

## Series James

### This Message Faith Without Perseverance is Dead part 1

“The testing of your faith produces endurance.”

### Scripture James 1:1-12

The Epistle of James was written to help believers to understand and attain spiritual maturity. It is an intensely practical book, and hence has proven to be of great benefit to those who study it and apply its truth to their lives.

Before we begin to think about its practical instructions, let me provide some background information. First, let's identify the writer. James was a very common name in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. There are, in fact, four men in the New Testament with the name James. Almost all New Testament scholars agree that the author of this letter was the half-brother of Jesus. According to Matthew 13, Joseph and Mary had several natural children, both sons and daughters, after Jesus. (*See Matthew 13:54-56.*)

While Jesus was on the earth, his half-brother James apparently did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah (*John 7:2-5*). This must have been of great concern to Joseph and Mary. It was only after the resurrection, after Jesus appeared to him personally (*I Corinthians 15:7*), after Pentecost, that James had a complete change of mind about Jesus. He eventually became the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. (*See Acts 15:13-21; 21:18-19.*) He was such a model of holiness to other believers that he became known as “James the Just” and “James the Righteous.”

James introduced himself in this letter as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The word for “servant” (*doulos*) is better translated “slave.” James wanted his readers to know that he was the joint property of God the Father and Jesus. In the Roman world, a slave had no rights of his own. He was obligated to give his master unquestioning obedience. This was James' attitude toward God and the Lord Jesus. His life was totally given over to them.

James addressed this letter “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” In the early days of the Church, that is, in the years immediately after Pentecost, almost all the followers of Jesus were converted Jews. There were literally thousands of them (*Acts 2:41, 6:7*). Initially, the majority of them lived in Jerusalem. That’s where the Apostles ministered. However, after the martyrdom of Stephen, Scripture informs us that all except a few of these converts were forced to flee Jerusalem because of persecution. (*See Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-20.*) The dispersion of these Jewish converts was an extremely difficult experience for those affected, but it had God’s blessing because it enabled the Church to expand rapidly throughout the Mediterranean region.

Because James had been one of the spiritual leaders of the converted Jews when they were in Jerusalem, he apparently felt obligated to continue to help them after their “scattering among the nations.” He provided pastoral care and encouragement to them through his writing. This letter was written about 15 years after Pentecost. Some commentators think it was written before any of the other materials which eventually appeared in the New Testament.

James was aware of the difficulties endured by the believing Jews of the diaspora. They were suffering in several ways: economically they had few possessions and resources; legally they were second class citizens; religiously they were rejected by both Roman officials and their unsaved fellow Jews. James did not want the recipients of this letter to be so disheartened by their circumstances that they would turn away from their faith. He wanted them to recognize that the adversities they were facing were excellent opportunities for them to develop their faith relationship with God.

The instructions of James fit in perfectly with the overall message of the New Testament. God wants every believer to become spiritually mature. God is disappointed when new believers, who are identified in Scripture as “babes in Christ,” do not grow up. The Apostle Paul explained that God had made it possible for “the body of Christ to be built up ... and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Paul also described the intended outcome: “Then we will no longer be infants ... Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (*Ephesians 4:12-16*).

The goal of the sincere believer is to become everything that God wants, and that is to be “conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ” (*Romans 8:29*). That was the outcome that James wanted of his readers. That is what we will focus on in the messages in the coming weeks.

The main theme of the letter is expressed in a verse in chapter 2 — “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (*James 2:17*). James wanted his readers to be zealous about their faith. He wanted their faith to be real and tangible. For him, genuine faith would be demonstrated in how believers acted — in how they faced their difficulties (*chapter 1*); how they treated their neighbors (*chapter 2*); what they said (*chapter 3*); how they dealt with their failures (*chapter 4*); how they prayed (*chapter 5*). We can think of this letter as a manual for Christian living.

The title for this first message is “Faith Without Perseverance is Dead.” This topic fits with the main theme: “faith, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Faith without the action of perseverance is dead. In subsequent weeks the titles will include “Faith Without Obedience is Dead,” “Faith Without Good Works is Dead,” “Faith Without Fervent Effectual Prayer is Dead,” and so on. There will be nine of these topics in this series. In presenting each topic, I will use the format, “Faith Without ‘X’ (appropriate behavior) Is Dead.”

