

James 1:1-18

The Testing of Your Faith

For the past several weeks I've been preaching a series of sermons on the "Open Doors" that God provides each of us in our lives. For me personally it's created a greater sense of awareness and expectation to the many opportunities God gives me daily to be used by Him to show His love to others and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

This morning we're stepping into phase two of the open doors by looking at the writings of an individual who probably, more than any Biblical writer, would be associated with encouraging Christians to quit being couch-potato Christians and to get up out of their spiritual easy chairs of grace and start putting their faith into action by walking through those doors of opportunity and demonstrate their faith through their actions.

This individual knows personally of what he writes because for many years he was a nonbeliever. He thought Jesus was crazy and even tried to convince him to quit this preaching/Messiah nonsense and just come back home and be a carpenter.

But everything changed for this individual after Jesus' resurrection. In fact the apostle Paul even recorded that after his resurrection, Jesus specifically appeared to this individual. After that personal appearance this individual boldly stepped through the open door of faith and grew quickly in his faith.

- He became a strong leader of the first church in Jerusalem.
- His deep faith led him into a deep prayer life – so deep, in fact, that an early church father referred to him by the nickname "camel knees" because his knees became so hard and calloused from kneeling on them through long periods of prayer.
- His faith carried him through the remainder of his life and he died a martyr for his faith in Jesus.

Who am I referring to? James the half-brother of Jesus.

For the remainder of the summer we're going to be spending time discovering the very practical and timely instruction for all Christians on how to live out our relationship with Jesus. My plan is to complete our discovery of James' writing on Labor Day weekend, so we're going to need to move fairly quickly through the book of James.

So, please take your Bibles and turn to the book of James. In the pew Bibles it's on page _____ and follow along as I read the first 18 verses.

Read James 1:1-18

Notice how James identifies himself: "***James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.***"

I am assuming that if you just met James and asked him to tell you about himself that this would likely be the description he'd give you. I find this curious because of all the writers of the New Testament, James is the only one who could have had the distinction of mentioning that he was Jesus' brother. But to James that distinction pales in comparison to the privilege of knowing Jesus as His Lord and Savior. To James that's how he wants to be known and remembered.

Let me ask you, "how do you want to be remembered?" "How would your friends most likely describe you?"

“To the Twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”

These would be the Christians who were scattered across the globe after the killing of Stephen in Acts 7. God used Stephen’s death to cause these early Christians to run for their lives and thus take the gospel message to cities and countries outside of Jerusalem. As a result their lives were turned upside down as they grabbed what possessions they could quickly pack and run with. They left their homes, their jobs, their friends and likely family behind. They knew personally what it was like to go through trials. And so James doesn’t waste any time addressing their difficult life situation with these somewhat shocking words.

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:2-4 (NIV))

Initially James might appear to be off his rocker. But upon closer inspection it’s a profoundly true and helpful instruction.

The word “*consider*” is a command to think deeply about something. This is different than a mere fleeting thought. This is much more like wrestling with a difficult math equation or a deep philosophical theory. You mull it over and over in your mind. James is saying that every time a trial comes your way this is how you are to think as a fellow servant of Jesus Christ.

“Consider it pure joy” Not consider it a little bit of joy or partial joy but undiluted “pure” joy. Remember there’s a distinction Biblically between joy and happiness.

Happiness = the inner sense of elation when something good happens in your life.

Joy = a deep sense of peace and confidence that God’s got this for you. It’s a confidence in the midst of a trial that God is still in control, that He loves you and that He will work out what’s best for you in the midst of this trial.

Happiness is dependent on the goodness of your circumstance.

Joy is dependent on the goodness of God.

“Trials of many kinds” = (Greek) *poikilos* from which we get the word “polka dots”. Just like with polka dots, trials are never the same shape, size or intensity. By using this Greek word to describe trials, James is encompassing all trials you may go through. No one can look at this verse and say, “*But my trial isn’t covered here* – **Yes it is!!!**”

Trials (vs. 2) and ***Tempt*** (vs. 13) are the same word in the Greek.

God will test us but He won’t tempt us. The difference is the goal of the event.

Testing is designed to grow us up or mature us. Tests are designed to show what we’re made of so we can either feel encouraged or challenged to grow as we discover what we’re lacking and take steps to correct that deficiency.

In the Old Testament it says that when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, to him that He was testing Abraham. He was trying to find out, through Abraham’s response, the depth of his faith. Abraham passed that test with flying colors and I would imagine that his faith was strengthened tremendously through that event.

Satan, on the other hand, tempts us with the goal to make us stumble and fail and step further away from God. But you can’t just blame your failure on Satan. James uses fishing and hunting terms (in verse 14-15) to describe the process of tempting. The bait is thrown out there to entice you and at that point you have to decide whether to go for it or not. And let me just state the obvious – Satan’s bait is going to be attractive to you. It’s highly unlikely that Satan is going to try to tempt me with liver and onions or cooked spinach or tempt me to go rob a bank. He will tempt each of us with something that we would

likely chase after because he suspects that the lure of that opportunity or feeling rivals our allegiance and attraction to God.

The key to both a God given test and a Satan produced temptation is our response. So, James is trying to lead us down a successful path by talking about how we should view every single difficult situation in our lives. It's as if with every trial and temptation in life there are 2 doors open before us and we have to carefully choose which one to walk through. The one that leads us into a deeper walk with the Lord or the one that will provide some initial satisfaction but ultimately breaks our heart and leads us further away from God.

