

Joy in the Face of Trials (James 1:1-4)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction: Why Study the Letter of James?

a. First, let's consider the case that Martin Luther made for *ignoring* the epistle of James. From Luther's 1522 *Preface to the New Testament* (in his German translation of the Bible); also in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, p. 362:

i. "If I had to do without one or the other, — either the works or preaching of Christ, — I would rather do without His works than His preaching; for the works do not help me, but His words give life, as He Himself says. Now John writes very little about the works of Christ, but very much about His preaching, while the other Evangelists write much of His works and little of His preaching; therefore John's Gospel is the one, tender, true chief Gospel, far, far to be preferred to the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the Epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three Gospels, — Matthew, Mark and Luke.

ii. "In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore *St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.* But more of this in other prefaces."

1. If you're wondering if Luther may have moderated his strong opposition to **James** later in life, please consider the quotes provided below.

b. From an account of Luther speaking, in an informal 'Table Talk' written down by Jerome Besold, in 1544:

i. "The Papists [*Roman Catholics*] only accept James for the righteousness of works, which is an indication that he is not an apostle, especially he calls faith a 'body' but bodies [*works*] a 'soul' [*referring to James 2:26*] which is plainly absurd and contrary to Scripture. Someday I will use James to *fire my stove...*"

1. Source: WA TR 5:382. *Table Talk No. 5854* (Luther-Mel. 281) in Weimar Edition (WA), the critical complete edition of *Luther's*

Works in German and Latin, volume 5 of Tischreden (Table Talks), p. 382.

- c. From Luther again (from *Table Talk No. 5443*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, pp. 424-425), in 1542:
- i. "The epistle of James we have thrown out from this school [*University of Wittenberg*] because it has no value. It has not one syllable about Christ. It does not even mention Christ once except in the beginning. I hold it is written by some Jew who heard only a dim sound concerning Christ but had no clear, distinct message; and because he had heard Christians put great emphasis on faith in Christ, he thought, I will oppose them and emphasize works. And this he did. Of the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, this heart of the preaching of all apostles, he does not say a word.
 - ii. "Then, there is no order nor method. Now he speaks of clothes, now of wrath, jumps from one thing to another. He uses this simile: 'As the body does not live without the soul, so faith is nothing without works.' (**James 2:26**) O Mary, Madonna! What a poor simile! He compares faith with the body while it should be compared with the soul. Already the ancients saw this, therefore they did not number this epistle with the catholic epistles."
- d. **Question:** Why *should* we study this letter, which Luther made such a point of trashing?
- i. **Answer:**
 1. Because the church, over 1,000 years before Luther, held this work as inspired and part of the Biblical canon.
 - a. Granted, this was one of the later parts of the New Testament to gain widespread acceptance.
 2. Important because it is *extremely practical* regarding living the Christian life.
 - a. Those who want to focus on theological fine points and new abstract insights may be disappointed.
 3. The fact that Luther hated this book points to one more reason it is important for us. Luther hated it for a reason: **James chapter 2** blows a major hole in the foundation of his entire theological system.

II. The Opening of the Letter

- a. Read **James 1:1**.
 - i. “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.” (**James 1:1**, NKJV)
- b. I assume that the reference to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” in his opening is a reference to the whole church everywhere. Similar to the opening of **1 Peter**, where Peter is using figurative language and imagery from the Old Testament to refer to the church, God’s people.
 - i. Also, Paul refers to the church as “the Israel of God” in **Galatians 6:16**.
- c. **Question:** Who wrote this letter, and why?
 - i. James was a common name (there is more than one in the New Testament). The opening in **James 1:1**, “James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...,” does not clearly indicate *which James* wrote this letter.
 - ii. Traditional belief, going back at least as far as Origen in the 200s, is that it was written by ‘James, the brother of Jesus’, who became bishop/ leader of the church in Jerusalem. (Source: Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, book 4, chapter 8, written c. 245 AD)
 1. ‘James, the *brother* of the Lord’ (**Galatians 1:19**) could refer to a half-brother or a relative, such as a cousin.
 - a. “Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas?” (**Matthew 13:55**, NKJV)
 2. James, the brother of Jesus, was also referred to as ‘James the Just’ or ‘James the Great(er),’ not to be confused with James the apostle, referred to as ‘James the Less(er).’
 - a. This would be the same ‘James’ who led the Jerusalem Council in **Acts 15**.
- d. Topics covered in this letter include:
 - i. Attitude toward trials and temptations that come into our lives
 - ii. Useless versus pure (true) religion
 - iii. Sins of the tongue (extensive discussion)