### **Read James 1:1-12**

James didn’t waste any words before getting to his first main point! Would you want to receive a letter that begins with such an outrageous statement? James had a radical view about the trials and difficulties of life.

Remember that he was writing to members of the Jewish diaspora, individuals who had been forced to flee from familiar surrounding, had lost their homes, left behind most of their possessions, who had taken up residence in unfamiliar locations, and were being discriminated against because of their cultural differences and persecuted because of their faith. And James had the audacity to say to them, “Consider your experiences to be pure joy!”

Actually, James is not the only New Testament writer to make such an outrageous statement. The Apostle Peter used similar words when he wrote to suffering believers, “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, ... but rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ” (*1 Peter 4:12-13*).

The Apostle Paul wrote, “We exult in our tribulations” (*Romans 5:3*). He wrote several of his letters while confined in prison and the theme in his letters was “Rejoice in the Lord always” (*Philippians 4:4*). We cannot accuse James of being out of touch with Biblical reality.

James, Peter, and Paul understood that trials can have an ultimate beneficial spiritual purpose, and they wanted their readers to consider that purpose. The word “consider” in verse 2 means “to contemplate and think deeply about something based on certain facts.” For believers, those facts are the statements of truth given in Scripture. Believers must carefully consider their earthly circumstances from a Biblical perspective.

The word “trials” (Greek: *peirasmois*) refers to conditions that make life difficult for believers, negative circumstances which adversely affect their lives. The difficulties may come upon the believer from external forces, such as interpersonal conflicts, accident, and persecution, or they may be the results of improper desires which arise from within a person. James wrote about both of these negative forces. This week we are focusing on the difficulties which come upon believers from without. Next week we will think about the temptations which get stirred up within us.

James mentioned “many kinds of trials.” Think about the circumstances of his readers. They were Jews who had become followers of Jesus; therefore they no longer fit into their traditional cultural patterns. As Christians they were harassed and persecuted by both the Romans and orthodox Jews. Because they had been forced to leave Jerusalem and their home country, they had become exiles scattered throughout the Mediterranean region. As a result of these circumstances, these 1<sup>st</sup> Century believers did indeed face “trials of many kinds.”

James did not write, “if you encounter various trials.” He wrote “when” because he knew that all God’s people will face challenges to their faith. Immature believers might naively think that if they obey the Lord, they will be spared from earthly difficulties and trials. All too often, when they are confronted with troubles, they become confused and even angry at God. On the other hand, mature believers will be quick to “lean on” God when in the midst of their difficulties, and when they do so, they will experience the power and presence of God in deep and meaningful ways.

Mature believers understand that trials are not necessarily the consequence of sinful disobedience. Trials can be initiated by God Himself according to His purposes. He uses trials to develop and firm up characteristics which are Christ-like. He uses trials to test the strength of and to grow the faith of His followers. God knows what is the best and most effective way to hasten our spiritual growth, and often it's the negative and stressful circumstances which produce the most rapid positive spiritual results in us.

Faith that doesn't waver when under pressure is a characteristic of mature believers. "Perseverance" implies tenacity, stamina, fortitude, and steadfastness. Faith that grows and increases during periods of tribulation, persecution, suffering, and sorrow is proof of developing spiritual maturity.

According to verse 4, there are two important benefits that come from perseverance: maturity and completeness. The word "maturity" refers to full spiritual development. Scripture defines this as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (*Ephesians 4:13*). That's an incredible goal for a believer!

The believer arrives at such a level of spiritual maturity only after trusting God in times of extreme stress. Poets have described their experiences in words such as: "some through the waters, some through the flood, some through the fire, but all through the blood; some through great sorrow, but God gives a song; in the night season and all the day long" (*from the hymn: God Leads Us Along by G. A. Young*).

David was among the many Old Testament saints who experienced difficulties and opposition. He cried out to God many times for relief from his miseries and for guidance. His testimony was: "Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up. ... My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you, ... My tongue will tell of your righteous acts all day long" (*Psalms 71:20, 23-24*).

Trials are God's method to build character before He calls us into service. God put David through many adverse experiences before he became king. God worked with Abraham for 25 years before he was qualified to have Isaac. Moses had 80 years of preparation before he was qualified to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

It is “perseverance” in facing trials which develops maturity of character. Maturity is a promise for those who persevere when under pressure. The word “completeness” has the meaning of “all the parts coming together” so that the finished product is what it should be, with nothing lacking.

