

JAMES: FAITH THAT WORKS
Correcting Misconceptions About God and Life

James 1:1-18

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January 9, 2022

If you don't know it already, over the next 7 weeks you'll see that the Book of James is full of powerful truth statements. Today I'll be focusing on James chapter 1 and I've asked Anna Ellis to help me out by reading 4 verses that have an important message for all of us.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. James 1:2-4 & 12

Thank you, Anna. I appreciate your willingness to read for us this morning. I asked Anna to read those verses about perseverance during times of difficulty, because perseverance through suffering is one of James' main themes in chapter 1 and throughout his letter. We'll look at those verses and more of chapter 1 later, but first I want to provide some context and some background information on James for us.

The beginning of a New Year is a good time to reflect on the year that has passed and to make new commitments for the year ahead—I'm sure that's why "New Year's Resolutions" are popular. As we start a New Year at McBIC, I'm convinced the greatest challenge we face as followers of Jesus is living with our feet firmly planted in this world, while also living as citizens of Jesus' kingdom. Consider some of the things we all struggle with—our health, relationships, finances, our jobs and how we manage our time. Those are difficult issues for anyone, but they're uniquely challenging for those of us who follow Jesus, because we live in two kingdoms—the kingdom of this world and God's eternal kingdom. Take finances as an example. As Jesus' followers, we're not just thinking about financial security in this world and investing our resources well for our lifetime and the lives of our children and grandchildren. We're also charged by God to consider how the stewardship of our finances advances Jesus' kingdom. Fortunately, we're not left alone in trying to figure out this challenge of how to live in both kingdoms. Much of the New Testament was written specifically to address the dilemma of how

to live well in this world and the kingdom of Jesus simultaneously. And the Book of James takes on that challenge as directly as any of the letters in our New Testament.

The author of this small letter that we know as James, is believed to have been Jesus' brother. James wasn't an apostle. In fact, from all we can tell, James didn't believe his brother was God's Son until after Jesus was raised from the dead. However, after placing his faith in Jesus, James quickly gained great influence among Jewish believers and based upon what we learn in the Book of Acts, became along with Peter, one of the key leaders in the Early Church. History tells us that James was given the nickname "The Just," and he was martyred for his faith in A.D. 62.

Not surprisingly, based on James' relationship to Jesus, the Book of James shows greater similarity to the teaching of Jesus than any other New Testament book. James doesn't quote Jesus directly, but there are 26 allusions to his words in The Sermon on the Mount.

In spite of the similarities with Jesus' teaching, the Book of James wasn't definitively included as part of the Bible until the 4th Century. And the famous 16th Century theologian Martin Luther referred to James as "an epistle of straw," because he thought it contradicted the Apostle Paul's writings about faith and it didn't directly mention Christ.

While it's often difficult to accurately date when some of the New Testament books were written, James gives evidence of being one of the earliest, if not the first New Testament book.

James is very authoritative in tone. 54 imperative verbs are used in its 108 verses. James' purpose in writing appears to have been to give practical direction to 1st Century believers in Jesus about how to live the Christian life. Speaking of James in the commentary he wrote, Curtis Vaughan says, *"It would appear, then, that under the pressures of poverty and persecution some of the readers had become depressed, bitter, and impatient, and were accommodating their lives to the life of the world. The [letter] is intended to give comfort, rebuke, and counsel to Christians passing through a period of severe trial—comfort for their sorrows, rebuke for their worldliness, and counsel for redirecting their lives."* Curtis Vaughan

Speaking of James' emphasis on living out our faith, Vaughan likes this small book to salt—it's not good to eat by itself, but it adds essential flavor to dishes. Vaughan goes on to say that James has an important role to play for those who are "long on theory and short on practice."

Hopefully, you're beginning to see why I think James is an appropriate book for us to immerse ourselves in as we begin 2022. The relationship between what we know and what we do—between our faith in God and the way we live our lives based on that faith, is essential for each of us. Our series title, "Faith That Works," tries to capture the both/and of God's grace and our response based on the faith we place in Him. The Apostle Paul captured the relationship between God's grace and our works well when he wrote, *"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."* 1 Corinthians 15:10

My hope is that as we walk through James together, you and I will be encouraged and equipped to have the phrase, "Faith That Works," characterize our lives.

I invite you to follow along as I read verses 1-18 of James chapter 1...

James 1:1-18

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

The letter of James is often classified as "wisdom literature" and grouped with books like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, because of its no nonsense, practical advice. James has many pithy one or two-line statements that grab the reader's attention. One of the challenges of that

writing style for preaching is that sometimes it's difficult to identify a theme or thread that runs through sections of this letter, and that's particularly true of chapter 1 where James writes about persevering through trials, the fleeting nature of life, temptation, God's nature, hearing and doing and the nature of true religion. Just in the first 18 verses there are at least 4 different and after a quick read, unrelated, themes.

As I read and reread verses 1-18 of James chapter 1, I asked the question, "*Is there a theme that holds these different ideas together?*" The thread I saw was that in chapter 1 James writes to correct some misconceptions about God and life, and I'll focus on three of them.

