

RUF Large Group Bible Study
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James 1:5-18²

I've decided to do things a little differently on this passage. What I'm going to do is go straight through the text and then come back and talk it through in application. I think that way we'll best be able to see what James is trying to say. This passage flows right out of 1:1-4 of course. Last week we talked about counting and considering everything joy – even trials. There is a connection from verse four to verse five with the word “lack.”

“Look forward, then, to the day when you will stand complete, lacking in nothing. But just at present I am pretty certain there is one thing you know yourself to lack. It may be that you cannot quite see life as I have portrayed it. You are in the thick of such a tangle of circumstances that there is no way in which it can seem other than a purposeless mess. There is no stretch of the imagination by which it even begins to look like a stepping stone to maturity. In a word, you need wisdom: the wisdom that sees all life as serving the purposes of the Lord. Or your situation may be somewhat different: you accept that your circumstances are designed by the Lord to exert those pressures and impose those tests which, in due time, will bear the fruit of maturity. But you find that seeing life like that does not make it either easy or plain which way to turn. There is more than one path opening ahead. Prepared as you are to persevere, you don't know which to choose as the divinely appointed way forward. Again, you need wisdom.”³

Wisdom

James 1:5 says: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* I'd say that this verse is pretty straightforward. God gives wisdom to those who ask for it. Proverbs 2:6 says, “*The Lord gives wisdom.*” Matt 7:7 – *Ask and it will be given to you.* Proverbs 3:7 – *Do not be wise in your own eyes.*

“Wisdom is the mean by which the godly can both discern and carry out the will of God. Wisdom will therefore keep a person from immorality and enable him or her to be acceptable to the Lord. Finding wisdom, claims Proverbs, means finding life and receiving favor from the Lord.”⁴

Praying for wisdom admits that this isn't a closed world system. It's an open one, in which there is a God and He can change the situation. This is a really different way of thinking. Aron Ralston, whom I mentioned last week, cried outside his system. He writes, “‘God, I am praying to you for guidance. I'm trapped here in Blue John Canyon – you probably know that – and I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Please show me a sign.’ I slowly tilt my forehead back until I'm looking up through the pale twilight. Nothing. What was I expecting? A swirl in the clouds? A petroglyph showing a man with a knife? I start again. ‘OK, God, since you're apparently busy... Devil, if you're listening, I need some help here. I'll trade you my arm, my soul, whatever you want. Just get me out of here.’”⁵

I'm not sure what Aron was thinking but he seems to have missed out on the second part of this section - *But let him ask in faith, with no doubting.*

Doubting is the opposite of faith, but there is doubting and then there is *doubting*. Paul writes that Abraham did not waver regarding the promises of God (Rom 4:20); but we know that he did wonder and question at times. Paul's point isn't that Abraham never doubted, but that over his life he could be characterized by faith instead of doubt. He displayed a consistency and longevity in his faith.

James 1:7 is rather chilling in this regard, “*For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.*” James says that God doesn't answer every prayer offered to him. We must pray in faith. If we don't we are double-minded or double-souled. (see Psalm 119:2, Deut 6:5)

James mentions a sort of spiritual schizophrenia, saying you live one way and then living another. John Bunyan calls this person “Mister Facing Both Ways.” “That feat is just as impossible spiritually as it is physically.”⁶

James says that this person is “Unstable in all his ways” – “People astray from God are ‘troubled’ – they have no inner or outer restfulness.... Is our heart *one* with God (not ‘right with God’, for that has been eternally secured for us by

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² Resources used: Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982; Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000; John MacArthur, *James*, Moody Press: Chicago, 1998; Dr. Tim Keller's sermons on James found at www.redeemer.com; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, Doubleday: New York, 1995; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New Interpreter's Bible), Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1998; J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, Intervarsity Press: Downer's Grove, Illinois, 1985.

