

Tested Faith

James 1:1-8

2/9/2020

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We're beginning this morning in this series in James titled Wisdom and Faith in Practice. In the fall, we went through the Sermon on the Mount which is a part of the great wisdom literature of the gospels of Jesus giving us the wisdom of the kingdom, the wisdom of what it means to walk in faith and trust in Him. And then we also looked at the nature of the kingdom of which Jesus was coming to bring as we prepared for Christmas and celebrating the incarnation. And over the last month, we were together in the book of Proverbs looking at the broad themes of Proverbs and the life of wisdom.

Now, we transfer to the New Testament in the book of James which we will begin today. And we will continue to go through all of it in this spring of 2020. But why the book of James? It is because it is considered to be the book in the New Testament that most closely represents wisdom literature. In fact, the book is full of very clear understanding of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It carries with it less so the sense of a letter and more so the sense of a sermon.

And if you will, it acts like the book of Proverbs in this way. As you recall from when we looked at Proverbs together, it seems at first glance that the book of Proverbs is just a grab-bag of proverbs. But when you look a little deeper, you see that the structure which the various writers of Proverbs were centering around is the nature of what it means to walk in wisdom. The same is the case with the book of James, often misunderstood, often erroneously pitted against the work of Paul - which I think is completely erroneous, although understandable - but also recognizing that each of the writers of the New Testament were dealing with a different context and situation.

So, what we see in James, which is written by James the brother of Jesus, is a deep understanding of wisdom literature even particularly in that period of time which we call the intertestamental period which is between the finish of the Old Testament and the beginning writing of the New Testament. But more than that, he's dealing with a group of people who are in a situation that is, I would argue, very contemporary for us. He was writing to a group of Jewish converts to the Christian faith who were in and around Jerusalem as well as those who were Jewish diaspora, as the letter tells us. And by that, they found themselves in a situation where they were in a new faith that was unlike not only their old faith, but their old circumstances. They're in a city that is increasingly becoming a place of authoritarian rule by the Roman government. Now, this is before the fall of Jerusalem, but it's already seeing the beginning of the persecutions on Christians in Jerusalem and scattered throughout the Roman world.

He's writing to them in the midst of this situation. How then should we now live as followers of Christ? And that will require wisdom.

It will have similar themes that we heard in the Sermon on the Mount. We will hear wisdom with regard to how we are to treat others, how we are to be hearers. But more importantly, also to be doers, how we are to be aware of prayer and speech, and how we ought to be aware of that which is being produced in our lives. Is it consistent with what we say we actually believe? These are not uncommon themes from the Sermon on the Mount. And I hope it will be helpful to us.

But one final note I want to make aware is this. There are over 60 imperatives in little more than 108 verses to be concerned with action and response in life. It is very practical. And I would say, although this is not the reason that we picked it, this book formed perhaps one of the greatest pieces of the foundation of my early Christian life and continues to be a book that I return to over and over again. It is a book for which I am eternally grateful because without understanding its wisdom, I would have been like a rudderless boat. And it forced me to look deeply into my own soul to see unhelpful sinful patterns for which I needed to continue to walk in repentance. And so, we want all of us together to enter

into this book. And if you're not a Christian, it will form, I think, a very real way of understanding the Christian faith, and for you to consider whether or not you want to follow and to know Jesus.

That is the introduction to the book. Let's dig in together. This morning, we're going to look at the first eight verses of chapter 1 as we consider tested faith.

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

Greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.
[ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Now, Lord, we ask that by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Jesus Christ and of the Father to the church and to all who are united to Christ, by your Spirit, give us a vision for our present and a very new future, a future that is characterized not by our present circumstances but by the promise of God in Christ of which we have sung this morning. We come to you as a refuge and an anchor even in the midst of the storms of life. And we ask you, O Lord, make us more and more the reflection and the reality of the glory of Christ. Lord, we ask for those who do not know you that they may have a very clear sense of who Jesus is and of His beauty. For those who do follow you, O Lord, I ask that you would, as Paul would pray, make us more and more mature as we are presented to Jesus Christ our savior. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we look at the text this morning, we'll do so through two points. If you have your pens available and you want to take notes, my two points this morning are first, trial produces steadfastness, and then wisdom supports steadfastness. Trial produces steadfastness, and wisdom supports it.

