

Scripture Reading: James 1:1-18 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

<sup>1</sup>James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

<sup>2</sup>Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, <sup>3</sup>knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. <sup>4</sup>And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

<sup>5</sup>But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup>But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup>being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

<sup>9</sup>But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; <sup>10</sup>and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup>For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

<sup>12</sup>Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. <sup>13</sup>Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup>But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup>Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. <sup>16</sup>Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup>Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. <sup>18</sup>In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Today I would like to begin a series of sermons going through my favorite book of the New Testament – the Epistle of James. There are a lot of Christians who have this letter as their favorite New Testament book. One reason for this is that James discusses practical Christian living involving several areas of our lives. In contrast, the Apostle Paul discusses many important theological points in his letters, and while Paul does make many exhortations on proper Christian behavior, James seems to be very focused on practical aspects of how true Christian disciples should be living their lives. That is why many of us love this epistle.

A moment ago, we heard the Scripture being read from James chapter 1, verses 1 to 18. Here is an outline of my message today:

1. An introduction to James and his epistle.
2. Trials test our faith – be happy about that.
3. Praying for wisdom ... Praying in faith.
4. The place of the rich and the poor before God.
5. Temptation, sin, and death.

Part 1: An introduction to James and his epistle (James 1:1).

Let's read James 1:1 – "James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings."

Notice how James calls himself a "bond-servant" ... "a bond-servant of God" ... "a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ." Other English Bibles translate this term as "bond-slave." What does this phrase "bond-servant" or "bond-slave" mean?

Slavery in the ancient world was not always a bad thing. Oftentimes, slaves were entrusted with a great deal of responsibility, and this often meant a mutually beneficial relationship for both master and slave. In the Old Testament, several people, including Moses, were called slaves of God.

Several New Testament authors call themselves bond-slaves of Jesus Christ. This was a term that implied both an honored position in God's household and a commitment to obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. This should be characteristic for all Christians: obedience and devotion to our Lord.

Here is my next question: Who is this man James? There are several men mentioned in the New Testament with this name. Two of Jesus Christ's twelve disciples have this name. If you look at Matthew 10:2-4, you will see two men named James – in verse 2 we see James, the son of Zebedee and the brother of John; and in verse 3 we see James, the son of Alphaeus. But most Bible scholars say that neither of these two men seem to be the author of the epistle written by James.

[*Unspoken during the sermon*: Matthew 10:2-4 – “<sup>2</sup>Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: The first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; <sup>3</sup>Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; <sup>4</sup>Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Him.”]

It is pretty clear to me and to many Bible commentators that the man named James who authored this letter is James, the half-brother of Jesus. As you know, Jesus was the son of Mary, who conceived her child by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by a human father. But Mary was engaged to Joseph and after they were married and after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary had other sons and daughters by natural birth – they would be half-brothers and half-sisters of Jesus. During Jesus Christ's three-year ministry, while he was teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, some of his acquaintances criticized him with these words from Mark 6:3 – “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?” And they took offense at Him.”

The brother named James here is a half-brother of Jesus. And the brother here in verse 3 who is named Judas (a Greek name) is likely the man that we call Jude (in English) and who is the author of the small epistle of Jude that you can find in your New Testament just before the book of Revelation. Let's read the first half of Jude verse 1 – “Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James ...” James and Jude were brothers, and they seem to have been the same men mentioned in Mark 6:3 as brothers of Jesus. And I notice that both men have identified themselves primarily as a bond-servant of Jesus Christ. By the way, the apostles Paul, Peter, and John also refer to themselves this way.

Another important thing to note about this man James is that he seems to have been one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. You can see this in verses such as Galatians 1:19 and 2:9, Acts 12:17, 15:13-29, and 21:17-18. Also interesting is 1st Corinthians 15:3-8 where it is said that the Lord Jesus appeared to several people after His resurrection, including Peter, later James, and last of all, Paul. I will let you look up those verses on your own.

[Galatians 1:18-19 – “<sup>18</sup>Then three years later I [Paul] went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas [Peter], and stayed with him fifteen days. <sup>19</sup>But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.”]

