

2

Tested Faith

1:1–18

I. GOD IS SERIOUS ABOUT THIS FAITH BUSINESS—1:1–8.

In these verses, James tells us to do three things:

A. Consider trials joy—1:2–3.

Whenever: There is a progression of thought here from trials to testing of faith to endurance. Peter and Paul have similar lists. In 1 Peter 1:6–7 various trials prove faith which will receive praise and glory at the revelation of Christ. Paul’s list is in Romans 5:3–4, in which suffering produces endurance which produces character which produces hope which will not be disappointed.

The difference in the lists, however, is that in James there is no eschatological end as in Peter and Romans. When James says, “whenever [*hotan*] you face trials,” he seems to indicate that trials are a normal part of the Christian life. You are always going to have trials in this life; the question is whether you will consider it joy or not.

Because: But why should we be joyful when we encounter trials? We have hinted at it already—because they prove that our faith is real and they produce endurance. We really get our understanding of how testing confirms our faith from 1 Peter. In one sense, the reality of our faith is proven in trials when we continue to cling to Christ and are enabled to lift our eyes above the situation to rest in his eternal purposes. In another sense, Peter teaches that our experience of trials further confirms that our lives are united to Christ—if he suffered, we will suffer.¹²

This is one of those instances in which the Bible challenges us to hold two seemingly contradictory thoughts in our minds at the same time—calling us to be joyful in suffering. What does this look like?

I think Paul Tournier begins to get at it in his book, *Creative Suffering*, which he wrote shortly after the death of his wife, Nelly. His thesis is that suffering can actually increase one’s creativity rather than diminish it, and that this should be especially so for the Christian. For instance, he felt that his being an orphan contributed to his creativity and enabled insight that he would have had no other way. He says something similar to this about his grief. It is an illustration of how it is possible to live out this command to be joyful in suffering by recognizing that God is working through it:

Since my wife’s death I have come to realize that I had lived all my life in mourning, waiting for reunion in heaven with my parents. Nelly had felt that this was so, because just before

she died she said to me that she would meet them there. So I have lived my whole life in their unseen presence, in the atmosphere of faith, love, and poetry that characterized their own life. Now, with my new bereavement, my link with heaven is made stronger still, and that stimulates, rather than diminishes, my interest in the problems of this world. The human heart does not obey the rules of logic; it is constitutionally contradictory. I can truly say that I have a great grief and that I am a happy man.¹³

B. Let perseverance finish its work—1:4–5. But you will notice that the end result is not automatic. Maturity and completeness only come if we let perseverance finish its work.

Complete: We must allow this perseverance to make us whole people. The Greek word is *teleios*, literally, “perfect.” It has a moral connotation to it and thus stands in contrast to the “double-minded” man about whom we read in v. 8.

The point is that suffering does not automatically fill one out as a godly person. Many who suffer do build endurance—they get tougher and tougher—but not necessarily more and more godly. We can think of many of our friends who have suffered much, but who, instead of growing in their love for Christ and others, have grown bitter and hard. Perhaps you do not need to think of anyone else—perhaps you are the one who has become embittered and hardened. So what are we to do to allow perseverance to continue its work?

Lacking: The next verse gives the answer and is almost humorous: “If any of you lacks wisdom. . .” Who in his right mind would say, “I may lack a number of things, but wisdom is not one of them”? Of course we lack wisdom, and we especially lack wisdom in knowing how to let perseverance complete its work.

We are immediately driven to prayer by this lack with an assurance of God’s character. He tells us to ask God for wisdom with the assurance that he is one who gives generously and without “hesitation”; that is, without the same hesitation that we have in asking.

Now, here is something definite for which God tells you and me to pray. There can be no doubt whether or not it is his will, or whether or not such a prayer is in accordance with Jesus’ name. Therefore, if you ask for wisdom he will give it, and if you do not have wisdom it is because you have not asked God for it.

