

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 2 Count it All Joy James 1:1-4 Date: June 22, 2014

I. James' Greeting

James 1:1

As many of the NT 'books' are, this written communication by James is a letter or epistle. In ancient letters it was common to start a letter with the author's name alongside some blessing, such as 'grace' or 'peace', and a brief description of the writer. In this case, a unique construction is used by James, "*James, a servant (slave) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

There is no blessing here, no encouraging word either here or at the end of the letter, which ends so abruptly that some think we may not actually have the end of the letter. In this simple greeting, the fact that James does not elaborate about his position or call himself an apostle (although Paul calls him one in Gal. 1:19) means that he believed that those who would receive the letter would know which James he was, and thus, the authority he had.

Although there is no doubt that it is a letter, it reads more like a tract or essay since James immediately launches into theological themes and it contains little if any personal sentiment. However, as stated in the previous lesson, there is no real reason to doubt that this James is anyone but the Lord's half-brother.

Note the humility in his first few words: "*James, a servant* [Greek – *doulos* or slave]". For him, his identity was tied to his service to God and the Lord Jesus – this was how he saw his role. He did not trade on his famous brother's title, and the phrase he uses "God & the Lord Jesus Christ" is unique in the Bible, connecting Father & Son together as related to one's servanthood.

But what about this idea of slavery? Slavery has been a fact of human life throughout most of recorded human history. It is even prevalent in the OT as the common form of humbling those one has defeated in a war or battle that was not killed. In Joshua 9:14-27, we find the famous story of the Gibeonites, who, rather than face the might of the God-led Israelites, deceived Joshua by making it appear that they had come from a distant country to form a peaceful alliance with Israel. When their deception is uncovered, they were made to be slaves – "wood cutters & water carriers" – and having escaped certain death, they were happy with that outcome.

In most of Israel's OT conquests as they took the land as God had commanded them, there were no prisoners taken, and all were killed. Israel herself became enslaved in Egypt [in fulfillment of God's prophecy to Abraham in Gen. 15:13-14] in Exodus 1-13, and then later on, as a result of God's discipline on them because of the idolatry and disobedience, many were carried off into captivity and enslaved by either the Babylonians or the Assyrians. Individuals in the OT were often enslaved as well, such

as Joseph when his brothers sold him to a caravan heading for Egypt, and Philemon was an escaped slave who went to assist Paul as recorded in the epistle that bears his name.

In ancient times, slaves who loved their masters (and not all did) could request to become permanent lifelong slaves, and the sign for this was that an awl was used to poke a hole in the slave's earlobe, and usually a ring was put in the hole – cf. Exodus 21:1-6. The other aspect of slavery, under God's law was the idea that, on the 7th year, a slave was freed, and unless willing to be so, was not doomed to lifelong slavery. Such released slaves were usually let go with some financial security, because they were paid something for their work by all but the cruellest of masters.

NT writers considered themselves to be slaves of Christ as virtually every NT epistle identifies the writer as a “bond-servant” (Gr. *doulos*) in its opening verses. Paul's declaration in Gal. 2:20 expresses this mindset, that he considered himself to have forfeited his own desires to follow Christ and obey him alone. Notice too his statement in I Cor. 6:19-20. The concept and reality of slavery in the Bible is much greater in scope than we can examine herein, and if you are interested in pursuing this as a personal study, I would recommend as a good place to start, the Book, “Slave” by John MacArthur.ⁱ In God's scheme of grace and redemption, we are not just slaves, but sons, and heirs, so we obey Him willingly. [cf. JN 15:15,20; Rom. 6:6-13; 8: 16-17]

It is unfortunate that, as a result of American 18th - 19th century slavery connections as well as the British experience [Abe Lincoln & William Wilberforce championed the eradication of this shameful practice in their respective countries], that Bible translators have softened the term by translating *doulos* as servant or bond-servant rather than slave. The only 2 exceptions I am aware of are the Goodspeed Translation in the early 1900's and the HCSB both of which do translate the word *doulos* as 'slave'.

