

Perfecting Faith

We are finally getting into James' words this week after spending so much time discovering who this man is. Our last homework lesson concluded with the image of a very wise, mature man who spent so much time on his knees, that he was nicknamed "Camel Knees". While I may not want that exact nickname, I wouldn't mind some of the personality traits that inspired that name. I think we are given a clear image of a man who followed Christ with sincere piety, had a deep devotion to leading others to faith in Jesus, and also spent much time praying and seeking the company of the Lord in the Jewish tradition of his heritage. I think it immensely important to remember that first and foremost James is a Jew to his very core, but one that has claimed the truth that Jesus is the fulfillment of all things for which the Jews were waiting.

In our class lesson we also learned that James was well-educated in both the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. His writing reflects that knowledge and reveals a real gift for the written word. John in his gospel quoted Jesus saying, *"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."*¹ I think we can justifiably say that James' words in this letter were whispered in his ear by his brother during those many hours on his knees. Not only are these words spirit and life, they are inspired by the Lord, echoing his own Galilean voice.

Faith and Trials

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy

So starts the passage of scripture we will be studying today. Sound like fun? In all truth, we all face seasons of trial in our lives. James is telling us to change our perspective on how we view those seasons. Instead of facing them in dread and fear, view them as an opportunity to strengthen, or perfect our faith. We are far from alone in those seasons, though we may not always feel the presence of the Lord as we do at other times in our life. Before we begin our lesson today, let's take a moment to come before the Lord, maybe even in the attitude (or latitude?) of Camel Knees.² *Lord Jesus, help us to understand how we can view the trials and tribulations of life with an attitude of joy. Help us to see how these trials perfect our faith and encourage us with the understanding that we do not face these times alone, but are held up by your strength. Bless this child of yours in the pursuit of studying your word today. –Amen.*



Read James 1:1-8 and answer the following questions.

¹ (John 6:63 NRSV)

² For those of us who are physically able, maybe we can even make it a habit through the course of this study to spend these moments on our knees.

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In verses 3-4, fill in the simple diagram illustrating the progression that begins with trials (or “testing” in some versions) and in your own words write what it means. What is the purpose of this season of our lives?



What is it we are to ask for if we are lacking?

Who will give us what we need?

If this wisdom comes from God, what kind of wisdom is it? Is it worldly or spiritual?

Read 1 Kings 3:4-15; 4:29. What is significant about Solomon’s request? Why did God honor that request?

Read Mark 11:24 and Matthew 7:7-11. What do these verses tell you about our requests to God, and in particular a request for wisdom?



James describes what happens to the man who doubts as being like a wave tossed by the wind. What is the truth behind this image? Who do you think this person might be listening to or finding guidance?

What does it mean to be double-minded, and what does that have to do with instability? Where does stability come from? See also Hebrews 11:6.

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Hebrews 11:6

James enjoins us to face our times of trial with joy because no matter the immediate outcome we have the promise of God’s mercy to look forward to, his promise of everlasting life and that this life is transitory as is all that we experience in this world. Our situations change, our trials, while painful, reach an end. The faithful are promised strength in enduring their trials and tribulations. The test is not a test of our own strength or abilities, but a test of our obedience and submitting humbly to God in the circumstances

in which we find ourselves. The word *trials*, from the Greek word *periasmos*³, James speaks of in verse two are those times in our life that through no fault of our own we find ourselves besieged by whatever would oppress us. Whether it is our health or that of a loved one, a financial situation, a difficult relationship, a work related problem, the list goes on and on, but the one thing they have in common is that they are circumstances we find ourselves in rather than the circumstances related to temptations and sin. (James will address this issue later.) These situations are arduous for the distinct reason that they are to develop perseverance and build faith under stress. We are told that endurance or perseverance borne with integrity will have its “full effect” or “finish its work” (according to the NRSV and NIV, respectively) resulting in our faith being mature or complete, not lacking anything. Read how the NASB translates verse 4 from the Greek, and circle the repeated words:

And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I love this word “perfect”. At first it may seem ominous, unattainable, demanding – and so it may be if we leave it as the adjective we are used to encountering – an almost unattainable goal. But here it describes a result, and not one empowered by our own abilities – it is not our work alone that does the “perfecting” but it is our perseverance joined by the power of the Holy Spirit that achieves the goal. The word “perfect” is translated from *teleios*, it means "having reached its end" (*telos*), "finished, complete, perfect."⁴ It is the finished process of maturing or completing. Now notice the repetition in verses 4 and 5.

