

April 15, 2018

James: Been There, Done That

James 1:1-18

Imagine growing up in the home of Joseph and Mary ... with Jesus as your older brother! Jesus was part of a family. Joseph, Jesus' human father, is not mentioned after Jesus' childhood.¹ But his mother, brothers, and sisters are (Matthew 12:46, 13:53-56). Several of Jesus' brothers are explicitly named: James (who likely wrote this letter), Joseph (probably the next oldest, named after his father, Joseph, according to Jewish custom), Simon, and Judas (or Jude, the writer of that letter, see Jude 1).

Mary and Joseph experienced the miracle and wonder of Jesus' conception and birth. They saw God's work in their lives. They had heard the angels, shepherds, magi, and prophecies (Simeon and Anna). They passed those stories on to their children. Can you imagine what his brothers and sisters thought? And Jesus was different: He never sinned. He "*grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him*" (Luke 2:40). Did they experience respect or resentment? Joy or jealousy?

About age 30, Jesus quit the family carpentry business. As eldest son, it was his responsibility to run the family business and support the family. He was the head of the household. Joseph, James, Simon, and Jude may have been more than a bit angry that Jesus left them in the lurch, perhaps one of the reasons he was not honoured in "his hometown" or "in his own house" (Matthew 13:57). Interestingly, none of Jesus' family, except Mary, is described as having faith in him until after the resurrection (John 7:5).

Jesus' second-to-last appearance between his resurrection and ascension was to James, and James alone (1 Corinthians 15:7). From that point on, James seems to have believed in Jesus as the Messiah. He went on to become the key leader of the Jerusalem church.² Tradition says that James was executed for his faith in the early 60's A.D.: the Jewish leaders had him thrown from the roof of the Temple and stoned to death.

The letter of James is written by a man who knows Jesus intimately, but has struggled to come to faith in Jesus. When he does make that decision, it means something. He endures persecution. His faith in Jesus will mean he will die for Him. So when James talks to us about what it means to live as a Christian, we do well to listen. He has credibility as someone who has "been there, done that" and made the hard choices along the way.

1. What is the letter about?

This is a letter. It's a letter written to the people of God, people who believe in Jesus. "*I, James, am writing this letter. I serve God and the Lord Jesus Christ. I am sending this*

¹ The last mention of Joseph is in Luke 2:41-51, when the boy, Jesus, remains at the Temple. Since Joseph is not mentioned later, it is assumed he died before Jesus' began his ministry (about age 30), but nowhere does the Bible say this explicitly.

² James' story and leadership is recorded in Acts 1:14, Acts 12:17, 15:1-21, 21:18, and Galatians 2:9. 1 Corinthians 9:4-6 suggests James may have been married, and the church may have supported him and his family financially.

letter to you, the 12 tribes scattered among the nations. Greetings.”(1:1)

“The 12 tribes” – Jews – were among the poorest people in the Roman Empire. Jews who became Christians were often those who didn’t fit in mainstream Jewish society: the sinners, prostitutes, lame, crippled. Many of those who heard this letter were the poorest of the poor. They were suffering people. Misunderstood people. Outcast people. Paul will organize a special offering throughout Greece for Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

We are all struggling people. We may not be the poorest of the poor, but we all have issues. James’ father (Joseph) died when he was young. His oldest brother, left home, leaving Joseph Jr. and James (the next oldest sons) as heads of the household. His brother, Jesus, managed to incite riots many places he went, then resisted family attempts to restrain him (Mark 3:21). The religious leaders called his brother, Jesus, demon-possessed (Mark 3:22). Jesus would go on to be arrested as a heretic, condemned for treason, and brutally executed. For the family (like James) Jesus’ life caused them real hardship.

After James comes to faith, he is in Jerusalem when Stephen is stoned for his faith. There is intense persecution by Jewish and Roman authorities. James is the leader when the church almost blows itself apart, battling through conflict between those who wanted all Christians to become Jews (circumcised and everything else that went with being Jewish) and those who didn’t. At the end of the day, James dies a violent death.

2. The thunder rolls

This is James’ personal testimony: *“My brothers and sisters, you will face all kinds of trouble. When you do, think of it as pure joy. Your faith will be tested. You know that when this happens it will produce in you the strength to continue. And you must allow this strength to finish its work. Then you will be all you should be. You will have everything you need.”(1:2-4)*. This is not pious platitude. This is James speaking from the stress, agony, and confusion of firsthand experience

Most of the time we cannot choose whether trouble comes – it just does. But we can choose how we respond. James’ experience was that when he chose to see pain as an opportunity to deepen his faith in God it did just that. He discovered a deep, profound joy that transcended his situation and transformed his experience.