It is often argued by atheists and Bible critics that the Bible does not condemn slavery, but this is due to a shallow Americanized cultural view of what slavery is and was. In NT times, the early 1st centuries AD (and late BC), there were forms of slavery completely unrelated to USA in the 1800's. NT slavery had virtually no connection to race, and in fact, 4 major types of slavery in ancient Rome have been identified;

- Work in the mines – this was usually reserved for convicted criminals or enemies of the state
- Rural slavery – due to the heavily agricultural economy, many people were conscripted to work the fields, and conditions were not favorable to these slaves.
- Urban household slavery – this was the most common type of slavery found in the NT. Conditions varied, but in some cases people sold themselves into this sort of slavery, anticipating rewards for skillfully fulfilling their duties. In most cases, this resembled our modern idea of “a job” and people were paid a wage. These slaves were usually set free after a few years of service, and automatically after 30 years, unless they desired to stay with that master.

- Imperial slavery – these were slaves in the household of an emperor and these were people at the top of their skill levels, and many of them were wealthy.ⁱⁱ
- There was also (my addition to this list) the idea that a person who had wound up in deep debt to a benefactor, could approach this person and enslave themselves to that person as a way to work off that debt. In ancient times that might be the only way to pay off a debt, especially if one did not have a job, as there were no government safety nets. In cases like that, this type of slavery sort of paralleled what we today call “a job.”

James, of course, is not referring to any of these types of slavery but his is a willing and humble acquiescence to the role of leadership he has been thrust into as a result of the circumstances of his life, and he is grateful to have received this gigantic responsibility from God as the leader of the church at Jerusalem – the start-up church for all of Christianity.

John MacArthur helpfully says this,

“Submission to the Lordship of Christ – a heart attitude that works itself out in obedience to Him – is the defining mark of those who are genuinely converted, First John 2:3 is explicit in this regard; “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.” As His slaves, we are expected “to obey Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2), to “present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual service of worship” (Rom. 12:1)...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Slaves have one job: please their master by being obedient.

James equates God with Jesus Christ here, even calling Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. James 2:1). He is putting himself at risk here with this statement, because Jerusalem was largely Jewish and anyone who equated God with Christ, and especially called Him Lord, would be seen as a mortal enemy of the Jews. Most of the early persecution of Christians arose from Jewish sources in the 1st century as the NT heavily attests.

Lastly, in v. 1, we see the recipients of the letter, “*to the twelve tribes in the dispersion*”. So, almost immediately we come across a minor curiosity in trying to understand who he means by this. In usual OT / NT dialogue, this phrase “the twelve tribes” refers to Israel the nation, even though 10 of the 12 had faded into obscurity after the attacks of Assyria recorded in the OT and who are often referred to as “the lost tribes”. It’s possible that James has the hope of eschatological reunion in mind, given his Jewish flavoured speech in Acts 15:16-18a^{iv}, where he quotes from Amos 9:11-12.

However, James has Christians in mind – converted Jews, because in the early history of Christianity, Jews made up the majority of those being saved, and they often met in synagogues (cf. John 2:2 – ‘assembly’ = ‘synagogue’). In fact, James uses the word ‘church’ only in James 5:14. You can tell by James 1:2, that he is addressing believers, when he refers to “my brothers”, a term he would not be likely to use for Jews in general, because once he was saved, they became his enemies, and of course, evangelism targets.

But he also says of these ‘brothers’ that they are “in the dispersion”, and this simply means those believers who had left Jerusalem (usually because of persecution) and now lived outside of Palestine^v. They needed this message that James was sending to them, because those who still lived in or very near Jerusalem were able to receive this teaching directly from James and other apostolic church leaders in Jerusalem.

God had used the Jerusalem based persecution of new believers to advance the gospel outside of Jerusalem & Israel, and most of those in the dispersion or “diaspora” started out by fleeing for their lives. Notice Acts 8:1 as well as the obvious context of Acts 7:54-60 and the martyrdom of Stephen. One of the initial results of the dispersion is in Acts 8:4-8. This dispersion was conceived of in part by Jesus Himself in Matt. 28:18-20. The persecution became the first missionary impetus, which soon after morphed into an incredible combination of missions, persecution, & church planting at the hands of the very zealous Saul of Tarsus – who had been a chief protagonist of causing the dispersion in the first place! Of course, he had assistance from men such as Barnabus, Silas, Luke, Mark, Timothy, etc.

So James has stated who the writer is, who the letter is being sent to, and it is to no particular person, such as an elder but to those exiled in a sense from Jerusalem with his very simple, almost cold, “Greetings.”