³ Motyer, p. 37

⁴ Moo, p. 57

⁵ *Outside Magazine*, Sept. 2004, p. 60

⁶ MacArthur, p. 39

Christ), without any division of loyalty? And a second question follow: are we proving the reality of that sole allegiance to God in the place of prayer – not in the public place of confrontation with the world (that will come later), but in the secret place of prayer? For out of this will emerge that wisdom which unifies the personality and holds us on a steady course in the storm.⁷

For James there is no middle ground between faith and no-faith.

God gives wisdom to those who ask for it. He is a good and gracious God. God is more than giving, but he is always giving. “God is, then, one who gives sincerely, without hesitation or mental reservation. He does not grumble or criticize. His commitment to his people is total and unreserved: they can expect to receive.”⁸

Think of this as the English or math help desk. There are people there waiting to help you on your papers and math problems. They’re sitting there waiting for you to come in. All you need to do is admit you need some help and go and receive it. Sadly, too many people turn in bad essays and lousy homework because they don’t want to ask for help. But imagine this even more – it’s not just a grad student or senior there helping you, it’s John Steinbeck or Maya Angelou or CS Lewis ready for your papers. Or Einstein and Isaac Newton to help with your calculus.

When was the last time you prayed for wisdom? When have you cried out and admitted your weakness and asked for help from God out of faith that He could provide that help and perspective?

Perspective

Verses 9-11 help us with one scenario that gives us perspective. Riches and poverty. This is one place where you really need wisdom. The natural thought is to think that the poor person is in a bad place and the rich person is in a good place. But James says that that’s not the way to look at it. He says Christians always must evaluate themselves on spiritual not material standards.

He tells the poor Christian to boast in something. Take pride. I am a Child of God! And he tells the rich person to remember that all wealth is transitory. (Isaiah 40:6-8, Ps. 103:15-16, Ps. 49:16-17)

“James’ point, then, is that believers must look beyond the world’s evaluation to understand who they are and look to God’s view of them.”

“When you lose a daughter, son wife, husband or other loved one, wealth is no comfort. When you lose your health, are betrayed by a friend, or are wrongfully maligned, money cannot buy peace of mind or decrease the pain. Trials are the great equalizer, bringing all of God’s children to dependence on Him. Wealth does not bring God closer, nor does poverty keep Him further away.”⁹

Money is one of the greatest trials a person can endure. Money and what it can buy are a tremendous lure. (Matt. 6:24) The greatest trial is to have no trials. You probably all know someone who hasn’t really ever had anything go wrong in his or her life. Does that person usually have a clue? Probably not, and it’s because adversity shapes us. Working to make money, dealing with a lower position, not getting everything you want – that is helping us to gain perspective, humility, godliness and even generosity. The person with a lot of money can think he or she doesn’t have problems. Not true. Very not true. You can watch television shows to see the reality of how messed up rich people are and how easy it is for them to refuse to deal with their problems. Riches can also tempt you into thinking that luxuries are necessities.

Having money can make you a stingy, greedy person. Statistics show that people who make under \$25,000 give approximately 4% of their income to charities. People who make over \$100,000 give less than 1%.

Jeremiah in 9:23-24 of his book, writes: *Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”*

What is your perspective on money and life? Do you think you *deserve* what you have? Are you obsessed with making money? Are you in your major because you think it will provide the most income for you? Are you generous with what you already have? Do you give it away? Do you give any of it away? Friends, money will ensnare you in its trap. Get a godly, Biblical perspective on it now and it will serve you instead of you serving it.

Trials

The next paragraph, verses 12-15 talk about trials and temptation again. But James makes a different point from what he was talking about in verse 2. We certainly should count it all joy when we face trials of various kinds, but we have to be careful that we don’t slip into bad thinking with trials too.

