

Faith Works: Living What We Claim to Believe

Faith Perseveres

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FAITH PERSEVERES James 1:1-18

Good morning. If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open to me to James Chapter 1. James Chapter 1. It is good to be back in the country. And really, really good to be back and worship with this faith family. This morning we're going to begin looking at the Book of James. We've walked through Ruth, and now we're going to walk through James. Over the last three years, we've covered a variety of different topics in the Word, seen what the Word says about what I believe have been some necessary beneficial foundations for understanding what the Word says about who we are as a church and where we're going as a church.

In the days to come though, I want to begin to shift us, much like we did with Ruth and what we're going to do with James, toward intentional, systematic walking through books of the Bible. We started with Ruth, we'll be in James, and we got a lot more to cover in the days to come. We'll try to hit most, if not all of them, God willing. Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be great just us, as a faith family, to walk through the whole – now, some people would say why? Why the Book of Ruth, the Book of James? Why not preach on cool topics like how to manage your money or how to raise teenagers or how to raise toddlers? Like any of us really know the answer to that question.

Why not topics on how to deal with the health-care crisis or something like that? And the reality is we could probably draw a crowd a little easier with the next and coolest topic, but what would happen...What happens when the people of God gather together and say, we really just want to know God? Because the danger is when we pick topics here and there, the danger is we avoid parts of the Word that we don't really like that confront us, that change us in ways we're not ready to change.

And even the parts that we go to, we kind of twist to begin custom tailoring Christianity to fit our preferences, and what appeals to us, and in the process, we get a very man-centered picture of Christianity, as opposed to what happens when the Word does the work and we walk through it and God gives us a picture of Himself and in the process does what He has promised to do in this book. He transforms our hearts and our lives into the image of Jesus so that as parents of toddlers and teenagers and people trying to manage money and living in a culture with all kinds of different issues and questions, that we are living to the glory of God in the middle of every one of those issues. So let's trust that God knew what He was doing when He put this book together with these books in it, and let's dive into them, and let's ask God to do a work as we systematically walk through Scripture, do a work in forming a people here that draws others to Himself and a people who are enthralled with knowing and loving and treasuring God.

Why James?

So why James? Of all the books that we could dive into at this point, why James? And I want to share a couple of reasons why I believe the Spirit is leading us at this time, as this faith family, to dive into the Book of James.

A couple things, background here: book written, letter written by James, the half-brother, most people think of Jesus. That's the James that wrote this book in the New Testament. Acts 15, Acts 21 both talk about how James was a leader particularly in the church in Jerusalem. You remember Acts 8 after Stephen was persecuted, church in Jerusalem was scattered all throughout Judea and Samaria as a result of persecution. And you'll hear that in the very beginning. Even just look at James 1:1, "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.*"

And the picture here is predominantly written to Jewish Christians, probably many of whom had association with the church in Jerusalem. They were walking through difficult times as a result of persecution. That's why the passage we're going to look at today just dives right into trials and struggles that we walk through.

To Examine the Relationship Between Faith and Works

Now, two reasons why I believe the Spirit's leading us to James at this point. Two reasons. First, to examine the relationship between faith and works. To examine the relationship between faith and works. On one hand, James refers to faith fourteen different times in this book. It works out, on average, though it doesn't actually work out practically this way, but on average, that's about three times every chapter.

We've got this picture of faith over and over and over again, but then we've got obedience and the works of faith all over the place. You might write this down. Out of 108 verses in James, 59 different commands are found here, 59 different commands in 108 verses. That's a command every two verses. Obedience is all over the place. And this is so key. We live in a day when as soon as you start talking about obedience of commands or laws or work in the Christian life, immediately people cry legalism and run away.

Don't talk about work. Christianity's not about doing this and doing this and doing this. And James comes on the scene and says, yes, it is. Yes, it is. Like you don't just listen to the Word, you do it. That's next week. Then Chapter 2, if you don't do anything, you don't have faith, your faith is dead. James would not make it today. Not a lot of members in James' church today. Always giving commands. Lost? Follow.

Now, we have to be very careful when we think about this relationship between faith and works to think about faith and works biblically and rightly, and James is going to challenge us here. But what we need to realize from the beginning is it is immature, shallow to separate faith from works. I would even go so far to bluntly say, James 5:1, it's damning to try to separate faith and works because you can't have one without the other. They go together.