II. Why Count it All Joy?

James 1:2-4

We immediately arrive at one of the most counter-intuitive and puzzling statements of the entire Bible. There is no prologue or preamble in the letter as is found in most of Paul’s letters for example, but there is an immediate jump into doctrinal considerations. The first topic on James’ radar has to do with that largest of all secular (& Christian) questions about God’s control of His world – a theodicy – “If God is all powerful and all good, why is there evil and suffering in the world?” The Christian might add, “especially for His own people?” It is tempting to use v. 2 as a launching pad for a protracted discussion of this topic, but I have done that elsewhere at great length.^{vi} We do, however, need to look at the topic at least enough to realise what James means by this seemingly strange advice.

Certainly, those he wrote to were quite familiar with trials due to persecution and extreme poverty. That he chose to address this topic first is a probable indicator that this was the biggest issue for these early Christian pioneers and they needed direction in order to know how to cope with and respond to these very issues in their lives – very practical advice.

i. Why does James propose this here?

Having stated how to deal with various trials by giving the unlikely command to “Count it all joy!”, James does not leave his readers wondering what value that would provide versus how the world or the one who doubts deals with trials. The word “for”

in v. 3 tells us that James is about to explain why we should count the coming of trials as joy.

His first point is that trials test our faith, which of course implies that those who have faith will [or at least, should] respond in the way that James describes it. Faith can really only be called faith when it is being tested or has been tested and a positive result proves its existence, while a poor response may indicate either the absence of faith entirely or a weak faith, but this admonition of James is more an indication of “strengthening the faith that is already present.”^{vii} Later on in the letter [James 1:12; 2:14-26] James will outline what results from real faith, but here, he focuses on this one aspect of our response as a believer to trials.

The testing of our faith produces steadfastness or endurance { some versions – perseverance, fortitude or patience }. Christopher Morgan comments;

“Like a muscle that becomes strong when faced with resistance from a weight, Christians develop spiritual strength and stamina by facing trials. It is hard to imagine how perseverance could be developed in any way other than by such resistance, since perseverance presupposes a pressure to endure. So when trials come, James says, joyfully recognise that God is developing perseverance and other good traits in you. The development of this perseverance is a process. One event does not bring forth enduring character. It is the real-life process of encountering trials and responding to them in faith that produces perseverance. But perseverance is not only an end; it is also a means to further ends: “And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4). As we view suffering with wisdom and from an eschatological perspective, we discover that it in itself is not the end God has in mind; our maturity is.”^{viii}

The full effect of this steadfastness is that “you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” But what does this mean? As Chris Morgan stated above, a proper response to a single trial is not what James has in mind, but rather a consistent response to various trials which, when they have tested us and produced that steadfastness, the collected sum of life’s trials, coupled with a joyful response will mature us, perfecting us or forging a character of blamelessness in us. The Christian who has been made complete is fully formed, or as Paul states in Rom. 8:29 – *“conformed to the image of God’s Son so that He (Christ) might be the first born among many brothers.”* As we mature, we heap more glory on our Saviour!

David Nystrom says, “It is also important to note that this is not some unachievable high standard; rather, we can become persons of integrity, persons who are single-minded in their loyalty and devotion to God. It is the fully developed character of stable righteousness.”^{ix}

We’ll see in our next lessons how James continues to develop this theme and talks about how it connects with prayer, and reveals the problem with those who are double-minded and tend to doubt God’s power & sovereignty. But let’s also look at some other key verses in the NT to see how trials, suffering & persecution can work in believers.

ii. Paul's Perspective

For Paul, this topic comes up quite frequently^x, but for the sake of brevity, we will mention only a couple of passages. The two I want to look at with you have a similar theme to James' verses here regarding our response to suffering or trials – Romans 8:18 and II Cor. 4:16-18. Both passages carry the thematic message of the hope of salvation from immediate well-being as is promoted shamelessly by modern Word Faith practitioners to the Biblical eschatological hope of glorious and perfected righteousness as Revelation 21:4 promises believers.

Romans 8:18 The glory to be revealed

Read with me Rom. 8:12-25. Here Paul bolsters what James says, not declaring anything about joy in the trial per se, but assuring us that what awaits us in the future is so vastly superior and glorious that whatever suffering we endure in this life is of no comparison – by which he means “of no eternal consequence”. In fact, according to v. 17 & v. 22, suffering is seen as humanity's lot in life and the current order of creation, as a result of God's curse on creation, but this was not done maliciously, but according to v. 20, “in hope.”