Let's go back to James 1:1. He addresses his epistle “To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” We can see here an allusion to the twelve tribes of Israel who had been scattered after the northern and southern kingdoms had been destroyed by Assyria and Babylon. But there may also be an allusion to the early Christians, who had been scattered due to persecution – in the first chapter of the epistle, we see an exhortation to faithfulness amidst trials. The epistle of James was written rather early, probably between AD 40 and 48, and so most Christians were still people who were mainly from a Jewish background. James displays a Jewish mindset and his epistle contains a lot of reflection on the Jewish Torah.

That is enough for my introduction to this letter. Let us move on to the main lessons of today's passage.

Part 2: Trials test our faith – be happy about that (James 1:2-4).

Let's read James 1:2-4 – “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, <sup>3</sup>knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. <sup>4</sup>And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect [mature] and complete, lacking in nothing.”

The first thing that I want to point out here is that we should consider it a joyful experience to have to go through this process. That is because at the end of the process, James tells us, we become "perfect and complete." Although our English Bibles often use the word "perfect" in this verse and in other verses in the New Testament, the Greek word here could be translated in other ways, such as "mature," "complete," "morally perfect," and "genuine." The idea here is not that we become absolutely perfect – that will not be possible as long as we live in our current bodies – but that we become mature after a process that tests the genuineness of our faith and that leads us to be the finished products that God wants us to be.

Notice that verse 3 here says that this process involves the testing of our faith – our faith is being tested for its genuineness, so that we will be mature and complete. Verse 2 says we should welcome this process ... we should consider it joyful, because this testing produces endurance and maturity.

Let me read some verses from Hebrews chapter 12. Verse 7 – “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” If you are truly a son or daughter of God, then God is going to discipline you. The discipline you receive from your father and mother is a part of growing up, so that you become a mature, responsible adult. God's discipline of His children is so that they become mature, responsible Christians.

Hebrews 12:11 – “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” During the season when this discipline is happening, it doesn't feel joyful, but the end result is something desirable: desirable by God and it ought to be desirable by us as well. After having been trained by the Lord's discipline, this verse tells us, the result is “the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Holiness and right living are goals of Christian spiritual formation, as well as peace with God and peace with one another.

Let's look back at James 1:3-4 – “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. <sup>4</sup>And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

*Let endurance have its perfect result.*

The objective is *that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*

The end goal of the Lord's discipline is *the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

In my own life, as I have traveled on this road of endurance and testing, I have sometimes found myself grumbling at the things that happen to me in my life. Things sometimes don't go as I wish they would or in the way that I expect. There are mountains and valleys in the Christian walk, high-points and low-points. There have been some great disappointments in my life, and sometimes while going through these experiences, I have grumbled intensely ... but that has led me to seek answers from the Scriptures. And I sometimes seek out wise counselors to give me feedback and

advice. One of my favorite verses is Psalm 46:10a – “Be still and know that I am God.” Just calm down and reorient my focus off of self and circumstances. Focus on God. Meditate on His Word. Know God – be in right relationship with Him. And through all of the high-points and low-points in my life, I have felt my faith strengthened, just as these verses in James chapter 1 exhort us to do.

Let's jump ahead to James 1:12 – “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved [Or: *passed the test*], he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” The Greek word to “be approved” in this verse has the same root as the word “testing” in verse 3. So, my New American Standard Bible gives an alternate reading for the phrase “been approved” – it can be read as “passed the test.” The Christian who perseveres under trial and remains faithful has passed the test. The genuineness of his faith has been demonstrated.

We should consider it a joy to encounter trials, since these are an opportunity to have our faith tested and approved. 1st Peter 1:6-7 – “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

And then in the end, as James says, we will receive the “crown of life.”

Part 3: Praying for wisdom – Praying in faith (James 1:5-8).

Let's move on to James 1:5-8 – “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. <sup>6</sup>But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup>being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

In the context of going through trials that test our faith, we are advised to ask God for wisdom. This means that we can pray to God for wisdom to understand what we are going through. You might not get all of the answers you want, but God will give you what you need to know to continue the walk that you are on.

I am reminded of the story of Job in the Old Testament. He was a righteous man who was tested in various ways to see if he would remain faithful and righteous. Although he sometimes complained to God, he never blamed God. And he learned some valuable lessons while going through his experiences. Interestingly, he is never told the reason why he had to go through these trials – if you read the book of Job, you will learn about the backstory that Job himself is never told. The book begins with a scene in heaven where Satan challenges God to allow affliction to fall on Job to prove whether or not Job is really the righteous man that he appears to be. God allows Satan to bring various calamities to Job's family and to Job's health. Job doesn't know why these things are happening to him, but he refuses to turn his back on God – he remains faithful and righteous. Job 1:22 says, “Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.”

