

A brief overview of James

James 1: James 1:2, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*” The Greek word translated as “trials” is *peirasmos*. Trials is one of several possible meanings. In Scripture, the meaning is usually trials allowed by God to test and strengthen the integrity of faith. Another common meaning is temptations from Satan intended to bring about sin. Both tests and temptations are challenges to a person’s moral integrity. In 1:2-12 James expands on tests of integrity. In 1:13-18 he deals with temptations to sin.

When tests and trials are dealt with biblically, faith and endurance increase. But “tests” and “trials” can morph into temptation. That adds a new challenge.

A good consequence of life’s trials is that they often result in growth in faith (1:2-11). True faith can deal properly with temptations (1:12-18). Believers, as enabled by the Holy Spirit, will change their behavior to match Scripture’s principles and commands (1:19-27).

James 2: When a believer’s prejudices and pride conflict with the righteous action required, believer’s along with everyone else, tend to rationalize and make excuses. Paul in Galatians 5:6 (NIV) says when a believer is conflicted about what to do, they should remember, “*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*” How would love respond? True faith will fight prejudice (2:1-13), indifference (2:14-20), and unproductive intellectual belief (2:21-26).

James 3-4: Expressions of faith require control and humility. Arrogance and insensitivity are deadly to expressing faith. There are verbal (3:1-12), emotional (3:13-4:12), and volitional (4:13-17) expressions of faith.

James 5: When faced with distress and suffering, true faith exhibits patience rather than panic and failure. To illustrate this truth, James cites common situations such as not having enough money (5:1-12), sickness (5:13-18), and dealing with a spiritual brother or sister whose walk is not with the Lord (5:19-20).

Overall Characteristics of the Letter

Style: The style of writing style of the letter, plus the high quality of the written Greek, leads many bible scholars to believe James' original material was edited and assembled by someone highly skilled in Greek. That may be, but the thoughts and message are from James. The letter is practical, intended to encourage believers to earnestly seek spiritual maturity and to stand fast in faith, never giving way under pressure. Believers should live lives worthy of their status in Christ.

Structure: There is an overall theme in the letter. It is the blessing which comes from God when believers stand firm when confronted by trials. Steadfastness encourages developing strong, active, mature faith. Such faith enables doing the right thing at the right time for right reasons. Faith determines behavior. There are several individual themes which will be examined as encountered.

Commentaries and Scripture Version Used: Scripture quotes unless otherwise noted are from the English Standard Version (ESV) of **The Holy Bible**, Crossway Bibles, 2001. Commentaries: **James**, Douglas Moo, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, IVP (1985), **Expository Notes on the Epistle of James and Peter**, H.A. Ironside, Loizeaux Brothers, Inc. 1947, **Living Insights New Testament Commentary, James and 1&2 Peter**, Charles R. Swindoll, Tyndale House Publishers, 2014, **James**, George M. Stulac, IVP New Testament Commentary Series, IVP 1993, **Growing Slowly Wise (Building a Faith that Works)**, David Roper, Discovery House Publishers, 2000.

Comments on the Letter From James

James 1:1 – *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”*

The greeting is direct and humble. The author identifies himself only as James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the early church, only one “James” was so well known that he would need no other form of identification. That was James the Just, half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Church in Jerusalem. James

prominence in the Jerusalem church can be seen in the salutation of Jude's letter which begins, "*A servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.*" Following the instruction and example of Jesus, James claims no title other than "servant." The letter was sent to believers scattered among the nations.

As mentioned, James appears to have been an unbeliever until after the resurrection. Paul reports James was visited by the resurrected Lord. From that moment forward, he appears in Scripture as a different man. James was with the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 1:14) and we see references to him in Acts 21 and Galatians 2. As leader of the Jerusalem church, James led the important 50 AD conference in Jerusalem to review the missionary work of Paul and Silas. When Paul made his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18), James was still the leader of the Jerusalem church. It is believed that James was martyred after the death of Festus in AD 62, but definitely before the AD 66-70 war with Rome.

James 1:2-4: "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*"

A Difficult Saying: James spends no time on preliminaries. He jumps immediately to his principal concern of how his readers react to trials. At first reading, it may seem James says facing trials enables one to become perfect and complete. But, of course, that is not what he says. There is nothing inherently good in trials and suffering. Their good or bad effect on a believer depends both on how the believer deals with them and how God uses them in the believer's life. Merely facing trials may have consequences that are good or bad, or both good and bad. James' concern is with the effect trials have on a believer's faith and behavior.