This morning, as we consider this trial that produces steadfastness, as we look together at this text, what we will notice is that James is very clearly not coming to them as one who has already arrived. He comes to them humbled. And He comes to them as one as could correctly be translated, as one who recognizes his place. He recognizes himself as a co-laborer for Christ. But he also recognizes himself first and foremost not by what he does but by his identity. He is a servant, a slave of the Lord God Himself and of the Lord Jesus Christ. His identity is one as a servant. And so, he comes to them as one who wants to serve. And he calls out to them, if you will, "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion," is it the reference to the Old Testament Israel, or is it to the 12 disciples? One I think he's meaning to blend into the other.

But he is calling out to them, and he recognizes their circumstances, not their identity. To call them the "Dispersion" is not to say they are merely exiles. They are in exile. These are the circumstances to which he is writing to them. And he greets them. And then he begins with verse 2 when he says this trial produces steadfastness. How is that possible? It begins by understanding that response to trial is one of joy.

Let's break this apart just a little bit. He says, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." First, let's deal with this idea of trial. Now, he doesn't define it in such a way that it is merely a trial which we are experiencing that is brought on by external circumstances. But it is

absolutely included in that, that trial can come because of our circumstances, because of our difficulties. It can come also by trial because we are facing persecution and pushback in various ways. It also can be the trial of temptation, that which we face internally.

Now, he's writing to them in their circumstances as exiles, but also those who are in Christ. And so, very likely, he first wants to at least draw their attention to their circumstances. But I want to be clear, your circumstances right now may be quite fine. But what you're facing internally is a battle, perhaps, with doubt, or with frustration, or with anger, or temptation to control your circumstances even though they might be good and you want to make sure they remain that way. And perhaps you see patterns in your life that are not reflective of a deep trust in the gospel, but you're facing the temptation that you want to find your trust in something else other than who Christ is.

Whether the trial is internal or external, he's writing to all and has application to all. And he says the response to these trials that are of various kinds, he says, "Count it all joy." Now, this joy is not, well man, I am excited about this. It's not a glib happiness. It's not a shallow response of saying, whatever will be will be. Or, this too shall pass. Because it may not. He's talking about something that cannot be, if you will, defined or fully encapsulated within a particular emotion, although it might find its expression through emotion.

He's talking about, I think, respond to trial with a deep sense of rootedness. A deep joy instead of being a glib happiness is a deep sense of peace knowing that this is connected to something greater that we might not be able to understand or fully see. But it is happening to me and happening to us collectively. This is applicable to the individual as well as corporately. This is happening to us, and so therefore, I know that there is something in it that I may not understand. But this I know, right back to the identity, if I belong to Christ, then I can have a deep sense of peace, a rootedness amidst the storm.

But I also want to say something deeper about what James is getting at and that is inferred. To suggest that we in our response to trial of various kinds is one of joy is something that is profoundly doctrinal. Now, some would suggest, and some have written that James is the least doctrinal of the New Testament letters. To some degree, at least overtly, I might agree with that. But underneath this call to joy in response to trial is something which is profoundly at the heart of the Christian faith.

And I was reminded this week from my sister Julie Iwaskiw, our director of women's ministries, that I think is perhaps one of the first things I ever said to you as a pastor. What undergirds this response of joy to trial is the following. The truth that Christ has secured our reconciliation through our salvation by enduring the cross. That's part one. Part two, that Christ's vindication, His victory over sin and death is recognized in the reality of the resurrection. But then there is yet a deeper part three, that because of Christ's death on the cross securing our salvation through its suffering and then receiving the vindication and victory through the resurrection, He has also secured our very certain future of restoration which means absolutely no one outside of Christ and His absolute finished work, not achieving for you and me the possibility of salvation, vindication, and restoration, but its certainty.

Jesus in His death, Jesus in His resurrection, Jesus in His glory of restoration is not something that the Christian goes, oh, that's pretty interesting. I hope that happens. No. It is a certainty because it has already happened to Jesus our savior.