Now, how do they go together? That's what James is going to walk us through. So that is why the title of the series, Faith Works. Really, it's kind of a play on words in two different ways, two senses. Faith works in the sense that faith acts. Faith must be put into action.

But then in another sense, faith works as in faith is effective. It actually works. That faith is valuable, and faith comes to life in us.

To Explore the Impact of Our Faith On...

So two purposes. To examine the relationship between faith and works, and then, second, to explore the impact of our faith on, first, life in this world. To explore the impact of our faith on our lives in this world. And there are so many practical issues addressed in the Book of James. Trials, poverty, riches, materialism, favoritism, social justice, the tongue, how we speak, what we say, how we pray, what to do when you're sick, wisdom. All kinds of practical things all over this book.

And so James is going to show us how faith literally comes to life. It's almost tough to find a structure in this book because you just go from one practical thing to another. But here's where I want to take this a step deeper. Not just shows us how faith looks in our lives in this world, but I want to apply this in this room. We're going to study James to explore the impact of faith on life in Birmingham.

And here's why I want to emphasize this. I just spent a week in Europe with incredible brothers and sisters that are serving all over Europe. You may or may not know that in Europe today there are 24 countries that are less than 1% evangelical Christian. Evangelical Christian means, gospel-believing Christian, not just Christian because of tradition or sociopolitical identification. Gospel-believing—less than 1%. 11 of those countries are less than .2% Christian.

The gospel is scarce in many parts of Europe, and that on top of Central and South and East Asia where there are hundreds of millions of people who even in their history have not heard the gospel. Now, I hear through different avenues and different times people say things like, "Brook Hills has gotten too focused on the world," or "Brook Hills is too consumed with mission overseas." Brothers and sisters, we have the gospel and they don't. We have the gospel. They don't have it. They don't have it. We must focus on the world, it's sin not to.

We don't think like this. We think the world is like this. We think there is access to the gospel. There's not. They don't have it, and they won't have it unless we take it to them. How else will they get it? Romans 10.

Now, unreached in the world are out of sight and out of mind in church in America. And I am convinced biblically, as pastor, that I have a responsibility to keep the unreached in your sight and in your mind all the time. But I know that there is a danger inherent there that in talking about the world like this that people will think or say, "Well, they just don't care about Birmingham, don't care about needs here." As a pastor of this church in Birmingham, the last thing I want is for that to be true. And people will say it, they'll always say it, but I want what Oswald Smith said to be true, "The light that shines the farthest shines the brightest at home." I want that to be the story of The Church at Brook Hills. That this is a church that was radically devoted to making the gospel known among the ends of the earth. And you could tell the way the gospel shined and radiated in Birmingham, Alabama.

And you are doing this. This is where I realize I have dropped the ball in sharing, platforming ways that you all are doing this all over the city of Birmingham. And there's small groups starting ministries, people multiplying the gospel all over the city. I just made a quick list last night. This week men and women from this faith family will be leading Bible studies in workplaces and neighborhoods all across this city, will be helping addicts in rehabilitation centers, will be serving food in homeless shelters and on the streets, will be

teaching orphans in learning centers, caring for widows in retirement homes, providing hospice care for the elderly, training men and women to do job skills, tutoring men and women in reading, rocking sick babies at the hospital, helping patients in AIDS clinic, teaching English to internationals. And the list goes on and on and on and on.

I want us to study the Book of James to encourage what you are doing as your faith is coming to life in Birmingham. And I want us to study this book and pray that God would take the faith of The Church at Brook Hills and lead people all over the city of Birmingham to Christ, lead people all over the city of Birmingham to see the glory of Christ as a result of the faith, by God's grace, He gives us as the Church at Brook Hills so that we might see that here and live for the spread of His gospel, our faith coming to life here and there. Both-And, and everywhere in between. So God may that be so.

And I'm hesitant. I want to jump ahead because there's some text and some things that I think that God is going to do in our midst that have the potential to have a radical effect on the city of Birmingham, but I'm going to resist the temptation to jump ahead. I'm just going to stick with where we're at today.

Why Trials and Temptations?

So James 1:2. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to dive into this first chapter, first half of the first chapter. And the main themes that are going to carry throughout the book are going to be introduced here, particularly though, trials and temptations. Why do we face trials and temptations? How do we face trials and temptations?

