

JAMES—WEEK 1

BEHAVIOR ON TRIAL



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

James, Week 1 — Behavior on Trial
The Cover Picture is St James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640)
On display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain

James begins with a blunt description of life in Christ and the challenges Christians face. Our trials are actually opportunities to do great things for the Lord, but are also opportunities for failure.

No excuses.

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James, Week 1 — Behavior on Trial
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1 James 1:1–4 (ESV)

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.

Wow. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds??* Is James serious?

Yes, and look at who he’s writing to—*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*. The Dispersion (διασπορά, diaspora in Greek) literally means the Jews that were “dispersed” around the world by persecution. It also means the Christians (especially Jewish Christians) who were similarly dispersed after the martyrdom of Stephen.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. — Acts 8:1b–2 (ESV)

So the trials faced by James’s readers make most of the trials we face look like picnics. Many of them were literally refugees. Counting trials like these as *all joy* is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind. Praying to be delivered is more like it.

And that’s why James wrote this. He is not instructing his readers to do something that’s automatic. He’s also not minimizing their suffering.

He’s saying that it’s all worthwhile.

But James’s main point isn’t simply that the suffering is worthwhile; it’s why—because it produces steadfastness. The Greek word that’s translated as “steadfastness” (ὑπομονή, hu-pom-on-ay) means patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, endurance. The NKJV translates it as “patience” here, the NIV as “perseverance.”

Okay, fine, but how is learning steadfastness/patience/endurance so important that it’s worth major trials?

That question is the perfect intro to the book of James. Growth in Christ (AKA sanctification) is at the core of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. James is writing against the variation of Christianity-light that says, “Just say the sinner’s prayer, and I’ll meet you at the pearly gates.”

This isn’t about how to become a Christian; his readers already are.

It’s about how to glorify God by being a useful one.

2 James 1:5–8

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

He who doubts? Doubts what?

That it's all true—that Jesus is who He claimed to be.

And for the first century Christian (and for us) this all hinges on one thing—that He rose from the dead.

While Jesus was in the grave, His disciples were confused and depressed. They were, for just a few days, *like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.*

Then Jesus showed up.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall.

Yesterday's lesson was on the value of trials. There is no better example of this than the back-breaking trial the disciples went through while Jesus was in the grave. Imagine the confusion. Imagine the pain. Imagine the questions they asked each other.

And it was all a set-up. When Jesus showed up and flipped the script, the release of pressure could kill a weak heart. The disciples went from total doubt to total certainty in a matter of seconds.

Actually, no they didn't, and that's the lesson. When Thomas refused to accept what his eyes were telling him, he was acting normally. What he said that day was what many of the other disciples could have been thinking.

The mind does not switch gears easily. Humans are wired to have a consistent, coherent view of reality (sometimes called a worldview). This keeps us sane. We process everything through the lens of our worldview. Any major disruption is not easily processed. In fact, we often ignore outright anything that contradicts our worldview. It "doesn't make sense" so we don't remember it.

For example, we all believe that the past is fixed. We can lie about or forget the past, but we cannot change it. If something were to come up that challenged this view, we wouldn't quickly go, "Oh, I see," and change our view. This new idea would be a hard sell. Almost no proof would be sufficient.

So it was with Jesus's resurrection. Death is, by definition, irreversible. The disciples couldn't process and accept the new reality in an instant. The mind just doesn't work that way.

This is connected to James's point about doubt leading to instability.

One has to have fully incorporated the resurrection into their worldview or they're in a state of confusion.

3 James 1:9–12

Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

My wife has a bunch of Girl Scout buddies who love to get together. They come from all levels of society. Some of them can barely afford to travel to their get-togethers. Others often fly on business jets.

But when they're together, none of that matters. What matters is who knows how to tie a particular knot, or the best way to cook corn in a campfire. In the Girl Scouts' universe, those are the things that matter. Most of the things that matter in our world aren't important in theirs.

Christianity is, likewise, separate from the secular universe.

