. But God is very generous. He gives extremely valuable gifts to those in need free of charge. He does not rebuke us, pointing out our faults. He does not say, "In the time of blessing you never came to me. Why do you come to me now, in the time of trouble?!" King Manasseh was the most evil king in Israel's history. But in the time of trial, he humbled himself before God and prayed. The Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea and delivered him (2Ch 33:13). God is so patient and generous that he sent his one and only Son Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Knowing who God is encourages us to ask him for wisdom in times of trial.

Nevertheless, there is one condition to meet when we come to him. We must believe and not doubt (6a). When Hannah was in great distress over her barrenness, she did not fight with her rival or nag her husband. She came to God, pouring out her agony of soul before him and made a vow. She believed without doubting that God heard her prayer and would answer. Then God gave her a son--Samuel, a great servant of God, who would change the course of Israel's history (1Sa 1:9-20). However, if someone doubts, they are like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind (6). That person should not expect anything from the Lord (7). Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do (8). Here we learn that doubt is a serious spiritual disease. Those who doubt discredit God's power, love and goodness. This doubt comes to those who are not committed to God, those who do not trust God. When we trust him, God is ready to bless us.

In the midst of teaching how to overcome trials, James deals with the poor and the rich in verses 9-11. Why? It is because there was conflict between them in the churches. The poor were marginalized and without a voice in church decisions, while the rich tended to be influential on the basis of wealth, not godliness. So their church's policies could be guided by economics rather than faith. To rectify this situation, James exhorted them to consider faith as most important. The poor should not shrink back because they had no money. Though they seem to be insignificant in the eyes of the world, they should have confidence that the Lord has exalted them to a high position: by faith they are children of God! (2:1,5) They should freely speak up and participate in the work of God positively.

On the other hand, the rich should be humble. Though they are envied in the world, they are sinners before God. They should not depend on money or boast about it, for it will vanish like a wildflower. They will also fade away even while they go about their business (10-11). They should realize that to God, money does not matter; faith is all that matters. The sole basis for our security and confidence should be faith in Jesus Christ. In the Christian community, when we value faith in Christ more than anything else, we can live harmoniously and work together for the glory of God. We can go through trials together and overcome them. James concludes: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will

receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (12). Our trials are not worth comparing with the glorious crown of life the Lord will give us. As I prepared this message, I thought about the trials the Lord has used in my life, especially to raise my children. Though it has been painful at times, God helped me learn his father's heart, taught me to pray persistently and fervently, and assured me of the crown of life. So I am positive about going through trials. What are your trials? Whatever they are, let us persevere through our trials, overcome them, and receive God's blessing.

Second, how to overcome temptation (13-18). Every trial is accompanied by temptations. When we face financial difficulty, we are tempted to doubt God's provision. If we confront the death of a loved one, we are tempted to doubt God's love. In times of unjust suffering, we are tempted to doubt God's justice and goodness. If we are betrayed, we are tempted to doubt God's faithfulness. Temptation comes to everyone; no one is exempt from it (1Co 10:13). Even Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are (Heb 2:18). How should we understand these temptations? How can we overcome these temptations? In verses 13-15 we learn the source of temptation and the consequences of falling into it. Verses 16-18 tell us how to overcome it.

Verse 13 says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." When temptation comes, we tend to blame God, saying, "Why did God put me in this situation?" Many people ask, "Why did God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil right in the middle of the garden and then tell Adam and Eve not to eat from it?" "Is God trying to trap us?" "Does he enjoy watching us fail?" But God cannot be tempted by evil. And God does not tempt anyone. God is holy and perfectly sinless. God is light; in him, there is no darkness at all (1Jn 1:5b). As light and darkness cannot coexist in the same space, God cannot coexist with sin and evil. So he cannot be the source of temptation (Heb 6:18). We should not blame God for temptation. Then, where does it come from?

Verse 14 says, "...but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." Though James does not mention

the devil, the phrase “dragged away” implies that the devil is behind temptations. Our evil desires are used by the devil to drag us away, just as a fisherman uses bait to entice a fish and capture it. In verse 16, the phrase, “Don’t be deceived” also implies the devil is the one who deceives. However, James emphasizes that the main reason for temptation is within us. We should not blame God, or even the devil. In Genesis 3, the devil deceived the woman by telling a lie which was half true. The woman tried to excuse herself, blaming the devil. But God did not accept this excuse; she was accountable for her sin. Similarly, the man tried to blame the woman, but God did not accept his excuse either; he was accountable for his sin. Each person is accountable for their own sin. There are no excuses. Period. When temptation comes, we should know that our evil desire is the main problem and fight against our own evil desires, not someone or something else.

We find more reason to fight against our sinful desires as we consider the consequences of falling into temptation. Verse 15 says, “Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” We tend to minimize our sinful desires. For example, as Jesus says, it is easy for us to entertain evil thoughts of sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly (Mk 7:21-22). But these thoughts become planted in our hearts like cancer which develops rapidly and is unstoppable. Finally it brings forth death. This is why we should take immediate, extreme action to get rid of evil thoughts. Since evil thoughts are so powerful, we cannot do this with our own strength. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, James tells how to overcome temptations. He exhorted them, “Don’t be deceived” (16). When we have spiritual discernment of what is right and wrong, and sure confidence in God and his love for us, we can stand firm and not be deceived when temptation comes. This discernment and confidence come from knowing who God is. Verse 17 says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” God is the Father of the heavenly lights. God is the Creator and the source of light. Psalm 104:2 says, “The Lord wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent.” Even the sun and moon will disappear when Jesus

comes again (Mt 24:29). All creation will disappear, but God remains forever (Ps 102:26). In this verse we can learn some of God's attributes. God is good; he is always good to his children. God's motive in all that he does is for the good of his creation. God always works for the good of those he loves (Ro 8:28). God uses even trials for a good purpose. God is also faithful and unchanging. God is not capricious. God is never tired or absent. God is always there. As a Father, God is loving and generous. He always gives the best gifts to his children (Mt 7:11). When we know who God is, we can be sure that every good and perfect gift comes from him. What is the best gift?

Verse 18 says, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created." The "word of truth" is the gospel (Eph 1:3; Col 1:5). Through the gospel, God gave us new life and made us his children and heirs of his kingdom. This is only God's grace. "First fruits" carries the idea of a foretaste of that which is to come. Our salvation is the first step in making all things new, including a new heaven and a new earth. When we know all these truths, we can stand firm and not be deceived. This kind of inner victory is the secret to overcoming trials and temptations. Let us consider all trials as pure joy. Let us ask God's wisdom to overcome trials and temptations so that we may receive the crown of life.