

Joyful Steadfastness (James 1)

Let's pray:

God we pray that we, today, would listen to your Word. May we grow in our time together. You are the one who has offered everything of yourself so that we may benefit from all that you did. Give us confidence to stand upon your Word. Make us more sure of our convictions about you. Create clean hearts and passion to proclaim your name and your marvelous deeds. Teach us through your Word and grow us through the Holy Spirit that dwells in your people, that we may be more and more like your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen. (Tell people they may be seated)

Some of the most powerful words spoken by people are their last words. It's the culmination of their life and thoughts. The ones that are often most inspirational to me are from church history. I think of R. C. Sproul as his last sermon, *A Great Salvation*, was such a fitting final sermon for a man set on worshipping God with all his whole life. My favourite final words come from a man named Hugh Latimer. Latimer was an Anglican minister who refused to fall prey to the demands of the Roman Catholic Church who expected him, and his fellow ministers, to affirm the doctrine of transubstantiation (where the bread in the Lord's Supper becomes Jesus' literal flesh and the cup Jesus' actual blood).

As a Protestant, who denied much of the Catholic Church's teachings, he was deemed a heretic and called to repent. He, alongside his companion Nicholas Ridley were to be burned at the stake. On October 16, 1555 where Broad Street is today, they were bound and the fire was lit. And here, Hugh Latimer says his final words: "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man; we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as shall never be put out." I love the confidence in these words. He was steadfast. He knew where he stood even when he was under a fiery trial that would result in his death. He had confidence in God and knew where he was going. And he knew that God would be honoured through it. He suffered well, knowing there was the crown of life stored up for him.

But there was another man, a third member, who was not burned with Latimer and Ridley. His name was Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was also an Anglican minister and was accused alongside Latimer and Ridley. But where those two held firm and did not recant, Cranmer did. He caved to the pressure of the Catholic Church and recanted being an Anglican, returning to the Roman Catholic Church, and with his own hand wrote a letter to renounce his Protestant beliefs. Not because he believed what the Roman Catholic Church taught. No, no. We are aware he did not change his convictions. But because his fear of men overwhelmed his fear of God, he crumbled under pressure. He decided, instead of being bound to God's Word and following his conscience, to submit to the Roman Catholic authorities before him. He decided to obey the church rather than obey God.

I don't know about you, but stories like this—they sit with me. For Latimer, they stick in my mind as a model of what I want to be: Confident in God above all. Lacking the fear of man. But for Cranmer, they stick in my mind knowing that I, too, am tempted to take the easy way out. To cave under the pressure of others and the trials of life. But that's not what God wants for us. God has a word for us concerning how we face these situations that we all, sometimes, experience.

Join me, as we turn to the book of James, which is on page 1011. James was written during a time of difficulty for Jewish believers: The Diaspora. They were scattered outside Israel, most of whom were spread throughout the Roman Empire. They were in a time where it was hard to have confidence as a Jew. So they were no strangers to difficulties. James writes this letter to encourage them in their faith and in their conduct while they've been separated from one another. That's how he starts the book of James.

For anyone who has read James, you'd know that it's a highly practical book. It has many instructions, and teaches deep, profound, wisdom. Scholars sometimes refer to it as the Proverbs of the New Testament. They consider it wisdom literature because of how it echoes books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In it, James tells his readers, the Jewish Diaspora, how to face trials with confidence. James is teaching them how they can be encouraged and teaching them how to be truly *religious*.

I chose to say "religion" here on purpose here. There's been a trend over the last decade or two where people say, "I'm not religious." Instead they want to emphasize it's not about a set of beliefs, but about a personal connection with God. "It's not about religion, it's about a relationship with God" or "*Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus*" and other things of that nature. And I understand the sentiment behind this. It's important for people to know that Christianity isn't stale. It's good to show that there's a personal element that Christians experience with God. But this "not religious" stuff is a deep misconception.