Before we read this passage, I want you to go ahead and circle a couple of words in this passage that will kind of frame our understanding of it. I just want us to see how this theme is before our eyes from the very beginning. In verse 2 you'll see, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials...*" (Jas. 1:2). Circle "trials" right there, and then go down to verse 12, and it says, "*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial*" (Jas. 1:12). Circle "trial" right there. So circle those two instances, "trials" and "trial". Those two kind of bookend each other on one section in the passage we're about to read. And then you get to verse 13, and it says, "*When tempted.*" Go ahead and circle "tempted" right there; and you're going to see it over and over again in verse 13 and 14, the same word, "temp", used in different ways. So circle it every time you see it. "No one should say, 'God is tempting me,'" circle it there, "God cannot be tempted," circle it there, "by evil, nor does He tempt anyone." Verse 14, "each one is tempted." Circle all those "tempting" words.

So the reason I want you to circle those words is because that word that you circled in the original language of the New Testament, is actually the same root word. It's a noun in verse 2 and 12, and it's a verb in 13 and 14. It's the same root word. Now, it's translated differently, trials and temptations. And we're going to see, based on the context, the reason why it's translated differently, but the picture is this whole passage is understood in the context of trials and temptations. And what we're going to see is that trials and temptations have everything to do with our faith. And how we respond to trials and temptations says a lot about our faith.

If I could sum up this passage we're about to read in one sentence I would sum it up like this: Trials and temptations are inevitable in our lives, and God intends both of them to

deepen our faith. Trials and temptations are inevitable in all our lives, and God intends both of them, trials and temptations, to deepen our faith.

So with that kind of preview, so to speak, let's dive into verse 2. James writes:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he 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 man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God 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 one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away 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. 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 firstfruits of all he created (Jas. 1:2-18).

God is Sovereign Over Our Trials

Trials and temptations. I want to show you a few truths that help us understand how faith applies to trials and temptations in our lives. First truth: God is sovereign over our trials. God is sovereign over our trials. Here's what I mean by that, what I believe James means throughout this passage: Trials are never outside of God's control. Trials are always under God's control. And there's a sovereign God who's accomplishing His purposes through trials. Now, quick note here as a reminder, and we've talked about this before, but it's so prevalent in our day, whenever the Word addresses this, I want to make sure to remind you not to buy into the heresy that is prevalent today that you can name and claim health and wealth, and if you follow and trust God, you will have prosperity in this life. It is blasphemy.

The picture here in James 1 is James writing to a group of people who, most of them are impoverished, having been scattered and separated from one another as a result of persecution. And he's encouraging them, saying in the middle of it, "consider it joy". Not increase your faith because you've done something wrong. Consider it joy. Now, let's be honest. Let's step back for a second. Am I the only one who kind of wishes this passage was

not in the Bible? Like really. Consider it pure joy. Like when a trial comes, put a smile on your face and say you love it. Is that what the Bible's actually telling us to do?

And this is one of the most profound, most crucial truths necessary for mature Christian living, for our lives in Christ. This is not some emotionally flippant happiness when things are a wreck around you. "Consider it"—it's a command there. That's a command—imperative. "Consider it" is a verb of thought. This is not even about emotion as much it is, "Consider...fix your mind on the fact that your trial's... consider it pure joy." What a phrase. Pure, literally, all joy—complete joy.

Now, I want to encourage us even when we think about trials that James 1 does not necessarily have to be the first word we speak to someone when they're struggling in grief. Okay? Somebody's life is just falling apart around them, and they share that with you, he shares that with you... You don't say, "Well, consider it joy, brother." As she is weeping and sharing about this trial, "Pure joy, sister. Enjoy it." No. John Chapter 11. Remember when Jesus was approached by Mary and Martha after their brother Lazarus had died? The first thing He does is He doesn't start telling them that God has a purpose in all of this, which He did, and Jesus would communicate. The first thing He did is He comforted them, wept with them.

So this is a truth that affects the way we look at trials. Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of all kinds, all kinds of different kinds—small trials, big trials, minor trials, major trials. I came across this, this week, and it's a little bit long, but I want to read it because I think we can identify to this. So follow along with this thinking about trials of many kinds.

A high school senior lives in tension. He is, at long last, king of the hill, the privileged one, and yet classes are still long and boring, homework is still baneful. At home he still faces curfews and chores. He looks around and asks, is this what I've been waiting for all my life? There must be more. I'm tired of school, tired of books, tired of teachers, dirty looks. I'm tired of my room, my mom, my activities. I can't wait to get out on my own to do a thousand new things. When graduation comes, then my trials will be over.