Steadfastness in the face of trials is commended. Steadfastness in faith, through all kinds of situations, enables believers to move toward perfection and completeness. Even a trial's unpleasantness can be used by God to produce positive effects in believers who steadfastly endure.

Verses 1:2-4 are primarily concerned with trials arising from external sources. Verses 1:5-11 are primarily concerned with trials arising from internal sources. Every

trial (external or internal) exposes believers to temptation to do something to relieve the trial's pressure. Further, every temptation is a trial testing one's moral strength.

Trials causing stress to a believer's moral nature are James major concern. When inappropriately dealt with, such trials can degrade a person. If dealt with properly, spiritual maturity increases.

All people face trials. Many trials involve suffering and distress. While most trials are beyond a believer's control, some trials occur due to a person's own wrong choices. Other trials occur simply because we are humans living in a fallen world. Life in a fallen world exposes people to sickness, accidental injury, bad weather, other natural disasters, and the actions of bitter people.

Whatever the source of trials, God uses them to uncover moral weaknesses, produce changes in lifestyle, and, in general, to strengthen a believers faith.

Some people are abused physically and mentally because of their beliefs. Trials befalling believers which arise from following Christ are a special case. In Matthew 5:11-12, Jesus says, "*Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

Count it all Joy: Count every trial as an occasion for joy. That is a startling statement! What does James mean? I think one thing he is saying is that **attitude** is vitally important in successfully dealing with trials.

What attitude is appropriate for facing trials? James says "joy!" He seems to mean that believers have a basis for joy that transcends earthly trials. They know their future is secure "in Christ." They should have confidence God will use even dreadful trials to accomplish something to their benefit. They have before them the example of Jesus death on a cross as He suffered greatly. Yet that incredible trial is what God used to accomplish the astounding benefit of salvation for all who believe.

James says there are right and wrong ways to face trials. It is wrong to get panicky, resentful, complaining, self-pitying, scared, and reacting with feelings of bitterness and anger. It is right to trust God's promise that He will use steadfastness, even in the face of a difficult painful trial, to accomplish something good. Believers

should then be able to reckon trials as occasions for joy, not because they are pleasurable which they are not, but because God will use all trials for their benefit.

James says, “**we know**” God uses tests of faith to increase patience, perseverance, and steadfastness. These are three valuable traits of godly character. If facing trials is necessary to gain those benefits, it will change our attitude toward trials.

Believers should have attitudes that recognize tests or trials from God are ultimately going to be beneficial. Testing enables believers to uncover weak spots and correct them, thus advancing in perfection and completion. In the end, believers will lack nothing necessary for fellowship with God and fellow believers.

Remaining steadfast in faith when tested by trials is a major issue. However, it can be more difficult to remain steadfast when God gives blessings of wealth and power. Temptation to abuse wealth and power in a quest for more wealth and power is often overwhelming. Believers are to stand fast in integrity and there may well be an earthly cost for doing so.

Focus on Blessings not on Troubles: Every believer **has in the past received** the most valuable and precious gift available in the universe which is salvation “in Christ.” Starting with acknowledging that incredible gift, believers should regularly count their blessings and thank God. Constantly viewing trials as a source of trouble. is not fruitful. Trials are best viewed as challenges to be dealt with in faith, trusting God to use them for our ultimate benefit.

Consider James statement that true faith is strengthened by a proper attitude toward life’s trials. Is there something that will help me put that in perspective? Yes! Think about God’s sovereignty. Suffering doesn’t only arise from trials. Suffering can arise from yielding to temptation and from persevering in righteousness. These two broad sources of suffering are very different in nature and should not be confused. For a believer, when suffering arises from yielding to temptation and the subsequent sin, that suffering will degrade their spiritual life. On the other hand, suffering which arises from persevering in faith will strengthen spiritual life.

Trials challenge faith. True faith, when battered by trials, may bend or stretch but it doesn’t break, even under a load of emotion and doubt. True faith manifests itself as a persistent willful commitment to our Sovereign God.

Joy in Being Steadfast: Believers should always deal in God-honoring ways with trials which confront them. **Let right attitude and knowledge** develop steadfastness to the full. The implication is that if we have a right attitude toward God and a right knowledge about our relationship with God, we will face trials in a God-honoring way and God will use the consequences of those trials for our benefit.