And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

The word “lack” jumps from one verse to the next highlighting what is lacking: wisdom. And where does this wisdom come from? It comes from God. It is the voice of God spoken in the Holy Spirit resident within us – the Wonderful Counselor⁵. It is up to the Holy Spirit to complete the work of perfecting our faith. We must submit to it, obey it, seek and follow its wisdom, but the Holy Spirit is responsible for the heavy lifting of getting us through our trials and perfecting our

faith.

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Perseverance is not immediately conferred upon us upon conversion to Christ. It is a slow process of testing and building overtime, but by God’s mercy it is also infused with his strength and wisdom as we need it and when we ask for it.

³Mmeaning both trials of endurance of faith from outside influences as well as internal temptations or desires that lead to sin which are trials of moral fortitude. James appears to be using a more narrow meaning in addressing the trials of outside influence in these verses.

-- Strong's Talking Greek and Hebrew Dictionary

-- Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

⁴ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

⁵ “The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” of Isaiah 9:6 – tell me I’m not the only one who sees the trinity described in unity with our Mighty God.

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Human endurance or perseverance is not left to bumble along according to human weakness and human understanding, but is strengthened by God. We are instructed that when we find ourselves not knowing how to proceed in a given circumstance, we are to ask for wisdom. God's wisdom is a gift to his faithful. Our God is a generous father who takes pleasure in providing what we need and is generous to give it to us when we ask. It pleases God when we ask for wisdom and guidance because it reveals and testifies to our faith in him.⁶

Verse 5 goes on to tell us that not only is he sure to provide the wisdom we seek, he finds no fault in the faithful child asking for it. No matter how many mistakes we make in the process of enduring our trials, when we turn to him he does not hold our failures against us. He delights to give us the spiritual wisdom we need to succeed in our season of trial. Godly wisdom is necessary to enduring our trial of faith. It is what provides stability amidst the turbulence of life. It is the anchor that James' double-minded man so desperately needs, but refuses to ask for in *all* faith. In this James passage, faith is the belief that God not only exists, but also responds to those who seek him. This faith means having confidence in God's promises even when they seem counter-intuitive or in opposition of worldly wisdom. God's wisdom is defined by three characteristics: practicality, transcendence and Christ-like.⁷

- 1) It is *practical*. It doesn't stand above the circumstances as an ideal, but gets down and dirty amid the suffering and oppression and works its way through to the end. It discerns the truth of the circumstance and works to resolve the issue at hand. Wisdom is characterized by action, it doesn't just theorize about the causes of the trial, it takes action against what is likely the root cause.
- 2) God's wisdom is *transcendent*. It goes beyond common sense or the worldly perspective. It reflects God's righteousness and allows us to differentiate between right and wrong, God's way and the world's way.
- 3) God's wisdom reflects the *character of Christ*. It puts God first, it shows love to others, and promotes life. It is humble and not self-serving.