We here at Calvary Baptist Church are religious. We're convinced you should be religious too! Religion is a good thing. In fact, it's such a good thing that James will tell us what it means to be truly religious. And guess what! Religion is the warmth of theology mixed with practice. It's faith with deeds. It's your belief fused with your works. THAT, my dear brothers and sisters, our friends, is pure religion. James warns us not to defile our religion throughout the book. I would make the case that the entire book of James is about **Teaching True Religion**.

Now if I were to sum up chapter 1, like I do with the kids in Sunday School, I would focus on one main theme of the chapter. And I'm convinced that the theme of chapter one is about having joy that's unwavering. So this is how I would frame James 1: **True religion is joyful steadfastness**. This chapter starts with encouraging us to be steadfast, and the rest of the

chapter gives examples of how to apply steadfastness in our lives. Again, **true religion is joyful steadfastness**. Now that we're in James 1. Let's look at the first way we are called to joyful steadfastness. Again, it comes from James 1. It reads:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

That's quite a lot to unpack. But here we see one way to apply having joyful steadfastness. The points today flow out from having true religion and being steadfast. Here's James' first application: **Be joyful in trials, with confidence!** Look at how James talks to his people. First with a standard greeting: *This letter is from James. I'm a servant of God. This letter is written to those of you brothers and sisters in the dispersion.* James is assumed to be the half-brother of Jesus. But his intention for them isn't to boast in his position as the brother of Christ, the anointed God and Messiah. His intention is to show that he, like them, is under the authority and power of God the Father and God the Son. This is a significant point for this letter. The reasons for why he can be joyful come from his security in God. Not in his status, not his position, not his ethnicity, but this very truth: It's better to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Father, than to be anything else. That's why James can write this. It's because he knows that he can **be joyful in trials, with confidence**.

James says that we're to count it joy when we face various trials. But he amplifies that for us. He doesn't just say to count it joy, but to count it *all* joy. It's hard enough thinking a trial is a joy. But to consider that the trial should produce *all* joy seems to be a lot. But that's what he says. So why does he say that? ...It's because of what comes after. James tells us that trials means your faith is being tested. And when your faith is being tested, it exists. But beyond that, when your faith is being tested, it produces steadfastness.

What is steadfastness? It's to be firm in your determination. It's to not change. Not to other influences, or to back down, or to let others tell you what to do. Steadfastness is confidence. And when you have confidence in God, you can proclaim what God's word says and not fall prey to the other forces and voices that tell you to move. I use the Captain America quote too often, so I'll switch it up. "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." I can't find the origin of the quote, but it rings true. We are people of truth. Standing on God's word: The truth. There's a message that we have to share to the world: Destruction is coming. And we have a promise for the world: Salvation is here. Though we are all sinners and fall short, we have a God who set out to save us. A God who is sent by his Father. A God who resolutely looked to the cross and didn't look back. Hebrews 12 says:

Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

This is what we're proclaiming! Jesus, our risen saviour has finished his work and has endured trials for us. So as he endured, so too may we endure. **Be joyful in trials, with confidence!** As Christ endured trials for us, we can grow in the trials God has given us, knowing that he is growing us. Growing us in firm unshakable truth. As it says in verse 4, we will have steadfast's full effect that we may be perfect. That we may be complete. That we would lack nothing.

The text repeated that three times. That we would grow into a fully steadfast person, filled with faith. Do you look forward to that? I do. I'm not there yet. I would love to wake up and be perfect. But the process of sanctification is that we're fighting sin as God grows us into a complete, perfect, person. I'm not there yet, and I'm sure none of you are there either. But with every trial God gives me, I'm getting closer.

If you're like me, and I trust everyone here will recognize that we can grow so much more in pursuit of holiness, even if you're completely excited for that, trials still hurt. Trials are

heavy. They're still something that's hard to face. And we're not fully grown yet. That's why verses 5-11 has instructions for us:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 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. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. 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.

I think James is really kind saying "if" here. We all lack wisdom of some kind. But for all of us, as we see areas where we're lacking in wisdom, we're told to go to God and ask him for more!

