

RESERVOIRS
of STRENGTH

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Lessons from the Book of James

Gerald M. Bilkes



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Reservoirs of Strength

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Introduction

INTRODUCING JAMES, A SHEPHERD OF SOULS

James 1

All believers endure trials and tribulation. The early Christians did, and today we must as well. Christ did not hide this truth from His followers but prepared them for it: “In the world ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). A generation later, Paul taught that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The exact makeup of trials in your life might be yours and no one else’s, but all Christians pass through the fire of refining that is called tribulation.

If you are a Christian, what is your tribulation? And what is it doing for you? Or, what are you making out of the trouble you endure? Do you have somewhere to go in your trials? Do you feel like you are coming apart at the seams? Are you between battles and trying to catch your breath? Can you say with Paul, “I am exceeding joyful in all [my] tribulation” (2 Cor. 7:4)?

Paul wasn’t the only one who was joyful in tribulation. James opens up a brief letter to very early and mostly new Christians with a bold challenge: “Count it all joy when ye fall

into divers temptations" (1:2). Do you want to know how to do that? James will show us. As a pastor, a shepherd of souls, he knows the way to the quiet streams that can strengthen us in trials. In this little book, he has left us an inspired map leading us to reservoirs of strength in times of testing.

Backcountry of the World

The days of the apostles were remarkable, with many unprecedented things taking place as the early church grew through unlikely means. Common people, such as fishermen, from "backcountry" areas of the world, like Galilee, turned things upside down as they preached the gospel boldly, beginning at Jerusalem and throughout the world. They took this gospel to synagogues, to marketplaces, to governors' palaces, and to prisons. Everywhere it went, this gospel showed its power. Strongholds of darkness and idolatry were torn down. People's lives were transformed. Communities of faith sprang into being. The truth about Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior, was blessed to many hearts. Sinners everywhere turned from their sins and confessed Christ as Lord. God was working mightily, and the effects were clearly visible.

For the most part, the apostles were not well-educated men. Most of them grew up in the small villages of Galilee, learning trades such as fishing, building, and tax collecting. The religiously orthodox elite looked down on Galilee as a motley and compromised area, and indeed, much pagan darkness reigned there. The miserable effects of sin were visible everywhere: armies came and pillaged the land; demons possessed people; fear, disease, and death seemed to have the

upper hand. And yet it was from this despised area that the author of the epistle of James came.

Meet James

Who was this James? James was a popular name at the time, so it shouldn't surprise us that more than one person with that name is mentioned in the Gospels. In the circle of the twelve apostles, two men were named James (Mark 1:19; 15:40). But it is generally accepted that it was not one of those two men but James, a half brother of Jesus, who wrote this short epistle. This man is mentioned in places such as Mark 6:3. He was a leader in the early church and was known as one of its pillars (Gal. 2:9). We meet this same James in the book of Acts, where he clearly has a place of prominence and authority. Scholars who have studied James's speech in Acts 15:13–21 have noticed a remarkable similarity between its language and style and that of this epistle. Early Christians, then, would have understood the simple reference to "James" in the first verse of this epistle to have been this James, the apostle.

Although James was privileged to grow up in the same home as the Lord Jesus, we are told that during Jesus's public ministry, James did not believe in Him (John 7:5). It is sobering to think that as "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52), James saw no beauty in Him that he should desire Him. After Jesus's resurrection, however, He made a special appearance to James (1 Cor. 15:7). This meeting is generally believed to have been the turning point in James's life, leading to his conversion. Now James could say with Paul: "Though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no

more" (2 Cor. 5:16). In other words, the human and physical tie between James and Jesus was not nearly as important as the spiritual tie between them. The Lord Jesus Christ was now his Lord and Savior.

After his conversion, James united with the company of believers who waited for the coming of the Spirit (Acts 1:14). He became a man of prayer, a leader in the church, and the author of this New Testament letter. He also shows himself to be an able shepherd of souls. A shepherd of souls is someone who has the mind and heart of the Lord Jesus, who is the Great Shepherd of souls (1 Peter 2:25; 5:2). A shepherd of souls shows the way, exposes dangers, feeds with truth, and leads weary sheep to quiet streams.

