

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹James^{ab}, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ^c, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad^a: Greetings.

^a The book of James has long been the subject of controversy among scholars because of apparent contradictions between it and the letters of Paul. Sixteenth century church reformer Martin Luther said in 1522 in the preface to his New Testament translation of James, “On that account the epistle of James, compared with [the other epistles of the New Testament] is a veritable straw-Epistle. For it lacks all evangelical character.” It is true that the epistle of James does not offer a full theology of redemption, but James belongs with the New Testament redemption letters like pictures of vegetables belong in seed catalogs. You get green bean seeds in the mail, not the green beans from the picture, but you cannot have one without the other. James certainly believed in salvation by grace through faith as we learn elsewhere (Acts 15:11), but he teaches us that genuine faith produces works. This letter portrays the lifestyle that identifies someone who has received this salvation.

Much praise is due to the man who unfavorably compared the faulty doctrine and practice of his church with the Bible, but Luther was nevertheless wrong on several points he made about James: (1) That the early church rejected the book; (2) That James emphasized the law as opposed to grace; (3) That James and Paul made contradictory statements in their letters. The alleged contradictions will be addressed in comments on chapter 2.

^b 1:1 **James**. The identity of this James has been much debated. There are four well-known men with his name mentioned in the New Testament. We can all but eliminate the first three from our consideration:

- James the father of the apostle Judas (not Iscariot) is unlikely because nothing is known of him outside of the mention of his name in Luke 6:16.
- James "the less," the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), is an interesting study because so little is known of him and yet so much speculated about him. His obscurity and the relative absence of early claims to his authorship of this letter all but eliminate him from the discussion.
- James the son of Zebedee likely suffered martyrdom at the hands of Herod Antipas before this letter was written (Acts 12:2).

Most Bible scholars are agreed that this is “James the Righteous,” the half-brother of Jesus, who became recognized as the shepherd of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Mary and Joseph did have other children after the birth of Jesus, as shown by Matthew 13:55, Mark 3:31 and John 7:3. His prominence among the Jerusalem believers kept him from having to add a lot of credentials behind his name in this letter. Several early Church fathers believed the books of James and Jude to be authentic Scripture penned by half brothers of our Lord before they were officially recognized as part of the canon.

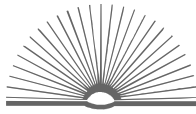
^c 1:1 **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. What is noteworthy about this James is his unwillingness to “drop names” in this epistle. Who wouldn’t want “devoted brother of Messiah” on his resume? Instead he chose to use what he considered to be a more important relationship to the Lord: “bond-servant” (Greek *doulos*, “slave” or “bond-slave”). James was not always a devoted follower of his brother and Messiah. He is described in John 7:5, along with Jesus’ other brothers, as an unbeliever. He may have been among the family members who wanted to put Jesus under protective custody during a frenzied portion of his ministry (Mark 3:21).

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²Consider it all joy^b, my brethren, when you encounter various^c trials^d, ³knowing that the testing of your faith^e produces endurance^f. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result^g, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing^{a,b}

^a 1:1 **To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.** The “dispersed” tribes (Greek *diaspora*) were the believing Jews dispersed throughout the Roman empire. To address a “Christian” letter to the tribes of Israel is problematic to some. Some people think Israel has been set aside temporarily, making it unnecessary for a New Testament letter to be addressed to the nation. Some people think Israel has been effectively replaced by the church, thus spiritualizing this introduction to the epistle of James. Another way of looking at this introduction is to understand that, since God is not through with his people, James is addressing the “nation” of believing Jews into which we Gentiles have been grafted.

^b 1:2 **Consider it all joy.** The word translated “consider” is normally used of rendering a definite decision. In other words, James calls his readers to look decisively on their trials. Who other than one who fully understood the great paradoxes of Christianity would dare urge sufferers to rejoice? The world cannot give or understand this kind of peace. Only one who knows the Savior “who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2) has eyes to see the attractiveness of fellowshiping in the sufferings of Christ. The sufferers know a joy the comfortable can never know.

^c 1:2 **when you encounter various.** The word translated “various” here is *poikilois*, which means “multi-colored” or “variegated.” Like blessings, trials come in all shapes, sizes and colors. James did not need to address a specific trial or his readers might have concluded that God could not give pure joy in some hard situations. Whatever the color of your trial, there can be fullness of joy in the midst of it—no exceptions.

^d 1:2 **trials.** This word (*peirasmois*) is the same word used in verse 12 (“perseveres under trial”). Is it possible that James was present on that mountainside around twenty years earlier when his older half-brother and eventual Lord said, “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice [a word related to the “joy” James commands] and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great...” (Matthew 5:10-12)? How can it be said that James and Paul wrote from contradictory viewpoints when we compare the above words of James with Paul’s challenge to the Romans, “...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:4)?

^e 1:3 **the testing of your faith.** The word *dokimion*, a word that when used as an adjective has been translated “genuine,” has been used to describe refined or tested metal. The same word is used later (“when he has stood the test”). Peter uses this same word twice of the testing of faith in 1 Peter 1:7. This is not like running a stress test to see how well your heart does. Stress tests do not make your cardiac health better. Faith testing is different because it refines your faith, i.e., what you really believe. It strips away non-essentials and makes you run to what you really believe.

^f 1:3 **endurance.** One noteworthy part of the writing style of James is the way he completes a phrase with a word or thought and then inserts the word or thought into the next phrase. More than a poetic device, James gives the reader the chance to learn the meaning of his words by using them more than once. For instance, he follows “trials” in verse two with the same word “testing” in verse three. Here he says that endurance is the results of testing and further describes endurance in the next verse.

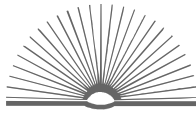
^g 1:4 **And let endurance have its perfect result.** Notice that endurance is said to have work to do. This use of the word is like asking a friend, “Is the pain-killer you took for your headache *working* yet?” When you have a “headache” it is best to take a proper dose of endurance and let it do its work. Its work, unlike a pain-killer, may not make your “headache” go away, but

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endurance is designed with an end in mind: spiritual maturity. Endurance is a hard worker and the finished product is worth the wait.

^a 1:4 **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** “perfect and entire, wanting nothing” (KJV); “completed and rounded out with no defects whatever” (*The Modern Language New Testament, New Berkeley Version*); “mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way” (*The Message*). It is God’s will that His people continually grow toward maturity. They will not grow without perseverance. They will have no perseverance without trials. The evidence of the complete maturity that comes from perseverance is... perseverance.

^b 1:1-4 This letter offers more commands per verse than any other New Testament letter. The first two commands are found in the first four verses of James. They call us to find joy in hard times and to learn the lessons from hard times. Here are some reasons why you should find the joy in hard times:

1. Because hard times bring endurance. People who live in comfort complain far more about life's little inconveniences than people who are persecuted for their faith. You should find joy even in those little inconveniences because God is making you grow up.
2. Because hard times bring maturity. To be mature is to be like Christ. He is the standard for what is “normal.” The world has no standard for “normal” and therefore no legitimate goal for the help it offers people. All the world can do is help you cope. God is taking you to a predetermined goal. We often become angry when things do not go our way. We want things to get back to “normal” and are very discontent until they do. Knowing this keeps you from getting bitter in hard times. God is making you normal.
3. Because hard times bring abundance. You have to lose some things in order to gain more important things. As the poet has pointed out, God cannot pour his riches into hands already full.

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