God is a generous God. He wants us to go to him. He's a kind Father who loves to give good gifts to his children. So ask! And know that he's not a miserly father who refuses to give anything to those he loves. He's a God who pours out blessings. James tells us not to doubt that. God loves you. God wants you to know he loves you. He's a God who does not clear the guilty and punishes sins to 3-4 generations. But he's a God who shows steadfast love to THOUSANDS of generations of those who love him. Not just 3-4 generations. Thousands. God's wrath is great, but God's grace is incomparable. And if the gospel of Jesus doesn't show to you his overwhelming love for fallen sinners, saving those who are in the midst of trials, as his grace is poured out and rescuing us, then you've missed out on seeing the immeasurable beauty of God on display.

James gives a picture here of a foolish person. Someone who doesn't see God's beauty and kindness. Someone who does not remain steadfast under trials. This person is a doubter. And doubters are tossed around by the winds and the waves. Like a sand castle. Instead of having a firm foundation, where they trust in God, they're like the foolish man that built his house upon the sand, or worse, made his house *out of* sand. When the troubles of life, whether

they're light or heavy, come, they are completely out of sorts. The house isn't going to last. The foundation has eroded away. And they're left with nothing. That's weak faith. Faith that only lasts when there is something to show for it. Faith that's present in good times but vanishes when the going gets tough. In other words, "not faith". Those people, as our text says, are "double-minded" and "unstable in all his ways." May that not be true of you. May you have confidence to stand, with your feet firmly on the rock of Christ, an unmoving foundation that does not ebb and flow. That your faith isn't destroyed when life gets hard. But a faith where you can be joyful in trials, with confidence.

As we continue, there's another way we learn that **true religion is joyful steadfastness**. It's not only because we have confidence, but because we can **look forward to rewards from God**. In Sunday School training, many experts tell us not to reward kids for good behaviour. They tell us that the kids are doing it because they want to be rewarded. Not because they're doing the right thing. They should be doing the right thing anyway. It's something that's expected of us... And though it's true we don't want the kids to simply have behaviour modification, we do want hearts that produce good behaviour. We want them to see both why it's good to do the right thing while we teach them to believe the right thing. Rewards, when used properly, help us to couple belief with behaviours. It's okay (even good!) to want rewards. We're built to want rewards. James even teaches us that when he shows us what God promises. We can **look forward to rewards from God**.

Look at verses 12 and following:

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. 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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

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. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

I want the crown of life. I'm sure you do too. That doesn't mean I want it *more* than I want God, but this is something that I can strive to get while I seek after God. The crown of life indicates everlasting life. Abundant life. A life filled with joy and celebration. It's a life that's filled. Not with sin, sickness, striving, and a slow march towards death. Instead, the crown of life signifies that those who receive it knew that there was a greater life, not under the sun, but under God's Son. The crown of life is a reward that we have eternity in the presence of God. We have forever to bask in the good gifts and great glory of God. Do you want this? I'm sure you do. And you can have it.

When you face trials, and endure suffering, think about this promise: God is for you. He's not against you. He wants you to experience life under his dominion. A life that's better than your best days. A life that's better than the best day with your spouse. A life more joyful than the greatest day of your life. A life free from addictions. A life free from pain. A life free from cancer, or dementia. From dying, and death. A life... Free. In your darkest hour, remember that this trial is still for your good.

I don't want anyone here to think that I'm minimizing their trials. As some of you think of the death of a child. As others think about the suffering of loved ones. As you endure chronic pain or something that I couldn't even begin to understand. I want you to, instead, know that God's reward for your faithfulness goes *beyond* your pain. Every painful breath. Every shed tear. Every moment that feels like you are going to break. All of that is known by God. And he hasn't ignored you or forgot about you. Even as you endure in this life still, each and every moment in your suffering is under the power of God as he works in you, growing you, and

rewarding you. It's hard to endure but it's an endurance that tells the story of God's love for you as you share with others the great God that he is. And whether he, through your prayers, heals you in a moment, or you endure this for the rest of your life, know that this is not a wasted moment. Every second of your life belongs to God and is for your good. Don't rejoice in the pain, but rejoice in the trial, knowing it is from God that you can show the world his goodness, his power, his glory, and his perfection.