James says “*Blessed is the man.*” He is using psalms and Sermon on the Mount language to make his point. He wants us to know that there is a great reward at the end of the race – the crown of life, and that those who are truly God’s will make it. Don’t give up. Don’t falter. Don’t stop in your pursuit of holiness. Jesus will see you through. “The blessings God will give are summed up in the gift of the *crown of life*. In the Bible the wearing of the crown speaks of dignity of

⁷ Motyer, p. 42

⁸ Davids, p. 73

⁹ MacArthur, p. 41

position, royal or otherwise (Est. 8:15, Ps. 21:3). It speaks of gladness and rejoicing (Song 3:11; 1 Thess. 2:19); it is given to the victor (1 Cor. 9:25); it is the prize at the end of the race (2 Tim. 4:8), the chief Shepherd's reward to his undershepherds (1 Pe. 5:4). Specifically, it is the reward of faithful endurance (Rev. 2:10)."¹⁰

But think rightly about this. James says that all trials are also temptations. Everything is a test that can move you on toward prosperity and the crown of life or towards temptation and death. Everything that enters your life will change you, make you grow or make you go backwards. There is no neutral ground here. So think about it: Getting or losing love, getting or losing money, getting or losing promotions, getting or losing a grad school or a career. All of these are trials. Getting what you want is a trial – how will you respond to prosperity? Losing what you want is a trial – how will you respond to poverty? Are you pursuing the crown of life or allowing things to bring death to you?

And if there is death in your soul, a lack of rightness, a disease, an unhealthy, then there is only one cause for your sin – you want to. You desire it. You must not confuse the cause of your sin for the occasion of your sin, which we so often do. The occasion is the test, but the cause is your own desire. Think of a math test that a student fails (because he didn't go to the help desk?). The occasion of the failure and the cause of the failure are not the same thing. It's tempting to say, and you may have said this yourself: "If the teacher hadn't given me the test, I wouldn't have failed." Not true. The test revealed the failure that was already there. The giving of the test was the occasion, but the lack of knowledge was the cause of the failure.¹¹

Why is every test a temptation? Because we have desires that lead us astray. In every situation, we have to watch our desires and take them to Christ because He is the only one true desire.

How is that? Look at the text: James 1:14-15 *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* ¹⁵ *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

Do you see the progression here? Do you see the sexual language James uses to bring home his point? We are seduced; there is a conception; sin is birthed; then there is a grandchild of sin, another birth – death.

James uses an interesting word here, ἐπιθυμία which means "Over desire." This is a hugely important concept.¹² It's not that we want bad things, but that we want things so badly. An *over desire* seduces you. Most of you really do think of sin as breaking the rules. But that's not the best way to think of sin. Sin isn't just breaking the rules. It's *spiritual adultery*. We love other things more than God. We go to them for romance, to make us feel good, for self-esteem, for good vibes, for stimulation, for pleasure. We sleep with them on the side, all the while claiming fidelity to God.

And what happens? Our other lovers become a "fatal attraction." Something becomes your paramour, the author of your self esteem, the way you feel good about yourself, the way you orient your life. Career isn't wrong. But an epi-over desire for career is wrong. Romance isn't wrong. But saying "I won't be anything until someone loves me." My lover makes me feel like a human being – that is wrong. When you add something to Jesus Christ for your satisfaction and significance, that is wrong. It's not wrong to want it, it's wrong to *over want* it. To say, I've got to have it or else I won't be able to live.

When we have this over desire it gives birth to sins in our lives. That is the conception language, which springs naturally from the copulation going on with our other lovers. Think about it. Conception is something that is inside that comes outside. All sinful actions start as little embryos in the heart. Bitterness happens when something you think you've got to have has been taken away from you. Anger springs forth when you feel you're threatened, or have been mistreated. Fear shows itself in self-preservation, a lack of trust. Ask yourself, Why am I so angry? So afraid? So short-tempered? So petty? When you have an outburst, try to discern where that is coming from. There is something in you that has birthed this behavior. Some over desire.

And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. You are killing yourself with your over desires, with your sin. You really are. When you lie, you are killing the truth in you. When you get drunk, you are walking toward death. When you mess around physically, you are courting death, not life.

"James' call for a perception of testing as a chance to grow in a commitment is certainly at odds with a world that conceives of life solely in terms of gratification and self-aggrandizement. In that worldview, anything interfering with pleasure is a source of "suffering," which must at all costs be avoided. The ideal of "endurance" is not attractive to hedonism, for it assumes an understanding of human character based on something more profound than pleasure, possession, or power."¹³

Do we really want to view our trials as "entirely of joy"? Does this make sense?

