

## Real Faith

### *James 1:1-11*

#### Introduction

Through every sentence and paragraph that makes up James's epistle, it oozes with wisdom as to how the Christian can live out his/her faith. The epistle helps us understand what faith looks like while suffering, how it responds to both poverty and wealth, how faith in Jesus impacts our speech, and how our faith as Christians helps us navigate life in our upside-down world.

The group of Christians James addressed his letter to were Jewish Christians who understood what it meant to be a marginalized people, even before faith in Jesus; but after belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah, they were also ostracized by members of their community, and for some, their own family members.

So, who was James? Let me begin by stating the two things that we know about the person who wrote this epistle: 1) James was the half-brother of Jesus, and 2) he did not believe in Jesus until he witnessed His resurrection. Here is why I am mostly certain that James, the half-brother of Jesus (and not the apostle James) wrote this epistle:

1. The apostle James died by execution under Herod before this epistle was written (Acts 12:1-2), and the James mentioned in Galatians 2 and Acts 15 is the brother of Jesus who became a predominant leader in the Jerusalem church.
2. We are told in the gospels that Jesus had biological brothers who were born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth who did not fully believe in Jesus even though they grew up with Jesus (see Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 7:3-5).
3. Jesus appeared to his brother, James, and then to the rest of His brothers, after his resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:6-7).

However, when James did finally believe in Jesus, he was all-in on who his older brother claimed to be, and his belief was backed up by his life, actions, and convictions. Not only was James all-in when it came to Jesus, but how he introduced himself in his epistle tells us a lot about who he was as a man of God: **"James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad..."** (v. 1).

James does not introduce himself as the half-brother of Jesus, but as a "bond-servant" of God. The Greek word for "bond-servant" is *doulos*, and it literally means "slave." In other words, James' authority as a leader does not come from his biological relationship to Jesus, but his submission to the Lordship of Christ, not as his older brother, but as the King of kings and Lord of lords. The other thing to note here is that James places "God" and "the Lord Jesus" side-by-

side, implying that Jesus' words before James believed are the truth that he has since bowed his knee too (see John 10:30).

I believe that James finally believed that his brother was the Messiah when Jesus appeared to him after He rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:6-7), which is a good reminder right from the very beginning of James, that no one who has truly encountered the resurrected Christ can remain unchanged by an encounter with the living Christ. James went from a doubter who grew up with Jesus to a believer who would identify himself as a slave to God, and held Jesus as the Lord over his life.

The dispersed Christians James addressed his letter to most likely include hundreds of Christians who fled Jerusalem as a result of the stoning of Stephen and the great persecution Saul (before his conversion and was renamed "Paul") and others brought upon the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. I think James originally addressed his letter to those we read about in Acts 8:1-3,

**"Now Saul approved of putting Stephen to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles. Some devout men buried Stephen, and mourned loudly for him. But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house; and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison."**

It was to these Christians (and others), and now to us, that James' letter addresses. The two great themes that are repeated through this epistle are faith (a word used at least 14 times) and obedience to God as the fruit of genuine faith (there over 50 imperatives given throughout James regarding this). This is the reason for the title of my sermon series: Faith and Works. There were other titles I thought of while preparing for this sermon series that came to mind, such as: Faith-Acts, Faith-Works, but settled for Faith and Works. If you are looking for a verse that encapsulates the theme of James, I submit to you James 2:17, **"In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself."**

With the time that I have left, I would like to direct your attention to three categories that James addresses in verses 2-11 that set the tone for the rest of the epistle: 1) suffering and joy (vv. 2-4), 2) wisdom and knowledge (vv. 5-8), and 3) poverty and wealth (vv. 9-11).

### **Suffering and Joy are Compatible (vv. 1-4)**

Suffering and joy sound just as incompatible as water and oil do they not? Whoever wanted to sign up for a healthy dose of suffering? You might be thinking to yourself: "Jesus did." You are correct in thinking so, but do not forget that on the eve of His suffering, we are told our Lord prayed while in agony over what He was about to suffer: **"And being in agony, He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground"** (Luke 22:44). Jesus even included in His prayer, **"Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done"** (22:42).

The world tends to look at joy and suffering as incomparable, but James gives us a different perspective, he informs these dispersed Jewish Christians who have lost their homes and loved ones, **“Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials...”** Notice that James does not use the word “some” but the word “all” when it comes to the level of joy that we should have over the “various trials” we will experience in life.

Why should we consider it “all joy” when things get difficult in life? On the surface, it sounds like James is giving us the same advice Bobby McFerrin gave us in the late 80’s with his one-hit-wonder song, *Don’t Worry, Be Happy*. Some of you remember the song:

Here's a little song I wrote  
You might want to sing it note for note  
Don't worry, be happy  
In every life we have some trouble  
But when you worry you make it double  
Don't worry, be happy

Ain't got no cash, ain't got no style  
Ain't got no one to make you smile  
Don't worry, be happy  
Cos when you worry, your face will frown  
And that will bring everybody down  
So don't worry, be happy

Did you know that McFerrin’s song was number-one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart for two weeks straight and that he received a Grammy for Song of the Year for that song? If James told these Christians the same thing Bobby McFerrin wrote in his song, they would have assumed that James was out of touch at best, and crazy at worse! Thankfully, James is not telling Christians who face the various trials that come our way to fake a smile and repeat to ourselves: “Don’t worry, be happy.” That just will not work! James also experienced the fear his dear brothers and sisters experienced when persecution came into their city, and he no doubt felt the loss of dear Stephen when he had his head and body crushed under a barrage of rocks that resulted in Stephen’s martyrdom (see Acts 7).