In v. 24, “*In this hope we were saved*” - the hope of eternal life, of redeemed bodies, of the revelation of the sons of God (us – in redeemed and glorified bodies). Verses 24-25 are profound. Hope that is seen is not hope – it's present reality and can be dismaying, but we hope patiently for what we don't see but has been promised to us as believers. Unbelievers have the same sort of trials as Christians do, but the unsaved do not have our hope and thus are susceptible to despair.

II Corinthians 4:16-18 The eternal weight of glory

This passage has a similar angle to Rom. 8:18 as Paul, still not using the word, “joy”, illustrates for us the concept of future renewal and glory. His referral to things both seen and unseen points to the idea that those unseen things are eternal and the seen things as physically visible and thus more able to press on our physical bodies and through that affect our spirit.

But the key and shocking verse in this passage is v. 17; “*For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*” Knowing what we know from Paul's trials which finally ended in his martyrdom in Rome, we would call them anything but “light and momentary”. In fact, we are more likely to be ashamed of comparing the things that happen to us which are of far less consequence to anything Paul endured for the sake of the gospel, but of which we often complain vehemently and bitterly. This is why James has to tell us to “Count it all joy” – because that is not our natural reaction. By seeing even these couple of passages from Paul, we see he has the same position as James on this topic, only he expresses it differently.

iii. Peter's Perspective

Peter has only written two letters^{xi} included in the canon of Scripture and both are short, yet he does have a perspective on the Christian's relationship with trials and suffering. He too has written a number of verses on this topic.^{xii} He too, wrote to those "in the dispersion (I Pet. 1:1).

The passage in Peter's writings I wanted us to examine briefly is I Pet. 4:12-19. Peter wants to make sure his readers (note 1:1) realise that they should not expect to avoid "fiery trials" and he does connect the idea of rejoicing when the trials come upon us, yet he qualifies it in v. 13 – *"rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings"* – IOW, like Paul in Phil. 1:29, we've been granted to suffer for His sake as part of the process to shape us to be more like Christ, so that *"when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy."* Therefore, have joy now because of the realisation that God is using the trials to mature us, teach us patience, test our faith, mold & shape us to give us an opportunity to be an example, and future joy when it's all in the past.

Peter also though, in this passage relates that we are not to seek trials and suffering by doing evil. There will be no joy in the suffering that results from being tripped up and exposed as a gossip or being arrested for committing a crime. But when we suffer as a Christian, our job is to glorify God (v. 16), and v.19 is the key verse for the book of I Peter.

iv. John's Contribution Rev. 21:4

John doesn't really touch on trials or suffering in his 3 epistles, and when the topic comes up in his gospel, it is not so much doctrinal as it is historical narrative. One example is in JN 21:20-22, as Jesus relates to Peter regarding His coming trial and martyrdom, versus John not dying that way, and Jesus' reply when Peter questions that fairness? "You follow Me."

However, in the book of Revelation, a book rife with examples of severe persecution of believers (martyrs), as well as inevitable divine judgment on the wicked, we come to the final 2 chapters which paint a portrait of heaven and the eternal state. In Rev. 21:4, one of the most comforting and hopeful verses in Scripture is found. For me, this verses connects with all these other verses we've looked at in that it says that God, who undoubtedly has had the power from eternity past to end all the evil anytime He chose to, (or to not allow it into His creation in the first place) chose not to end it during the exile of His people in the OT, during the killing of His prophets, the crucifixion of His Son, the holocaust, every war ever fought, 9-1-1, you name it. He did not decide not to act because He was either powerless, unknowing or not good. He has reserved the actions of Rev. 21:4 for a time He has planned from eternity past which implies strongly that He has had a purpose for everything that happens throughout history, even the bad stuff.

I love the perspective of these 2 women I will now quote. The first is Mary Beth Chapman, whose 5 year old daughter was killed in the family's driveway when she was accidentally run over by her brother's car;

"These are places where God exercises His sovereign right to retain mystery. We cannot fathom the intricacies of the divine plan. But make no mistake, when we are in the driest desert, we can receive the manna to make it all the way to the other side where trees bud and children laugh. God sometimes delivers us from evils we never see. Other times He parts raging oceans before our very eyes. Still other times He says, "When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you...Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west" (Isa. 43:2,5)."^{xiii}

The other lady is Joni Eareckson-Tada, and I believe most people here today are very familiar with her struggles with quadriplegia as a result of a teenage diving accident. Listen to her view of her lifelong struggle;

"I hope I can take my wheelchair to heaven. With my new glorified body I will stand up on resurrected legs & I will be next to the Lord Jesus. And I will feel those nail prints in His hands, and I will say, "Thank You, Jesus!" He will know I mean it, because He will recognize me from the inner sanctum of sharing in the fellowship of His sufferings. He will see that I was one who identified with Him in the sharing of His sufferings, so my gratitude will not be hollow.