Scattered Sheep

James was writing from Jerusalem, and he addresses his epistle to the "twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (1:1). This probably means he was writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout Israel and beyond. Because of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles that had occurred long before James wrote, the Jewish people had already been scattered far and wide. Even when some Jews had returned (Ezra 1:4–6), most continued living outside of Palestine. We refer to this as the "Diaspora," which literally means the "scattering" or "sowing" of the Jewish people throughout the world. But there was also a more specific scattering of Jews that occurred during the time of the apostles. We read of this in Acts 8:1. Because of the persecution the early church faced at the hands of the Sanhedrin and other authorities, Christians had to flee for their lives.

Though we can't be certain about the exact date James wrote his epistle, most scholars believe that it is an early writing, perhaps the earliest part of the New Testament. For one thing, the book depicts a time of persecution, poverty, and oppression, characteristics of the earliest stage of apostolic Christianity.

Also, there are no references or allusions in the letter to matters pertaining to the Synod of Jerusalem, which took place in AD 48 or 49, as described in Acts 15. Bringing the gospel to the Gentile world brought with it many challenges, and this matter would have been a point of discussion at the Synod. James makes no mention of these challenges in his epistle, however, or of any tensions between Jews and Gentiles. This would lead us to believe the book predates the wide-scale spreading of the gospel to the Gentiles, which began in the late AD 40s. So although I can't say with total certainty, I believe James's letter was written during the first generation of Christianity after Pentecost, probably in the early AD 40s.

Conflict

A careful reading of James highlights another important part of the circumstances in which the earliest readers of this epistle found themselves. James frequently mentions the division and oppression within the community itself. The rich and the poor were at odds (2:6–7); the rich were oppressing the poor (5:4–6); and there was favoritism for the rich and disdain for the poor (2:1–4).

Conflict is always difficult, especially when people groups are set against each other. In this case, the “haves” and the

“have nots” were at odds (5:1–6). No wonder James refers to dissensions (4:1–3) produced by selfish ambition and warns about the misuse of the tongue (3:1–12), since these were times characterized by such conflict.

James faults the rich for oppressing the poor and not paying proper wages to their workers (5:4–6). But the people James was writing to also had a worldly spirit (4:1–4), and though it may be easier to be worldly when you are rich, you can be just as obsessed with the world if you focus on what you don’t have and want to get. James instructs the poor, then, to be patient (5:7–8).

Temptations

No doubt there were other trials and temptations these early Christians were facing, just as we face an amazing variety of challenges in our day. James opens his letter by referring to “divers temptations” (1:2), or various kinds of trials. Notice that James seems to use the words “temptations” and “trials” interchangeably. In 1:2, he writes of the Christians falling into “temptations.” In 1:12, he speaks of enduring “temptation,” but he also refers to being “tried.” Perhaps you wonder what the difference is between trials and temptations.

Our difficulty in understanding these terms comes partly from our English language, in which the word “temptation” has a more negative connotation than “trial” does. We think of temptations as opportunities presented to us that lead us into sin, while we think of trials as difficulties through which God calls us to walk. But let’s keep in mind that James is using the word “temptation” more neutrally and has in mind

what we think of when we think of “trials.” In that sense, then, the words are interchangeable.

Even if we think of trials and temptations as different things, isn't it true that they often weave themselves together? Satan tempts, trying to get us to stumble and fall into sin. We can't blame God for such temptations. He neither is tempted nor tempts anyone like that. But God can use what Satan intends for evil for good in the lives of His people. We could say, then, that God allows those temptations to become trials in our lives to mature us, to refine our faith, and to bring glory to Him. Here we see that God is standing above Satan in every way, even by using Satan's power to turn evil into something good.

This tempting to sin is exactly what Satan tried to do to Christ when he tempted Him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11). He wanted so desperately to get Christ to fall! But God allowed this trial and used this temptation in the wilderness to prepare His Son for His ministry and to be a sympathetic representative of His people (Heb. 2:18). Christ was tempted so that He would know how heavy these temptations can be and how to identify with us in our weakness.

Again, there are many kinds of temptations. We often think of the temptation to lust, to commit adultery, or to murder, for example. It is true that such temptations are real and strong. But we shouldn't allow ourselves to be distracted by such “grandiose” temptations and overlook the thousands of other opportunities to sin. There is no such thing as a small or insignificant sin, and if Satan can catch us off guard, so much the better for him. Let's remind ourselves to be on our guard against *all* sin. Think, for example, of the

temptation to complain or to be lazy. Think of the temptation to slander someone or to gossip about him or her. Think of the temptation to lie, to doubt, or to be proud or angry. Think of the temptation to hypocrisy, to blasphemy, to fear man, or to be double-minded. Even mistrusting the goodness of God or doubting our faith and our salvation are forms of temptations that Satan can use to discourage us or to doubt God's saving work.