So our young man goes to college, he is free, but he's a chemistry major perpetually in the lab and working part time to cover his expenses. By his senior year, he has a serious girlfriend. They begin to think about marriage, but haven't been together long enough to be sure, when he gets a job in Dallas, 800 miles away from his sweetheart who will be teaching third grade. Absence makes their hearts grow fonder. They work harder than ever to master their new professions, but they are lonely and tired of kissing their telephones goodnight.

They decide to marry. Gazing into each other's eyes, they say, we will be together forever. Soon our trials will be over.

Don't laugh too loud.

The honeymoon comes and goes. They set up house in a small apartment. On his first day of work, he showers and starts to shave, but he can hardly see himself because the stockings draped over the mirror are blocking his view. And how she spends money. Once more, she still expects him to demonstrate his love with flowers and dates.

He thinks, what do you mean you want tokens of love? I married you. Why do you need tokens? Of course, he causes a few trials too. At the table he eats as if he were back at the fraternity. When he sleeps, he thrashes about their bed as if he is reenacting an Olympic decathlon. Eventually, they sort things out. That trial is over. Now they want a baby, but one year, then two years go by without success.

And then just as they prepare to meet with the physicians, she conceives. They say, now our trials are over. I will not recount the trials of pregnancy, the nausea and mood swings. Let us travel forward for eight months. They have a healthy girl. Mother and daughter leave the hospital and spend their first night at home. The baby is asleep and the parents lie in bed thinking, our marriage is strong, our baby is home, at least our trials are over. They drift off to sleep.

In an instant they're awake. The baby is crying. Why? She's dry, she's not hungry. She's crying for no reason whatsoever. So the trials of parenthood begin. In every stage of a child's life, parents tell themselves the next phase will be easier. When we can sleep through the night, when the baby can understand us and we can understand her, when we are done with diapers, then it will be easier.

When they are old enough to go to school so mother can have a little peace and quiet, when they become more independent, when they can drive so we no longer spend endless hours chauffeuring them to soccer games and clarinet lessons, yes, when they can drive, then our trials will be over. When they go to college and can stop fussing about curfews and we can stop wondering where they are, they may never come in, but at least we won't know, then our trials will be over.

Work is no different. Trials never end. Things never settle down. If the economy is thriving, the company is growing and our work is respected. There is too much to do though. The trials are over work and exhaustion. If the economy is cool, or there is not enough business, then income is down and jobs are in jeopardy. Trials continue after retirement. We miss the camaraderie, the respect, the friendships at work. We have too much time on her hands. Health issues surface, and we may wonder if we laid aside enough money to fund the next twenty years. From our childhood home to the retirement home, trials are constant.

Can anybody identify with that right there? Many kinds... There are small things almost daily. And then there are the tragic, devastating trials that put all these other things into perspective, whether small or big. Is James really serious, is the Bible really telling us that we should consider them all pure joy? How is that possible? How can the Bible be serious about this?

And this is where I want us to realize that James is showing us that trials are not joyful in and of themselves, but they are joyful when they are under the authority of a sovereign God who is accomplishing His purposes through them. What is He accomplishing? Well, what He does in verse 3, as James uses the word "because", and he begins all the way down to that book end in verse 12 to show us what God is doing in trials.

First, in trials we learn to grow in His likeness because, *"You know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"* (Jas. 1:3-4). This is the first purpose here in James 1 and it's really the whole purpose in the Book of James. *"So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"* (Jas. 1:4). Here's the deal. God's goal for our lives, all of our lives, God's goal for our lives is maturity in Him. God's goal for our lives is growth into His likeness, knowledge of who He is. One day every single person in this room will stand before God Almighty. And the goal is to prepare you from now until then for that day. God's goal for our life is to grow us into His likeness, teach us who He is.

Now, the problem comes, in our lives, when it comes to trials, and this is not our goal. Because let's be honest, let's just put it on the table, most of the time when you and I go through trials, our goal is just to get through it as quick as possible, right? Our goal is to fix these circumstances, to get things switched around back to where they're supposed to be, the way we had planned it, the way that fits best with our ideas.