Elisabeth Elliot is a great example of one who has received wisdom that has enabled her to allow perseverance to have its perfect work. She writes in her little book, *Facing the Death of Someone You Love*:

I know of nothing more paralyzing, more deadly, than self-pity. It is a death that has no resurrection, a sink-hole from which no rescuing hand can drag you because you have chosen to sink. But it must be refused. In order to refuse it, of course, I must recognize it for what it is. Amy Carmichael, in her sword-thrust of a book, *If*, wrote, “If I make much of anything appointed, magnify it secretly to myself or insidiously to others, then I know nothing of

Calvary love.” That’s a good definition of self-pity—making much of the “appointed,” magnifying it, dwelling on one’s own losses, looking with envy on those who appear to be more fortunate than oneself, asking “Why me, LORD?” (remembering the “weight of glory” ought to be a sufficient answer to that question). It is one thing to call a spade a spade, to acknowledge that this thing is indeed suffering. It’s no use telling yourself it’s nothing. When Paul called it a “slight” affliction he meant it only by comparison with the glory. But it’s another thing to regard one’s own suffering as uncommon, or disproportionate, or undeserved. What have “deserts” got to do with anything? We are all under Mercy, and Christ knows the precise weight and proportion of our sufferings—*He bore them*. He carried our sorrows. He suffered, wrote George Macdonald, not that we might not suffer, but that our sufferings might be like His. To hell, then, with self-pity.¹⁴

C. Praying with faith—1:6–8.

Shapes our requests: We have just seen that we may have absolute confidence that we will be given wisdom when we ask for it because it is clearly something that God wants us to have. If verse 5 is about the quality of God’s giving, verses 6–8 are about the quality of man’s asking. This strong admonition that we must believe and not doubt when we pray must cause us to shape our requests carefully. We must pray for what God wants. In some instances, like this one, that is easy—he wants us to have wisdom; he wants us to be like Christ; he wants us to glorify him. In other cases, that is impossible to know what God wants—concerning a loved one with an illness, a financial decision, or what person to marry. How must we shape our requests in those situations? After the manner of the Savior’s prayer: “If it be your will.” Now, most of us do that already; the exhortation, however, is to do it and *mean* it. For instance, before you come to God and ask that he would give you that house if it is his will, make sure that you mean it. Do you really want him not to give it to you if it is not his will, or are you only adding that phrase to help “twist his arm”?

Reflecting on the Greek word (*dipsukos*), translated “double-minded,” Os Guinness defines doubt as a “state of mind in suspension between faith and unbelief so that it is neither of them wholly and it is each only partly.”¹⁵ Guinness says that the secret to escaping doubt is thanksgiving, which is exactly what Paul indicates in Philippians 4:6: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything with prayer and supplication, *with thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God.” Living and praying in a constant state of gratitude focuses one’s mind and heart on the character of God and thus increases faith and confidence in him.

Shapes our approach: Secondly, it must shape our approach. If we have shaped our request so that it is fitting with the Word of God and we have submitted our wills to his, then we must ask with full confidence that he will do what is best. James warns that one who doubts the character and the ability of God in prayer should not pray. In fact, he adds that the instability of one’s approach to God reflects the instability of the rest of one’s life. God is serious about this faith business! When he tells us to believe in him, he means for that to settle the issue. We must be careful not to shoot off prayers to God without first reflecting on his sovereignty and his sure

promises. We must take time to prepare ourselves to come into his throne room with respect and be prepared to do business with him.

The great theologian, Jonathan Edwards, admonished his readers to pray for revival. Note the God-centeredness of his thought:

It is very apparent from the work of God, that he is wont often to try the faith and patience of his people, when crying to him for some great and important mercy, by withholding the mercy sought, for a season; and not only so, but at first to cause an increase of dark appearances. And yet he, without fail, at last succeeds those who continue instant in prayer, with all perseverance, and “will not let him go except he blesses...” Whatever our hopes may be, we must be content to be ignorant of the times and seasons, which the Father hath put in his power: and must be willing that God should answer prayer, and fulfill his own glorious promises, in His own time.¹⁶

II. EYES ON THE GOAL—1:9-18.

In the early days of the school, one of my Bible professors at Covenant College, Chuck Anderson, was also the cross-country coach. One year Paul Ward, James Ward’s brother (author of the New City tune to “Rock of Ages”) came out for the team. Chuck says that Paul was awful at first. The first race, he came in very near the end of the pack. The next race, he was only a little better. But then there was improvement. He began to come in just short of the winner. And eventually he began to win races. Finally, Chuck asked him what was up, what the secret was of his new success. Paul said, “Coach, Lois (his wife to be) is waiting for me at the finish line. Coach, she is really beautiful!”