This is why James identifies himself as a servant of the God most high and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider the words of the book of Hebrews when it writes of Jesus. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance," which by the way is another way of translating the word that is translated to "steadfastness." So, "let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Why is that the case? Because of this, "looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." Do you see? He is the foundation and He is its perfection. "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." Hallelujah. Amen. Let's go home and eat.

That's the point. If it is for Jesus to whom James is a slave and a servant and to those who are united to Him, we who profess faith in Christ are also His servants. If it's Jesus who set before Him a joy endured the cross, not its glib happiness but recognizing a deep rootedness of His glory and of the power of the Father that He would be raised from the dead on the third day acclaiming and getting for the Lord our God His people, then we too have for us a joy, a rootedness that can say to trial, only through it will I become more like my savior.

It is profoundly doctrinal. And as one of my favorite writers, Fleming Rutledge, says, "It is in God's definitive and performative action in Christ alone, all of it." The response to trial is joy because of Christ.

Then James says something else. He says, of course when you meet trials of various kinds, "for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness," produces an endurance. If you will, trial produces steadfastness because hard makes great.

Do you remember the movie *A League of Their Own*? Tom Hanks says to Gina Davis when she wants to quite baseball because it's too hard, "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great." Edgar Allen Poe, who died in Baltimore at the age of 40 from whom we get the name of the football team the Ravens, said this. "Never to suffer would have been never to have been blessed."

This deep sense of peace, deep sense of joy, and the deep sense of what God might be doing although we cannot see, which is why we look to Jesus and we recognize it is a joy because if Christ has gone through this for our sake and has achieved what He has achieved for us, then there is absolutely no trial, there is absolutely no temptation, there is absolutely nothing in the entire cosmos that can separate us from the love of Christ. But what it will do is it will make us stronger. It will enable us to endure, although the challenges and difficulties may be many. And instead of living in fear that there might be this silver bullet around the next corner, we can live with a deep sense of peace knowing that we do not have to worry or to fret knowing that it is the Lord, my life is His, I belong to Him, my identity is in Him. So therefore, Lord, by your grace, make us strong to endure. This for James is foundational.

But then James shifts in a way that perhaps may not make sense. He shifts to the idea of wisdom. In verse 5 and following when he deals with wisdom, I want to suggest to you he shifts to wisdom not because it's a separate subject, but it's because wisdom supports steadfastness. It requires that we think, if you will, Christianly about what is happening around us and about what is happening in us which requires that we're paying attention, and thereby are enabled by the Lord to respond accordingly.

What does he say? He says first, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach," meaning ask away. But then he is careful to suggest that although the Lord will give it, be aware that when you ask in faith, it must be without doubting. So, let's deal with the issue of asking and doubting, what it means and what it doesn't mean.

First of all, I don't think I need to explain asking. Ask. I stand before you to give glory to God in Christ Jesus, who as a young man I was an utter fool. The things that I did for which I am, with a full sense of God's grace, ashamed of, and yet I recognize I am fully cleansed. And I am no longer that person. But I am also grateful that in my foolishness, the Lord put into my life someone who pointed me to these verses. And I remember as a young person the very first time I heard these words. And man, if somebody says to me, hey, you need something, just ask. Then man, I'm taking you up on that. And that's just the way it struck me. And so, I completely leaned into that. And what began for me is a simple prayer. Lord, give me wisdom beyond my years.

That's all that is required. But we must be aware that what he says here is that when we ask such a simple thing and God gives without reproach to do so without doubting, does that mean that the Christian faith means we can't experience doubt? That is not what he means here. It's not doubting in the sense that we all experience as those who have never physically seen Christ, were not present at His birth, His death, His resurrection, yet we still believe as Jesus prayed for us. It's not that we don't

experience doubting. What he's saying, however, is if we're treating asking God for that which only He can give but at the same time going, "I'm going to try this out and see if it works, but I'm also going to try out these other things in case that doesn't work because I'm not really sure," then it's about intention.

It's talking about intention. It's talking about integrity. If on the inside we really don't believe that God is the Father of all wisdom, yet we're asking Him for wisdom, then that's the kind of doubting that does not come forth in an answer because all we're trying to do is try on Christianity or to try on the Christian faith or wisdom because it might work for me now, but just in case, I've got a few other things in my file cabinet that I can try.