- iv. Practical meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself”; the importance of helping the poor
- v. Those who teach will be called to a higher standard.
- vi. Importance of demonstrating our faith with obedient action (works)
- vii. The root causes of strife in the church
- viii. The danger of boasting
- ix. The dangers of material wealth
- x. Attitude toward wealth
- xi. Patience/perseverance
- xii. Praying for the sick
- xiii. Confessing our sins to one another
- xiv. Keys to effective prayer
- xv. Restoring sinners who repent

III. Joy in the Face of Various Trials

- a. Read **James 1:2-4**.
 - i. “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (**James 1:2-4**, NKJV)
- b. The word “perfect,” which appears twice here, means ‘*complete, not lacking anything.*’ In this context, it does *not* mean ‘*flawless / without any sin.*’
 - i. In English grammar, we use the term “*perfect tense*” to describe actions that have been *completed*.
 - ii. This is the same word used of Jesus, in **Hebrews 5:8-9**.
 - 1. “...though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And *having been perfected*, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him...” (**Hebrews 5:8-9**, NKJV)
 - 2. Although Jesus never sinned, He had to go through suffering to become *perfect* (meaning complete, lacking nothing).

- c. James calls us to *become complete*, lacking nothing.
 - i. While our sins were washed away in baptism, that act did not make us “complete.” There is more to follow, as James says here to Christians, and also as the writer of Hebrews said in **Hebrews 6:1** and throughout that book.
 - ii. Jesus was made complete by remaining faithful and obedient through the refining trials of the suffering He went through.
 - iii. James seems to think it will be the same for us.
- d. God will allow various trials to come into our lives to refine us and make our faith complete. As with Jesus and with the many heroic examples of faith from the Old Testament, described throughout **Hebrews 11**.
 - i. Peter says the same thing in **1 Peter 1:6-7**.
 - 1. “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,” (**1 Peter 1:6-7**, NKJV)
- e. **Question:** What are some of the “various trials” that you are experiencing in life, right now?
 - i. **Possible Answers Might Include:**
 - 1. Extreme financial pressure or uncertainty (trying to purchase a house and raise a family in the Boston area).
 - 2. Extreme pressures related to career or educational pursuits.
 - 3. Challenges of dealing with very imperfect parents.
 - 4. Challenges related to raising children.
 - 5. Difficulties in your marriage.
 - 6. Wanting to get married and have children, but no open door.
 - 7. Major life decisions before you.
 - 8. Major disappointments (or sin) from other Christians.
 - 9. Illness, declining health, in pain physically.
 - 10. Etc.

- ii. **Question / Challenge:** Do you see these trials that come into your life as *positive things*? Do you see them as being sent or allowed by God to refine and perfect (make more complete) your faith?
 1. Do you consider these things as “all joy” as James said?
 2. Do you “greatly rejoice” in seeing these trials as refining fires that purify something more precious than gold, as Peter said?

f. **Practical Applications:**

- i. See God at work in your life to complete your faith (while Satan is trying to sift you out of the kingdom).
- ii. Do not just seek to reorient your life to deaden or minimize the pain (in your own life or in the lives of others).
 1. God wants us to become stronger and stronger spiritually.
 2. He will bring or allow painful trials to come into our lives, to see how much we love Him, and to refine us.
 3. This is for our own good, in the end; but it may not be much fun now!
- iii. If we want to help each other become stronger spiritually, including our own children:
 1. Don't *coddle* others. Allow them to experience pain and face the truth, which can often be painful.
 2. Remember the old adage, “Tough times will produce strong men; while easy times tend to produce weak men.”
 - a. Difficulties (if combined with perseverance and faithfulness) can indeed produce spiritually stronger people than easier times would.
 - b. Note that difficulties *without perseverance and faith* can crush people or produce all sorts of wickedness and evil!
- iv. Practice seeing the sovereign hand of God working even in bad situations (as Joseph did, in **Genesis 37-50**). Both in Scripture and in the lives of those around us.
 1. **Personal Example from our Household:** We have taught our grandchildren a game we call “Unfortunately/Fortunately.”

- a. The adult will come up with a statement that starts with the word “*Unfortunately...*” and explains something that likely would be disappointing to the children.
 - b. Then the child has to respond with a follow-on statement that begins with, “But *fortunately...*” that brings to mind something positive.
 - c. The game helps to teach them to look for the good, even in the face of something that otherwise would be a disappointment.
- v. Never forget the goal: to produce strong, independent-thinking Christians, including our children (not just people who are forever dependent on us). Allow the trials of life to produce their good fruit. Teach others to be refined through their various trials, and to find joy in them as they see God’s hand at work.