These trials also reveal who we are – children of God or children of the world. When faced with difficult circumstances do we turn to God or turn away from God embracing the many worldly ways of coping at our disposal. James goes on to warn against doubting God. The one who doubts is tossed by the sea and blown about by the wind because he gives as much credence to the advice of the world as he does to the counsel of the Holy Spirit. He is double-minded, with one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom. He questions either the authority of God or that His counsel is right. He doesn't have faith that God will act on behalf of the faithful. The one who doubts God subjects himself to the influences of the world, and has nothing to anchor him against the storm of his circumstances. He has nothing with which to ground his perspective and find stability in the

⁶ "A close connection exists, therefore, between faith, prayer, and wisdom. The one who asks for wisdom asks in faith; asking in faith requires divine wisdom; to ask for wisdom is itself wise and is part and parcel of persevering in faith and growing in wisdom. Growth in wisdom is to understand that everything of faith is from God. Prayer is both accepting and asking. Prayer accepts the gift of faith. Prayer likewise asks for the means to work out that faith through the gift of wisdom. In the asking mode of prayer, the believer seeks that which will secure persevering wisdom. And asking without doubt is at the heart of James's understanding of prayer."—New American Commentary (NAC)

⁷ NIV Life Application Bible Notes (NIV-LABN)

whirlwind. He cannot have it both ways; he must choose one course or the other: friend of God or friend of the world. To reject God's counsel is to ultimately reject God.

Blessed is the One Who Perseveres Under Trial

I know yesterday's lesson was long. As I am writing I am amazed that James packs so much into so few words. I wish you could see the size of some of the commentaries I'm using to help understand all that James is saying! Today we will continue looking at perseverance under trials. Take a few minutes to come before the Lord. *Heavenly Father, as we study James' inspired words today, let us take home an understanding of perseverance that will honor you in the living through the seasons of trial that come our way. Let the words penned by James not just move in our minds, but transform our actions under pressure bringing glory to your name –Amen.*

Our brief passage begins with a contrast between two believers: one in "humble circumstances" (NIV) and the other is rich. James continues his discourse on withstanding trials by addressing Christians who find themselves in either category. Seasons of trial are nondiscriminatory. The wealthy and the poor alike face times of suffering.



Read James 1:9-12 and answer the following questions.
What is the high position the humble brother ought to take pride in?

Why should the wealthy take pride in his low position? What is his low position?

What is the implied warning to the wealthy man?

James finishes this brief passage with a promise for those who endure their trial. What is the promise?

What is the crown of life? What is it that God has promised to those who love him? See 1 Corinthians 9:25 and Revelation 2:10.

Among the many and diverse things from which people suffer, the Christian Jews to whom James was writing were suffering persecution. They were hated for being Christians (recall that it was at this time that Saul was "breathing out murderous threats" against the Christians, seeking them out to imprison them, and it had not been long since Stephen's death at the hand of the Jews.) The Jews hated them for supposedly turning against the Torah. Because of Saul the Christian Jews were forced out of Jerusalem and Judea and scattered across Asia and the Roman Empire. They were also hated by the Romans for being Jews, they were discriminated against and mistreated, and subject to Roman persecution. The trials that these Christians Jews faced were

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intense enough to push them into recanting their faith. Wealth or the lack of wealth was not a help in steadfastly persevering trials of faith. Life certainly would have been easier to recant their faith and return to Jerusalem, the temptation they faced. Only submitting and trusting the Lord would allow them to come to the eternal promise: eternal life – an outcome more immanent for the type of persecution they were facing. Scholars think that Jesus' teaching on the Sermon of the Mount may have been in James' mind as he wrote this passage. The final two beatitudes appear to be directly aimed at encouraging those scattered from Jerusalem and facing the intense persecutions of being a Christian and a Jew:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

The trials perfect our faith and increase our wisdom, wisdom to know that the ways of the Lord are not the ways of the world.

James encourages those of humble circumstance to take pride in their high position. Jesus' teachings constantly remind us that the Lord has a special place in his heart for the widows and orphans, the oppressed and down trodden. The poor must suffer the trials engendered by their poverty. But their sufferings of this world will be rewarded greatly in his kingdom if they but persevere in faith until the end. To the wealthy he reminds them to be humble despite their material wealth. The wealthy must guard against trusting in their wealth (and becoming like the one who is double-minded) rather than trusting in God. One day they will come to the kingdom of God and will be judged on their faith. The material possessions they have may make their trials a little more comfortable, but it is faith in God that will allow them to persevere to the end. If they become distracted by their material possessions and the worldly pursuits they can afford, they may miss what is important: a relationship with God.