In a similar way, we may not always understand why things happen to us. But I believe that God will give us enough information to keep us going on our journey of faith, though we each have a different path to take. I told you that I faced various troubles in my life. I don't know the “why” behind some of these experiences, but I know that I am supposed to remain faithful to whatever

information and insight God has given me – usually, this comes from some portion of Scripture, though sometimes I get a wise word of counsel from a Christian brother or sister.

And something else we need to remember is that God always does what is best for us. Even when we sometimes fail, God always turns our failures into benefits. God loves His children.

James 1:5 again – “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” God desires us to ask Him. And God will provide the needed wisdom generously, or whatever else we may need. My *ESV Study Bible* has this to say: “Wisdom ... is a God-given and God-centered discernment regarding the practical issues of life. Wisdom comes from prayer for God's help.”

I am reminded of Matthew 7:7, where Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” The footnote in my Bible says the verbs here should be read this way: “Keep on asking, and it will be given to you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and it will be opened to you.” We remain persistent ... we keep on asking God.

Jesus continues in Matthew 7:8-11 – “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. <sup>9</sup>Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? <sup>11</sup>If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” He wants to answer our prayers.

But notice James's warning in James 1:6-8 – “But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup>being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

We must ask in faith. We must not harbor any doubts about God, or doubts about whether He will answer or can answer our prayers. Doubts weaken our faith. Doubts are corrosive to faith, like when the interior structure of a building or a bridge begins to corrode on the inside: you don't see the interior problem, but it will damage the structure in the long-run and it will start to fall apart. If you pray but you harbor doubts about the effectiveness of prayer, then you subvert yourself, you are weakening your foundation.

But do not think that God will not answer your prayers because you sometimes sin. We are all sinful. We are all imperfect while we are here on earth, while our feet are on the ground. What God wants is a heart that loves Him, trusts Him, and seeks Him. Then God will answer our prayers.

I have often contemplated this great privilege we have to bring our requests before God, the creator of this world, the One who created human beings in order that we may have a relationship with Him. Why do we need to pray? He is sovereign over everything and He can do anything He wishes whenever He wishes. Why should He respond to the requests of any of us little people? Because that is what He wants to do: He wants to hear our prayers and He wants to respond to our prayers. He may sometimes respond with a "No" to our prayer requests and He may choose to answer in ways that are different than our expectations and in a different timeframe than we desire, but He does wish to hear us and He will respond in a manner and in a timing of His own choosing.

As I continue to contemplate these ideas, I realize that God wants us to be in a dependent relationship with Him. When we pray to Him, we put ourselves under His umbrella ... we admit our

dependence on Him ... and when we present our requests to Him, we ought to leave the answering of the request up to Him and not worry anymore about the request that we have brought to Him. We gave the matter to Him and now we let our Father handle it.

I like Philippians 4:6-7 – “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

We need not be anxious for anything. We can bring our prayer requests and supplications to the Lord. He wants us to. And we ought to do so with thanksgiving, expressing our gratitude for the various ways He has blessed us in the past. And after you have brought your prayers and supplications before Him and put yourself under His umbrella of care, then the wonderful peace of God will guard our minds and hearts – our hearts and minds can be in restful peace, if you have followed this procedure. I have experienced this many times. Well, actually, I have also experienced the opposite: periods of anxiety because I forgot to pray or forgot to be grateful for His blessings, but when I put these verses into practice, I experienced the peace of God.

Well, I could say more, but it is time to move on to the next point of today's message.

Part 4: The place of the rich and the poor before God (James 1:9-11).

The next paragraph in today's passage contains a concept that I find rather intriguing.

Let's read James 1:9-11 – “But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; <sup>10</sup>and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup>For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.”

When I read these words, it makes me feel that relationships in God's kingdom are upside down. Christians who come from humble backgrounds can now glory in the fact that they have the privilege of being adopted sons and daughters of the Creator of the Universe. Meanwhile, Christians who are rich ought to remind themselves that they are mere human beings who walk on this earth for a short time and then end up in the grave just like everyone else. Rich Christians ought not to be proud and to use their position for personal gain to acquire more wealth and more power – instead, they ought to use their resources to help those people who are less fortunate than they are (you can see 1st John 3:16-18 for more on that topic).

