

# Faith Under Pressure

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Date: 07 September 2025

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We're starting a new series, this term, in the book of James. Now, this book of James was considered by many in the early church not to be worthy of being in the New Testament, because it didn't seem to contain the truths and doctrines of the other books of the New Testament.

And Martin Luther went as far as describing it as an epistle of straw, because he said it didn't contain the fundamentals of the Gospel about the birth, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And of course, its most well-known phrase is, faith by itself, if it's not accomplished by action, is dead. Now, I'm not talking on that, because that's a bit later on.

But, despite the fact that Luther thought it wasn't a great epistle, he did include it in his New Testament, and we have it in our New Testament, and we believe it is the Word of God.

Now, James understood that being a Christian is not just believing certain doctrines or beliefs. It's not just being baptized, not just going to church, not just taking communion.

[ 1 : 1 8 ] Being a Christian means you act and speak in certain ways, ways in which you're motivated by what you believe. It means what you believe should result in certain actions and a way of living.

Faith not accompanied by action is dead. So, in his letter, James sets out a way of living to his hearers, as they try to live as Christians in the light of their existing circumstances.

And as such, James is as much relevant today as it was to his original audience. In this letter, he deals with intolerance, the desire for wealth, favoritism, and the wrong use of the tongue.

All things which are just as relevant today as it was in the day of James. As with most of the New Testament letters, James starts with who the letter is from and to whom it was sent.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Greetings. But it's rather short and rather terse. And the only greetings he gives is greetings.

[ 2 : 3 1 ] If you read Paul's letters, he goes on and says, grace to you, you're doing well, thank you for being what you are, and blah, blah, blah. But not James. He goes straight in. I'm James.

You're you. Greetings. You're welcome. You're welcome. You're welcome. We don't know for sure who this James was. Because there's no clue from him.

He doesn't say who he is, except for he's James. And really no clue as to who he was writing to. It's very, very vague. There are about five Jameses mentioned in the New Testament.

But most people, and I think that's probably true, is that this James was actually the brother of Jesus, who held a prominent place in the church in Jerusalem.

For James, his importance was not who he was, but what he was. A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 38 ] This word for servant is *doulos*. And in Greek, it's a common term for slave. But in the Old Testament, the word for servant suggested someone who'd been chosen by God to have authority under God.

And James had this role in the early church because he was chosen by God, not because he was after personal power. He wasn't there to say, look, I'm James.

Look how important I am. I'm the leader in Jerusalem. No. He was there because he was chosen by God. So he could write with authority, not only because he was a servant of Jesus, but because, sorry, but only because he was a servant of Jesus.

No other reason. No other reason. And in this, he was following in the steps of Jesus, who said that he came not to be served, but to serve him.

I know we are looking for a new minister, and we pray for that every day. And my take is, any minister that comes here must follow that word.

[ 4 : 50 ] I've come to serve, not to be served. We need someone here who's got a servant heart. And again, unlike most of Paul's letters and earlier letters in the New Testament, James is not writing to a specific church, but to the 12 tribes scattered among the nations.

This is really describing the Jews who had been scattered amongst nations for many reasons, and for various reasons, but we really don't know exactly to whom he was writing.

So after a very brief, this is me, this is you, greetings, he gets straight into the nub of his letter. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whether you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

So James, though we don't know exactly who he was writing to, it's clear he was writing to people who were going through difficult times and needed support in their trials.

The word used for trial here is actually the same word that is used for temptation. So James is pointing out that a trial is not only something you have to put up with, but may be a means of temptation to draw you away from the path that God wants you to be on.

[ 6 : 14 ] But it is a means, trials are a means by which our faith and our belief is tested. Now, in this country, we're not tested in the same way as some Christians in other countries are, where being a Christian can lead to imprisonment, can lead to torture, can lead to death.

We don't, praise God, face that. But we do face personal trials and problems because we are Christians and we believe certain things and we want to walk in certain ways, both at work and with family.

But Jesus never said we would be protected from trials and difficulties. He never told us that we would be protected. And we only have to look at the life of Jesus to see that he had many trials and temptations.

But what Jesus did say is he would be with us during those times. Now, you know, many of you will know, I've faced myself a difficult time over the last few months with the loss of Sylvia.