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." — John 18:36

Like the Girl Scout universe, Jesus's kingdom has its own priorities. Wealth, fame, power, and all other forms of status in our culture mean nothing to this king.

And do not miss why *the lowly brother* [should] *glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation*. It's because these things are as transient *as a flower of the field*.

They mean nothing; the eternal means everything.

This sets up an interesting segue to James's discussion of temptation. Unlike riches, temptation connects to the eternal. The one who resists temptation *will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him*.

That last part is curious. Why not just say, "*will receive the crown of life*"? Why add, "*which the Lord has promised to those who love Him*"?

Because it forces a connection between loving Him and resisting temptation. This connection is made clearer by deconstructing the Greek word that's translated as love here (ἀγαπᾶσιν, agaposin). It's from the root word agapé, which means sacrificial love—giving priority to someone other than yourself.

Loving Jesus means giving priority to Him. This explains John 14:21.

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me." — John 14:21a

If you give in to temptation, then the Lord isn't your top priority. That's a lack of agapé.

4 James 1:13–18

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

There’s an amazing lesson in the Greek word (πειρασμός, peirasmos) that is translated as “tempted.” It’s the same root word that’s translated as “trials” back in verse two at the beginning of the book.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, — James 1:2

This is hard for English speakers to wrap their brains around, but peirasmos doesn’t mean temptation or trial depending on the context. It means both. Temptations and trials are the same thing. Every temptation is a trial, and every trial is a temptation. They’re both simply peirasmos.

Spend a moment letting that sink in. This is how God’s “school of hard knocks” works. Trials (temptations) have a purpose.

But James lays on an important caveat. Do not say, “*I am tempted by God.*” That’s not how it works; trials are rooted in our sinfulness. *One is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.* (This is not to ignore Satan’s role. See <https://www.aibe.org/columns/thedeep/item/19981-the-first-cause>.)

Thus, there is danger in these trials. Our sin can blossom; *and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.* The lack of agapé that we mentioned yesterday can get really bad.

So, *do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.* The Greek word translated as *be deceived* (πλανᾶσθε, planasthe) is not in the future tense; it’s in the present. This hints that some of the people James is writing to are currently struggling with the belief that God tempts.

So James kills this view once and for all by showing God to be the polar opposite. *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.*

But the big takeaway is in the final sentence, which gives the purpose behind all this. *Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.*

Never forget, the purpose of everything is His glory. It’s not all about us. Even gifts that come *down from the Father of lights* are not all about us. Sure, we benefit, but for the purpose *that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.*

This is best understood by interpreting “we” as the early Christians that James was writing to.

They were the firstfruits of the most consequential movement in the history of man.

5 James 1:19–27

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James now moves on to tell his readers the details of how they will be the firstfruits of a movement that will turn the world upside down.

And James's teaching is anything but easy. He begins with keeping wrath in check. Wrath is anger out of control—even if it's righteous anger. It's a great example of how sin can ruin anything. Righteous anger comes from our innate sense of justice. As such, it's a good thing.

But our sinful nature can cause righteous anger to boil out of control—turning a good thing into one of the seven deadly sins.

“*Therefore,*” James continues, we must act like the people we claim to be, laying aside wickedness and being doers of the word, not just hearers. Remember who you are.

James then makes a clever point—forgetting that you're a Christian is as absurd as forgetting what you look like in a mirror.

This is mockery. It's not really forgetting; it's faith that's a joke.

James then gives two examples of Christian behaviors that we shouldn't “forget”—control our tongue and minister to the afflicted.

These, along with being slow to wrath and laying aside wickedness (and keeping oneself “*unspotted from the world*”), are of prime importance to the principal task of a Christian—glorifying God. This sets the stage for the rest of the book.

James is an essential book. Some of its points are blunt, but they're important.

Many Christians need this kind of a wake-up call.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What kinds of trials are most "useful"?
2. Have every had a sudden big change in your view of something?
3. What priorities compete with Jesus?
4. What temptations feel the most like trials?
5. Why is this so hard to do?