James is not talking about putting a smile on your face or faking your joy after receiving news of a terminal illness, the loss of a job, or the death of a loved one. He is reminding us that there is purpose behind our suffering even when it is brought to us by the hands of evil men or rouge cells in your body. Behind your suffering is a good God who does not waste your tears nor your hurts. What James wants these Christians to understand, and what the Spirit of God wants us to know, is that the various trials you will experience are allowed into your life by design and with purpose. Consider what two other apostles had to say about the purpose of suffering in the Christian life:

**The Apostle Peter:** *“In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith,*

*being more precious than gold which perishes though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ...” (1 Pet. 1:6–7)*

**The Apostle Paul:** “...but we also celebrate in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” (Rom. 5:3–5)

It is also important to note that James informs us that trials will come. The question is not “if” they come, but “when” they come (v. 2). We will come back to the significance of verses 3-4 next week when we look at verse 12, but for now you should know that your trials are producing something in you dear Christian. What those trials are producing is the kind of endurance that is fueled by hope because what others mean for evil, or what the hard things in life will ultimately be used for is not your demise or destruction, but your good, because such trials are allowed for two purposes in your life: God’s glory and your good. What else could verse 4 mean? Such trials are wielded by the Almighty to bring about the following in your life: “...that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Again, we will unpack this truth a bit more next week, but for now, think of “trials” as “trails” that God has purposed to use, to bring about verse 12 in your life: “**Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.**”

### **Wisdom for Life is Found in God (vv. 5-8)**

When we walk through the various trials that will come, such painful experiences can throw us through a tailspin. This is why some “deconstruct” their faith and walk away from the Christian faith and ask questions like: “How can a good God allow such and such into my life?” You can look at your circumstances and draw from those things your own conclusions without any regard for how God intends to use such trials to produce something much more lasting and beautiful in your life.

Think about how easy it is to walk through your suffering and the hard things of life with little regard to seek wisdom from the One who has called us to walk through such trials. The point of verses 5-8 is that all of life requires a greater wisdom that can only come from the One whose knowledge and understanding of your life and the world is infinite. The fact of the matter is that you really do not know what is coming in while you sit and listen to this sermon. You do not know if there is some rogue cell in your body that threatens certain parts of your body. On a Monday (June 30<sup>th</sup>) I was told that my uncle was in hospice and by Thursday morning (July 3<sup>rd</sup>) he was dead. This is why Jesus said, “**For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the sky, that they do not sow, nor reap, nor gather crops into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more important than they?**” (Matt. 6:25–26)? Jesus did not just tell us to not worry but provided the best way to fight and push back our

anxiety: **“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided to you”** (Matt. 6:33).

Listen, when the trials come in the form of waves or even tsunamis, if your faith is not tethered to the One who is sovereign over such waves, you will be **“driven and tossed by the wind”** (Jas. 1:6). The point James is making in verse 5 is that we do what Jesus told us to do: Don’t lean onto your own understanding in the midst of your trial but seek wisdom from the God who wants to use your trials to produce what is lacking in you. Instead of asking, “Why me?” You ought to ask: “Lord, please use this trial in a way that helps me know and understand you more so that I can live the life you have called me to live better.” Instead of running to your own conclusions, seek wisdom from the One who sees the whole picture of your life. Instead of running to whatever solution you think is best, run to Him who knows what is best!

### **Our Treasure is Not Earthly (vv. 9-11)**

Finally, regardless of what you have in your bank account, your position and status before God has nothing to do with what the world thinks of you but what God thinks of you. The real question is not how much you have of this world, but how much of your heart does the Lord have of you? What is your so-called “faith”? Is it just religion? Where or who is your treasure? Most of those to whom James was writing, were poor. With the persecution that came to Jerusalem, they had lost their income, property, and social status. However, there were some who were wealthy.

For those who are poor, it is easy to conclude that God has forgotten them. For those who are wealthy, it is easy to forget God. The danger for both groups of people is to become spiritually near-sighted to the point that you fail to set your eyes on what it is that you did not work for and cannot lose. How can you experience joy in suffering? Where does lasting wisdom really come from, wisdom that guides rather than blinds? It comes from setting our eyes upon that which has been given and promised to those who have been truly saved by the grace of God through faith in His Son, to receive the gift of salvation that you cannot work for or earn.

Those who share in James’ status as **“bond-servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 1), are heirs of Him who spoke and owns the cattle on a thousand hills! The poor are to *glorify in their high position* as those whose inheritance and status is found in the King of kings and Lord of lords! The rich person who also is a **“bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,”** must hold his/her wealth with an open hand in a way that honors God and serves His people. Why? Well, in the words of the famous missionary, CT Studd: “Only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last.”

Let me leave you with this final thought: When you are going through the hard stuff, know that because of your identity as a Christian, that God is more interested in your good than you can ever wrap your mind around. When the trials come, because you are a Christian this much is true: “You are more sinful than you know and more loved than you imagine.”