

Faith That Works: Persevering and Asking
By Jason Huff
August 2, 2020
Psalm 2; Matthew 7:7-11; James 1:1-8

Our final Scripture reading today comes from James 1:1-8. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “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, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”

Coming out of our study of Revelation is a bit of a jolt. Since last September, we’ve been in a surprising, scary, marvelous picture of God’s judgment to come and the new world He has for those of us who believe and trust in Him. But despite all of the wonders we saw there, Revelation had some really practical aspects. It was written to encourage believers, to strengthen us, to warn us, and to keep us moving towards Jesus.

One of the biggest questions that Revelation poses to us is this: “If I want to be a faithful follower and experience all the wonder God has in store in the future, how should I live *now*?” That’s why we’ve turned to James. James is all about the Christian life in the here and now, to have a faith that works. James isn’t lofty – instead, it’s practical, pithy, and blunt. It’s the perfect place to turn for straightforward answers to the question Revelation made us ask.

Now James doesn’t tell us which James he is. Some think this might be written by the apostle James, Jesus’ close friend and part of Jesus’ inner circle. Yet he was martyred in 44AD. It’s unlikely he wrote anything before his death. Historically, the church has believed it was written by James the brother of Jesus. Different traditions dispute if James was an older half-brother of Jesus by Joseph or if he was Jesus’ younger brother through Mary. Either way, he wasn’t a disciple; he didn’t even believe in Jesus until Jesus appeared to him after His crucifixion and resurrection. He became known as James the Just, a leader in the Jerusalem church.

The book James left for us strikes me as something written by someone who was very familiar with Jesus’ way of telling parables and tales to make a point. He’s definitely not Jesus, but it has the sound of someone who might have grown up with Him and learned from Him, even if as a jealous brother he might have once rejected Him.

And James is very much interested in wisdom. His book deals with that topic early. It’s written like the Proverbs and wisdom books in the Old Testament. He isn’t concerned about any one topic for very long. He gives us a key point and then quickly moves on. And like the Old Testament proverbs, we have to read James in light of the rest of Scripture. It is easy to misread James. But read in light of all of Scripture, he has so much godly wisdom we need to hear.

The book of James is written like a letter and starts off with James' greeting to his readers. But unlike most of the other letters in the New Testament that were written to specific individuals or churches, James writes to a much larger group: "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." It's a letter by a Jewish man written primarily to the Jewish church scattered around the world, although we Gentiles can get a lot out of it. We who belong to Jesus are a part of spiritual Israel, so we count too. But the tone of the letter is really meant to encourage and convict those who have been trained by the Old Testament law and who have come to believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah.

James' introduction is pretty humble: he calls himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." This is not a lesson that James intentionally preaches, but it's something to note: *true Christian leadership starts with service and humility*. James was a somebody. If he was the apostle, well, then he walked by Jesus for three years learning from Him and ministered well until his death. If he was Jesus' brother, well, then he was Jesus' brother! You would think that this would be a way for James to get his audience to pay attention. "My message is important because I was a close personal friend, even a brother, to Jesus!"

But James doesn't do that. Scholars have wondered why James doesn't talk more about himself and his association with Jesus. I believe it's because James wasn't interested in name-dropping, and he knew that if his words were truly inspired by God, they would have the desired effect without having to elaborate on how he was connected to Jesus.

Our world is full of name-dropping, isn't it? I met so-and-so, did you see that person at their party? Go onto a musician's Facebook page and plenty of people will show pictures of themselves along their favorite artists. And we buy books based on who endorses it. You'd be amazed how many Christian authors sold more books simply because Billy Graham gave them his sterling recommendation. Billy Graham was a humble man by all accounts, but plenty of folks knew their stars would rise in the Christian world by being associated with him.

True Christian leadership, though, is characterized by humility. Jesus humbled Himself to save us from our sin. We walking behind him in turn humble ourselves. To say that we are a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ – that's enough. What matters is that God has seen fit to call us His own. And ultimately, Christian leadership is dedicated to service. For us to fulfill our destiny well as the children of God, we are to give ourselves away in service. We don't call the shots. Instead, we look to imitate what we see God doing. And that means keeping others in mind before ourselves. When James calls himself a servant, it means he will serve others as Christ served him and gave His life for him.

