

## INTRODUCTION

### Theme

The overall theme of the epistle of James is that of *true faith* and *true religion*. Faith, if it be real, must produce works by which it can be proved. Religion, in order to deserve the name, must be more than a *theory* vainly savoured by the intellectual mind, or a *formalism* coldly observed by the lips and hands, or a *feeling* temporarily embraced by the emotional faculties – it must have a deep, genuine, and transformative impact on the whole life of the believer.

This is very much in line with the theme of the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7) – where the Lord Jesus exhorts us to rejoice in persecution (5:10-12); to display actively the good works required of God’s children (5:13-16); to be generous in giving to all (5:42); to pray effectually and fervently (6:5-13); to avoid hoarding earthly “treasures,” which may be corrupted by rust (6:19); to seek God’s kingdom first, rather than trying to make our own plans in life and worrying incessantly (6:33-34); to be wary of judging our brethren (7:1-5); to be mindful of the fact that “a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit,” and vice versa (7:18); and to be doers and well as hearers of God’s word (7:24-25). All of these things are dealt with also by James.

The epistle of James is thus a very practical epistle. This is not to say that the other New Testament epistles are not practical: but James writes directly, even bluntly, in dealing with issues that still plague the church today. What he has to say is especially relevant in our context of “easy-believism” and end-time deception, where “religion” has become so loose a term that a person calling himself a “Christian” may in fact believe just about anything, and behave in just about any way he pleases.

### Structure

After a brief salutation, James gets straight to the point. The first chapter of the epistle is an introduction of sorts to the theme as a whole, and James strikes first at the heart of the struggle faced by many of his readers: the trials and temptations of life, and how rightly to respond to them. After this specific exhortation, he generalises the theme in the second half of the chapter.

The rest of the epistle consists of various further applications of this main theme, with both positive and negative examples given. Finally, the epistle closes with an exhortation to patience and prayer, as essential components of the Christian life.

## OUTLINE

- I. Salutation and Greeting (1:1)**
- II. Exhortation to True Religion (1:2-27)**
  - A. Specific: True Religion Rejoices in Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)
  - B. General: True Religion Consists in Being “Doers of the Word” (1:19-27)
- III. Examples of True Religion (2:1-3:18)**
  - A. True Faith (2:1-26)
    - i. Specific: True Faith is Incompatible with Respect of Persons (2:1-13)
    - ii. General: True Faith Necessarily Produces Works (2:14-26)
  - B. True Wisdom (3:1-18)
    - i. Specific: True Wisdom Passes the Test of the Tongue (3:1-12)
    - ii. General: True Wisdom is Pure and Peaceable (3:13-18)
- IV. Enemies of True Religion (4:1-5:6)**
  - A. Worldliness (4:1-10)
    - i. Worldliness Causes Enmity with God and Man (4:1-4)
    - ii. Solution: Humbly Submit to God (4:5-10)
  - B. Slander and Judging (4:11-12)
  - C. Self-will and Boasting (4:13-17)
  - D. Greed and Exploitation (5:1-6)
- V. Endurance of True Religion (5:7-20)**
  - A. Individual: “The Patience of Job” (5:7-12)
  - B. Corporate: “The Prayer of Faith” (5:13-20)

## SALUTATION AND GREETING (1:1)

### Author

It is commonly held that the author of this epistle is James the half-brother of Jesus (mentioned as a person of prominence in the early church, for example in Gal. 1:19). There were also, however, two apostles called James (one the son of Zebedee, and the other the son of Alphaeus), and it would seem preferable to assign apostolic authorship to this inspired epistle.

### Recipients

The epistle is addressed to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” This appears to be a reference to Jewish believers, and supports the idea that the epistle was written early, when the church consisted mainly of Jews rather than Gentiles. These Jewish believers were “scattered,” firstly as Jews since the exile to Babylon, and more recently as Christians due to

persecution from their fellow Jews – and so James turns immediately to address their response to what must have been a season of great trial.

### EXHORTATION TO TRUE RELIGION (1:2-27)

#### True Religion Rejoices in Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)

James first summarises the believer's rightful response to trials (v2), and then explains the basis for this response (from v3 onwards).