And if that's our goal in trials, then we are in for endless frustration, endless anxiety, endless worry, and there will be no joy in the trial. But when our goal in our lives is to grow in the knowledge of God and to be transformed into His likeness, then no matter how deep or dark the trial is, we can know that our goal is going to be achieved. It's going to be accomplished. God wants to reveal Himself to us. He wants to make us mature and complete in our knowledge and understanding of Him and our growth into His likeness.

Now, you think about this. Think about a trial in your life right now. It could be small, it could be major, it could be big. Just think about it. Kind of get it in your mind, a trial that you're walking through right now. What's your goal in that trial? Because if your goal is to fix that circumstance, if your goal is to get that situation changed around and do what it takes to get this changed around that's what you're looking to, then the reality is maybe it'll happen; often times it won't, particularly not like you had planned completely.

And even if it does, then something else is coming around the corner that's going to add on top of it. But what would happen if you looked at that trial in your life, small, big alike, and you said, "Lord, I know there's things I got to deal with circumstantially here, but more than anything, I want to know you in this process?" This is a radically different way to live. This is a distinctively Christian way to live. Pure joy in trials.

Here's the deal. Trials are joy when God is our goal. Did you catch that? Trials are joy when God is our goal. When we believe that knowledge of God and intimacy with God is supremely satisfying, then trials, which cause us to trust, lean on, and pursue God, are a really good thing. Pure joy.

Malcolm Muggeridge said it better than anybody else I know. Contrary to what might be expected, Muggeridge said, "I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially devastating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained." Now, this does not encourage us if our goal is just to get our circumstances fixed. This is not very encouraging if that's our goal. But if our goal is deeper knowledge of God and growth into His likeness and trials drive us toward that goal, then we can consider them pure joy. It's not some flippant emotion that we just are happy with every trial.

This is Jesus, a couple pages before this, end of Hebrews, Chapter 12. "*Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the*" what set before Him? "*For the joy set before Him endured the cross*" (Heb. 12:2). That is weird. How do you endure the cross with joy? Because you know you're scorning its shame, and there's coming a day when you're going to sit at the right hand of God. That's how. When God is your goal, trials are joy. Even the cross is joy when God is the goal. Make sense? In trials we learn to grow in His likeness. A James 1:3 and 4 kind of life is only possible when our lives are centered on God and not on fixing our circumstances and getting things that we want.

Second, we learn to trust in His wisdom. Not lacking anything, verse 5. "*If any of you lacks wisdom*", which is James' implicit reminder that we're not there yet. We lack wisdom, so we ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault. We've talked about the wisdom of God before. We've talked about our wisdom compared to His wisdom. And we talked about how wisdom really is based on a few different factors. We grow in wisdom when we grow in three different factors. Number one is knowledge. We've talked about this before. The more knowledge we have, the wiser we become. We make decisions sometimes that are unwise because we didn't have enough knowledge. "If we'd just known this, we wouldn't have made that decision." Knowledge. Second, perspective—when we make a decision and it turns out to be wrong in the end, we're like, "Well, if I'd have seen it from that perspective, I would have never done that." We lack perspective. We have limited perspective. And then, third, experience. Our wisdom grows with experience. The more we walk through things... When we are walking through stuff that we don't know... I mean, this is like every step in the parenting process. "I've never been here; I don't know; what is he doing? I don't know what to do now. I've not seen this." So, no experience, you lack wisdom.

And so the picture is we have limited wisdom because of our limited knowledge, our limited perspective and our limited experience. And here, this has got to be one of the most glorious, comforting, encouraging truths, promises in all the New Testament. God says, "If you lack wisdom, ask me and I'll give it generously, liberally without finding fault to anybody who asks." Anybody who asks! Think about that. God. His wisdom. He has all knowledge. All knowledge. There's nothing He doesn't know. He never says, "Well, if I'd have known that, I would have done"—no. Never says that.

He has total perspective, and not just the perspective of everything in the present. He has the perspective of how this is going to affect things for all of eternity. Eternal perspective. And infinite experience. He was and is and is to come. He's gone before. And the God who has all knowledge, eternal perspective and infinite experience has said to you and me, to you and me, "Ask me, and I'll give it to you." That's good.

Now, this is not an easy answer. It's not the quick fix. It's not circumstance is automatically fixed and everything's good. No. This is God saying in middle of trials, draw near to me. And don't doubt. Now, you will struggle in your faith, but don't doubt that I am good and that I am wise, and I will give you my wisdom as you walk through this.