But what about a trial in which every nerve in the body tingles and we shake with fear dreading the mental or physical pain we face? Our emotions and intellect will demand we do something, do anything, to get out of the threat. Temptation will be great to take any available “out” even if it compromises our faith. In such situations, only God can enable us to endure. He has done that for countless people who ended up losing their mortal lives, but God enabled them to stand firm to the end, even as they were burned, sawed in two, killed by animals, stoned by “religious” friends, and otherwise slaughtered by fellow humans.

It is unlikely anyone in this life can avoid encountering trials and difficulties, but they can face them with a God-honoring attitude. We can use will-power and the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit to choose a righteous attitude and the corresponding right behavior. Joy is the attitude James suggests, joy grounded in knowledge of God and His promises.

Will-power usually works, but extreme physical and mental torture may be more than body and mind can bear. Even such an extreme case, James says, count up the pluses and minuses of being faithful to God compared to the pluses and minuses of denying faith. It is always best to be on God’s side even if it costs our earthly life. God rewards faithfulness. A believer’s mission in life is to trust and obey God. Succeeding in steadfastness is a cause for joy.

Behavior is the Issue: James is not concerned with feelings or whether, when we are confronted by a trial, we think it is fair. His concern is our behavioral response in the face of trials. Attitude strongly influences behavior. We are created such that our will can make right choices in spite of contrary feelings and intellectual conclusions. The human will can control emotions and intellect.

The essential attitude to have is a desire to please God. That attitude is the basis for other godly attitudes. Attitude and behavior interact. Each strengthens or weakens

the other. When we waver between options, attitude and behavior bounce around until an equilibrium of agreement is reached. Bad behavior and bad attitude go together. Change one and the other follows. Behavioral patterns can be chosen even when emotional and intellectual inclinations must be overridden.

In a kind of spiral effect attitude influences behavior and behavior either reinforces or works against that attitude. Both are under control of the will. When attitudes or behaviors are chosen based on feelings, the result is almost always problematic.

Victor Frankl's Example: The life of Viktor Frankl provides an example of the power of the will in choosing an attitude. As a prominent Jew, Frankl was taken prisoner by the Nazi's. Before he was finally liberated, he was subjected to years of indignity and humiliation, horrors beyond imagination. Near the beginning of his 3-year long ordeal, something happened that enabled him to endure.

He was marched into a Gestapo interrogation room. His captors had already taken away his home, family, freedom, possessions, even including his watch and wedding ring. They shaved his head and stripped off his clothing. He stood naked, under glaring lights, to be interrogated by the Gestapo. He was falsely accused. He had every reason to believe he was doomed. He was destitute, a helpless pawn in the hands of brutal, prejudiced, sadistic men. It seemed he had nothing. Suddenly it came into his mind that something remained. There was one thing he remained free to do.

Dr. Frankl realized that, in spite of his horrible situation, he still had the power to choose his own attitude. Unless they took his life, no matter what was done to him and regardless of what the future held for him, he could choose his attitude. He could choose bitterness or forgiveness, choose to give up or to go on, choose hatred or hope, choose determination to endure or the paralysis of self-pity.

Frankl realized he had one freedom left – the ability to choose his attitude. He chose to believe in the future and the goodness of God. During his concentration camp years, Frankl was mistreated in inhuman ways, but continued to endure. He remained steadfast in his chosen attitude through the power of his will. Unknown to him until after he was liberated, his father, mother, brother, and wife were all gassed or otherwise died in the concentration camps. After liberation, his persevering attitude carried him on to an illustrious career in neurology and Psychiatry.

Every Believer's Attitude: As Dr. Frankl demonstrated that while mental and volitional capability remains, so does the power to choose a right attitude toward people, things, and events. The indwelling Holy Spirit aids believers. We can “trust and obey” God even when our feelings and intellect cringe to the point that, like the advice given to Job by his wife, we are inclined to deny God and die.

Believers should have a Christlike humility and willingness to sacrifice self for the benefit of others. Philippians 2:5-8, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

Making Right Choices: Believer's emotions, intellect, and will are not independent. They interact. Each influences the others. In most situations, the will is able to control the intellect and emotions. Choosing to do what we know to be the right thing is sometimes easy, sometimes exceedingly difficult. When emotions, thoughts and the right choice are aligned, the choice is easy. When emotions and thoughts oppose the right choice, the choice is difficult. For that reason, Scripture repeatedly instructs believers to train their intellect and emotions to be aligned with Scriptural principles so that choices made will always be godly choices.

