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James 1:1-18 – Joy Amidst Trials

I. Introduction:

A. What is the difference between a trial and a temptation? Does God tempt us? Does God test us or put us through trials?

B. **Fallen Condition Focus:**

1. Have you ever experienced hardship of some kind (loss of a loved one, loss of job, poverty, conflict, etc.) that led you to become angry with God or to doubt his goodness and love?
2. Why do we doubt God's goodness or become angry when we suffer? What does this reveal about our hearts?
3. It reveals that we think God owes us when we are faithful. It reveals we obey out of fear of hardship or out of a desire to get from God. It reveals that God only satisfies us and we only think him good when he gives us what we want.
4. This is sin at its core because it reveals that we trust ourselves to be our own saviors. I will work and God will reward, thus my effort is what saves me.
5. The book of James is written to Christians undergoing suffering. The letter is not about suffering, but it addresses them in the midst of suffering. Our text today focuses on suffering and having the proper perspective.

C. The Book of James:

1. Author:

- a. James the son of Alpheus, also known as James the Younger in Mk. 15.40 (one of the twelve)
- b. James the father of Judas, Lk. 6.16
- c. James the son of Zebedee (one of the twelve) who was martyred around 44 A.D., Acts. 12.2
- d. James the brother of Jesus, Matt. 13.55, Mk. 6.3, I Cor. 15.7, Acts 12.17
- e. An unknown James
- f. It is almost certainly James the brother of Jesus who wrote this letter.
 - i. He was prominent in the church in Jerusalem, which fits the context of the letter.
 - ii. The other men named James were either too obscure or not likely to write Scripture (i.e. Judas' father). The only James with prominence other than Jesus' brother died too early to write this.
 - iii. The content of the letter fits with what we know about James the brother of Jesus from the rest of the New Testament
 - iv. This has been the dominant view of the Church throughout its history.
- g. Roman Catholics argue that Jesus could not have a brother since Mary was always a virgin, thus they argue that James was either a cousin (Jerome argued this even though it is nowhere attested in Scripture and does not fit with the word 'brother' used in the New Testament) or an older step brother from a previous

marriage of Joseph. However, the brothers of Jesus in the Gospels are closely associated with Mary which suggests she was their mother and not a wife of Joseph from a previous marriage.

2. Audience:

- a. James states up front that he is writing to the twelve tribes scattered in the dispersion. This is Old Testament language used to describe Israel in exile. Some have argued that this represents the true people of God in exile as they await Jesus the king to return, but the Jewish nature of the letter, the likelihood that James the brother of Jesus wrote it as the leader of the church in Jerusalem makes it likely that the audience was Jewish Christians who were persecuted and forced to leave Jerusalem and live in northern Palestine. The letter is general in that it was most likely written to several churches scattered in the area.
- b. The audience was severely persecuted both in Jerusalem and in northern Palestine where they ended up. Clearly they were still experiencing religious persecution that was affecting them economically.

3. Date:

- a. If James the brother of Jesus is the author, the letter most likely was written in the mid to late 40s A.D.
- b. If the older of the two James' of the disciples was the author, the book was written really early, too early, before his death in 44A.D.
- c. If an unknown James wrote the book, then it was probably written much later, but this is unlikely.

4. Themes:

- a. Suffering: While suffering is certainly the context of the letter, it is not necessarily a theme. It is evident throughout that the letter is written to those who are living or have just recently experienced trials.
 - b. Faith that works
 - c. Rich and poor
 - d. Speech and conduct
 - e. Wisdom and prayer
5. Message of James: Christians must be single-minded, living with integrity, living by faith that works, because God himself has integrity and a single minded purpose of sovereignly calling us to himself through his word.

II. **Organization:** This morning, our text will give us the proper perspective on suffering and instruct us on how we are to live and hope in hard times.

- A. Our lesson today will consist of a series of three contrasts that help us to understand how we are to deal with suffering.
- B. We will not walk through the text in order because James does not seem to write in a purely linear way. He touches on the topic and then addresses issues that relate along the way before ending the passage in a way that finishes off the topic.