Have you noticed how many examples there are in Scripture of people who have been saved from a disastrous attitude by a transcendent perspective? Think of Elijah after his battle with the prophets of Baal. “I have had enough, LORD. Take my life” (1 Kings 19:5). What changed his attitude? A fresh view of God as the one who speaks calmly in the midst of the storms of life—a renewed vision of the One who had preserved seven thousand faithful ones like Elijah.

Think of Jonah when he was sinking into the depths of the ocean, despairing of life. How did his attitude change even before any assurance that he would be saved? He says it, “When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you to your holy temple” (2:7). He remembered from Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 9 that wherever he was, he could turn in his mind to the temple in Jerusalem and know that as surely as that temple was there, God ruled.

Think of Asaph in Psalm 73, when he was complaining about how easy the wicked had it and that he had lived a righteous life in vain. What saved him from that embittering attitude? Going into the temple, getting a fresh view of God and understanding the ultimate end of the wicked.

And think of Peter who walked on top of the water as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, but sank when he looked at the waves.

Paul explains how this faith worked in Abraham: “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:20, ESV). In other words, Abraham’s faith was fortified by worship.

James is writing primarily to the Jewish Christians who are dispersed throughout the world. They are discouraged as they look at the world around them that is hostile to their faith. Most of them are poor, many of them are being persecuted, and they are tempted to evil on every side. How are they to make it? By casting their eyes on God’s transcendent purposes. The same is true for us. In economic shortage, we must rejoice in our heavenly reward; in trial, we must press on to our reward; in temptation, we must look to the God who is better than what is being offered.

A. Poverty—1:9–11. Although these four paragraphs seem to be disjointed, like a number of proverbs addressing different subjects, they are connected to one another by “stitch words.”¹⁷

The first circumstance that James addresses that could get a believer off track in his attitude is poverty. Notice that in this paragraph it is a “brother” who is in humble circumstances (cf. 2:5), but the one who is rich is not identified as a brother. James is not making a blanket comparison between rich and poor, but rather addressing their particular circumstance. Most of the Christians that James was addressing would have been poor, and the rich that he is describing are those identified in 2:6 who are exploiting and persecuting Christians.

James is telling these Christians that they must remember that though they may be poor and helpless in this world, they have a high position in Christ. They may be getting run over in this world, but this world is not all there is. In fact, compared to eternity, these rich people’s rule is as brief and vulnerable as the grass of Palestine, which is green for only a very short time before the southeast wind, the sirocco, burns it up.

If you are getting beaten up by this world because of your economic vulnerability or your social level, God tells you to focus on what is real: you have a high position in Christ and will reign with him someday. Money, power, social standing cannot acquire what you have. He calls us to think long-term about destinies. Those unbelievers who are powerful and secure in this world will be destroyed in the midst of their business deals and be punished for eternity, while you may suffer for a little while but live with your Savior for eternity.

B. Trial—1:12. Next James addresses trials, which have the potential of moving us to despair.

James urges us to remember that we are being tested, but that test is not to see if we qualify for salvation. How do I know that? I know it because he uses Job as an illustration in 5:11. Job was tested not to qualify but to prove to God’s cosmic Accuser the reality of his faith. Among other reasons, we are tested in the same ways and suffer the same difficulties as the rest of the world in order that God might prove to all in heaven and earth that his people will praise him regardless.

The crown of life is promised to those who stand the test. The Bible is clear that one cannot lose his salvation given him by faith in Jesus Christ. But the proof of salvation is clinging to Christ to the end. Notice the premium put on overcoming in the book of Revelation, for instance. These things are promised to the one who overcomes, “the right to eat from the tree of life” (2:7); “he will not be hurt at all by the second death” (2:11); “I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (2:17); “I will give him authority over the nations” (2:26); “he will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (3:5); “I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21). Your endurance with Christ to the end is not irrelevant.

This does not mean that we will all end nobly, nor does it mean that we will all live victoriously for Christ all our lives. But it does mean that regardless of difficulties, failures, or doubts, if we are clinging to Christ at the end, we will receive the crown of eternal life.