One other thing: James doesn't mention Satan here. There is no need. Even if there weren't a Satan, there would be sin, wickedness and miserableness in our world. There is no need to blame external forces. "The enemy is not within the camp, within the heart; the enemy is the heart itself."¹⁴

¹⁰ Motyer, p. 48-49

¹¹ Illustration from Tim Keller

¹² What follows are thoughts from Tim Keller.

¹³ Johnson, p. 183

¹⁴ Motyer, p. 54

This is all remarkably found in CS Lewis' novel, *The Great Divorce*. He shows the subtlety of sin and how it is conquerable, but so manipulative. It's not just doing wrong things, but wanting the wrong things too greatly and wanting the right things too lightly. I'd highly recommend reading it.

The Fount of Every Blessing is God

James finishes up this passage with two important thoughts, and reminds us that all of this is aimed toward believers by writing *my beloved brothers*.

His first thought is another reorientation statement. *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.*

With all this talk about trials, James wants us to enjoy life, to really appreciate the goodness of life. Of the great song, the fine wine, the vacation on the beach, the incredible scenery, the laughter at the party, the warmth of the embrace, the essence of the painting, the accolades of a job well done, the smile of your daughter – love all of these good gifts, James says. But remember where these came from. These are all like the moon. None of them have any real light in and of themselves, but they reflect light from the giver of light, the sun.

The moon is incredibly fickle, isn't it. Some nights it's so bright you could read by it, and yet for much of the time it's either not there or barely there. It's not a good source of light, but it never claims to be. It's reflective only. So are the good things we have. Don't over-place too much onto this world's goodness – they are derivative in nature. You will be unhappy if you claim the moon is the sun. Appreciate the moon, but realize its place.

And then James mentions, rather casually, something that he feels we should already know. The only way you can do any of this that he has spoken of is if you are *brought forth by the word of truth*. This is born again language, much like Jesus' talk with Nicodemus in John 3 where Jesus says, *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* ⁴ *Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* ⁵ *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."* ⁶ *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* ⁷ *Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again"* ⁸ *The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

There you have it. You have to be born again. That is an incredibly humbling, vulnerable thing. I don't know how many of you have seen a child be born, but I've witnessed it four times. They are remarkably needy when they come out. They really can't do anything for themselves. They don't have much capability. And yet all is provided for, is it not? All is taken care of by the love of the parents.

Your SAT scores won't get you this. Your popularity won't. Your Greek letters or major won't. Being from Dallas or Edmond or Sulphur or Ada accounts for very little on this score. Your future earning potential is worth nothing. Being a son or daughter of God, that kind of humility and vulnerability is what matters. And God says that He is the one who gives it. It's His doing. *Of his own will.*¹⁵

James is a pastor. Imagine him pastoring someone.

"Wow, thanks for telling me all of that. I appreciate your honesty, and I can tell that that really has hurt you and is tough for you to deal with.

But I've got to tell you, as I've been listening to you, I think that you have some things wrong in your life. Are you willing to interact with me on these things? Good, that's the first step I think in gaining maturity – being willing to ask for help and talk with someone else about it. That you called and came over and we're talking about it is a really good thing. It's always great to get outside yourself, so even though it may be hard, it's good.

Make sure that after we're done talking that you talk with God about it. You need to ask for his wisdom and guidance in this. Seek him out in the Scriptures, partake of the means of grace – the word, sacraments and prayer. Seek his face, and he says you will find him. It may take some time, but be earnest about it. Seek true peace, not a made up peace. And peace may end up meaning you have to do the hardest thing, not necessarily the thing you would find the easiest. We can keep talking about it.

