

All Joy

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[0 : 00] We begin today with a new series in the book of James. Someone came to me just as we were in the greeting time and said, this passage in particular was the first passage that he read in the Bible.

Isn't that pretty neat? But I don't know about you, but probably not for all of us, not all of us have probably spent a whole lot of time in James. It's a book that's sometimes kind of a little ignored. So I'm glad that we as a church are journeying through together in this book. So I am especially thinking that not a lot of us have journeyed through this book.

I had quite a thorough introduction planned. But as my beautiful, my honest wife told me that after 20 minutes, she needs pictures. And I don't have pictures, so we better get going.

I've got a few things to say. What I'm going to try to do is just briefly introduce the book and the context and then make three main points out of the passage for today. So if you've read through James, maybe recently for the first time, one of the things that you might notice, especially if you read a lot of Paul's letters, is that it's a little different.

[1 : 17] James doesn't speak a lot directly about Jesus. And James doesn't say anywhere explicitly that Jesus came to save those who believe in him.

And the trouble for us is we like to hear those things. And those are great things to hear. We should hear them every day over and over. But I think for these reasons, James is often kind of a little ignored.

But as we journey together through this book, I think you're going to see, like I've seen, that James doesn't disagree with any of these things. But he is saying something else.

James is saying he has his own message. And he's concerned that we as believers in Christ know how now we should live as believers in the world.

So I think as we journey together, you're going to find James challenging you in various ways. Do you have wisdom? I mean, do you know how to apply your faith in God to your real life?

[2 : 25] Does your faith in God bear fruit? I mean, has your faith in God affected the way that you speak? Or the way that you think about money? And as James deals with these issues in our lives, he's going to keep bringing us back to this point.

Do you have a correct view of God? Do you know that he's the source of good before whom we must be humble? These are the sorts of things I think we're going to discover as we journey through James and hopefully today.

And just in case you think you can brush James aside, chances are he was a very great leader in the early church. They often called him James the Just. What a cool name.

Most likely he was the half-brother of Jesus. He wasn't one of the 12 disciples while Jesus was alive, but Jesus appeared to him. The resurrected Jesus appeared to him.

And James becomes the great leader, a great leader in the early, very important church, the church in Jerusalem. All this to say, all that I've said, that as we journey through James, let James be James.

[3 : 42] Let him speak to you with the message, with his own distinct voice. It sounds a little different than Paul's voice, but he speaks in harmony with Paul.

They say the same thing, and the rest of the biblical witness. Rick Watts, professor of New Testament Region College, says that James is perhaps the most outstanding example in the New Testament of wrestling with the practical implications of the gospel.

How now should we live? So we begin, even just looking at this passage, we look at the context.

Verse 1 says, James, if you follow with me in the scripture, James says that he's writing to the 12 tribes in the dispersion.

Right there, James already is somewhat unique. It's a bit of an unusual description. It's not used often in the New Testament.

We learn from this that James is probably writing to Jewish Christians, but here the 12 tribes doesn't refer specifically to the historic tribes of Israel.

[4 : 50] These 12 historic tribes practically didn't really exist after the exile of most of the Jews into Assyria and Babylon more than 500 years ago before James writes this letter.

No, when James here says the 12 tribes, he's referring to a new sort of Israel, a regathered Israel, a spiritually renewed Israel that many Jews believed would be brought into being in the last days.

And James believes that in Jesus, this is coming together. The people of God are being regathered and made new in Jesus. But here we see a tension.

They're the regathered people of God, but they're still in, they're in the dispersion. Like the Jewish community became dispersed among the nations outside of Palestine. This renewed people of God is still in some sense a dispersed people.

Not everything has suddenly been made right. And I think this context, this is how the letter of James finds you and I today.

[6 : 06] I don't know about you, but I've often considered my faith in Christ as something liberating, something exciting, something fresh and new.

And it is. But as I journey, I find that even though it's liberating, I find it's also very divisive. And even though it's truly exciting, being a follower of Christ can be dangerous.

And that even though Christ has brought a fullness of meaning to my life, like I never experienced outside of it, this meaning can still be offensive to others. And as we follow Christ, I think we find, like Paul describes in Philippians 3, that suffering isn't something that we'll face in spite of our faith. No, suffering is something that we face sometimes because of our faith. But how will we respond to this question?

And this is where James begins in our passage. So in these first eight verses, James paints us a picture of three characters. We see a character, hopefully you and I, called to be steadfast in the midst of trials.

[7 : 33] We see another character who's double-minded and rather being steadfast is described as unstable in all of his ways.