Your story, or their story, is like Jesus' story. He endured suffering. He was sold by his friend. He was betrayed by his people. He was humiliated in public. He was beaten beyond recognition. He was mocked endlessly. And he suffered the greatest pain a person could experience: A criminal's death, naked and exposed, taking on the sin of the world as God, his Father, poured out his wrath upon all the sin that Jesus took upon himself. The weight of all that killed him. But he went to the cross, willingly, as the Son who learned and practiced obedience. And his reward was great. He did it to please the Father. To bring us into communion with him. When you think of the suffering that you, or someone you love, think of Jesus who also suffered. Think of how his suffering led to life. How it still leads to life for all who believe. And think of how you can glorify God in your suffering, as you gain the rewards of steadfast endurance.

There's a moment here in verse 13 that warns us, in our suffering, not to blame God. "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." Though God has all power, there are some things God cannot do. When Scripture says God can't do something, it's not because it's outside his ability, but it's outside of his character. He won't do anything contrary to his nature. As the God of truth, he and his word do not lie. As the God of truth, he cannot be tempted. As the God of truth, he will not tempt others. So when we're struggling and going through hard times, we

should know that God is not encouraging us to sin. And we cannot blame God for that. It's not him. When we're tempted, it's because our desires are distorted. We have allowed our minds to wander away from what is good, true, and beautiful. We see what is wicked, false, and ugly. And when we let that happen, our desires that have distorted our vision leads us towards wickedness. We seek after ourselves, and we seek after sin. And when we follow after sin, we are led to death and destruction.

But by contrast, when we follow God, we see that's not the case for us. We learn, in verse 17, that every good gift is from God. We must not be deceived! God is the one that gives good gifts. Not just some good gifts, or most good gifts. Our text says *all* good gifts come from God. And God is the one that freely offers them to us. We can rejoice in both the rewards of God for obedience, and the gifts of God for us even when we don't deserve anything. What glorious promises!

There is a third application from James as he teaches us about faithful and joyful endurance. Not only can we **be joyful in trials with confidence, and look forward to rewards from God**, James also teaches us that we should **resolve to be godly, and act now**. **Resolve to be godly, and act now**. The way he does this is by showing us who God is and how we are to be like him.

Let's back up quickly to verse 16 again. Look at how God himself is steadfast.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

When we were told to remain steadfast, we see that God himself is steadfast. He is the one who gives good gifts, but he's also one who has no variation. He doesn't have any change in his character or shadow that changes. Our shadows change all the time. As we move, or as we

grow, or as we do shadow puppets. We're creatures bound by space and time. But God isn't. And earlier, we heard that God cannot be tempted and doesn't tempt. That's the stability of God. God is, as one theologian said, "**gloriously flat**". In that, he means that God is not one who changes from one day to the next. He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is the very picture of what it means to be steadfast. He sticks to his word. And he doesn't throw tantrums or wake up grumpy hoping to ditch his responsibilities as God. He never sleeps. He doesn't change. He's always present. And we would do well to learn who God is better so we can imitate him.

The text continues, saying:

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

As we know who God is, we are given instructions from James for how to conduct ourselves wisely. How we can be more steadfast in how we approach life. We're called to be quick to hear. We should be slow to speak. And we should be slow to anger.

Listening is an action where we are actively hearing others. We're taking information in. But speaking is where we are sending information out. And when we speak more than we listen, we start to rely on ourselves. This isn't to say you shouldn't talk. We're called to talk in various ways. Praise the Lord! Encourage the saints! Speak words of truth, joy, and life! Sing! But

these come out of us because we've first received the Word of God. We've received the truth. We've heard the gospel. These come out of us *as a response*.