Here's the mental process that James and God want us to think through.

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Did you notice that word, "**because**"? That indicates that what follows is the key to counting every trial you go through *pure joy*.

Because the testing of your faith develops perseverance and perseverance leads us down the path toward full maturity and completeness in Christ.

The word "*perseverance*" is the Greek word *hupomeno*. **Hupo** = under & **meno** = remain. so *remain under*. The idea is that when you're going through a trial you choose to remain in it rather than try to escape but you keep your mind and heart focused on God rather than your trial. You continue to believe in God's goodness and His sovereignty over your situation and His love for you and His plan for your life is better than any plan you can come up with.

Paul expressed this desire for maturity when he wrote in Philippians 3:10-11

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

I've said before, God is more interested in the transformation of your character than the comfort of your body. And if it takes us going through some uncomfortable tests to stretch us and grow us than that's what we most need. To make this process of growth through trials joyful we need to focus on the end result and not the means to it. If I focus solely on my trials and heartache then I will get discouraged and disheartened. But if I continue to focus on the transformation of my character into Christlikeness then I can be encouraged by my growth. And nobody can take that potential for growth away from you. Only you can walk away from that potential.

People love to quote Romans 8:28

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Sometimes those that are going through difficult times or loss of a loved one are quoted that verse by well meaning people. But if you're the one going through it, it may not feel like God is working for your good in the midst of it. Our thought might be – "if God was really working for my good" than He'd make this go away.

But we neglect the very next verse which talks about the "good" that God is most interested in.

Romans 8:29 (NIV) *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

Again, God is more interested in our conformity to Christ than the comfort of our bodies.

Let me ask you: "*which is most important to you: comfort or conformity to Christ?*"

Your answer to that question will largely predict how you'll handle trials and temptations that come into your life.

I read recently about the process that a mother giraffe goes through in teaching her newborn baby to walk. Shortly after the baby is born the mother kicks the baby to initiate the process of baby quickly learning how to walk. So, the baby giraffe begins to stumble to try to get up and the mother kicks it again, knocking it to the ground. This happens repeatedly until finally the baby giraffe gets to its feet successfully and begins to run along with its mother. To an outsider this process can seem cruel – but animal trainers have come to understand that the mother is trying to bring adversity and force a sense of urgency into this process of learning how to walk. Because the mother knows that there are lions and tigers out there that would love to pounce on this newborn baby giraffe while it's still weak and doesn't know how to walk confidently yet.

This reminds me of a passage from **1 Peter** where it's written:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (1 Peter 5:6-10 (NIV))

In the midst of your struggles and trials in life stand firm in your faith by running and clinging to God and let him do the fighting against Satan for you.

After that opening bombshell of a principle, James realizes this can be a huge challenge to adopt into our lives and so he says that each of us should ask God for wisdom, His wisdom. Wisdom is different than mere knowledge. Wisdom is the practical application of knowledge. So, to apply this principle of counting it all joy, we're each likely going to need God's wisdom. So asking God's wisdom ought to be included in all of our daily prayers. And be specific. Mention how in this trial you're currently going through you're having great difficulty seeing how God is going to use it make us more like Jesus. Ask God to reveal that to you. And then keep your focus on God rather than your trial.

Then in **verses 9-11**, James mentions how money is no guarantee that you won't experience trials in your life. In fact both being rich and being poor can be a trial. You might work and save really hard and accumulate wealth but in an instant it can all go away – just like wild flowers in a field. One day it can look so beautiful and the next day they are just a plain green plant in a field (kind of like peonies recently).

I love how James ends this passage.

James 1:16-18 (NIV) *Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

James has been talking about standing strong in the midst of trials and temptations. But that's not all of what constitutes life in connection with God. He's also the giver of lots of gifts, the best being the gift of His presence, love and peace in your life, especially in the midst of trials. But then James closes by mentioning a gift that God gave you but at the same time also gave Himself. Through Christ's death on the cross and your acceptance of that gift, you have your sins taken away and your identity radically changes. You are no longer an enemy of God's but you warmly welcomed into His family – you have become a child of His. James describes this process that we are a kind of *firstfruits* of all He created. A *first fruit* was the very first part of a harvest. First was often considered but chronologically but also in terms of quality. First Fruit could also designate the very best of the harvest. And so, to God there are lots of harvests of crops that take place each year here on earth, but when you become God's child through accepting His grace, you become the very best of all the harvests to God. His death on the cross cost Christ dearly but it was worth it all when you accepted that gift and became a harvest gift back to God. It's the gift that God, the giver of the very best gifts, gets the most excited about.

Sermon Outline July 2nd, 2017

Who am I?

What description did _____ use for himself?

Why is that significant?

“Consider” =

How much joy should we consider? _____

Happiness = _____

Joy = _____

Happiness is dependent on the goodness of your _____

Joy is dependent on the goodness of _____

Trials and *Tempt* are the _____ in Greek.

Perseverance = _____

God is more interested in the _____ of your character
than the _____ of your body.

Which is more important to you?

- Your comfort
- Your conformity to Christ

Why would you need to ask for wisdom from God?

What does it mean to you to be a *firstfruit* to God?

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