And then I will say, "Lord Jesus, do you see that wheelchair over there? Well, You were right. When You put me in it, it was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on You. And the harder I leaned on You, the stronger I discovered You to be. I do not think I would ever have known the glory of Your grace were it not for the weakness of that wheelchair. So thank You, Lord Jesus, for that. Now, if You like, you can send that thing off to Hell."^{xiv}

Elsewhere, here is her sage advice regarding suffering;

"God uses affliction like a hammer and chisel, chipping and cutting to reveal His image in you...God uses suffering to purge sin from our lives, strengthen our commitment to Him, force us to depend on grace, bind us together with other believers, produce discernment, foster sensitivity, discipline our minds, spend our time wisely, stretch our hope, cause us to know Christ better, make us long for truth, lead us to repentance of sin, teach us to give thanks in times of sorrow, increase faith, and strengthen character. It is a beautiful image!

...Yielding to the chisel is 'learning obedience from what we suffer.' Our circumstances don't change; we change. I cannot afford to focus on hammer and chisel...Believing in suffering is a dead end. Believing in the Sculptor is living hope."^{xv}

III. Summary

There's the hope we have and the foundational importance that all the trials we go through are first filtered through the loving hands of a sovereign & good God who loves us and decided in eternity past that those things we would never have chosen for our own lives, He would put into our lives – not randomly because of luck or fate (as the world sees it), but purposefully, for our good and His glory – Rom. 8:28.

We count it all joy because we know that as a result of Who our trust is in for all eternity that our trials are really only temporary, light affliction, even if it lasts for 60

plus years. As we get into our next lesson, James 1:4-8, we'll see that James continues this concept right into the idea of how we pray when we lack wisdom, because wisdom is knowledge put into action and if we are going to count our trials as joy, we need God's wisdom to enable us to do it.

Discussion question: How would you explain to an unbeliever or a new Christian why God would allow His early church to be persecuted in deadly ways?

ⁱ John MacArthur, *Slave*, Thomas Nelson Books, 2010

ⁱⁱ David P. Nystrom, *James – The NIV Application Commentary*, 1997, pp. 35-36

ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur, *Slave*, pp. 46-47

^{iv} Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT, Eerdmans, 2011, p. 66

^v The name for the area around Jerusalem, (in NT times, Judea) which we would refer to as Israel began to be called Palestine in about 70 AD - a name invented by the Romans who had sacked Jerusalem, killed many Jews and chased others completely out of the region.

^{vi} See my Romans SS notes, especially on Romans 9:22-23; Rev. 21:1-4, plus 2 or 3 sermons over the last few years.

^{vii} Douglas Moo, *James*, Tyndale NT Commentary, IVP / Eerdmans, 1985, reprint 1988, p. 60

^{viii} Christopher W. Morgan, *A Theology of James – Wisdom for Gods' People*, P & R Publisher, 2010, pp. 70-71

^{ix} Nystrom, p. 49

^x Rom. 8:18,28-30,31-39; 5:3,4; Gal. 4:13-15; II Cor. 1:3-7, 9-10; 4:16-18; 12:7-10; 11:23-30; Phil. 1:29;4:4-7; Col. 1:24; I Thess. 3:2-7; II Thess. 3:1-5; I Tim.4:10; II Tim. 1:8-12; 3:12,10-13; and of Paul Acts 9:15-16.

^{xi} With the possible exception of the Gospel of Mark, which is strongly believed to be Peter's gospel, as told to and recorded by Mark

^{xii} I Pet. 1:6-12, 13-21; 2:18-23; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; 5:10; II Pet. 3:14-18

^{xiii} Mary Beth Chapman, *Choosing to See – A Journey of Struggle and Hope*, Revell, 2010, p. 19

^{xiv} Joni Eareckson-Tada, in chapter entitled, "Wheelchairs in Heaven?", p. 324 of "Why O God?", Larry J. Waters & Roy B. Zuck, editors, Crossway Books, 2011

^{xv} Joni-Eareckson-Tada, cited in Michael Beates, *Disability & the Gospel*, Crossway Books, 2012, p. 123