Theologically, God is "pure act". That's the term we used to recognize that he's the first agent, or the one that sets everything in motion, and didn't need anything to exist. He's self-sufficient and his being is unaffected by us. We can't change who he is. We, on the other hand, "react". We're created beings that only do things in response to what God has first done. God creates, and we live. God commands, and we respond. So when the text says "**put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls,**" we have a choice. Do we listen to the God who gave us the implanted word? The one who gave us life? And then when we sinned and deserved death the one who gave us hope undeserved through Jesus. Do we listen to that God? Are you a doer of the word?

I believe we could spend an entire sermon just on that verse. "**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.**" I'm going to ask two questions that may really strike at your soul here. But I want you to consider it seriously. First question: "**Are you a doer of the word?...**" "**Are you a doer of the word?**"

At Calvary, we as a church expect fellow members to worship God, grow together, and serve others. Those are all applications. Those are all demands expected of Christians from the Word. Do you take God's Word seriously and do what God calls all Christians to do?

Second question: "**Are you even a hearer of God's Word?**" You may be sitting here today and recognize that you don't even really take your faith seriously. I'm here to tell you, today, that God expects every person to heed his call. He is the Lord of creation. He is the sovereign who has dominion over everything. And if you do not listen to his call, there will be trials, but there will not be an escape. The unrepentant, who does not listen to his call or do what he says

will be put to shame. The Bible says they'll be cast into utter darkness, they'll suffer in the place where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. A place where the fire never dies and the smoke of torment rises up.

I say this not to scare you. I say this to warn you to leave your life of self behind. To come unto Jesus and be saved. I tell you this because there is a better way for you! Where you can experience joy, and rewards! But God calls us to come to him. God calls us to be doers of the Word. So I plead with you, **resolve to be godly, and act now**. If you're in need of prayer for any of this, please come talk to me or ask someone to pray with you. We don't want you to be like the man who looks in the mirror and then turns away, forgetting. I want you to look in the mirror of the law and resolve to live a life pleasing to God. But don't do it for me. God is gracious to thousands of generations, and he will be faithful to you.

Take inventory of yourselves, brothers and sisters. But remember we serve a God who is not only good, but a God who is kind. James is not warning these brothers and sisters to make them fearful. He's warning them because he loves them. He wants them to have true religion. Faith that leads to action. Faith that works. We aren't saved by works, but as we are saved God grows hearts in us that desire to do great works for him. Faith that produces religion. Religion that is unstained and pure. Faith that leads us to care for the marginalized. Faith that cares for widows and orphans. Faith that cares for those in need. And faith that keeps us on a pursuit of holiness.

I want to return to Thomas Cranmer. The man who out of fear submitted to the Roman Catholic church. The man who watched his friends, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, perish in flames. Latimer's confidence, as he called out to Ridley that they would be a candle that would never burn out, is a picture of true religion in the worst of persecutions. But that's not the

end of Cranmer's story. The candle did light a fire that led to Cranmer's repentance. He recognized that he feared man rather than God. He publicly declared that he was wrong to have recanted. And in an act of repentance as he too was burned on Broad Street a year later, offered his hands up to the fire first, saying, "my hand shall first be punished therefore; for, may I come to the fire, it shall be first burned."

I don't expect any of you will have to offer yourself up to be burned at the stake like the Oxford Martyrs anytime soon. But I do believe that each of you will endure trials. And I hope that James gives you confidence to rejoice, to seek God's rewards, and to resolve to be godly. That is the essence of true religion: Joyful steadfastness in trials. Let's pray.

God, you are the one who knows our hearts. You are the one who knows all things. I pray that the Holy Spirit would convict each saint in this room to fan into flames the gift of repentance. That they may look upon your law, like a mirror, and resolve to live a life pleasing to you. Burn away our sins and faults and grow us. I pray that we would remember what Jesus did for us, enduring trials with a firm resolve and that his sacrifice for us would lead us to show the world that you are a kind God, but you do not leave the guilty unpunished. May we be people who proclaim the good news you have promised for us, until all hear. In Jesus' name. Amen.