III. Contrast #1: Understanding Trials – God tempts us vs. God tests us (1.2-4, 12-18)

James 1:13-18 ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming

down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

A. Wrong understanding: God tempts us to sin.

1. James instructs us in verse 13 not to think or to say that God tempts us. This is the natural way we sinners respond to trials.
2. We begin to believe that since God is sovereign and in control of everything, and since trials afflict us, and since we begin to sin or doubt amidst the trials, God must be tempting us to deliver us into sin.
3. But James says this thinking is totally wrong, because:
 - a. God cannot be tempted himself. He is good, and cannot sin. Temptation is what occurs when a person lacks something and is enticed to seek to have the lack met by something other than God.
 - b. Jesus was tempted because he experienced lack as a human and was enticed by Satan to forsake the will of the Father.
 - c. God cannot be tempted because he lacks nothing and is perfectly satisfied in himself.
 - d. Because God cannot be tempted, he himself cannot tempt others to sin. This is against his nature. He never entices people to seek satisfaction in anything other than himself.
4. James provides the actual reason why we confuse trials that come from God as temptations.
 - a. We have sinful desires.
 - b. If our desires were for God alone, we would never deal with our lack by turning to idols.
 - c. Instead, our desires conceive and give birth to sin, and mature sin brings forth death.
5. Illustrations:
 - a. The trial of being slandered:
 - i. Someone slanders us → We desire a good reputation and it is now lacking → Our desire for a good reputation conceives the action of retaliation → We gossip or respond with harsh angry words → A life lived this way results in broken relationships → A life lived this way results in spiritual death.
 - b. The trial of lacking money:
 - i. We lose our job or can't make money → Our desire for comforts and independence conceives and gives birth to stealing or perpetual anger with God → A life lived this way results in punishment from the law or perpetual alienation from God.
6. Our circumstances do not make us sin, our sinful desires make us sin in the midst of circumstances where we exhibit less self-control.

B. Right understanding: God tests us through trials as a means for growth and future reward.

1. We should not be deceived, but we must remember that God is good and everything that is good comes from God.
2. God, the Father of lights, created the heavenly lights of the Sun and the Moon. This is evidence of his goodness.

3. But, unlike those heavenly lights, the Sun and the Moon, he does not have a dark side, for he does not change as they do. He has no dark side, nor does he produce a shadow, but is consistently good.
 4. To evidence the goodness of God, James highlights the sovereign work of the new birth.
 - a. He explains that God, according to his own will not ours, brought us forth, through the power of his word so that we are the firstfruits of the regeneration of all things.
 - b. James here describes being born again. He explains that God willed for us to be born again, and he accomplished this by the power of his word, the gospel. We know this is the gospel because in verse 21 he describes the ‘implanted word, which is able to save your souls.’
 - c. Thus, our new birth by God’s Spirit through the gospel message is an act that God brings about according to his will, and this act ensures that we, along with creation, will one day be restored to the way we were created to be.
 - d. This is evidence that God does not tempt us. He is good. He is singly focused on redeeming the world, of which our new birth is the beginning.
- D. Therefore, we are to consider our trials to be an occasion for joy because we know that God is using them to build us into maturity and to give us a future reward.
- James 1:2-4, 12** ² 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. ¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.
1. Trials are difficult, obviously, so James is not saying that we need to pretend everything is wonderful. It is right and good to acknowledge suffering and pain and to say it is bad.
 2. But, as Christians, we also must remember to consider it a joy when we suffer because this tells us that God is going to build us into maturity.
 3. Some think that the test is a test to see if we have faith. That is not what James is saying. This testing is more like the type of testing you do to a bridge or a building to make sure it is strong. It is a testing that has a goal of strengthening something with weaknesses. It is not a litmus test where God is trying to find out if you have faith.
 4. The testing produces steadfastness or perseverance, or as Paul puts it in Romans 5, proven character.
 5. The final product of proven character is perfection and completeness. Here he does not mean sinlessness, that will not come until this life is over. He means a faith that is complete in that it is mature, able to endure.
 6. But, verse 12 tells us that the reward we receive is life.
 - a. Those who ran races in the Greco-Roman world were given laurel crowns as a reward signifying their victory.
 - b. The crown James has in mind is probably like this crown. It is not a royal crown with jewels, but a crown signifying the success in the race.
 - c. Thus, the crown of life signifies that the eternal life we receive as a reward for a life of faith is the crown honoring us.
- E. Contrast: God tempts vs. God tests
1. The proper way to view trials is to see them as the means by which God builds character and maturity in us rather than occasions for God to try and make us sin.

2. The result in viewing them this way is joy rather than anger with God.
3. The result in taking joy is righteousness rather than sin.

F. **Applications:**

1. When we encounter trials, we must be careful to discipline our minds to remember the purpose of God in our trials.
2. We must encourage one another in our trials to remember the hope we have.
3. We must pray that God would show us that he sustains in the midst of suffering.
4. We must seek to find what God may teach us in suffering.

IV. Contrast #2: Dealing with Trials – Dependence upon God vs. Dependence upon Self (1.5-8)

James 1:5-8 ⁵ 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.