And this has indeed been a trial for me. But knowing Jesus and knowing he's been with me has helped me through this difficult time.

[ 7 : 34 ] And that's my prayer for the nieces, family and friends. That they will know that Jesus is with them through this difficult time.

And that he will help them, any of you here who are going through times, going through difficult times, that he will be with you at this time.

I have to say that I have not actually considered the past months as pure joy. But we are told to mourn with those who mourn.

And I know that this church family here has mourned with me. As in past times, they have celebrated with me over various things. And it's good to know there's a church family behind you.

And it was behind Bernice. And it was behind others who have lost loved ones. But going through these trials teaches us perseverance to keep going.

[ 8 : 41 ] To keep going on, even when you think, I don't want to go on. It helps us to go on, to endure with hope. And if we do this, James says, we will become mature and complete having everything.

Because we know that the Lord Jesus Christ is with us. And in verse 12, it tells us, blessed is the one who perseveres under trial.

Because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. You remember that in Matthew, Jesus set out eight Beatitudes.

Eight examples of why Christians will be blessed. And in fact, they will be blessed if they will live in these certain ways. And the eighth says, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and forcefully say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.

[ 9 : 47 ] For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. James is saying, you may be under trials, it may be difficult. You may be wondering what is going on. But he says, at the end of this, you will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

And Paul tells us that this crown is a crown that will last forever. It is a crown of righteousness for all those who belong for the appearing of Jesus Christ.

And it's a crown of glory that will never fade away. That's a crown worth having. A crown of righteousness and a crown that will last forever. And a crown that will never fade away because it's a crown given to us by God.

James then goes on to speak about wisdom. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault.

And it will be given to you. But you mustn't have any doubt when you ask, basically he says. Now I think most of us would agree that we lack wisdom, or at least lack wisdom in certain situations.

[ 10 : 56 ] And James does not say, look for wisdom in books, or Google, not that he would have done, or chat GPT. That's not where wisdom comes from.

It might be where information comes from. It might be where facts come from. But it's not where wisdom comes from. But we need to ask God who is the source of all wisdom.

And it is to him that you should go for the wisdom you lack. And he says, well, if you lack this wisdom, and you really want this wisdom, don't go about it in a half-hearted way.

Pray to God and say, look, I need wisdom for this reason, for that reason. I don't know the answer. Please, Lord, let me know what the answer is. So we should ask with faith and have no doubt that God is able to answer our requests.

Now, this doesn't mean we should try and work up our faith, you know, get down and do some exercises in faith. Because if we follow Christ, we already have faith, as it is faith through grace that has saved us.

[ 12 : 01 ] And it's not enormous faith that we require. As Jesus said, faith as small as a grain of mustard seed can enable us to move mountains. So it's not great faith, but faith in a great God that helps us in prayer.

What is this wisdom? I think one of the songs we just sung says what it is. It is a wisdom about God and his purposes. It's not wisdom about who's going to win the next match, who should I bet on, blah, blah, blah.

It's not that kind of wisdom. It's a wisdom about knowing God and his purposes. It helps us to be able to see our situation from God's perspective, not from the world's perspective or even from our perspective, but from the perspective of God.

To live our lives in the light of God. That is true wisdom. And then Paul goes on to sort of, not really contrast, but say, people in humble circumstances and people who've got money.

And I think here he's simply saying that we should be content with the circumstances we find ourselves in. Whether it be one where resources are limited.

[ 13 : 16 ] And James says that they do, in fact, have a high position. Not because they've got lots of money. Not because they've got big houses. Not because they've got lots of cars or a good job.

They have a high position because their position is in Jesus Christ. It will save them. Their position is at the right hand of the Lord Jesus Christ. So they have a high position.

It doesn't matter what they possess. But they possess grace in Jesus Christ. Because they, like the rich, are saved by grace.

Not for anything they have done. Not for anything they have got. And that's true for those who have money. Those who don't have money. It's true for all of us who come to Jesus.

They are saved by grace through faith. Not of works. Someone will come and talk about that in a couple of weeks' time. Their wealth does not enable them to enter the kingdom of God.

[ 14 : 13 ] And remember that picture that Jesus had of the difficulty of a rich man coming into the kingdom of God. That it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Sometimes what we have can hide what we need. And what we all need is to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. We all need God's grace.