And then we'll see God described as the opposite of the double-minded man. And God, therefore, himself is steadfast. And these are the three points that I want to try and make as we go through. That firstly, the steadfast life yields a flourishing life. But secondly, the flourishing life requires steadfastness.

And thirdly, the steadfast life depends on God. So the steadfast life yields a flourishing life.

We've seen that James is speaking to a community who will face trials of various kinds. But he begins by reminding them about the end, the outcome of these trials.

[8 : 38] Look at verse three. The testing of your faith, he writes, produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Is that okay for you? Perfect and complete, lacking nothing. I could take some of that. Well, I hope this doesn't disappoint you, but James doesn't mean perfect in the sense of never making a mistake again.

I think it's pretty obvious. Or he doesn't mean lacking nothing in the sense that you'll have all the stuff that you ever wanted. I think, James, here, we see a glimpse of the ongoing, the maturing life of a Christian.

We will face trials, but if we remain steadfast, if you remain steadfast, you'll flourish into a mature follower of Christ.

So the phrase perfect and complete in this passage means something like to reach a summit of goodness or to be fully developed in a moral sense.

[9 : 56] I don't know about you, but when I think of my life and I consider my progress, maybe think about yours, I often look to my achievements or my possessions.

Or I look to the future and I consider questions, or I did, will I be married? I am now. But will you be married? Will you have children?

will you be wealthy? Will you be healthy? Some of these are important things to consider. But have you, do you sometimes wonder whether you'll be different?

I mean, do you wonder whether you'll be more loving in two years from now? Or more patient? Or more trustworthy? I think here James is saying that we can be.

And the steadfast faith in times of trial yields this sort of maturity. The trials that we face are an opportunity to mature.

[11:08] I know some of us like to pretend that we like to be immature. But I think we have something inside of us that knows that we were made to grow up.

I remember for some reason when I was four, a big moment in my life occurred when I could stand on my tippy toes and look over the top of the kitchen counter.

That was just a big moment for me. So I'd really matured into something. New possibilities opened up for me. Or I think about when I was 10 or 11 and I used to get into the car.

It's just amazing. We had a nice big white Mercedes and we had this really I must use a skedonk is a South African word.

It's a kind of a really second hand really bad car but it was a Ford Escort and to me a little 10 year old kid the Ford Escort looked a lot faster than this big old bulky Mercedes.

[12:09] So I always imagined I'd always choose the Escort and I'd go sit inside and I would just make noises and I'd kick in the clutch and I'd change the gears and I'd imagine I'm driving and I'm railing and I'd imagine the day when I'd be old enough mature enough to drive this car around.

Something about being older and being mature opened up a whole new world to me. As much as we like to pretend we like to be mature there's something about growing up into who we've been made to be that we know we long for.

And this is why James reckons that there's something about the goal of being maturing Christ that is itself strong enough to pull us through times of trial.

This is why he can say in verse 2 consider it all joy when you meet trials. Because this maturing why joy and maturity?

because maturing is the flourishing life. By flourishing I mean the life that bears fruit. Does your life bear fruit?

[13:26] Fruit that will last? You and I were made to glorify God. And one way in which that happens is our lives bear fruit for him.

the Bible teaches that we were made in the image of God. We weren't made of God but we were made to reflect who he is.

We know this story something's gone wrong in our fallen state this image has become distorted. We no longer reflect clearly who God is.

And so part of what God is doing in Christ is he's transforming us back into the likeness of Christ so that we may again reflect the image of the God in who we've been made.

Now there's a real sense when we become believers in Christ that we are made perfect. That we're made perfect. That you and I as believers in Christ have been made perfect.

[14:29] We stand as Paul says righteous before God because of God's grace by our faith in Jesus. We've been made perfect.

But there's a very real sense in which we still need to let this gracious justification work its way out in our lives. Sometimes we call this sanctification.

It's still something that happens by God's grace and through the work of his spirit. But our faith in Christ begins to bear fruit as we live out our faith.

Paul in harmony with James describes the singulations as the fruit of the spirit. Is your life bearing the fruit of love, of joy, of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

Is your life in Christ yielding this flourishing maturity? This is the kind of maturity and flourishing that James has in mind when he writes to his beloved brothers and sisters.

[15:44] It's as if he says, hang in there, be glad. What you're going through will cause you to mature and to bear fruit. The steadfast life yields a flourishing life.

But its corollary is also true. The flourishing of life requires steadfastness. We don't simply become mature and flourish just because we face trials.

We need steadfastness in the face of trials. As James writes in verse 4, it's only when we let steadfastness have its full effect that we can reap its flourishing rewards.