Paul described life as a race for which the victor received an imperishable wreath⁸, the crown of life. Jesus promised the crown of life to those who persevered under persecution.⁹ The crown is the promise of everlasting life. The reward is not glory and honor in this life, but it is the promise of the life to come. But there is a blessing promised and received in this life. The promise is *"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial¹⁰, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."* (James 1:12 NIV). While the reward of the crown of life may come at the end, God's blessing rests on the man who is enduring these trials in this life because he is progressing toward salvation. His faith is increasing and growing in maturity. God's blessing is upon him as he strives against the trials of life.

Believing in Jesus doesn't guarantee we will not suffer, the Bible stands in testimony to the many who suffered in the name of Jesus. If anything, we may face more suffering because we profess faith in Jesus. Our testing and trials will not end until we reach the end of this life. These

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:24-25

⁹ Revelation 2:10

¹⁰ Again translated from the Greek *periasmos*. Where previously James appears to be addressing external afflictions and trials, in verse 12 the intent of the word appears more general including both trials and internal temptations that cause mankind to stumble into lack of faith or sin, -- NICNT.

tests and trials teach us to stand in full confidence and obedience to the Lord even under terrible trials and persecution. The trials perfect our faith and increase our wisdom, wisdom to know that the ways of the Lord are not the ways of the world. They are superior to the world, leading us into a deep and abiding relationship with the Father and eternal life with God.

Paul modeled this perseverance in the face of persecution. His faith did not waver and steadfastly he pursued his work to spread the gospel. To his protégé Timothy he wrote shortly before his death:

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Tim 4:6-8 NRSV)

If we can but keep our eyes on Christ, trust in God, ask for his wisdom and steadfastly stay the course, we too one day will receive the crown of life set aside for all who long for Christ's appearing.

Faith and Temptation

The second meaning of *periasmos* is temptation. While trials and tests come from external sources and are used of God to test and strengthen (perfect!) faith, temptations come from within. They are the inner conflict of all mankind – serve self or serve God. The inner desire to put oneself ahead of God leaves us open to the allures and attractions of temptation. In today's passage James implores us to not be deceived. *Lord Jesus, open our eyes and our hearts to the truth of temptation and the destruction to which it leads. In our studies today, Lord, strengthen our resolve to seek you first in all things. Implant your perfect word so thoroughly in our hearts that we will recognize temptation for what it is, the insidious work of Satan to lure us from life to death. Remind us that we are children of light and therefore Satan has no power over us. –Amen.*



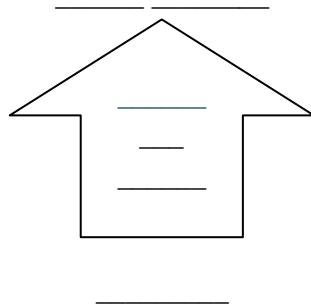
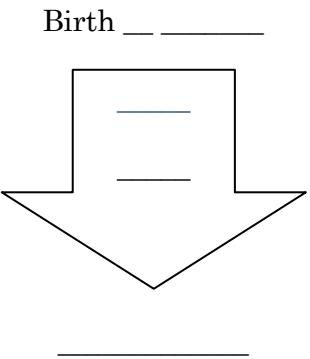
Read James 1:13-18 and answer the following questions.

Why it is that James says God can neither be tempted nor can he tempt others? (Consider how his holiness enters into this concept).

How is the idea that God can test us not compatible with God tempting us?

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Fill in the diagram of temptation leading to sin below and explain its progression in your own words :



What is the deception that we are to guard against? Who or what deceives us? (See also Genesis 4:7, Jeremiah 17:9, and Isaiah 59:12-13)

*"Uttering lies our hearts
have conceived."*
Isaiah 59:13

What good and perfect gift has God given us that will keep us from falling into self-deception?