I am reminded of 1st Corinthians 7:22 where I see a parallel idea. Discussing the social condition we were in when the Lord called us to be His followers, the Apostle Paul says this: “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.” You and I are to consider ourselves no longer as free people but as slaves of Jesus Christ – I noted at the beginning of today's message that several of the New Testament writers called themselves a “bond-slave of Jesus Christ.” Meanwhile, Paul is telling his audience that anybody who is a slave who becomes a Christian can glory in the fact that he is a free man in the Lord. He still has an earthly master, but as a Christian disciple, he is a free man. If his master is a Christian, then master and slave are brothers, which we read about in Paul's epistle to Philemon, verse 16.

Let us move on to the last part of today's message.

## Part 5: Temptation, sin, and death (James 1:13-18).

This is one of my favorite passages in the epistle of James: a practical look at the process of temptation and sin. Contained here are some ways we may avoid sin. Sin separates us from God, and He desires that we forsake and avoid sin. This is the reason that He sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world: to save us from our sins, as is said in Matthew 1:21 and many other places in the New Testament.

Let's read James 1:13-15 – “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup>But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup>Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

This is a negative topic, but it is a necessary topic, since it is sin which separates us from God and which we are called on as Christians to repent of. For if you do not want to turn away from sin, then you have destined yourself to eternal separation from your Creator.

If you call yourself a Christian, then you will want to forsake sin in your life. How can you do that, when temptations are all around us and our human nature so easily leads us in wrong directions? I find this passage very insightful and helpful in describing the process of temptation and sin and how to break that process and how to avoid sin – avoid sin and death.

Firstly, note that James says “**when**” you are tempted – not **if**, but **when**. Temptation is inevitable, so be ready for it. Secondly, don't blame God for your situation – God is not doing any tempting. No. This passage clearly states, thirdly, that each one of us is led into temptation from inside us: verse 4 says we are tempted when we are carried away and enticed by our own lust. It is inside us – our own lust. We might each lust for different things, but this lust comes from inside us and we should not blame God or anybody else. The temptation to sin begins within us.

Temptation itself is not sin. But when we take note of the temptation that crosses our path and we let our inner lust be stirred up, verse 15 describes the process that takes place. When we let our lust interact with the temptation, conception takes place. And then conception leads to the birth of a sin. And when we let sin continue without repenting of it, sin is brought to full fruition, and that leads to death. Death. This is not a nice process.

I once heard a preacher tell a story about this which I found very helpful. He said that he had talked with a Christian man who was very distressed at the lustful thoughts that would go through his mind. This man would be in a public place and he would see a pretty girl with an attractive body. The man said to the preacher: “Help me! When I see the girl, all kinds of thoughts start racing through my mind!” The preacher replied, “Praise the Lord – you're human. Those thoughts are natural. What matters is not that first look at the girl. What matters is the second look. Do you take a second look at the girl and her body? If you do, that's when you sin, letting your lustful thoughts lead you to sinful desires.”

I found that story really helpful. It's not a sin when the first look happens. It becomes a sin when you crave to have a second look. That is when you let the temptation interact with the lust that already lurks in your heart. The secret to avoiding this process of temptation, sin, and death is to turn your head away from the temptation and refuse to feed it, refuse to indulge it. Turn your head

away from the temptation! Whether it is a lust for flesh or for money or for prestige or whatever, turn your head away from it and refuse to indulge your lust.

I have found this to be really helpful advice and it has kept me from many potentially sinful situations with potentially dreadful consequences. So, I share this advice with you today.

Let me close today's message with the final part of today's passage. James 1:16-18 – “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup>Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. <sup>18</sup>In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.”

Lust and sin are deceitful. Proverbs 7 vividly describes this, and verse 23 in that chapter tells us that when a young man indulges his lust and engages in sin, that *will cost him his life*. Do not be deceived: in the end, sin is not pleasurable but is a cruel master that will lead you to destruction. Temptation tries to make you think that you have an attractive opportunity, but this does not come from God. God only gives good gifts. Every good and perfect gift comes from God.

I have come to end of today's message. Let's pray.