Last Sunday I was preaching. And I had mentioned before I left, the church where I grew up in was having a 50th anniversary. I was preaching. Just a great day, and the whole family was together, brothers, sister, mom in Atlanta, and just had a great time. And it was a special day for us, in particular, because it was five years ago last Sunday when dad had passed away. And my dad was the wisest person I've ever known. I would give anything for one more conversation, and it would be long, really long because I got all kinds of questions, things that I need to learn in this life. And I would just pepper him with questions, and I would sit there and listen, soak in. And then I come to James 1 and I realize I have something infinitely better. The God of the universe has said to me and said

to you, all of you, “Just ask me, and I will give you wisdom, knowledge, perspective, experience to walk through this.” Not that we’ll understand everything, but the picture is there’s a God who is waiting to give us wisdom when we walk through trials when we ask.

Have you ever notice somebody that you’ve watched, maybe you’ve walked through difficult times in life with and they’ve made decisions at different points that in the end turned out to be really good decisions? And each time they made a decision like that—maybe the first time you didn’t really trust them, but you learn to trust them a little more, a little more. If you walk through enough trials with somebody and you’ve seen them make wise decisions, then when you go through a trial, you’re immediately looking, “Hey, what do you think we should do?” And this is the picture. Brothers and sisters, God is right and has been right every single time. And He is with you in the middle of your trials. And the picture of trials is as we go through one after another, small and big alike, we learn to trust in the wisdom of God. We learn to grow in His likeness, we learn to trust in His wisdom.

Third, we learn to rely on His resources. Verses 9 through 11 are really interesting. It’s where James first introduces riches and poverty. And we’re not going to camp out here long because we’re going to see this and really camp out more extended on this theme. But you almost wonder, “*The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower*” (Jas. 1:9-10). It just seems a little random.

Trials, and then, brother in humble circumstances. One who’s rich. What is he saying here? I want you to see the relationship between the two because James is making it very clear here. What we know, trials in this life have a leveling effect, don’t they? It’s trials like these impoverished brothers and sisters were experiencing that James says boast in that in your high position because you are learning to rely on the resources that only come from God. And then he turns to the rich person and he says, be careful because trials will reveal the fact that your safety and security are not found in your stuff, in your nice house, in your nice car, in your nice things, and all the protection you’ve surrounded yourself with, stuff in this world will fade away and you will fade away with it unless you trust in His resources.

And here in the wealthiest county in Alabama we need trials to remind us to rely on the resources that only God provides, to remind us that we can’t fix our trials with our stuff, that we need that which only comes from God. And when that happens, it enables us to rejoice because in the end, the reality is the house, the car, and all the stuff are going to burn up just like he said in verse 11. They’re going to be gone. And we need to be careful not to trust in those things for if we do, we will burn up with them. Trials teach us to rely on His resources.

Finally, we learn to live for His reward. Verse 12, “*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial.*” Does this sound familiar? Matthew Chapter 5, Sermon on the Mount. It’s really interesting... And I’ll try to point out different places all throughout the Book of James. There are numerous, direct, deliberate allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James. And this is key to helping us understand what James is teaching because it relates directly to what Jesus taught in Sermon on the Mount. “*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him*” (Jas. 1:12). Now, when we hear this crown language, we need to be careful to guard against two mistakes in our minds that we might make when we think about crown, crown of life.

First, don’t picture some gem-studded headpiece that a king or queen wears. Move that picture out of your mind because even the original readers in the Book of James when they

heard crown would have immediately in their minds gone to the wreath, kind of a laurel wreath that was put on the head, over the head of an athlete who had competed in a race, who had been victorious in some kind of competition. And this is the crown that would be put on them. And so that's the picture. Not some king in a flowing robe. This is an athlete who's just been through it. This crown has been put on his head.

Now, the second thing, be careful even when you think of this physical picture of crown because we see this kind of terminology at different places of the New Testament—"crown of life" here, "crown of glory", "crown of righteousness". Well...don't just think, "Well, there's some crown like constructed with glory or some physical crown constructed with righteousness or some physical crown constructed with life." The picture is, the crown of righteousness; that we will receive righteousness itself. The crown of glory, glory itself. In this case, the crown of life, life itself. And the picture is at the end of this race, through trial after trial after trial after trial, there is eternal life at the end of this goal waiting for us. Experience in abundance. And we're going to talk about this more in just a second, but this is where we're reminded in our trials, brothers and sisters, this world is not our home. And we are living for reward to come. And this gives us great joy in the middle of trials.

