

James 1 • How To Be Sure

Introduction

Both the Greek and Hebrew words for “faith” can also be translated “faithfulness”. This helps tremendously to understand the true context of what James is talking about, who is writing the early church which has just experienced its first serious persecution. Most of them have been driven out of Jerusalem and are living dispersed throughout the known world. And like every Christian, the issue is how to maintain faithfulness in less than ideal circumstances. When faithfulness is tested, it’s a time when doubt can creep in, when hard questions are posed as to why this is happening and whether we’re sure that we’re still walking according to God’s Word and ways.

¹James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.

²Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵But 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. ⁶But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; ¹⁰and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

¹²Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

[Read v.1-12]

Q: What exactly is a “bond-servant”? Why might it be significant that James uses this title instead of “apostle”?

A: A bond-servant is someone who voluntarily commits themselves to a life time of service to a single master, giving up everything personal to live the rest of their life serving in their master’s employ, living under their roof. As the half-brother of Jesus, James could claim some sort of family relationship, but does not; as head of the leaders in Jerusalem he could claim at least the title of apostle, but does not. It shows that like everyone else, he had to come to a personal decision regarding Christ. It’s a very powerful allusion to forsaking the things of this world for the things of Christ as part of personal, life-long commitment from choice.

Q: What might be the single, most important word in what James asserts about trials in v.2?

A: James doesn’t say “if”, but “when”. In other words, the experiences of the children of God do not come about by accident and are inevitable.

*And we know that God **causes all things to work together** for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*

Romans 8:28

Q: What is God’s greater purpose concerning trials?

A: The perfection of Christian character.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance;

Romans 5:3

Point: *Trials can produce patience, also known as “endurance”, which in turn leads to maturity in Christ.*

Q: Who are some biblical examples of this very process?

- Joseph endured 13 years of testing before being made ruler over Egypt.
- Moses endured 40 years in exile to before being used by God.
- David would not take his throne until 20 years after he was anointed by Samuel.
- Paul went through many tests, including 3 years in the wilderness.
- Others?

Point: *Knowing that God has a divine purpose in mind helps us yield to Him.*

[Continued on the next page.]

Q: Why does James seem to immediately go from the topic of trials to prayer in v.5-8?

A: Because we don't always understand God's purposes, this is the time we often ask questions like, "Why is God doing this?" and even, "Does God really care?" James is suggesting the need for prayer directed at seeking God's will beyond the present, visible circumstances.

Q: How would you describe someone who is "double-minded"?

A: It's someone who, because their emotions waver, their decisions waver. One minute they trust God, the next they doubt. Faithfulness during trials – never turning from obedience to His Word and ways – leads to the stability needed to endure them.

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

1 Peter 5:10

Q: How is James' reference to both the physically rich and poor in v.9-11 applied to the issue of personal trials?

A: Trials actually benefit both groups, reminding the poor that they are rich in the Lord and therefore can't actually lose anything, and reminding the rich that they dare not live for or trust in the things of this life.

Q: What is the point of v.12 in regards to God's purpose for trials?

A: It's a promise which also reminds us that what we're going through on earth is actually part of a process guiding us towards the greater things awaiting us in eternity.

Application: How does James' teaching reassure us that we can be sure of the purpose of God during trials?

1. God's not just in control during times of trial, He's actually using them to further the depth of our spiritual character and maturity.
2. Knowing God has a divine purpose in mind helps us yield to Him.
3. Prayer under the duress of trials is focused not so much on bringing the trials to an end, but understanding the will of God at work through them.
4. Whether we have little or much, they remind us of the fleeting nature of the things pertaining to this life and the need to embrace what's really important for the next.

[Read v.13-20]

Q: What is the specific distinction that James is making?

A: There is a difference between a "trial" and a "temptation". God sends trials to bring out the best in us...

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

Genesis 22:1

...Satan authors temptations because he's trying and lead us astray...

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4:1

[Continued on the next page.]

¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

¹⁹This you know, my beloved brethren.

But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

Q: What do the terms “enticed” and “carried away” have in common?

A: They are hunting terms. Something about Satan’s purpose in his use of temptation is being taught that speaks of targeting us for death, of a hunter using bait to lure and snare his prey.

Q: What is the “birth cycle” of sin provided by James?