C. Temptation—1:13–15. Another circumstance that can cause us to lose our focus in the Christian life is temptation.

Here James gives a succinct but thorough theology of temptation and sin. The first fact to realize is that God does not tempt to sin. God cannot be the author of evil. In fact, the devil is not even in view here. True, the devil is part of the process, but he cannot implant something in you that was not there all along. The devil may strike a tuning fork beside you in order to get your heart to resonate. But evil desires originate in our hearts. But notice the process. Evil desires or impulses are not sin. Sin is the result of pursuing our evil desires. Furthermore, notice that a sin will not kill you, but allowing sin to reign in your life will. As a Christian, you may resist evil desires. As a Christian, you will sin. But if you really are a Christian you will resist sin and repent of sin to your dying day.

James is telling us not to blame our temptation on God but rather take full responsibility for it. Furthermore, he tells us not to view ourselves as helpless victims but to realize that we may resist temptation and stop short of sin.

We must take seriously the fact that we are sinners. Nobody has made us sinners, no one makes us sin, and there is no temptation that we cannot resist. That must awaken us to treat ourselves with much less trust than we usually do. Friend, if you think that you are not capable of adultery, or pride, or lying, or extortion, or any sin, you are setting yourself up for a fall.

I once read an article by a man who has been on the forefront of the national fight against pornography, having founded the National Coalition Against Pornography and the Religious Alliance Against Pornography. At the time the article was written, he was the pastor of a prestigious church in Ohio. Of all people, he could not be tempted by pornography, could he? He said that he was. He said that when he goes to a hotel he has them disconnect the sex channels to his room. As soon as he comes into the room he recites some verses that he has memorized and prays for the LORD to protect him for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom, his family,

and his church. He then pushes in the channel numbers of the sports or news instead of channel surfing lest he pass by Showtime or HBO. Why? Because he knows that he cannot trust himself, he is a sinner, and this sin could take him far off his course in the Christian life.

- D. Proof—1:16–18.** James does not leave us without proof of God’s faithfulness to us. However, he uses a means that may not be well known in Scripture. It is an appeal to the regularity of creation to prove God’s faithfulness to us.

James says that every good gift that we receive comes from God. But he specifically identifies God as the “Father of the heavenly lights”; that is, the God who has created the planets. Furthermore, he says that this one does not “change like shifting shadows,” like the sun that casts brighter or lesser light on the earth relative to where it is in the sky. In other words, he is the creator and sustainer of the planets, not their equal. And, too, he converted us that we might be the crowning work of his creation.

Now this would have been assuring to Jews. Throughout the Old Testament, God appealed to the covenant he made with creation to assure his people that he would be faithful to them. At the beginning God made a covenant with the creation to reflect what was happening with his people at the center. When man’s relationship with God was harmonious, the Garden was harmonious. When man rebelled, the creation was subjected to entropy. But even with all the disruption of nature, God maintains a certain regularity of physical laws in order to assure us that his redemptive work is continuing. We see it in the renewal of the covenant with Noah after the flood (Gen. 8:22). He states it explicitly in Jeremiah 31:35, 36 and 33:19–22, 25, 26. And the redemption of the creation is the goal revealed in Revelation 21:1, 2.

So what is James saying? He is saying, “Christian, are you downtrodden because you are weak in the culture, beaten down by trials, assailed by temptation? Look around you. This is your Father’s world and he created it for you. He created it not only to provide an arena for your redemption but as a mirror. Every day that the planets are kept in their orbits, that the gases are balanced for sustaining life, that the earth spins on its axis, he says to you, ‘I’m not finished with you; I will never fail you.’”

III. CONCLUSION

We sing that same confidence in one of our favorite hymns. Have you ever noticed the second line of the second stanza of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” by Thomas O. Chisholm?

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Discouraged? Look in your Bibles, yes. But also look out your window. Someone is keeping creation going, and he is doing it for a specific purpose: your redemption.

James—Lesson 2

Read the lesson notes and James 1:19–27.

1. What was encouraging to you in the notes on 1:2–18?
2. James 1:19–21. How would you apply these verses to the context of corporate worship?
3. How could anger hinder you from receiving God’s Word?
4. What is the relationship to sin in the one in whom the Word is implanted?
5. How is this different from the relationship to sin in the one in whom the Word is not implanted?
6. James 1:22–25. How would you apply these verses to the context of corporate worship?
7. How is looking into the Word of God similar to looking into a mirror?