Diving in: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Talk about jumping into the fire, wow! How different this sounds to our ears than what we hear preached everywhere today. Self-help books are everywhere. 13 of the top 150 best-selling books right now are self-help. There were nearly 19 million self-help books sold in America last year. Everywhere you go, someone has some way to help you avoid trials and achieve success.

The world does it; a significant chunk of the church does it, too, promising health and wealth if you pray enough. I had a dear professor in seminary, Professor Tsoukalas, who left the church where he came to faith because his young wife had died of an illness and they told him she had died because their faith wasn't strong enough. That had they had enough faith, they would not have had that trial...or at least their trial would have had a happier ending.

That's profoundly unbiblical, as we see here from James. Consider it pure joy when you face trials. Now let's get our words and meaning straight. James does not say that you have to be happy. My professor was not happy when he lost his beautiful wife. But the joy he had kept him in the faith despite his loss and led him to eventually teach seminary classes about false religious movements like the one he was in.

Nobody says we have to be happy all the time. A Christian who is happy all the time is a fake. Many Christians are happy people because God has saved us – there's plenty to be happy about! But joy is deeper than that. Joy is that overwhelming, deep-rooted sense of pleasure in God that circumstances can't take away. Can circumstances take away your temporary happiness? Certainly. If I hit my thumb with a hammer, I am not happy in that moment. But watch out if circumstances rob you of your joy. Happiness is fleeting; joy is deeper, long-lasting, stable. We may not find happiness in our trials, but we can find joy.

So why is it that we can find joy – that sense of gratitude and hope and sustenance – in the midst of trials? It's the development of perseverance and, eventually, maturity in the faith. Sometimes when we hear about our faith being tested, we think of tests in high school, tests that determine our letter grade. We pass or fail, succeed or sink. I don't think that's what we should have in mind when we hear that God is testing our faith.

Some of you watching have worked in the auto industry, and you know how it can take a new model of car years to get to market. A significant chunk of that time is spent in testing. We all think of crash testing, of course, safety, but every detail of that car is tested. I've been called in to test cars a couple of times down in Warren, and I spent an hour giving my opinion on different containers they were thinking of putting in under the radio for storage. Once I was asked to figure out how to start a new car and use the windshield wipers. (It was more difficult than I expected!) But those tests weren't to say, "This car is no good," and put it out to pasture. All those tests were done so that the car that went to market would be the best it could be and satisfy the most customers – and, of course, by doing so make a lot of money for the car company.

When God sends trials to test our faith, they aren't there to break us, to destroy our faith. They are sent to us to shore us up, to help us see our weaknesses, to send us back to God and back to hope in Him. Those trials build up our perseverance. Each trial we face, we know God has gotten us through the last one, so we can count on Him to get us through the next hurdle.

There have been a lot of trials lately – from Coronavirus to race riots to China being belligerent and trying to figure out what school will look like in a month. There are wildly different from one another, but they are all tests of faith, so see how we rely on God (or ourselves and our own wisdom) when there's a lot of uncertainty and trouble.

Some of us have lost jobs or lost income. Some of us are worried about getting sick. But the test is what we do and who we turn to in the midst of these problems. If we are willing to be tested and examine ourselves rather than to worry and panic and react in fear, God can grow us more and more into the people He made us to be. Things are tough; there's no doubt about that. But know that God is here for you. Your church is here for you, even while we have to be apart. And your faith will grow as you turn to Him when the trials mount.

James goes on: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." Here's James' first appeal to wisdom. We need wisdom in these trying times, don't we? We get so much information over our phones and TVs and very little wisdom. I don't know how much wisdom we can expect from the modern media. Go back as far as the start of the newspaper, and we'll see information without wisdom.

We need wisdom to deal with our world well and to follow after Christ faithfully. What's the first step? Knowing we don't have the wisdom we should, knowing that we fail to see things clearly through God-colored lenses. Knowing we need God's wisdom is huge. And how do we get that wisdom? Ask God for it. Studying can give us knowledge, but it only makes wise those who take it to God to truly understand. Reading the paper or watching the news gives us knowledge, but it takes God's wisdom to sort it out. That only comes to us when we ask.