James gives us one more progression that is the reverse of the previous. Fill in this diagram and explain it in your own words.

When temptations come our way, what good gifts has our Father given us to withstand the allures of Satan?

Temptation is inevitable. We are human and we will, at one time or another fall into the traps and enticements set before us by Satan. When we fall into temptation, what must we do?

In times of temptation it is so easy to place the blame of our misfortune on the shoulders of others, -- anyone other than ourselves. We would rather blame others than face the fact that our situation is of our own making. We are responsible for the choices we make, good and bad. But who wants to take responsibility for our bad choices and the resulting consequences -- especially when they reflect poorly on our reputation, good judgment, or self image. The temptation to throw the blame on God is strong. If God tests our faith, why can he not be responsible for testing our moral fortitude through temptation to sin? First of all our God is holy and righteous. Sin is the result of our bad choice to entertain pursuing a course of action contrary to the goodness and righteousness of God. Choosing to follow the vices of the world require us to turn our backs on

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for God, and that Christian becomes a wonderful lure for Satan to entice other Christians into sinful choices.

In our homework we covered the progression of sin as well as God's plan of redemption for his creation through rebirth in his Word. We have two opposing birth scenarios. The first one is the conception of sin by the coming together of Satan's attempt to trap us and our own selfish desires. The language James employs in this passage is one of setting or baiting a trap or snare. Satan sets the trap with an alluring bait.¹¹ The parents of this grotesque and parasitic birth are the Father of Lies and ourself -- our own choice to fulfill a selfish desire. As the offspring of this union grows and matures it drags us deeper into sin and away from God where we become slaves to our sins and sinful ways if we do not put an end to it. The ultimate end of this progression is death. Perhaps, but not necessarily a physical death related to a disease being the outcome of sin – alcoholism, drug addiction, STDs, to name a few; or the unintended death of another (or of self) related to drunk driving, overdose, suicide... I think you get the picture.

But sin also leads to another kind of death in this life – the loss of relationship with God and the loss of abundant life in Christ (John 10:10). Choosing to walk in sin rather than in the light of God is a traditional Jewish concept. The death here is a metaphor for a poor quality of life. Deuteronomy 28 illustrates the choice before us in great detail. It is the great choice of choosing life verses choosing death. If we choose to follow the Lord, blessings will pour forth upon us, our families, our nation and our land. If we choose to disobey the Lord and follow after false gods (our own selfish desires and the things we choose to put ahead of God) then we will reap the consequences of our choices which will have an adverse affect on ourselves, our families, our nation and our land. Deuteronomy 30:15 puts it succinctly: *"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity"* (NRSV). Jewish Christians in the 1st century saw life in the here and now as a choice of walking a path of life with Christ (which was blessed by the presence and counsel of the Holy Spirit) or a path of death apart from the blessings of a relationship with God and becoming more and more blind and deaf to the movement of the Spirit of God. A believer could choose to follow a path of death losing his connection to Christ. Thankfully for the believer, there is an escape: repentance, confession and forgiveness leading to a return to the life in Christ.

¹¹ While God will not put stumbling blocks of temptation in our path, he will put many opportunities for us to repent of our sin and turn back to him. His goal is that we choose life in him, he will give us every opportunity and encouragement to return to him that does not impede our right to choose between life and death.

¹² Notice the word "lure" in alluring! If temptation is going to grasp our attention it must be an attractive lure, no one will fall for the grotesque truth of sin, only its enticing and deceptive outer appearance.)

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Notice the second birth sequence described in verses 17-18. The Father of heavenly lights, who gives every good and perfect gift, gives us birth through the word of truth. The child of this union is ourselves renewed— children of God with the promise of eternal life and being the first fruits of all he created. We are not the corrupted dying creatures of Satan's desperate intentions, but the first fruits of an eternal, life giving creation. The creation we were designed to be as children of God in his salvation plan for *all* creation.