The kind of asking he's saying is we are completely leaning in with our lack of wisdom, our lack of understanding, and yet, Lord have mercy. Help us in our unbelief. Give us wisdom. That's what he's asking us to do.

What he's cautioning us against is simply saying, the Christian faith, don't know, but we'll see. Seems to be working for me. Can I have some wisdom? All the while in the rest of our lives seeking to walk in our own understanding. There we get to the rub. There's the hard part.

If on the outside and if verbally we're asking God for wisdom but we're not aware of our tendency to simply walk in our own understanding and our own strength in the rest of our lives, then we are beginning to exist in that neighborhood of doubt that he's cautioning us against. And if you find yourself, as I often do myself, I find myself in that neighborhood of where I'm going, I'm going, I got this. And then by God's grace, He allows some suffering to come in to remind me, no, I don't have this. And I begin to realize how often I return to the neighborhood of professing faith, asking Him for wisdom, but then I am often going about the work even of ministry and life in my own understanding. Lord, have mercy.

But that's the beauty of the gospel. We can be renewed. We can be rescued back from that neighborhood. And He brings us to this place where we're back here saying, Lord, help us.

But why then is it wisdom that He's telling us to ask for? Why is it wisdom that He's telling us to ask? It is because, as I said in the introduction, he's trying to write to them in a situation that is very new to them. Not only are they recent converts to the Christian faith relatively speaking, but they also find themselves in a new reality. They find themselves looking into an unknown future, remembering what was past, but surrounded by a circumstance that is completely new, and they're not sure what's going to happen.

He says why wisdom? It is because there is a new opportunity to walk in faith and in trust. It is the fact that they're in a circumstance that they can't by their own strength recreate what they once experienced in their new situation, nor do they know what might come in the future while they're already presently experiencing trial and persecution. What might the future hold? And so, he says, ask for wisdom. Why? It's because of this. Lord, how should I live and trust in you when I can't know the future, but I can't return to the comfort of the past. When my family might be disregarding me, when I don't know where my next meal is going to come from, or when I feel the threat of persecution and challenge, or when I don't know how to deal with the sin patterns that I see in my life, wisdom is that invitation to not only look at who the Lord is, it's also understanding who are we in light of who He is? And ask, Lord, give me wisdom today.

It means to walk by faith, which is interesting because he doesn't pit faith and works against one another, although sometimes people want to make James out to be that. But this idea that to walk in trust of the Lord is to say, that meeting that I have at 9 o'clock this morning, I am afraid of what the outcome might be. That person who's constantly lording over me, who's looking to leverage above me or looking to expose me and throw me under the proverbial managerial bus, I don't know how to respond. I know how I feel. Lord, I ask you for wisdom. I don't know the outcome, but I know my pattern which is to lash out in anger and to leverage relationships against my enemy. Lord, in wisdom, go before me. Tame my tongue. Help me to see that my identity is not in my job, but it's in who I am in you.

It can be all sorts of very practice, very everyday life things. And it's simply walking the life of faith and doing the following. Lord, give me wisdom because I don't know what I'm doing.

But not only is wisdom supporting steadfastness, because in the midst of the building up of endurance and the midst of trial we ought to ask Him for wisdom which we know we do not have, and we know that we need it because we cannot see the future and we can't return to the past, I want to suggest to you that this quality of responding to trial with joy deeply founded on the work of Christ, knowing that it will make us a people who are more enduring of trial girded up by wisdom, it is because James knew what happened to Jesus. He knew what happened to the persecution of Jesus. But he also knew what happened on the other side of the cross which was resurrection and victory.

And what Jesus does in His resurrection is to create a whole new reality. Death and resurrection of the Son of God happened in the middle of history, not the end. And that when He was raised from death to life, He gathered a group of people who were once his enemies, and He made them His children. And we are brothers and sisters to Christ if you profess faith in Christ. He is creating something that is completely new.

And what I think that means is to have wisdom that enables us to endure means we must say, no more nostalgia. No more nostalgia. What do I mean?

