

James 1:1-18

A Quick Word on Suffering

Would you like to know what Jesus's half-brother had to say? Many are unaware that Jesus had younger siblings, yet Scripture is clear on the point (see Matthew 12:46, 13:55-56; Mark 3:31; Luke 8:19; John 7:1-10; Galatians 1:19). We know the names of some of his brothers, two of whom contributed to the New Testament: James and Jude. The letter written by the former is perhaps the most practical of the New Testament books and is often compared to Proverbs. There is little deep theological exploration, but is largely a practical work from a pastor to his congregation.

Interestingly, James immediately addresses the challenge of personal suffering. Americans take for granted the stress the early believers were under. Even if Christianity was legal, it was often unwelcomed. Regardless, James wanted his readers to view suffering and persecution through God's eyes and not their own.

Perseverance begins with a proper perspective. "Count it all joy, my brothers," James exhorts, "when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). Left alone, this statement can seem harsh. The joy is not directed towards suffering itself. At no point are we instructed to long for suffering. Any injustice moves us farther from Eden. Suffering reminds us of how broken this world is. Rather, James reminds us that suffering, among other things, tests our faith and a tested faith "produces steadfastness." (vs. 3) One well-known theologian suggested the reader should never trust a theologian who has yet suffered. A tested faith produces an abiding faith. It is not uncommon to witness many who leave the faith the moment tough times appear.

Perseverance also requires divine wisdom. It takes divine guidance to navigate the waters of suffering. Therefore, James exhorts that "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (vs. 5) Without wisdom we can neither persevere nor grow in our suffering. But when we ask, let us "ask in faith ... for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind" (vs. 6).

Furthermore, perseverance requires lasting hope. If our attention is exclusively in the present, especially in moments of suffering, we will not last long. The runner who focuses only on the side stitch rather than on the finish line in the middle of the race will likely give up prematurely. So too, the Christian must remain "steadfast under trial," because "when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him" (vs. 12). The day will come when, by faith, every injustice will cease, sin will be conquered, the Ancient Serpent will be crushed, and Death will die. As a result, all our suffering will end, and every tear will be removed (Revelation 21:4).

Finally, perseverance requires a sound faith. In the concluding verses of this passage, James wants the reader to rest in the truth of Christ. There are two fundamental truths James reminds the reader during times of suffering. First, God is not the Tempter. Scripture is clear that the Evil One is the Tempter. God is never presented as the one who is the cause of temptation. He tests but does not tempt. The testing of faith is to strengthen it. Temptation is to crush it.

According to James, temptation begins when we are lured by our “own desire” (vs. 14). Like a hungry fish looking for a worm is easily tempted by the disguised hook, so too are unchecked and unaddressed desires. In moments of temptation, we can easily be caught into sin. When sin is conceived in our hearts, we will either crucify it or it will crucify us. Or, as James put it, when desire “gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (vs. 15)

Finally, James reminds us that God is good even when the world seems cloudy. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (vs. 18). God is light. God is good. God is the giver of good gifts, even when we suffer. If this be true, then we can persevere. If this is not true, then what hope do we really have?