The first misconception James addresses is found in verses 2-4 and verse 12—the verses Anna read. The misconception is about how we handle difficult times in life.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. James 1:2-4 & 12

Persevering through difficulty develops maturity. Parents, teachers/professors, coaches and bosses understand this idea well. Those of us responsible for leading and developing people know that it's often in the most challenging times that the greatest growth occurs. A maxim many of you have probably heard is, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." A reservation I always have when I hear that statement is, "It'd be helpful to know on the front end whether I'm going to die or be made stronger." Parents, teachers, coaches and bosses embrace the idea that walking through difficulty develops character and maturity, but I think we'll all acknowledge that it's too easy for us to forget this truth in the daily grind of life. Can you honestly say you consider it a joy to walk through trials? After the fact, I'm often able to look back and say, "That wasn't pleasant, but it was good for me and I can see how God used it to mature me," but in the moment, I'm not always able to grasp the long view. The phrase that jumped out at me from these verses is at the beginning of verse 4, "*Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete.*" That statement reminds me that in the middle of hard times, it's our pushing forward, maintaining hope and embracing faith in God that God uses to grow us and ultimately to transform us. The misconception our culture communicates and many of us embrace is that difficulty is to be escaped from as quickly as possible. Comfort, pleasure and ease are highly valued and what we're encouraged to strive for. Suffering, difficulty

and hardships are to be endured and dismissed as quickly as possible. But James sums up the value of perseverance in verse 12. *“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”* Difficulty and trials are an inescapable part of life and as we embrace them, give ourselves and our challenges to God and persevere, He will use them to transform us into the person He created us to be.

The 2nd misconception I see James addressing is found in verses 9-11.

Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

A common misconception is that wealth is long-lasting. In response James points out that **Wealth is Fleeting.** James words echo what Jesus says in The Sermon on The Mount—what some have called, “The Upside Down Kingdom.” We’re told that our wealth is not something to boast in or place our trust in, because like the wildflower it will quickly pass away. This is connected to perseverance amidst trials. Just as challenges seem to last a long time when we’re in them and yet in the big scheme of life and eternity they’re very short, so, our wealth and the security it brings, which seems long-lasting, is actually very fleeting. Because of the fleeting nature of wealth, our posture as people with wealth should be one of humility, not pride. Conversely, if we find ourselves in humble circumstances and lacking in wealth, we should take pride in our station in life, because it’s a temporary situation. As followers of Jesus, we live in an upside-down kingdom.

The third misconception is found in verses 5-8 and 16-18 and it addresses the goodness of God...

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. James 1:5-8

Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. James 1:16-18

James highlights **The Faithfulness and Steadiness of God** in the face of our shakiness. Don't raise your hand and incriminate yourself, but how many of you tie your worthiness to the probability that God will answer your prayers? I frequently see this in others, and I recognize it in my own life at times. I love James' description of God as He "*who gives generously without finding fault.*" Let that sink in. God gives generously to us without finding fault. But James doesn't stop there. He challenges our tendency to waffle. He says when we pray, we need to come before God in belief, not doubt, because when our prayers are doubt-filled, we're waves of the sea that the wind tosses about. And then in verses 16-18, James reinforces the goodness of God, reminding us that every good and perfect gift is from our Father who doesn't change like shifting shadows. Every good gift you and I have ever received ultimately comes from God's hand. That's a God we can count on. Instead of God being like shifting shadows, He's actually the source of light who never changes. As I read James' description of our tendency to doubt compared with God's unchanging, steady faithfulness, it seems our tendency is to project our flakiness onto God. We recognize our inclination to doubt and to give to or withhold from others based on how they treat us and then we make those same assumptions about God. But God isn't like us. He is faithful and steady and He loves us and gives good gifts to us unconditionally.

As I began writing this sermon, I mentioned that I couldn't always see the thread that runs through James' statements, particularly in chapter 1, but the more I read and thought and wrote, the more clear James' message became for me. Throughout these first 18 verses James challenges us as followers of Jesus to embrace God's perspective on time, rather than a human perspective. Embracing God's perspective allows us to see trials that we walk through, wealth or poverty and the nature and character of God correctly, rather than from the short term perspective of the world around us. As we head into 2022, my prayer is that we'll be able to keep God's long view, rather than our short term view in focus. I'm reminded of the Apostle Peter's words in 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 8 & 9:

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8 & 9

I'd like to conclude the sermon this morning by reading portions of James chapter 1 from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase The MESSAGE.

Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who "worry their prayers" are like wind-whipped waves. Don't think you're going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.

When down-and-outers get a break, cheer! And when the arrogant rich are brought down to size, cheer! Prosperity is as short-lived as a wildflower, so don't ever count on it. You know that as soon as the sun rises, pouring down its scorching heat, the flower withers. Its petals wilt and, before you know it, that beautiful face is a barren stem. Well, that's a picture of the "prosperous life." At the very moment everyone is looking on in admiration, it fades away to nothing.

Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life.

So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures. James 1:1-18 selected The MESSAGE