

Lesson 1: The Testing of Your Faith (1:1-18)

Introduction

James begins his letter by first addressing the situation of his readers. These early Christians are apparently suffering, both economically and socially, as well as for their faith in Christ. Trials, tribulations, and physical suffering naturally lead us to question God's purposes for suffering. James wants to clarify for his readers the ultimate goal of suffering as well as the source of these "trials."

Homiletical Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1)
 - a. Author (1a)
 - b. Recipients (1b)
- II. Understanding Trials (1:2-8)
 - a. The Ultimate Goal (vv. 2-4)
 - b. Wisdom to Understand (vv. 6-8)
- III. Trials and Temptation (1:9-15)
 - a. Blessing in Endurance (vv. 9-12)
 - b. Trials, Temptation, and the Opportunity to Trust (vv. 13-15)
- IV. Good Gifts (1:16-18)
 - a. The Source of Good Gifts (vv. 16-17)
 - b. The Ultimate Good Gift (v. 18)

Verse-by-Verse Analysis

Verse 1. The writer of the letter claims to be James, who is presumably James, the half-brother of Jesus. It is interesting that James does not include his relationship to Jesus in his introduction. It would certainly add to his credibility. Instead, he describes himself as a "servant" of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The word "servant" is literally a "bondservant," a slave. James' humility is clear. He would rather people know him as a "slave of Christ" rather than try to raise his prominence as the brother of Jesus.

Verses 2-4. James is quite clear that his readers *will* encounter trials of various kinds. Think of "trials" as including any event in life that can lead us away from faithfulness to Christ. In other words, trials are not optional or theoretical. They are certain to occur. It is interesting that James does not spend more time on the reality of these trials but instead moves immediately to our response to trials. He says that we are to "count it all joy" (1:2a). Some translations use the phrase "pure joy," and for good reason. The Greek word for "all" most likely suggests intensity rather than exclusivity. In

other words, James is saying that we should have pure joy in the face of trials, yet that joy will not be our only response to trials.

How is it that followers of Jesus can view trials with joy? They focus on the positive results of trials. Trials, which James here calls “testing of your faith,” produce steadfastness. Literally, the word for steadfastness means “to remain under” and it is the picture of standing strong underneath a heavy load. By enduring trials, Christians are actually able to endure more trials as their faith is strengthened and character is formed. Each test of faith builds endurance and strength to “remain under” the next trial.

More than just steadfastness, James says that steadfastness will lead to its “full effect,” in that the believer will be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4b). James is saying that the process of endurance, when believers successfully endure and overcome trials, produces change in the believer. Over time, believers are shaped and formed by the trials. Their character develops, their spiritual health increases, and their spiritual maturity grows. In the end believers will emerge perfect and complete, in other words, mature, “lacking in nothing.”

Verses 5-8. “If anyone lacks wisdom” presumably refers to the matter of trials and how believers are to understand them. Those who desire wisdom are to ask God because he “gives generously to all without reproach” (1:5). Some translations say that God gives generously to all without “finding fault.” The idea here is twofold. First, God gives generously. He gives abundantly. Second, he gives without faulting us for not having wisdom in the first place. We have no reason to fear reprimand when we ask for wisdom.

The caveat to asking for wisdom is that the believer is to ask “in faith, with no doubting” (1:6). If we ask God for wisdom, we should expect him to give that wisdom. If we do not expect him to answer, why would we pray? James gives a special descriptor to the one who asks without expecting God to answer: “double-minded” (1:8). This word is very important in the Epistle of James. He uses it multiple times to describe some of his readers who he faults for attempting to blend worldliness with Christlikeness. The Greek word for “double-minded” is a compound word that literally means, “two minds.”

One who is “double-minded” is “like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (1:6) and “unstable in all his ways” (1:8). The double-minded person has two minds. One mind is supposedly relying upon God, which is why it prays and ask God for help. However, the other mind is focused on the things of the world, and it doubts God’s ability and/or willingness to answer prayer. The result is that the person cannot fully follow either mind. Instead, he goes back and forth like a wave of the sea. There is a lot of movement, but no progress. Like the wave of the sea, double-minded people are “unstable” in all their ways, lacking the foundation of singular devotion to Christ.

Verses 9-11. James addresses both the rich and the lowly in the world, basically the two extremes of society. Those who are lowly in the eyes of society should boast in the exaltation that comes from God. On the other hand, people who are rich in the eyes of society (either finances or popularity) should boast in humiliation, lowering themselves before God. Boasting in riches is foolish because those riches will fade and eventually the rich man will die.