1. It begins by responding to temptation by being “carried away” – that is, lured from without. (v.14)
2. The enticement is multiplied by giving in to “his own lust”. (v.14)
3. Instead of recognizing and rejecting our focus of lust, we allow it to grow like a pregnancy until it’s “conceived”. (v.15)
4. If we continue to pursue this “birth to sin”, it ultimately “brings forth death”. (v.15)

Q: What might be the “good news” implied by this description of the worst possible result of giving in to temptation?

A: The “good news” is that it does not originate from God, therefore we can trust Him to an even greater degree.

Q: How does James establish the work of God through trials versus the work of Satan through temptations?

A: Whereas Satan’s temptations can only bring death, God gives only good gifts, even if those gifts are wrapped in the form of trials.

1. God is light; His goodness does not flicker like some faraway star. (v.17)
2. We are His children, brought forth (that is “born again”) through His will and according to His Word. (v.18)
3. We are the “first fruits”, which was always the best and perfect gift to God. (v.18)

Q: So how does this apply to James’ segue in v.19-20 to maintain control of one’s speech and emotions?

A: When trials come, Christians shouldn’t be swift to speak out or complain, but quick to hear, trust, and obey the Word.

Point: *God’s will is worked out in our life when we’re patient, not when we’re angry.*

Application: *How does James’ teaching reassure us that we can be sure of the goodness of God during trials?*

1. *God is not the author of temptations whose ultimate goal is to lead us astray towards death, but of trials whose goal is to assure attainment of eternal life.*
2. *Trials are actually part of the good gifts which God provides to establish us as the first fruits of obedience to His Word and ways.*
3. *Our very response in times of trials is goodness.*

²¹Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

[Read v.21-27]

Q: James first establishes that God brought us forth “by the word of His truth” to make us a kind of “first fruits”, something whole and perfect devoted to Him alone. How does he here explain what must be done on our part to make this happen?

A: First by completely rejecting the world's ways (“putting aside all filthiness and...wickedness”), and then by embracing exclusively God's “word implanted” in us.

Point: *If we have unconfessed sin in our hearts or even bitterness against God because of a trial, we can't fully receive His Word and be blessed by it in the course of overcoming trials.*

Q: How does God's Word function like a mirror?

A: Just as a mirror reveals our external appearance, the Word of God likewise reveals our internal appearance.

Point: *When a Christian looks into the Word of God, they begin to see themselves as God sees them.*

Q: What is being described by the person who looks in the mirror and then simply walks away?

A: Where the Word of God is concerned, they're someone who doesn't actually put it into practice, what James calls in v.25 “a forgetful hearer”.

Q: How is one actually transformed by the Word?

A: By becoming “an effectual doer” of God's Word, not just hearing but becoming obedient by putting it into practice so that one's very behavior is changed.

Q: Is this accomplished as some kind of “one-time” event?

A: No. According to v.25, it's a constant, repeated activity of looking “intently at the perfect law” and abiding by it.

Q: How are v.26-27 describing the visible evidence of receiving “the word implanted” in one's life?

A: It's born out by:
(1) our self-control where our speech is concerned,
(2) the degree to which our personal relationships prove we love our neighbor as our self, and
(3) rejection of the world's ways to exclusively follow God's.

Application: *How does James' teaching reassure us that we can be sure of the Word of God during trials?*

1. *By actively confessing and purging all sin so as to establish God's Word in a pure heart.*
2. *By being “an effectual doer” of His Word rather than “a forgetful hearer”.*
3. *By never taking our eyes from His Word, but looking “intently at the perfect law”.*
4. *By putting God's Word into practice to such a degree that it's reflected in our speech, reflected in our relationships, and reflected in our rejection of the world's ways.*

Epilogue

James uses the word “perfect” throughout this chapter.

- *In v. 1-12 we’re presented with God’s perfect work. God’s perfect work is His purpose to mature us.*
- *In v. 13-20 we’re presented with God’s perfect gift. God’s perfect gift is His goodness to us in times of testing.*
- *In v. 21-27, we’re presented with God’s perfect law. God’s perfect law is the Word which strengthens and sustains us.*

Perhaps this will allow us to better understand the true meaning of Jesus’ admonition...

“Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:48

It’s about maturity of character. How is yours?