Like scattered and weary sheep, the early church was a ready prey for Satan, the furious serpent (Rev. 12:15). It is truly a miracle that it survived the persecution from without and the sin within. We can ascribe this survival only to Christ obtaining all power in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). From heaven He rules over everything, protecting His church and strengthening her.

A Letter from James!

Imagine yourself in one of the meetings of the early church. An elder announces the receipt of a letter from James, Jesus's half brother and a church leader from Jerusalem. It was a general epistle meant for a wide and general audience. He reads the letter aloud. Wouldn't hearing the words of this letter have impressed you? Imagine hearing these words for the first time: "Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (1:2). Or these: "Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?" (2:5). Or these: "Behold, we count them happy which endure" (5:11).

These words must have had a powerful impact on those who heard them. This was a letter of encouragement

to endure through trials and temptations. It was a letter of warning against dead faith. It was a practical letter, touching on topics such as the use of the tongue, wisdom, submission, and riches. Near its end, it spoke about healing the sick through anointing and prayer. Its hearers were reminded of Job and Elijah as good models of endurance and fervent prayer. And these weren't just the words of James, the half brother of Jesus. These were inspired words. James was the "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). God was the one who was writing them through the hand of James. It was His word that would help and direct these early Christians. That word would show them both what God was doing and what He was calling them to do, especially as it focused on truly knowing God and His grace and serving to His glory.

Pastor James

When you ask people what the book of James is about, many will mention one or more of its main topics, such as faith and works or the tongue. Some might say it is about Christian living, since it deals with many practical issues. These things are true, and they are important elements of the book. But to boil it all down, the basic theme of this short epistle is the difference between pure religion and vain (or carnal) religion. Pure religion is a state of the heart, but, as James describes, works are an indicator of spiritual health. This makes Christianity practical for daily life. So James's teaching is very practical, as 1:26–27 illustrates: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure

religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

James shows himself to be a wise pastor of souls in this epistle. His readers are tempted and tried Christians, but rather than dwelling on this or encouraging any sort of morbid introspection, he encourages them to be busy doing the work of the Lord. He wants them using their time, tongue, and talents in ways that bring honor to God.

Isn't it true that we often get sidetracked from what the Christian life is all about as we fret, despair, or look within ourselves? James understands that. And he knows that even though temptation can be discouraging, it cannot ultimately hurt a true Christian. Instead of being sidetracked during times of trial, believers need to be busy doing what God wants them to do. We need to be shining like lights in the world.

In the end, trials should be triggers that call us to identify with others undergoing trials, to empathize with those who are in need, and to bring the comfort we have experienced to others who are in distress. Think of every trial as a reminder to you of your duties. Talk to yourself about what it is that God commands you to do: let me visit the widows and orphans; let me keep myself unspotted from the world; let me use my tongue in a way pleasing to God; let me live in friendship and communion with God.

Pure Religion

James calls this all “pure religion and undefiled” (1:27). This is the real thing! We are reminded of David, who also desired pure religion. In Psalm 51, he prays, “Wash me thoroughly

from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (v. 2). David knows that God is not pleased with only the appearance of religiosity. He desires "truth in the inward parts" (v. 6), an honest and upright heart toward Him. No phoniness. No hypocrisy. No duplicity.

Why do we need encouragement to desire true religion? Sadly, we easily content ourselves with what has been called a "fig-leaf" religion. Adam and Eve covered their shame with fig leaves (Gen. 3:7), somehow imagining that God would accept them that way. Ever since, this has been our innate tendency. We are easily satisfied with something the Bible calls the "chaff" or "husk" of a religious profession (see, e.g., Ps. 1:4) as opposed to the "wheat" or "grain," which really matters. God is pleased not with *religious profession*, but with *true possession* of what He is seeking from us. We should ask ourselves these questions: Does my profession pass the test of possession? Have I been thoroughly washed and cleansed, and am I true within?

