



The Letters of James and Peter

Week 1

Day 1 - James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Understanding the Passage:

James, the author of this epistle (letter), is often thought to be James son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples. However, most scholars will say it was actually written by Jesus' half-brother. By the time this letter was written (some date it as early as 40s CE), James had become one of the key leaders of the Church in Jerusalem. What's interesting is James does not appear to be a follower of Jesus as he is presented in the gospels. At minimum he is presented as an outsider, and at most he is actually seen as disbelieving and criticizing Jesus (Mark 3:31-35; John 7:5). So how does someone go from opposing Jesus' ministry to a central leader of His Church? The best response we have is that he encountered the resurrected Jesus, and it changed him forever (1 Cor 15:7). Now the transformed brother of Jesus writes in a style that mirrors the Sermon on the Mount more than any of the other New Testament authors (Matt 5-7). Some question his audience, the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion (or diaspora). The twelve tribes reference the twelve tribes of Israel, but it is commonly understood to be a reference to Church, which at its early stages was still primarily a Jewish movement, spreading out from Jerusalem to the surrounding cities and nations. Referencing the dispersion simultaneously references this growth outward as well as the exile of Israel in the Old Testament. The church was rapidly growing, drawing in followers across socio-economic, political, and ethnic boundaries, and facing persecution. These circumstances led James to write a letter to the Church at large, encouraging them to enact wisdom by putting Jesus' teaching into action.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- How do you imagine James' experience and transition from critic to calling Jesus Lord?
- What would it have taken for you to make that change and become the leader of your brother's movement alongside Peter?
- What new challenges does a growing church face?
- How might their circumstances compare and contrast to Israel dispersed across the nations in exile (Jer 29:4-14)?

Day 2 - James 1:2-4

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Understanding the Passage:

Last week, a man shared with me the challenges in his life. It was a “had everything, lost everything” kind of story. There was a time a couple of years ago he had “about thirteen really significant problems crushing him” – issues with his marriage, work, money, legal issues, and a ton of other challenges. He laughed and said, “now I am down to just three or four really big ones, so I’m good.” Most importantly, he shared the change that the challenges have wrought. He has been humbled, and now he realizes now that he is in no way self-reliant. We discussed God’s agenda for him. Is it success? Happiness? Financial security? Prestige? A conflict-free life? No, God’s agenda for him is the same as God’s agenda for you and me: holiness.

In a conversation I had recently with a young couple preparing for marriage, I noted that the marriage vows point to better AND worse, richer AND poorer, sickness AND health. The groom made a comment that said, “we are ready for both, but I hope it is mostly the better part.” My response was “well, I hope you get all of it, because otherwise your marriage will be shallow and superficial. You don’t grow during the ‘better’ part.”

The word translated “testing,” is the Greek “dokimion,” and it literally means “to prove.” It refers to the process they would use to prove coins were pure, and not alloyed with some lesser valued metal. How we face trials is our witness – it is a demonstration to the world of the power of faith to transform the human soul.

We learn right away in this letter that James doesn’t pull any punches. Following Jesus won’t make your life easier. It very well may make it harder. But the challenges will, if we embrace them so they have their “full effect,” draw us closer to God. Trials can produce a tested faith, and that tested faith leads to 1) joy, 2) maturity, and 3) satisfaction (lacking nothing.) So when the trials come that test our faith, let’s lean in.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Twice in three verses, James uses the word “trial.” How would you define a trial?
- What have been the most significant trials in your life, and how have they changed you? How have they changed your faith?
- We are to consider it “nothing but joy” when we face trials. What is the difference between joy and happiness?