##### *Response to Trials: "Count it All Joy"*

As we go through life, difficulties are inevitable. Some – perhaps many – are the result of our own sins and errors, and these consequences we must patiently bear, even as a son must be glad to endure chastisement from his father. But some difficulties seem to be unwarranted; sufferings that cannot be traced to our own failures, and therefore seem unfair (the persecution faced by the early church is an example). These are the "temptations" (trials) that James speaks of, and they come in "divers" (various) kinds: we face them in our families, schools, workplaces, and churches. How ought we, as Christians, to respond when we find ourselves surrounded by such "divers temptations," beset on every side, as though we have fallen into a pit?

When we find ourselves in such dire straits, we ought to "count it all joy." It is cause for *joy* – not anger, or complaint, or despair. It is cause for *all* joy, with no trace of bitterness, no hidden murmur of injustice to be nursed in the secrecy of our thoughts. How is this possible?

The word "count" has the idea of considering, cataloguing, or classifying. It describes a deliberate act of the mind and will: facing a trial that seems harsh and dreadful, yet mentally classifying it under the category of "joy." This does not mean that there will be no expression of sorrow, no tears, no grief – the Christian is not transformed into a robot – but through the sorrow, and underlying it, there is a deliberate movement of mind and will toward "all joy."

##### *Basis of Response: "Knowing This..."*

But this is not some self-imposed delusion, a stubborn insistence on pretending to smile while the world crumbles. This deliberate act of the mind and will, which James enjoins, has in fact a solid basis. It is based on fact, and we perform the act "knowing this" (v3) – what is it that Christians know, which allows us to "count it all joy"?

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## Purpose

We know the *purpose* of trials (v3-4). We know that there is a purpose: the trials we face in life are not the product of chance, a random throw of the cosmic dice; but purposefully designed by an omnipotent and loving God. We know that the purpose is a good one: these trials are not meant to destroy, but to build us up; not to deprive us of physical pleasure and comfort, but to supply what we lack spiritually. God supplies our lack through trials – this is something we do not often appreciate. If a Christian feels he lacks love, and prays for more love, it will not simply descend upon him in an instant! It will come through trials, difficult people he will have to deal with, perhaps, testing and strengthening his love. If he prays for more faith, he may expect to be brought to the brink of despair; if he prays for greater effectiveness in service, he may expect a thorn in the flesh – and so on. Just as Moses had to suffer forty years in the wilderness before he could lead the great exodus from Egypt, and David had to be fugitive before he could be king, so every Christian is perfected by trials.

Is this not just cause for our rejoicing? When we are physically weak, and our lack is supplied by food, we do not complain – why then do we so often act against our own spiritual growth, by complaining of our sufferings? God seeks to purge away the dross of our sin, and to bring us to spiritual maturity – and should we despise Him for it? Our problem is, we want all the growth with none of the trials: but this is not God’s design.

## Provision

And God does not leave us to face these difficulties alone. There is not only a *good purpose* behind our trials, there is also a *gracious provision* to see us through them (v5-8). “If any of you lack wisdom” – the wisdom to endure trials, and navigate difficult situations – “let him ask of God.” This is a broad promise, and it is extended to all, without qualification (“any of you”). It is also a specific promise, because there is only one true source of wisdom. Who do you ask, when you are pressed by sore trials and struggling to cope? You may ask family and friends; you may seek counsel from the world and its professionals – but do you ask of God?

To those who ask, the promise is certain: “it shall be given him.” God’s supply is plentiful and liberal; there will never be any lack of sufficiency, or lack of willingness, to meet all our needs. He will not “upbraid” (scold) us for lacking wisdom; in fact, if we only ask, He will abundantly bless! The asking, however, must be “in faith, nothing wavering.” Those who waver are in two minds, one moment sure, the next doubting – this is visualised with the image of a wave driven and tossed by the wind, surging high and sinking low, unstable and restless.

Such doubt is natural in fallen man: Peter doubted, when he saw the strength of the wind (Matt. 14:30-31); even John the Baptist had occasion to question the Lord (Matt. 11:1-6). But we must strive against doubt, because those who are faithless and wavering will receive

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nothing (v7). God has promised, “it shall be given him” – to doubt is to deprive ourselves of this promise. What is more, such a doubter will find that his doubt affects all his life, witness and usefulness for God! “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.”