Stephanie Koontz is a historian studying nostalgia. And she writes,

"In a society at large, nostalgia can distort our understanding of the world in dangerous ways making us needlessly negative about our current situation. Some studies have shown in fact that nostalgia was such a problem during the Civil War that doctors diagnosed 5,000 clinical cases among Union soldiers and determined that nearly 75 men died from the affliction. Military officials prohibited Army bands from playing "Home Sweet Home" while ministers and officers avoided references in sermons and speeches that might tough off a new outbreak of longing for what once was."

Columbia Presbyterian Church, let's talk about us. We just celebrated 40 years. And thanks be to God for what He has done in the first 40 years. But we are not going back. We're not the people we once were. And we're not the people that we will still be. Why? Because the Lord is at work allowing different things to happen in us, around us, and to us for the sake of making us more like His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the beauty of the work of Christ, the beauty of the gospel is that we've been given a new name in who Jesus is. We've been given new priorities, not to fret of persecution and difficulty and trial, but the priority of leaning and asking for wisdom in the midst when we don't know what's happening. But we've also been given a new future.

What do I mean? I'm going to apply it very centrally to this congregation. Many of you sitting before me experienced a time in your life when you were growing in faith and wisdom, and you were excited about Jesus, and you remember that time. But for many of you, as I know from my conversations with you, acknowledge that those were in the past. And time of growth and love for the Lord, not that you lack love for Him, but you long to grow again. And that time of growth is like a ghost. And you feel stagnant in your faith. You feel frustrated by your circumstances, and it feels overwhelming to you.

And there are many of you sitting before me who I know believe that Jesus has died for you and your sins. But you have forgotten that He's done more than that. He has actually restored you and is restoring you, and you're not defined by being a sinner. You're now defined by who you are in Jesus Christ. You are not a worm. You are not a black-hearted Christian. You have been made new in who Jesus is and His victory over sin and death. And you've been called a precious child of the living God.

And while growth for some of you may feel like a distant memory, wouldn't it be great in this present hour of not only the intersection of this church in 2020, but this intersection of your life corporately and individually to say, Lord, by your grace in this moment, give us wisdom, give us a joy that we might endure to the end because we are defined not by our trials, not by the old, but by who we are in Christ because in Him we are given new names, new priorities, and a new future.

This is my prayer. This is the prayer of our session for this congregation, that we want to say, Lord, we don't know the future, only you do. But this we do know, that if Christ who set before Him endured the cross for the sake of joy has achieved for us a reconciliation with God the Father and transformed, then we need not fear the future, but instead look to it and say, Lord Jesus, come. Make us a people who can dream bigger for the sake of Christ, who can walk diligently in wisdom day by day in the small things. But we long to go deeper into the gospel because of what He has done.

This is my prayer for us. This is my prayer for you. And I would ask that it would be your prayer for me and for our elders, our staff, our deacons, our trustees because it is what the Lord is doing in testing our faith through various kinds of suffering in the past, present, and what may come in the future. Lord Jesus, make us more and more look like you. Help us go deeper. Let's pray.

Lord, we ask you to help us, to give us wisdom because we often lack it. Give us wisdom to see, to walk, and to trust in you every day in the small things and the big things. Lord, for those for whom growth and grace feels like a distant memory, by your Spirit and work, may we be able in the present and in the future to go deeper into what it means to trust in you. Lord, for those who struggle with being identified by what Christ has already done and made us new who struggle with guilt and shame, Lord, I pray for a joy to invade their lives because of who Jesus is and what He has done. And because of His name and because you have brought us into this salvation, we are your people. Lord, I ask that you would make us more and more to be able to experience the joy in the midst of the trial, not a glib happiness but a profound and rooted peace in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ. For those who do not believe, O Lord, much of what I said may have fallen away and made no sense whatsoever. But by your Spirit, I pray that for all who do not believe, may they come to see you as more beautiful this morning because of what you have done for them. Father, we pray for those that do not know you. We pray that we would be able to meet them where they are that they would know that whether they believe in Jesus or not, they are beloved and respected and we meet them there without judgement, for we are all broken and in need of grace. Lord, we ask that you make us, make them experience your grace a new today. In Jesus's name. Amen.