James was known as “Old Camel Knees,” because of the thick calluses built up on his knees from many years of determined prayer. Prayer will be the foundation of what James is going to say us. The joy comes, the endurance comes, the character comes, as you pray. *“Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him ... The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (James 5:13-16)*

“Blessed is the person who keeps on going when times are hard. After they have come through hard times, this person will receive a crown. The crown is life itself. The Lord has promised it to those who love him”(1:12). As we endure, we experience God’s blessing.

3. Grant us wisdom

In tough times, confusing times, uncertain times, we need wisdom. What ought we to do? How ought we to live? What's the Lord's will?

"If any of you needs wisdom, you should ask God for it. He will give it to you. God gives freely to everyone and doesn't find fault" (James 1:5). God will often tell us, if we ask. Sometimes it is very specific. Sometimes the wisdom God gives us is more general than we'd like: love God, love your neighbour. He expects us to make wise choices, consistent with the principles of Scripture (implying we need to know Scripture!). God will never lead us to be dishonest to the Scripture!

"When you ask, you must believe. You must not doubt. A person who doubts is like a wave of the sea. The wind blows and tosses them around. They shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord. This kind of person can't make up their mind. They can never decide what to do" (James 1:6-8). There is a faith issue here: we need to be willing to listen for **God's** answer. Sometimes we know what answer **we** want to hear, and we're not willing to really listen for God's wisdom.

Want to know what to do? Here are some guidelines: Is it contrary to God's will? If yes – it's not from God! If it is consistent with God's truth, do two things. First, pray about it: what does your conscience tell you? Second, talk to mature Christian friends: what do they say? Weigh those two things. Then make a good, godly decision. And don't look back.

4. Temptation happens

James began with *"you will face all kinds of trouble..."* (1:2). He continues by looking at one particular type of trouble: temptation. *"Why does God tempt me, so often? I want to live a holy life, but God keeps putting temptations in front of me! Why doesn't He just take them away?"* Do you ever feel like that? Wisdom is a wonderful "vaccine" for temptation! Godly wisdom helps us identify and handle temptation for what it is.

Listen to James' wisdom: *"When you are tempted, you shouldn't say, 'God is tempting me.' God can't be tempted by evil. And he doesn't tempt anyone"* (James 1:13). It would be a malicious God who deliberately leads us to the devil. God is not malicious, but loving. It was not God who tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. It was not God who created the challenges and temptations Job faced.

James argues, *"My dear brothers and sisters, don't let anyone fool you. Every good and perfect gift is from God. This kind of gift comes down from the Father who created the heavenly lights. These lights create shadows that move. But the Father does not change like these shadows. God chose to give us new birth through the message of truth. He wants us to be the first harvest of his new creation"* (James 1:16-18). God gives us good things, not temptations. In the Genesis story, the refrain is that God created things ... good. James is encouraging us to be thankful – for the good things that come from God. So often we become focused on the temptations and the bad things, that don't.

Temptations happen. James teaches us some wisdom:

1. The temptation comes
2. You think about it
3. You choose to do it
4. You do it
5. The guilt/death comes

There's always that progression. In the end, there is always the guilt/death. Something within us dies. We lose our joy. We lose our peace. We lose our clear consciences. We lose our innocence. Ripple effects of sin spread beyond us: our relationships suffer, too.

How can the temptation stop? It's always a choice to proceed to the next level. And it's always easiest to stop at stage 1. The wise person knows that. You will be tempted. Be wise: recognize the temptation when it comes, and immediately choose not to entertain it!

5. An Example ... Wise Wealth

"Here's what believers who are in low positions in life should be proud of. They should be proud that God has given them a high position in the kingdom. But rich people should take pride in their low positions. That's because they will fade away like wild flowers. The sun rises. Its burning heat dries up the plants. Their blossoms fall. Their beauty is destroyed. In the same way, rich people will fade away. They fade away even as they go about their business" (1:9-11). We are tempted to strive to get richer and richer.

One of James' themes is that poor people **can** recognize their complete dependence on God (true wisdom). This is not a given. Even a poor person has to choose to put his faith in God. James' point, as a very poor person,³ is that a poor person (with no prospect of being rich, in that culture) may not have as big a temptation to put their trust in what he has as a wealthy person. But he still needs to be wise and trust Jesus.

In contrast, rich people – and the rich people in James' world were **very** rich – **can** choose to put their confidence in their wealth. This is a temptation, not a given. A wise rich man recognizes he is tempted to trust in his wealth. In global terms, we are all rich. We all walk a difficult road, struggling continually against the pull of our possessions, and the pressure to accumulate more and more. Those "things" wither and fade all too quickly. We cannot take them with us. In the end they don't matter. Significantly, Jesus talked about money four times as often as he spoke about faith or prayer: *"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (Mark 10:25).

You will face all kinds of trouble, but God will give all the wisdom and strength you need ...

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³ The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were very poor (Galatians 2:10, Romans 15:26, Acts 11:28-30)