Day 3 - James 1:5-8

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. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Understanding the Passage:

James continues his thoughts from the previous verses: as you are in the midst of trials, seek God's wisdom because God is generous to give it. How many of us make it our first reaction to go to God in prayer when we face difficult situations? Even more to the point, how many of us actually make space to listen and receive that wisdom? I would venture to guess not many of us. We are smart, self-motivated, self-actualizing, independent people. This reality brings us to our next point. What does James mean about doubting and being double minded? For many of us, we may simply doubt that God would actually give us wisdom or meet us in our time of need, and therefore we have our need for independence. As we look at the rest of James, though, I think he may have other 'doubts' in mind as well. In James 3:13-18, we see that God's wisdom is given to us, but it flies in the face of the world's wisdom: it is humble, gentle, peaceful, void of envy and selfish ambition. So, what do we do when the answer God generously gives actually brings up doubt and double-mindedness within us? What do we do when we simply don't like God's answer? Maybe this tension is the perfecting patience and perseverance referenced in James 1:2-4, and maybe this is at the heart of James' writing as he returns to this issue time and again. James calls us to be doers of God's word later in chapter 1 and prayerfully patient in the closing thoughts of the book (5:7-20). James calls us to stand firm in trusting God and His wisdom, regardless of either the source of our trials or the believed results of that wisdom.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Describe a time when you needed God's wisdom.
- Have you ever felt double-minded or tossed like a wave? What was that experience like for you?
- Which set of doubts do you struggle with more: trusting God to give it or following through with what He's given?
- James repeats themes often; how do you see other passages in James reflecting back and illuminating this passage?

Day 4 - James 1:9-11

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

Understanding the Passage:

You may be starting to notice that chapter 1 may feel more like a list of topics or even a (dirty) laundry list than a flowing discourse. James is building his set of topics here in chapter 1 before he works his way back down the list in chapters 2-5. This is a common ancient Jewish writing style called a chiasm, where language and themes appear to mirror each other instead of the clean flowing thought we are used to in our more western thinking. The writer comes now to the theme of wealth, and he'll come back around to it indirectly in 1:27—2:7, and more directly in 4:13—5:6. The heart of James' thought on wealth seems to be centered around Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God. The kingdom is an eternal, upside-down reality, where the factors of power in human history (wealth, might, etc.) suddenly mean very little (c.f. Matt 4:23—5:12; Luke 6:17-31). God has promised the kingdom to those who have nothing. This wasn't just a cute teaching but a deep reality to James. Therefore, wealth, while not evil, merely has fading value, and those who have it should keep it in that perspective. The imagery of a fading flower is poignant for James' wealthy readers. We love the beauty of flowers, but their fleeting nature in comparison with the longevity of a lifetime puts our own pursuits into perspective with eternity. This

basic reality will set up how James addresses the choices we make in regard to relationships and wealth in the coming chapters.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- How do you see Jesus' teaching influencing James?
- How does the way you think about wealth affect the way you relate to people both inside and outside the church?
- How does this upside-down kingdom mindset challenge your personally approach to wealth?
- How do you think it should challenge our church as a whole?

Day 5 - James 1:12-18

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. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

Understanding the Passage:

James returns to the theme of perseverance in suffering. It's a theme we, particularly as American Christians, would like to leave behind, but James gives us perspective here. Whereas before perseverance brought us the promise of maturity, now it brings us the promise of the crown of life. The crown of life places our circumstances within an eternal perspective, where God is the source of our reward. If God is our source, this demands an evaluation – can I trust this source? What if God is the source of my suffering? It's so common to assume that since "God is in control," then He is the reason bad things are happening, but James is quick to silence this notion. James is practically shouting, "God is good!" All good things come from Him. Everything else, James says, comes from another source. So, now it's time for self-examination. James calls us to own the evil within our hearts and see how it produces death in our own lives. This plays out practically when he revisits the topic in 4:1-12. We see how easily people slip into a victim mentality, saying, "people are against me," or "God isn't giving me what I asked for." Our current passage tells us to approach life with the knowledge of our own sinfulness and a simple trust in God's goodness. In fact, God has generously given us a new birth – a new life in freedom from sin!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- What do you think the promise of the crown of life is? What is its significance to you?
- How does this passage affirm or challenge your views of God?
- What is the relationship between human sin and human suffering?
- What is this new birth? How can we experience it?