James 1:5-8: *“ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”*

Pray for Wisdom (Ask): Wisdom encourages developing steadfastness. What if wisdom is lacking? James says, if you lack wisdom – ask God. Wisdom is not a substitute for steadfastness, but then neither is steadfastness is a substitute for wisdom. Both are necessary in order to stand fast during trials. In facing trials, as in

all things, believers need an attitude that leads to steadfastness in faith. When wisdom is inadequate, ask God. He will provide.

Wisdom is different from factual knowledge and understanding. Someone has remarked that knowledge is the ability to take things apart, while wisdom is the ability to put things together. That certainly is part of it, but there is more.

Godly wisdom is the godly use of knowledge. It is a quality of understanding which enables apprehension of eternal truths, discernment of moral obligation, and discernment of the path of righteousness in life. Wisdom enables believers to endure and benefit from trials and in all things, to follow Christ.

God freely gives wisdom to believers who ask. He gives without reservation, generously, and without finding fault or counting the cost. He does require a single-minded commitment to Him. Single-minded commitment to God means an unvarying, sincere, committed trust in who He is, and an understanding of His overruling sovereignty. We often hear about the danger of putting all our eggs in one basket. Our relationship with God is different. It is OK to “put all eggs in God’s basket!”

Double Mindedness: James says doubting believers are like waves of the sea, up one moment and down the next. Paul uses a similar notion in Ephesians 4:14 where he urges believers to become mature in the faith *“so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”* In Matthew 14:22-23, there is a vivid picture of effects that can arise from doubt. Peter walks on the water toward Jesus. Peter doubts and Peter sinks.

By double-minded, James means a wobbling commitment, one moment turning to God, the next moment turning back to the world – no patience, no endurance, no steadfastness in faith. A double-minded person has no right to expect God will give what is asked. But in spite of double-mindedness, our gracious, merciful, God may give what a double-minded person asks. God gives good things to all people through His common grace.

Augustine once prayed “O God, make me pure – but not now.” That was a double-minded prayer. Just so, we might be inclined to pray “Save me O God, but don’t change me.” That too is double-minded. As Paul says, believers are to give their

lives to God as a living sacrifice. That gift is an unreserved commitment from the believer. That sacrifice is a part of being transformed into a likeness of Christ. Being two-faced with God, e.g., turning to Him in need but turning back to the attractions of the world when everything is rosy, is a losing proposition.

Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge: Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are all forms of *knowing*. All *knowing* is the consequence of mentally manipulating facts and ideas in a search for meaning and significance. Understanding necessarily includes knowledge. Wisdom necessarily includes both knowledge and understanding.

Knowledge results from gathering, accumulating, and evaluating facts for meaning and significance. Facts are gathered through experiences including observation, experimenting, listening to others, reading and study, etc.

Knowledge is not all of the same type. As an example of such differences, think about the enormous difference between having theoretical knowledge to write a descriptive article on how to milk a cow as compared to the practical knowledge of being able to go to the barn, milk a cow, and come back with a bucket of milk. Most people have the practical knowledge to punch the right buttons in the right order on a calculator to add and subtract, but most don't have the necessary knowledge of mathematical and physical principles to design and make a calculator.

Understanding is a higher level of *knowing* and includes the ability to see how individual things connect with one another and fit into larger pictures. Understanding enables synthesizing new knowledge from bits and pieces already known. Understanding enables knowledge to be organized and structured to have functional utility. Like knowledge, understanding has both theoretical and practical aspects. Understanding theoretically how a diesel engine operates is very different from practical understanding which enables diagnosing an engine problem and fixing it.

Wisdom is the top level of *knowing*. Wisdom is especially active in diagnosing problems and making decisions. When knowledge and understanding about a situation are available, wisdom is able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Wisdom can identify points of leverage, pivot or tipping points, draw accurate conclusions, and make good decisions. Wisdom discerns significance, value, and worthiness. Wisdom is able to put bits and pieces of knowledge and understanding together to

form an overall view of a topic or a broad area of knowing. Wisdom finds the knot in a tangled mess of information that allows complex situations to be unraveled. Wisdom in scripture is the foundation for godly decisions. James says if you need wisdom, ask God.

No one can truly understand the world without acknowledging God's existence. It is sad, but true, that it is possible to have worldly knowledge in great abundance, yet never have understanding and wisdom to apply that knowledge to living a godly life. It is possible to be wise in the ways of the world, but never have insight into the truths of God. Godly wisdom and insight enable seeing beyond life's trials, or beyond the pleasures of worldly wealth or beyond the thrill of power, to the true riches found only in Christ. When wisdom for life's issues is needed, ask God.

What is Next? Discerning good from bad and choosing the good.