This word steadfast in verse 4 can mean patience, endurance, perseverance. All of these things speak of our ability to hold up or bear up in the face of difficulty.

I think we inherently appreciate steadfastness when we see it. I think of a businesswoman who works late hours at night to get ahead in her work.

[17:01] Something about her steadfastness there. Or a sports star who heroically keeps playing even though he's injured. There's probably tons of hockey examples of guys losing teeth and things and keeping going.

I don't know hockey very well so I chose an example from a really classy game of sport called cricket. I don't know if you know that classy game.

I imagine an English village and a couple of 13 blokes on the field dressed in whites on a big green oval. For some reason I see weeping willows around the oval and I see some guys on deck chairs reading a newspaper clapping is going on.

I'm just painting the image of cricket match. South Africa was playing against Australia and we were playing the version of the game that takes five days five full days.

That's my favourite one by the way. It takes five full days to play this. South Africa was playing against Australia who for some reason seems to be everyone's arch enemy when they play against them.

[18:13] But we were playing against Australia and our cricket captain Graham Smith had broken his hand earlier on in the first four days and he wasn't expected to be able to bat again.

Batting is kind of like baseball batting except it's different. He was people didn't think he could come out again.

He had a broken hand. You've got to hold the bat. You can't do it. But in order to salvage the game, he was getting close. He was really getting close on the fifth and final day of this epic match and he needed to come out.

Well, he didn't need to. He didn't come out where he normally does right at the beginning. But as it got closer and it became evident that we could save this match, he came out with a broken hand probably injected.

He came out to face these bowlers who would, you're allowed to, unlike in baseball, in cricket, you're allowed to bowl at the player. One of the objects of the game is to intimidate the batsman and to try to get him scared.

[19:17] So he knew they would bowl right at his hand, right at his head, anything to try and intimidate him. And yet he came out with his broken hand. He went out pretty quickly and we didn't win the game.

But he got a standing ovation walking out. The whole crowd, we were playing in Australia, here. He became a cricketing hero in a small way.

I don't think many people remember that story, but I do. He became a hero that day in the cricket world because of his steadfastness, his perseverance. But it's obvious though that not just any sort of steadfastness is going to yield in us a godly life.

Graham Smith might be a brave and steadfast in the cricket field, but will he be patient and long-suffering with his children one day? I don't know. He looks like a nice guy.

I don't know if he's going to be patient with his kids. But the steadfastness that he needs to be gentle and patient could be quite different from the steadfastness that he needs to be brave on the cricket field.

[20:32] How do we know if we have a steadfastness that will yield a godly and a flourishing life? The trials we face will show us.

In James I think we see that the trials we face have a way of exposing the faith that stands behind our steadfastness or lack of faith. The overworked young business woman can endure her present difficulties because she looks forward to the promotion that she doesn't yet have and the faith that she has in the good life that will come from it.

Behind her steadfastness is a faith, a vision of how life will be and how the world works. To the extent that she really believes that, to that extent she'll keep going through the difficulties.

It's the difficulties, it's the trials that we face that show us what we really believe. James uses two words to teach us about this. The words trials, in verse two, can refer to inward trials, like the temptation to do something that you know is wrong, or outward trials like being ridiculed for your faith.

The word testing, in verse three, is the word used to describe an attempt to learn the character of something. I was thinking it's like, it's a little like writing an exam.

[22 : 12] It exposes something within you. Writing an exam exposes how much you know, or how much you don't know. And when James puts these words together, the trials of various kinds that become a testing of the faith, I think we see that the trials we face expose our faith, or the non-faith that stands behind our steadfastness.

I've often heard it said that if only Christians lived what they believed, then the church and the world would be a better place. I get what people are saying.

I've probably said that myself. The problem is, this passage shows us that we do live what we believe. We live what we believe, and nothing shows us what we believe, like the trials we face.

Brothers and sisters and friends, though you face pain and affliction, and your health is failing, will you take up your cross and find comfort in sharing Christ's suffering?

Though you be lonely, maybe desperately lonely, will you refuse the false comforts of casual sex or addictive eating and find comfort in the presence of Christ and his church?

[23 : 50] Though you be poor, maybe only in comparison to your neighbor, but though you be poor, will you refuse to make money the desire of your heart?

And trust that God will make a way when there seems to be no way? God our trials will show us what we really believe. Before you lose all hope, maybe you answered no to all of those, before you lose all hope, James is certain that there is a faith that will produce the steadfastness that you need for the flourishing life.