A. Right way to deal with trials: Depend on God and seek his wisdom.

1. Notice that the way we are to deal with trials is not by asking God to remove the trial. We are to seek God's wisdom in the midst of the trial.
2. If we seeking the crown of life, then we will take joy in the trial and seek God's wisdom.
3. Since God's purpose in trials is to grow us into maturity, when we ask for wisdom during our trials, he will grant us the wisdom to grow as he has planned.
 - a. It is important to note that this verse does not promise that whenever we ask God to give us wisdom about anything, he will tell us the right Christian understanding.
 - b. Many make this mistake when it comes to reading the bible. They assume that as long as they ask God to help them understand, God will tell them the proper interpretation, and then the matter is settled.
 - c. This verse particularly deals with seeking God's wisdom amidst trials so that we can grow into maturity and have our faith refined as God intends the trial to work.
4. We are to be single-minded in our asking God. True dependence upon God involves faith without doubting.
 - a. When we ask God for wisdom to deal with our trials, we are to ask, expecting that God will be faithful to answer us since we know that trials are meant to build character.
 - b. When we doubt, we are questioning God's goodness. This leads into the wrong way to deal with trials.

B. Wrong way to deal with trial: Depend on yourself and seek to avoid trials.

1. To doubt God is to question his goodness. Do doubt God will give us wisdom to deal with trials is inherently a movement away from dependence upon God and toward independence.
2. When we question God's goodness, we only ask God for wisdom when things seem beyond our help. It is a measure of last resort or it is something we do casually from time to time.
3. This is double-mindedness. It is not prayer with the single intent of hearing from God out of trust.
4. This sort of constant shifting from dependence to independence shows that God is not the one we trust but only a means that occasionally works to our end.

5. This sort of prayer for wisdom, prayer that is casual and infrequent, will not be answered. For this prayer lacks faith which is the very thing that God intends to strengthen in trials.

C. **Applications:**

1. Rather than always praying that God would remove our trials, we should pray that God would give us wisdom to see how he is strengthening our character.
2. Rather than only coming to God when our resources are exhausted, we should pray during any hardship for God's sustaining help and wisdom.

V. Contrast #3: Situation Exemplified – The Rich vs. the Poor (1.9-11)

James 1:9-11 ⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

A. The wrong way to deal with suffering: Find your ultimate identity in your economic status.

1. The tendency of the poor who live in trials every day is to despair and be ashamed, or to become angry with God and the systems and institutions of the world. For example, we...
 - a. abuse a substance to avoid the pain.
 - b. become violent at the systems which oppress us.
 - c. become passive, blaming everything on the institutions around us.
 - d. become angry with God for allowing this to happen.
2. The normal way the rich deal with hardship is to trust in their riches to get them through hard times. For example, we...
 - a. buy products that comfort us.
 - b. use our money to relieve stress by taking a vacation.
 - c. spend money to get us out of the situation that is difficult by paying for space.
 - d. distract ourselves with entertainment.

B. The right way to deal with suffering: Find your ultimate identity in Christ.

1. The poor in Christ are ultimately rich because they are God's children and have an inheritance in Christ as royal children of God. Thus, the poor, despite religious persecution that affects their economic success, can boast that they are in fact exalted in heaven and seated with Christ.
2. The rich in Christ are still persecuted in this life and identified with the outsiders and outcasts of society just like Jesus. Even though they have economic means, they realize that it is temporary and does not bring any sort of lasting security. In fact, they realize that to trust in riches will result in death and destruction in the end.

C. The Gospel and Trials:

1. In fact, these few verses in many ways capture the heart of this passage because they remind us that if we find our identity in anything other than Christ, we are doomed.
2. This passage calls us to an impossible standard. Most of us when we read this despair because we know we lack the faith that James calls us to have. None of us rejoice as we should in our trials. None of us are single-minded and without doubt!
3. So, how can this text do anything but discourage us? Certainly God wants to use trials for my good, but I certainly don't have what it takes to cooperate with God's purposes!

4. This is why we must be reminded of the Gospel, that is nowhere made explicit in this text but is alluded to in verse 18, is the essential foundation that is assumed by James.
5. Christ endured great trial and was even tempted by the devil in his ministry. He underwent suffering, temptation, and death, and yet he did not waver in faith. His desires remained sinless as he sought God's wisdom in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was single minded, and persevered for the joy set before him of being holy, perfect, and blameless.
6. Christ endured trials with perfect faith because we cannot. If we believe in him, his righteousness is credited to us.
7. In fact, we are reminded in verse 18, that God, according to his own will, brought us forth by the word of truth, the gospel message, so that we would be made like Christ.
8. **Basic Message:** *We must trust God in the midst of trials, not doubting, by remembering that he is good and cannot tempt us with evil.*
 1. You may struggle now with doubts. You may get angry with God during your trials. But now is the time to repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness, and now is the time to trust that God is good and that he is faithful to us.
 2. When you find yourself handling trials all wrong, rest knowing that Christ has handled trials perfectly in your place. Worship God for this great act of mercy, and he will build in you a joy that stems from knowing that he will grow us into maturity and give us the crown that is eternal life.