This passage can be hard to understand because it does not seem to fit the context of 1:2-18. However, if we keep in mind that the larger context is “trials” and the warning against being “double-minded,” we might have an idea of James’ intent. Both extremes, riches and poverty, are “trials” that can lead to double-mindedness. Those who are lowly and those who are rich can both be led astray by the lure of riches. Rather than focusing solely on obedience to God, they will be double-minded, focusing also on attaining or retaining wealth.

Verses 12-15. Unlike those who fade, the truly blessed man is the one who endures, the one who “remains steadfast under trial” (1:12). The “blessed” man here is not necessarily the “happy” man, but rather the one who receives God’s favor. Notice again the importance of endurance. It is not enough to start well. You have to finish well. Earlier in the passage James informs us that the reward for endurance is steadfastness, which leads to perfection and “lacking in nothing” (1:3b-4). Here, we learn that, after enduring trials, we will receive “the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (1:12). This “crown” here probably is similar to Paul’s thinking of an athlete’s crown of victory (1 Cor. 9:25). The idea is that those who endure trials and remain steadfast to the end will experience life.

Verses 13-15 are especially important in this section, but can be easily misunderstood. James turns his attention here to the issue of how temptations are related to trials, specifically the origin of temptation. The reality is that every trial includes temptation. For example, physical suffering can tempt us to doubt God’s sovereignty over sickness. The loss of a loved one can tempt us to doubt God’s love for us. These trials are difficult to bear, and can easily lead us to sin against God. However, we must keep in mind that, while God certainly brings trials into our path to test us, he never intends those trials to be grounds for sin. In other words he does not mean to tempt us to sin. Think of it as the relationship between outward trials and inward temptation. God certainly brings us the outward trial, but he does not bring us the inward temptation because he cannot be tempted with evil and he tempts no one (1:13). That is the issue James addresses in verse 14.

James says that we are tempted when we are “lured and enticed” by our “own desires” (1:14). The imagery here is of fishing with bait that looks enticing so a passing fish. We are tempted to sin when we see enticing “bait” that we want. However, notice the origin of the bait. We are “lured and enticed” by our “own desires.” The thing that tempts us to sin actually comes from within our own hearts! It is our desire, and

specifically worldly or fleshly desires that are contrary to God’s design and are remnants of the old self. They are certainly not fruit of the Spirit but are rather some of those “old desires” that we had before being made new by the Spirit. So, here’s the reality: when we sin, we have no one to blame but ourselves. The old adage, “The devil made me do it,” is simply unbiblical. No one makes us sin. We willfully chase the worldly desires that come from our heart.

James completes his argument concerning sin and temptation by using a new metaphor of a woman conceiving and giving birth. The idea here is that desire is “conceived” when we act upon it. In other words, we should note that James does not say that temptation itself is sinful. Rather, acting upon that temptation is sinful. When we act upon our sinful desires, we “conceive” and “birth” sin. If that sin is not ended and repented of, it will grow and eventually produce death. Given that James is writing to supposed believers, we should view this “death” as physical. While we do not know exactly how sin might lead to physical death, the overarching idea here is simply that sin left unchecked will reek disaster and destruction in the believer’s life.

Verses 16-18. James warns his readers not to be deceived about the origin of blessings or good things. Every good and perfect gift—not just some of them—is from the Father above. Notice how James describes the Father. He is the “Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). The Greek word used for “variation” refers to astronomical phenomena in the ancient world, such as the period movements of the sun, moon, planets, and stars. While there is debate about the exact meaning behind these words, it is most likely that James is simply using common language to describe God. Unlike the stars and planets, which constantly move and change positions, God does not change. He is unwavering and unchanging in his goodness to his children, as evidenced by his continual bestowal of good things.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of the Father’s purity of character and infinite benevolence is the fact that he “brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (1:18). James is referring here to the act of salvation by which the Father “brings us forth” and makes us new creatures, “firstfruits,” by the word of truth. This “word of truth” is the Gospel message that sinners hear and by which are converted (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Key Theological Issues

Divine Wisdom

Temptation vs. trial

Points of Application

The universality of trials.

Everyone either *has gone* through trials or *will go* through trials in the future. The truth is that we all need help navigating these trials. Not only are we going to need God's practical provision during those trials, but we are also going to need wisdom to understand his eternal purpose in sending those trials. Trusting God through trials is difficult. As much as other people can encourage us and exhort us with biblical truth, they cannot provide the wisdom needed to face trials. Only the Father can teach us the benefit of trials and give us glimpses into his eternal purpose for trials. The wisdom to understand is available. All we have to do is ask...and expect him to answer.

The true origin of temptation.

We can't blame God or even the Devil when we are tempted and sin. Temptation comes from within. Lesson? If we are to overcome temptation, we must 1) look outside of ourselves for the strength and 2) change our insides, our desires. Spiritual growth reshapes what we desire and will help to kill those fleshly desires that are remnants of the old self.