¹⁵ "Spiritually and doctrinally, the 'new birth' (or 'birth from above') belongs with all those passages of Scripture which unveil the secret story lying behind our conversion. From the point of view of God's decision, the Lord Jesus made the stark affirmation, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' (Jn. 15:16). Yet many of us remember with great clarity the day, hour and even the approximate minute when we chose him! But since we are taught that 'no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (Jn. 6:44), and that the very faith we exercise when we believe in Jesus is the Father's gift to us (Eph. 2:8, Phil. 1:29), we learn that behind our choice, making it possible and making it real, is the wonder the he first chose us. This is what James refers to when he says, *Of his own will he brought us forth*. The decision was his; so also, as we shall see, was the action which implemented the decision. Our conscious experience of conversion, of committing our lives to Christ, of receiving him into our hearts – all this was consequent upon his decision and action, and derivative from it, just as as the love we give to our human parents is a reflex of their parental love and care for us and is, indeed, part and parcel of the life which they have us." Motyer, p. 58

Here's what you really have to remember. God's perspective needs to be your perspective. The important thing going on here isn't really this situation, it's how you're handling it and dealing with it. Step back for a minute and try to see things from another point of view.

The fact that you're so upset about it should give you the first clue that something is wrong. Why are you so upset? Why so angry? Why so distraught? Don't you think that you might have over-desired this thing? That you put too much stock in this for your identity and significance? Maybe God has had it taken away to show you just that?

Can't you imagine another person reacting differently than you have? Sure it always hurts when you don't get the position, or you get rejected from the school you want, or you see the person you wanted to date with someone else, or you get turned down by the one you've wanted to go out with, or things didn't work out and you didn't see it coming... or a million other things. You are right to feel hurt. But a person whose identity isn't bound up in that thing can take that hurt to Christ and think and act differently than you are.

You have to say this to God, 'God, this really sucks. I don't feel good about things right now. I'm really hurting. But... I know a few things. One is that you are a good and loving God who will help me and who does the right thing for me. Apparently, even though I can't figure out how right now, this is the best thing for me, something that will make me grow as a person. Help me to see that. Give me the perspective you want. Something else I know is that the most important thing about me is that I'm your child. That is the essence of my identity. Career, dating, marriage, position, grades, status – all of these things are things I want more than you. I confess that. You're showing me this by putting me in this situation where I can see my reaction. I'm far too often swayed by the attitudes and desires of other lovers. But I confess that my first love is you and you only. Help me to forsake all others, clinging only to you. I want to appreciate your good gifts without squeezing the life out of them. I want to be able to hold all that you give me with an open hand, whether you give me a lot or a little, being thankful for your generosity. This is the kind of life and attitude I want, the wisdom to see life this way. I'm far from there, but you are a good and persistent teacher. Replace my desires for others with a wholehearted desire for you, Jesus, the author and perfecter of my faith, the one who lived, suffered and died for me, and who embraces me like no other. Amen.'

Can you learn to pray that prayer? Can you fix your eyes on Jesus so that you will not become undone by the things of life that don't go your way? Can you even get to the place where you might be thankful for the trials that God brings into your life because you can see that these are making you more like Jesus? Your faith says that you believe that God will answer you when you ask. He assures us that he will."

Appendix:

A friend gave me this quote from Charles Spurgeon so I'll attach it here at the end, sort of another thought from verse 18: Well can I remember the manner in which I learned the doctrines of grace in a single instant. Born, as all of us are by nature, an Arminian, I still believed the old things I had heard continually from the pulpit, and did not see the grace of God. When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul—when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron, and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown on a sudden from a babe into a man—that I had made progress in Scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God. One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, How did you come to be a Christian? I sought the Lord. But how did you come to seek the Lord? The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God."¹⁶

¹⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) was England's best-known preacher for most of the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1854, just four years after his conversion, Spurgeon, then only 20, became pastor of London's famed New Park Street Church (formerly pastored by the famous Baptist theologian John Gill). The congregation quickly outgrew their building, moved to Exeter Hall, then to Surrey Music Hall. In these venues Spurgeon frequently preached to audiences numbering more than 10,000—all in the days before electronic amplification. In 1861 the congregation moved permanently to the newly constructed Metropolitan Tabernacle.