The believer who has developed a mature faith is “complete” and pleasing to God. Such a believer is fully qualified for service in the kingdom of God - qualified to fulfill his or her calling. Such a believer has learned how to live victoriously each day. Such a believer comes ever closer to the measure of Jesus Christ Himself. That’s what God wants from all His people.

Verses 5-8 contain God’s offer of help for those who are facing trials. If, during the time of trial, the believer senses the need of guidance, he or she may have it by asking God. Verse 5 is the type of conditional sentence which assumes that every believer will not have adequate wisdom and should turn to God, the sooner the better.

The Bible is filled with admonitions to seek God’s wisdom and also filled with statements about God’s generosity in making wisdom available to everyone who seeks it. As the book of Proverbs exhorts, “If you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones” (*Proverbs 2:1-8*).

In the context of James’ letter, wisdom will be given to believers who need to understand the nature and purpose of trials and to know how to endure them victoriously. James used the verb tense which means to “ask God” not once only, but repeatedly. The promise is that “wisdom will be given every time the believer asks.” God will not scold his children for asking nor berate them for asking. In fact He is delighted when they do.

There is just one possible barrier to God's response. It is the inadequate faith of the believer. When the believer asks, he/she "must believe and not doubt." To believe is to be confident that God will give what is requested. It is confidence in the certainty of God's response. Doubters do not have this confidence. They are compared to the up and down waves of the sea. They will not get the help from God that they need. According to James, indecisiveness in prayer is an indication of indecisiveness in all of life. Doubts when praying are evidence of double-mindedness not only in the person's spiritual life, but in his or her personal life, business life, social life, in every area.

Verses 9 through 11 are inserted into the text to indicate that trials affect every believer, whether they are poor or rich, and that every believer is equally dependent on God for help when enduring trials. It might be assumed that the believer who is a beggar, the person of humble circumstances who has no resources, is eager to seek God's favor when confronted with an overwhelming difficulty. Such a person can take comfort (that's a better word than "pride") in the fact that God accepts him and hears his prayer. His "high position" is his position in Christ.

On the other hand, James wanted his readers to understand that rich believers are just as dependent on God's help and should be just as eager to seek God's help as the beggar. James was cautioning his wealthy readers to not look at their earthly resources as protection against trials. Wealth can be lost, like the flower that withers and dies. God is the only consistent Helper. The wealthy believer is therefore exhorted to glory "in his low position" of dependency rather than to glory in his wealth. He is to rejoice that in Christ he has been brought down to a level where 'the deceitfulness of riches' (*Mark 4: 9*) and the anxiety to amass and retain them are no longer primary or even relevant considerations, since in Christ he has learned to make a totally different evaluation of material prosperity. He has come to see that real wealth lies in the unseen things that are eternal and that material riches are transitory and uncertain. Without a proper attitude toward God, the rich man will pass away, overwhelmed by the trial which afflicts him.

In verse 12, James brings his discussion of the testing of faith to its conclusion. Verse 12 is a promise of reward to the believer who successfully manages the testing. The word "blessed" is linked to the statement of "joy" in verse 2. Both words refer to the transcendent happiness of a person's life.

James uses the term “blessed” to describe the status of the person who perseveres when confronted with trying circumstances and who thereby grows in faith and devotion to God through the difficulties. The phrase, “has stood the test,” (*Greek “dokimos”*) was used to describe the successful testing of precious metals and coins. It was important to receive confirmation that the tested object was genuine. The believers who pass the “stress tests” of earthly life will receive God’s confirmation of spiritual maturity, “the crown [*stephanon* ] of life.”

This crown is more than the eternal life which is given to every believer at the time of his salvation. “The crown of life” is a special reward given to those believers who have moved beyond the child-like stages of faith to the higher level of spiritual maturity.

The lesson in this portion of the book of James is that believers, when facing the challenges of earthly life, can choose to trust God and the promises of His Word, or they can fret and worry and try to work through their problems on their own. James wants us to trust God at all times and in all circumstances and to thereby grow closer to Him. According to James, a joyful attitude while enduring trials is a mark of spiritual maturity.