This is how we can face the worst, most devastating circumstances in this room because we know that this world is not our home, and there's coming a day when God Himself will share the completeness. This is where that bookend just comes around, where we will be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Where we will be glorified with Him. Crown of life. And trials remind us that we're living for another reward. We're not living for this world.

Now, you put those together and, brothers and sisters, I want to encourage you. I in no way want this to sound trite. I know there are trials represented around this room that I cannot fathom, but I want to encourage you not to waste your trials. I want to encourage you when you face trials to fix your eyes on the goal who is God. To draw near to Him and ask Him, just keep asking Him over and over and over again. Draw near to Him. Rely on the resources that He provides, and keep your eyes focused on your reward. And it's coming. It's coming. And this is the only way that you can look at trials you're walking through with pure joy.

We are Responsible in Our Temptations

Now, we're going to come back to this. I want to fly through this next part really quick. We've got a sovereign God over our trials. Second truth, we are responsible in our temptations. In verse 13, James almost takes like a hard left turn, it feels like. "*When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.*" So what's the relationship between trials and now temptations?

This is where we need to realize God, yes, is sovereign over our trials. And God will test His people—we've seen this—for our good, for others' good, for His glory. We see this all over Scripture. Genesis 22, Abraham tested. There's testing here. But what we have to do and James is making it very clear here because he sees in our minds, okay, there's testing in our faith, and this is under a sovereign God. And what he wants to make sure we don't do is take a step from the picture of God testing, God being sovereign over our trials to begin to think that God tempts us because the reality is, let's admit it, every trial brings temptation with it, right?

Like you're experiencing financial difficulty, somewhere along the way we begin to doubt, we're tempted to doubt and question God's provision. When something happens in our family, maybe we lose a member of our family, we're tempted to doubt the love of God. And in the process, we're tempted to run to the things of this world and turn our backs and go a

completely different way. And James wants to make sure we realize that though God is sovereign in our trials, over our trials, we are responsible in our temptations.

Here's the origin of sin. Don't miss this. James says very clearly God is perfectly sinless. Everything in Him resists sin. Evil is inherently foreign to Him. He is aware of sin, but He is untouched by sin. Like we were saying earlier, He is the holy one. God is not directly, neither is He indirectly responsible for sin-temptation in our lives. That leads to question then who's responsible? This is where James puts the mirror right up in front of us and says, "Each one is tempted by his own evil desire."

Here's the truth. We are...God is perfectly sinless and we are utterly sinful. This is so fascinating. Not only does James not say, "Well, God's not responsible for temptation," but I expect him to go in and start talking about how Satan is the one who pulls you away. And that's not what he does. And we're going to see this later in James 4, but that's not what he does here. And it's not that Satan doesn't have anything to do with our temptations, but the reality is what James is saying is that the responsibility for sin and response to temptation, that responsibility lies directly within yourself. There's no one else to blame. Not even Satan. It's in you. You're at fault here now.

Think about it. This is so counter what we hear all the time in our culture. At every turn we are told if we've done something wrong, why? What was it in our background? What was it in our family? What was it in friends or the circumstances we were in? What was it that's responsible for what we're doing now? And I in no way want to discount all of these things and the way they affect our lives in the present. I in no way want to discount that, but the reality that Scripture teaches is abundantly clear. The responsibility for sin is in you.

In the words of Romans 7, there is nothing good that lives in you that is in your sinful nature. Nothing good. How is that for the power of positive thinking? Thanks for the encouragement today Dave. Nothing good lives in you. Let's pray and go home. That's not a popular idea. And this is where in our culture we have undercut the very essence of the gospel. God is perfectly sinless, we are utterly sinful. The fault for sin lies within our self. There is a problem at the core of who we are.

Now, see how this develops into sin, the anatomy of sin. We're going to run through this real quick.

Step one is deception. Perfect example of this is Genesis 3, Adam and Eve. The heart of sin, the core of sin is unbelief, not believing God. "Did God really say, don't eat from this tree?" It's not believing God. It's deception. Leads to step two, desire. Each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. The language here is vivid. It's like a trap set for an animal or hook set as bait for fish. And the picture is no animal knowingly walks into a trap so he can be caught. No fish knowingly bites the hook that has nothing on it so he can be caught. No animal or fish does that. No. There's something on that hook or in that trap that appeals to them, that draws them away. And what James is saying is there is desire in you and in me that draws us toward that which will kill us.