And we are all equal in the sight of God. Riches will fade away, but the love of God remains. And God, James, goes on to talk about temptation.

When we are tempted, sometimes it's easy to blame temptation on others, on the things around us, or sometimes even on God.

But Proverbs 19.3 makes the point, well, a person's own folly ruins their life, yet their heart rages against the Lord. It's their own fault that they sin.

[ 15 : 22 ] It's their own fault they go down the wrong path. But they want to blame someone else. It can't be me. It must be someone else. But it is that which is within us that causes us to sin.

God does not tempt us. He has nothing to do with evil, except we sent Jesus to deal with evil and sin. It's down to us if we're tempted.

It's down to us if we fall. Jesus made this clear to his disciples where he said, Nothing that goes into you can make you unclean.

But from within, out of a person's heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, madness, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and make a person unclean. It's not what we eat or drink that makes us unclean. It's our thoughts. It's what's inside us that makes us unclean if they lead to sin.

[ 16 : 25 ] And James makes it clear that if we give birth to sin, when it's fully grown, it gives birth to death.

We're dead in our trespasses and sins unless we've come to Jesus Christ as our Savior. But we should not despair. Paul told the Corinthians and asked that no temptation has seized you except what is common to mankind.

And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. Whatever your temptation is, whatever comes your way, God has said there's a way out of it.

You don't have to fall to this temptation. I remember when I first became a Christian, I used to have little cards with verses on which you'd try to remember.

This was one of the ones we had that always helped me because it said to me, okay, I will be tempted. And it doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian, if it's two months or, like me, 60 years, you will still be tempted.

[ 17 : 40 ] Temptation will come your way in many forms. But there is a way out of it. You can meet it with Jesus Christ because he has dealt with that sin once and for all. And then James goes on to talk about gifts.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.

And he is the only one who gives good and perfect gifts. He did not look for gifts, for good gifts anywhere else but to God.

He is the only one who gives good and perfect gifts. Do not find the perfect gift in Harrods or on the internet, especially not on Amazon. But you can always send them back.

In describing God as the Father of heavenly lights, James is pointing us to the fact that it is God who created the sun, the stars and moon and put them in their place in the universe.

[ 18 : 49 ] Psalm 147 tells us he determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Now the universe contains some thousand million galaxies, each of which contain about a hundred thousand million stars.

An estimated 200 billion trillion stars. That's two followed by 24 zeros. Now none of us, not even Richard who was a good mathematician, our minds can't envisage that number.

It's just a number that is, your brain would explode trying to think of it. But it's a number that God can envisage because he named them all.

So that's because of the idea how awesome our God is. But God is not only the creator of these lights, but he is light in self.

In Jesus that light came into the world. And darkness, evil, sin cannot and will not and has not overcome it. And unlike the sun, moon and stars, God does not change.

[ 20 : 03 ] He is unchangeable. And the same is true of his son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. We will know that whenever we come to God, whenever we come to Jesus, he will not change.

We may change, but he will not. He will be the same. His love, his grace, his forgiveness will remain the same. And the greatest gift that comes from the Father is the new birth we have in Jesus Christ.

And this new birth is entirely in the hands of God. He chose to give us birth. As Paul says in Romans, God predestined us for those God foreknew.

He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. We did not choose God, but he chose us. And he chose us through the word of truth, the gospel, the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But to get new birth, through the gospel, one has to hear it. And that is part of our task as Christians. By word and deed, declare a love of God in Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 10 ] That's what Alpha is about, declaring the love of God in Jesus Christ. James then teaches that to follow God means learning from Jesus.

He was sensitive to the presence and the will of God, his Father. If we walk with Jesus the same way as Jesus walked with his Father, then in some way we will know God's will for us, God's will for this church, God's will for this world.

And we need to acknowledge God as our only authority, our only means of wisdom, and submitting our own interest to what God's will is for us.

And understanding at the end of the day, whatever happens to us, whether it's difficulties or good things, the outcome is in God's hands. And his will is always good and perfect.

Amen. And Father, I just want to pray that we will be your people. People who know your will, your wisdom, your love, and your grace.

[ 22 : 23 ] And that will be shown in what we do and in what we say. Amen.