Better yet, if you are a brother or sister in Christ, James assumes that you already have it. Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, he says, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, he says, the faith you have produces steadfastness. Just keep on going. Just keep calm and carry on.

The faith that you have in Christ produces steadfastness. How is this possible? And what if you don't have this faith? This brings me to my last point.

[25 : 17] The steadfast life yields a flourishing life, but a flourishing life requires steadfastness. Lastly though, the steadfast life depends on God.

James knows that God has everything that you need for the steadfast life. He contrasts, contrasting the steadfast believer who he describes in verse 4 as complete and lacking nothing.

James' next thought is an offer to those who feel like they are not yet complete, who know that they do lack.

He says in verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God. In some way, wisdom here can serve as an example of anything that you need for the flourishing life, for the steadfast life.

wisdom is interested in seeing how your faith is lived out. That's the essence of wisdom, knowing how to apply God's will for your life.

[26 : 38] He says, if you lack wisdom, let him ask God, where else can we go? if we're made in God's image, who else can speak truthfully about our identity and our purpose other than God?

So James says, let him ask God. But if we go to God, and if you go to God, how will God respond to you? I'll let James tell you in verse 5.

If any of you lack wisdom, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, it will be given him. James is convinced that God is generous and trustworthy.

When he says, the God who gives generously, in the Greek, the descriptive participle is worked into the name of God.

So it's as if he's saying, God is, this God who you come before, he is the giving God. God. And contrasting with the unstable man that we see later in verse 8, who's double-minded, James uses a word for generously that also has the meaning of something like with a single purpose.

[28 : 01] God has made up his mind. He is the giving God who gives generously. This is the God who we come to. And what's more, James goes on to say, God gives generously to all without reproach.

This means that God doesn't expect you to have wisdom, except as a gift from him. And it means that God doesn't condemn you for not having wisdom, but offers you everything that you need to become mature and whole.

God is generous and trustworthy. Is that the picture that you have of God? What about then, though, the terrible and the frightening warning in verses 6 to 8?

This terrified me when I read it. It always terrifies me. Not anymore so much. Hopefully, you not either. But let him ask in faith. Look at verse 6 to 8.

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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.

[29 : 20] He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. That's slightly terrifying. But this is, in a nutshell, the double-minded man doesn't trust God.

And in not trusting God, he excludes himself from the support that God wants him to have. Like we've seen, to be double-minded stands in contrast with God, who is simple.

God is unified in his will and his action. But the double-minded man can't act because he's trapped in his doubt. doubt.

But the doubt here doesn't refer to an intellectual doubt. It speaks about a conflict in your loyalties. It's a doubt of the will, if I can say that.

So in this sense, John the Baptist, who once said of Jesus, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John, who said that, is not a doubter.

[30 : 31] when he later asks of Jesus, are you the Messiah or should I wait for another? His loyalty is steadfast on God. He's looking to God.

All his eggs are still in this God basket, so to speak. He's just trying to discern how God is at work in the world. But for John the Baptist, his whole weight is still on God.

But the doubter can't rest his whole weight on God. Either he doesn't want what God has to give, either he doesn't want what God has to give, or he doesn't trust God to give it.

But in doing so, he doesn't stretch out his hand to receive what God wants him to have. it's like a man who stands in the sunshine, a sunshine that illuminates all the world around him, but he closes his eyes, and he refuses to take it in.

Brothers and sisters, the steadfast life depends on God. He has what we need to remain steadfast, and he wants to give it to us, but we need to depend on God if we are to receive it.

[31 : 59] We have a song that we sing called Fortress, and part of the song reads, in the days of plenty, in the days of want, I will put my trust in you alone, for there's no heart greater than the Father's heart, and there's no love sweeter than the Son's.

I think James would be happy to sing this song with us. He must have experienced days of plenty, in the excitement of the early days when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him, and the church was fresh with vision and hope.

But surely now he knows too about the days of want, as he writes to his brothers and sisters, scattered, persecuted, across the world. But think about it, this is James, who witnessed the life of Jesus.

He's seen the brokenness of a humanity that would crucify Jesus. But he's also seen the love of the Son, who would give up his life for the sake of the world.

This is James, who's seen the tyranny of suffering, that seemed to swallow up all hope in the grave. But this is James, who's also seen the power of God to raise us from the dead.

[33 : 20] This is why James, I think, can play his hand in the very opening sentence. Verse 1, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, in the midst of the days of plenty, in the days of want, can you call yourself a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ?

The steadfast life yields a flourishing life. full of fruit. But God alone has what you need for the steadfast life.

Let us set our hearts and our lives afresh and anew on God. Amen.