

Scripture

¹ James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. ⁵If 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. ⁶But 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.

Commentary

Bondservant -> Same as slave, servant; doulos(N); in subjection without bondage.

Though the brother of our Lord, and as the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, James identifies himself as one of the lowest order in looking to both the Father and the Son. The Father and the Son will be exalted. The whole of Creation will be brought to honor the Son as the Father. James wisely acknowledges his position in the Kingdom militant here on earth, looking ahead to his glorious reward in the Kingdom Glorified, where those who were faithful are given more and those who are least are the greatest.

The twelve Tribes scattered abroad might be seen as those after Stephen's death in Acts 8 who were then pushed out into Judea & Sumeria. As Paul was missionary to the Gentiles, James is to the early Hebrew Christians. So, he might also be speaking to those dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. Or on a wider sense, in that he is addressing Jewish believers, he can also be speaking to the whole of the Nation who have been dispatched by God throughout the whole world known. Notably, as God's people were dispersed in part to illustrate His Light such as in Daniel's life & work, so too is James' Epistle sent out to the Jews and the world in this early catholic circulating letter.

'Count it all joy when you fall into various trials'. Right from the start James heads into the core issue facing early Christians suffering under persecution. As a day to day thing, this encouragement must be seen as central for us too if we are truly living outside of our comfort zone for Christ's cause. And not only issues of the direct association of being known as a Christian which causes suffering at the hands of others, but also the interior trials of life sent on us by God in order to test/prove/build our faith – all for the ultimate use of the Lord for His Glory in both now and the Kingdom.

'Count it all joy' is referenced to the same joy shared by all of the Apostles in Acts 5:41. Having been twice arrested in two days, then beaten before the whole council & elders and commanded to desist, they left joyfully 'rejoicing they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name'. The seemingly inverse economy of God's Kingdom (as it might seem to those of the world) is recognized as profitable service by the Apostles, who are joyous in serving the Lord and also in seeing that store in Heaven added to. It is truly wonderful to serve the Lord in such a loving way, as a sacrifice for Him, and for His sake.

'When you fall into various trials' is the tip of such a huge 'iceberg' in Christian theology! Trials, testing of our faith by God, are not to be confused with temptation, of and by the Devil. From a pagan then to a Christian, the issue of trials takes on a radically different meaning, reality, and stance in one's life. The pagan will always loathe the trials, from small to large, bemoaning them as senseless, bothersome, or of no value except to cause them discomfort, brought about by whatever means. Be it someone cutting them off in traffic or a life threatening illness, all are despised to varying degrees. A believer however, in following the lead of the Word, will see the situation as an opportunity of growth brought about by their loving Father, of Whom no detail escapes, and Whom has promised to keep the interests of His children close to His heart. Recognizing our perfect God is in total control of the test at hand changes everything if we believe in His ability to do anything. Our fear should not be in His design of the outcome, but instead of our interference of our own will as we might try to arrest control of the situation. This response is ultimately rooted in a disbelief in God, His ability, and His intent. Once adopted and our standing before the Lord restored, the believer's life is best viewed as a 'boot camp' in training us for service in God's Kingdom. And considering our Perfect example in our Lord Jesus' life, the one overriding aspect He kept, and that we must seek to emulate, is perfect obedience to God. Trials are the mechanism by which our Lord brings about the opportunity to 'work out you own salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil 2:12); it is the process of Sanctification which our Jesus has undertaken so that we may be made perfect and that when gathered, will be ready to be presented to the Father as Christ's Church victorious. Trials truly are a blessing if you are a child of God and can recognize His loving gift of opportunity where, if we hazard to be faithful of Him, simply can't lose. God seeks to build, establish, grow a faith in us – rooted deep down, to which we cleave to, anchor to, in times of difficulties. All of this doesn't mean that God places false obstacles in our way as a faux exercise against imaginary adversity. These things are very real, often quite painful and even threatening, but again in seeking His Glory for Himself, the Anchor we lash ourselves to is always going to prove greater than anything ever found in our path of Sanctification. In His Mercy He strives to deepen and build our faith if we would only obey and trust Him.

Therefore, in facing our adversity, we must need appropriate tools. Blind, foolish faith is of no value and is dangerous. To clarify, having faith in God in the face of severe trouble, though all hope seems lost, is not blind faith. It is a belief in the truest force that all of Creation can acknowledge. However, a faith in something that can't or won't come through for us is foolish. This might be a faith in self, riches, devices, other people, or anything fallible in the light of it's abilities to handle the task at hand. Or, faith even in God that He will do something which in truth He has not promised or is not of His character is foolish too. But for the one 'who lacks (spiritual) wisdom, let him ask of God Who gives to all liberally and without reproach'. God wants us to succeed in growing, for it glorifies and pleases Him. Phil 2:13 – "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure". If He Wills that we succeed in trials, then He will of course make available to us the tools necessary to carry out our portion of the responsibility. If He seeks growth in obedience through faith, by placing us lovingly in trials, then to root our faith in Him as Someone solid, He will want to give us spiritual wisdom in order to build our understanding of Him, building our faith. In v.5 He has pulled all of the stops concerning His Truth to us as believers. As Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds and plainly to His Disciples, so too does the Lord offer full explanation to us, in greater order in fact, as His children. And more so, those who do ask will not be reproached, turned away in shame, or ridiculed, but treated well by the Almighty, though our request in His Light is so ridiculously ignorant.

However, the person who asks must do so in faith and without doubt in God's willingness and ability. The picture of the sea tossing about is one of great instability. How Gracious is our God for sparing us of knowledge we are not ready to contemplate. Following the parallel of the wineskins, our Lord knows that a seeker not yet stable in his existing foundations cannot gain from the weight which more Truth would bear. Know God and His Person through His revelation of Himself through the Word, have faith well rooted in Him and His Character, then again approach Him in Prayer seeking more and He will grant it.

Key Summary

Trials were a pointed fact in the life of the early Church believer, often at the threat of one's life. James writes to not only acknowledge the work of God through trials, but also expose the deep blessings the Lord seeks to bestow on us through them.

We are not typically taken Home immediately upon Justification, but will spend the rest of our days here in training. Jesus' work in us is for His Glory when we will be presented perfect to the Father.

God, willing that we succeed, also has given us the Counselor to shape us. He gives freely, in abundance, that we may never want for lack of spiritual wisdom.

Study Questions

Can you identify your past and current opportunities in trials?

Is your reaction to trials one of disdain, neutrality, or joy? Should you reconsider your response?

Are you being aware of the Holy Spirit's involvement in your life? Do you ask Him for help and teaching in the course of your prayers?