## Perspective

James now gives an example of the *perspective* we ought to have when facing trials, and its universal applicability, by considering two cases: that of a poor man, and that of a rich man (v9-11). In the case of a “brother of low degree” (of a lowly status in society), he is able to rejoice in his trials because in them “he is exalted.” He faces many difficulties, struggling to provide for himself and his family each day, ignored and even exploited by those around him – yet as a “brother” (a Christian) he is brought by his trials to cling all the more to the promises of God; to set his affection on things above; and to live a life of purity and hope, knowing that though he has nothing on earth, in Christ he has eternal rewards and a crown that will never fade away.

In the case of a rich man, he rejoices in his trials because in them “he is made low.” Earthly wealth is deceptive: its promises are alluring, but all it provides is fleeting and transitory. What appears bright and beautiful will soon fade, as flowers soon fall; the “ways” of the rich, their business ventures, their extravagant spending, their hedonistic pursuits, will all “fade away” like grass withered by the sun – trials, for the rich man, serve to expose the deception of riches, and to reveal the true nature and value of earthly wealth.

## Promise

There is also a blessed *promise* to all who endure trials as Christians, a promise related to the purpose of these trials (v12). Happy are those who endure such trying and testing! At the end of this process, when a Christian is sanctified and perfected, there is a reward waiting for him, when he stands before the Lord. There is a “crown of life” – the word “crown” was used of the prize given to winners of the Greek athletic games: but here it is life itself that is the prize; eternal life with God in heaven. This crown, this prize, is given various names in scripture (e.g., 2 Tim. 4:8 and 1 Pet. 5:4), but “crown of life” is chosen here because in the context of suffering and persecution, when one’s very life is in danger, it is a great comfort to lay hold on God’s promise of eternal life to those who endure.

Note, however, that this crown is promised not just to those who endure difficulties in life, but to those who “love” the Lord. That is the only acceptable motive! There are many who endure even great suffering, not out of love for God, but love for self: out of a desire for self-glory, to win prestige for themselves. There are many who think themselves righteous and worthy because they bear affliction, but theirs is a misplaced attachment to a godless cause. There is no reward for this. There is no virtue in suffering and affliction, in and of itself, unless that suffering is for the sake of Christ.

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## Precaution

At the same time, there is a solemn *precaution* for us to consider (v13-16). Trials often bring with them temptations to sin: whether by murmuring against God, or seeking a cure for our sorrows in the things of the world. These temptations to sin, James is careful to point out, are not from God. It is utterly impossible for God, by virtue of His very nature, to ever be tempted to evil Himself, or to tempt “any man” with the purpose of causing that man to sin. The purpose of trials sent by God has already been stated; whatever taint of sin may colour our response to these trials comes from us, not from God.

It is our own sinful lusts that cause us to be drawn away and enticed. The process is described graphically using a profoundly disturbing, but profoundly significant, image: that of the growth of a baby in the womb. This wonderful, joyful process, by which a new life is born into the world, James compares to the progress of sin: beginning with a secret lust harboured in the heart, nourished by fantasy and imagination as it grows, developing from sinful thoughts, to sinful words, and sinful deeds, until the end result, which is not *life* but *death*. Never think that any lust is “safe” or “harmless”! If these things are found inside you, know that they will end in death – how careful we must be, to be pure in our *thoughts* and *desires*, for if we think to harbour evil “safely” in our hearts, we are here warned that it will not remain dormant. “Do not err, my beloved brethren”!

## Provenance

Finally, James reminds us of the *provenance*, or source, of trials (v17-18). They are “good” gifts, because they come from a good Giver. The word “perfect” here has the idea of completion: these are “perfect” gifts, because they are designed to make us complete (cf. v4). These gifts come “from above,” from the God who is “above” in His purity, incapable of giving evil gifts to His children (cf. Matt. 7:9-11); “above” in His authority, who has decreed our trials for His own good purpose; “above” in His knowledge, who knows the good end to which we are being brought, even if from our perspective the prospect seems bleak – from the “Father of lights,” who can never change nor waver in His good purpose and loving commitment toward every one of His children, come the trials we so foolishly fear!

God, indeed, has formed us specially, uniquely among His creation – not only as human beings, made in the image of God; but as His elect people, deliberately chosen according to His own will and pleasure, “begotten... again unto a lively hope... born again... by the word of God” (1 Pet. 1:3, 23). He has brought us into His family, and purposed to purify and perfect us. Trials are His instrument to accomplish that purpose! We should never despise His grace, nor doubt His love, nor question His design: but, “my brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this...”