There's something in us that draws us toward that which will kill us. That's why men all over church they're running to pornography, a woman runs into another man's arms or a businessperson goes into a lifestyle of lack of integrity or honesty because there's something that appeals to us, drags us away and entices us and draws us to that which kills us.

I want to urge brothers and sisters across this room with the desires that are luring you in your heart, in your life maybe that nobody else knows about in this room do not be dragged away or enticed. Run from it. It looks appealing, but it will kill you. It will kill you and those around you. Deception leads to desire. It takes place. Desire – after desire’s conceived, it gives birth to sin, which leads to step three, their disobedience, to sin.

We act on our desires and the result is step four. When it’s full grown, it gives birth to death. Step four is death. This is in us. This is in us. This is a problem. Think about it. Now, trials and temptations. In our trials we are tempted to focus on man-centered goals and to miss the purpose that they’re there for. To not trust in God. In our temptations we are tempted, dragged away and enticed by our own desires to run away from God.

God is Faithful for Our Salvation

So what are we to do with trials and temptations? It leads to this third truth that is great and glorious. God is faithful for our salvation. That’s why James says, *“Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows”* (Jas.1:16-17). Trust Him in your trials and in your temptations. Do not run off and sin, and do not forsake Him in the trials. Why? Because He is good. He is infinitely good. And in every trial and in every temptation, you will want, doubt, question His goodness.

Don’t be deceived, church. Don’t be deceived in trials or temptations. God is good. His goodness is unchanging. I love this, it “does not change like shifting shadows.” Anybody thankful that God never gets in a bad mood? Never once. He never changes for the worst. Here’s what’s even cooler: God never changes for the better. Why is that cool? Isn’t it good to change for the better? Not if your God because if you change for the better, that means that there was something deficient in you in the first place, and there’s nothing deficient in this God. He is infinitely good. You can’t get better than He is. His goodness is unchanging.

And then, second, His goodness is undeserved. Verse 18, *“He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.”* Listen to that phrase. Underline that phrase. We are going to see all throughout this book, works and obedience. And see the grace at the heart of this. God chose to give us birth. Undeserved grace. Here’s the picture: There’s nothing good that lives in us, right? Everything that is good is in God. So what in us would cause Him to come down and save us and give us new life and new birth? Is there anything in us? No. He chose to do it out of His grace and mercy, undeserved goodness.

Now, this is the gospel right here. Anything good in us can only be a result of His undeserved goodness toward us. Right? This is totally not what 20th, 21st Century culture wants you to hear. “You are good. You’re okay.” No, you’re not. You’re depraved. You have a sinful nature at the core of who you are that drags away and entices you toward death. And a God, good and glorious God of the universe has reached down His hand into your heart, and He has put His goodness there, and every single thing that is good in you is attributed to His glory. That’s the gospel that we have nothing but bad in us, and we need a good God to come and save us, to give us birth to the word of truth. And He has done it by pouring out all the penalty for our bad, our sin, our evil upon His one and only son.

Praise God for the gospel. His goodness is undeserved. And it gets even better. His goodness is unending, *“that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created”*(Jas. 1:18). Firstfruits. The picture in firstfruits is a foretaste of that which is to come. Firstfruit’s in the harvest. You see a little bit, and it’s like, okay, it’s time, and the whole harvest is coming. And what James is saying here, what the Bible is teaching, don’t miss this, brothers and

sisters. What God has done in our hearts, in our lives, how He has saved us, given us new life, it's just a foretaste of that which is much greater to come because there's coming a day when He's going to redeem all creation, and all things will be new. The old will be gone and the new will come. There will be no more trials, and there will be no more temptations. And this, what He's done in our lives now, is just a taste of that which is to come in the future.

So think about how this changes the way we walk through trials. He has saved us from our sin. Take heart, brothers and sisters. He has saved us from our sin. And because He has saved us from our sin, we can rest in total confidence that He will see us through our sorrow. It's guaranteed. It's guaranteed. Your trials will end and glory will come. Romans 8, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (Rom. 8:18,31). God has given us His goodness already, and it's just a taste of that which He has promised to come.

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