Because God is pure, He wants us to be pure. He wants our worship and life to be singly devoted to Him. By pure, we don't mean that believers will never sin. That won't be the case on this side of eternity. But we do mean that believers should not be two-faced. There should be a consistency between their outward life and their inner life. If this consistency is there, they won't need to wear a "mask" to make themselves look good. They won't need to hide from others what they are like inside. That is what the Pharisees were so good at doing. Christ explained that they were experts in cleaning up the outside of their lives, while inside they were full of extortion and excess (Matt. 23:25). How they needed

Christ's warning: "Cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also" (Matt. 23:26).

Knowing the Difference

Throughout his epistle, James contrasts pure religion and impure religion on many points. Pure religion, he says, comes down from God and is established in the heart by spiritual regeneration (1:17). Meanwhile, impure religion springs from the heart, which brings forth sin, and sin brings forth death (1:15). Pure religion arises from the engrafted word, which saves the soul (1:21). Impure religion proceeds from the wrath of man (1:20).

Pure religion is visible in our actions. We cannot have the Holy Spirit in us without living it out to the world around us. When we have a close connection to God and our hearts are being transformed to His image, we will shine as lights in a dark place. When we walk as Christ walked and live as He lived in our world, we are showing that we possess true religion. To be sure, impure religion always remains in us, and therefore corrupt fruit always mixes itself with good fruit. Don't believers often have to confess how impure the thoughts and intents of their hearts are? But by God's grace, His purifying work in believers will continue and prevail.

Pure religion, when tested, is patient, constant, and God-glorifying (1:2–18). Impure religion wavers, is unstable in everything, and fades away (1:2–18). Pure religion is faith working by love (2:14–26). Those who have it keep themselves unspotted from the world (1:27), don't treat people with prejudice (2:1–3), and bridle their tongues (3:5–12).

They humble themselves before God (4:6–10) and rely on Him (4:13–15). They know fervent prayer (5:13–20). Impure religion, in contrast, does not work (2:4–26). It promotes jealousy (3:14–16) and lusts (4:1–12) and is degenerate (5:5).

Pure religion shows itself to be true in the end (1:4) and leads to the peace in our hearts that God alone can give (3:18). It will bear precious fruit until the Lord comes again (5:7). At the judgment, impure religion will not stand (2:13). God will unmask and expose it. Those who are marked by an empty profession of religion fall into condemnation (5:12). Only pure religion saves us from death (5:20). God will recognize only His truth and work, and those who are marked by it will be lifted up (4:10). Meanwhile, impure religion will lead only to punishment, death, and destruction (4:12) with the devil and his hosts (4:7).

God—Light without a Shadow

One key to James's writing is understanding his doctrine of God. When people interpret this book as being only practical, they are missing something that is key in James's thinking. James has much to say about God. The doctrine of God is present in every verse of his writing in the sense that each one teaches us something of His character, something of His promises, or something of His calling to us. The following verses are examples:

- God generously gives wisdom (1:5).
- God gives a crown of life to those who love Him (1:12).

- As the Father of lights, God gives only good and perfect gifts (1:17).
- God gives spiritual life in regeneration (1:18).
- God has chosen people to a kingdom He has promised to give them (2:5).
- God shows His friendship to people like Abraham (2:23).
- God has made people after His own image (3:9).
- God gives grace to the humble (4:6).
- God shows compassion and tender mercy to suffering people like Job (5:11).
- God can raise the sick and forgive sin (5:15).

As we see from this list, God is all goodness. These and other references prove that uppermost in James's mind is the character of God as the constant, giving, and forgiving friend of those who trust and love Him. This fits well with the most powerful description James gives of God: "Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (1:17). God is a faithful, covenant-keeping God. He does not change from one moment to another, from one year to another, from one century to another. He is light and gives light. He is a giver of only good and perfect gifts. He cannot veer even a little from what He has promised and pledged. There are no dark spots in the great character of the God who is light. He is pure, undiluted, holy, faithful, and good.

Study Questions

1. What can you reconstruct about God's work in James's life from the following passages: Mark 6:3; John 7:5; Acts 15:13–21; 21:18–25; 1 Corinthians 15:7?
2. In the days of the early church, God didn't often choose especially gifted or educated people to work in ministry. What does this say about God's priorities?
3. Give an example from your own life of a time when trial and temptation came together.
4. How is joy in suffering possible? Have you seen this in the life of someone you know? How does this motivate you to face your trials differently?
5. If pure religion and impure religion are so mixed in a believer, why do you think James makes such a sharp distinction between them?
6. Why is the character of God such an important starting point for James and for any understanding of His works and ways?