And James encourages us and gives us heart. God gives abundantly. God gives in large amounts. God pours out His love on those who earnestly seek Him. And the best news is, God won't find fault. In the Greek, there's the sense that God doesn't judge us for not having wisdom. God doesn't say, "You should have known better." God doesn't say, "Why didn't you come years ago?" When we come earnestly seeking His wisdom, He smiles on us and is happy to make us wise in His ways and thoughts. He's pleased we have come to Him!

James does give us a warning, though: "But when he asks [for wisdom], he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."

Jesus said that if we had faith of a mustard seed, we could move a mountain. That was a metaphor, but God's people in faith move all kinds of mountains. Hearts changed, lives rescued, wayward paths set straight. But doubt is the faith killer. Doubt is the mountain builder. Doubt makes it so that when we ask, we do not expect the mountain to move. We expect the mountain is too big, too difficult, too, well, mountainous.

This is where we have to use wisdom in understanding the book of James. Some have used this passage to accuse others of not having enough faith when their prayers are not answered in the way they want – like those who came against Professor Tsoukalas. But that is not what James is saying. James doesn't say that unanswered prayers are a result of a lack of faith. God may not give us the answers we want to prayer because He is giving us the joy of persevering in faith, as James talked about before. There are any number of reasons God says "no." But James *is* saying that a lack of faith will result in unanswered prayers.

This is true in many real-world situations. By the luck of the draw, I've never been picked for jury duty. Just because I've never been picked for jury duty doesn't mean I'm a convicted felon or a minor. Both will keep you out of the jury pool, but neither is true of me. Your prayers not being answered might be because of a lack of faith, but also very possibly not.

Here's the point James is trying to drive home: *live, work, ask, and pray in faith*. Faith is that belief that God is real, that He is there, that He is active in our world, that He wants our love and service, and that He will give good gifts to those who earnestly seek Him out. We can't expect to get anywhere in our spiritual lives if we live in a perpetual state of doubt.

James uses the metaphor of a doubter being like a wave in the sea. It's a strong picture. We go by a lake and one minute the ripples are heading this way, then the next a boat comes along and they're going another way, wind comes up and it goes that way. The waves are inherently unstable. You can't count on them being the way you want when you want them.

The same is true of someone filled with doubts. I say this not as a condemnation but as a reality – the most depressed, spiritually and mentally downcast folks I know are those who let their doubts about God overwhelm them. They are fearful and uncertain, not sure that God loves them, not sure that God is really there, and it affects their whole outlook on life.

Friends, that is not what God intends for us. God sent His Son Jesus for us that we might have life, and have it to the full, rich life, fulfilling life, eternal life. Not a life without trails and persecutions, but a life that reflects His goodness and grace. Jesus died for you so that you could live a life not battered by the waves, but resting secure in His love for you. His Scriptures tell us over and over again that instead of believing that trials prove God doesn't exist or doesn't care, trials that come from the sin that permeates this world nevertheless are used by God to fortify His people, to strengthen them, and to draw them back to Himself.

I have always loved the story of Mark 9, where a man approaches Jesus' disciples about helping his son who has been oppressed by an evil spirit since he was very young. The disciples are powerless against it. The man goes to Jesus and tells him all that has happened to his son and says, "If you can do anything, please have compassion and help us." Jesus says, "If you can? All things are possible for one who believes!" And the father immediately says, "I do believe – help my unbelief!" And Jesus heals the boy and gives him back to his father.

It's not that we never doubt. This man loved his son, but he'd seen his son go through much, being tortured by this evil thing for years, that he'd started to lose hope. And yet he had faith enough to approach Jesus. He wasn't sure what could be done, but he had enough faith to say, "I do believe – get rid of this unbelief in me!" His faith, as small as a mustard seed, tried and small but still there, led to his son's healing. May that be the case for all of us, never letting doubt overcome our hope in Christ.

Friends, I'm excited to explore more of the practical faith James presents to us. Until then, though, may we depend on the Lord through every trial, asking Him for wisdom with a heart full of faith, knowing that He will always come through for us, for those He loves.