4-14-24

James 1:1-8

James, the half-brother of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, has written this letter as instruction and encouragement, to the many Christian Jews who have been forced to leave Jerusalem and Judah due to persecution. By the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, he is also writing to us. Keep in mind that James is writing to Christians; and only Christians will be able to do the things he tells us because we have the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Because of sin, all people’s hearts seek evil and are desperately sick; no matter how good they appear. None of us can be pleasing to God; none of our works are acceptable to Him. And the Bible makes it clear that no one is able to change their own heart. But part of the Good News we learn from the Bible is what we read in Matthew 19:26, ‘*And looking at them Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*’

Over and again we learn that the way God changes the hearts of His people is through trial. And that is why James admonishes us to rejoice when we experience difficulties; be they persecution or simply hardships. Having joy, or rejoicing, in hardship is not a normal human reaction; and here is where the Christian has a tremendous advantage over the nonbeliever. The nonbeliever will see no rhyme or reason to suffering. They will consider it of no value and to be alleviated or avoided. In fact, that is one of the frequent arguments of the nonbeliever: How could a loving God allow suffering?

Of course, our short answer to that is that is the way God can bring people to Himself, and it is the way He purifies the faith of those who are His. Suffering is a reality; it is a consequence of sin and evil in the world; so we are truly blessed that God can and will use it for ultimate good. Unfortunately, many will not understand our point because, as we are told in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*” And that is also why we are to simply share the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is the One who will bring them to the point where they can accept Jesus.

Part of sharing the Gospel is living it. When you have joy during times of trial, people may want to know why. Have your answer ready; we are told “*be ready in season and out of season*”. And we must do our best to be ready at all times and live the Gospel at all times because you never know when God plans to use you to bring someone else into the Kingdom of Christ. As Christians, we know our eternity is secure; if it takes our suffering to bring another to Christ, so be it. That’s not challenging God; that’s a statement of our willingness to serve.

Don’t forget that we are not to seek suffering. Trouble enough will come. But as the people of God, He will allow our suffering in accordance with His plan. Recall all the stories of the Bible where someone tried to “help” God with His plans: it doesn’t work; we mess it up.

James refers to the *testing* of our faith. Testing comes from God; temptation does not and James makes that clear a little later on. A big difference is that testing is meant for your benefit; temptation is meant for your harm. We tend to think of testing as being a way to see if faith is there, or possibly how strong it is. But the nuance here is “purifying”. God tests us to purify our faith. The Bible compares this to purifying gold and silver. These are precious metals that are purified by exposing them to intense heat. The impurities separate and float to the surface. We are precious to God and He purifies us.

When we go through trials it has an effect on us: it produces endurance or perseverance. Perseverance is so important. As James tells us later in verse 12: *Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.* In other words we must persevere in our Christian walk in order to reach the Kingdom. On the other hand, if we have truly accepted Christ as our Saviour, we will persevere because He will bring us through our trials. Perseverance then becomes a testimony to our true faith in Jesus.

The Lord brings or allows the trials, but again, we have our part to do. In verse 4 we are told to “let” or “allow” endurance have its perfect result. If your translation doesn’t have those words, it is at least implied. We are to endure trials in the proper way. And that is with faith in God. We believe that God will work our good through this suffering. Now, if that’s what we believe, then that is how we must act. We rejoice in God and His goodness and look to Him to bring us through the hardship.

The result of all this is that we become “*perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*.” Some translations say “mature” instead of “perfect” and that gets close to the idea, but it’s not quite strong enough. We can become mature Christians in this lifetime. A mature Christian is one who can wrestle with the deeper things of the Bible and has been through trials. Although they know a lot, they realize that they still have a long way to go.

But the goal James sets for us is perfection; we are to be complete. Jesus Himself tells us in Matthew 5:48, “*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.” God requires absolute moral perfection in order to be in His presence; which is why we are currently covered in the righteousness of Christ: our own righteousness is not yet perfect. Jesus and James both know that we are not going to achieve moral perfection in this lifetime. But that is what we are to strive for; that is what we know trials are bringing us toward.

Being faced with an impossible task should reenforce to us that we need Jesus. And with that is good news: even now, we are children of God. The goal that we work toward and can’t achieve will come to pass because it is up to God not us. Paul tells us in Philippians 1:6, “*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus*.” And when will perfection take place? 1 John 3:2, “*Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.*”

The day will come when we stand before Jesus and at that moment we will be perfected entirely. Whatever is lacking from our work on earth will be completed. Just be sure that you are at work on your perfection when the Master calls for you.

Navigating life calls for wisdom. There is a wisdom of the world and it is common among those who are successful by the world’s standards. But it is an undesirable wisdom. James talks about it later and he even calls it “demonic”. The wisdom we need as Christians is wisdom given by God. It is the type of wisdom that God has and it works according to His purposes.

James tells us that if we lack wisdom, we should ask for it. None of us have enough wisdom, so we should all be asking for it. God will not frown upon us when we ask, He will not tell us that we have enough already or scold us for not already having it. Our heavenly Father will give us all we need and will be happy to do it. Why is He happy to give wisdom to us when we ask? It’s because He wants us to have wisdom, so when we ask, we are praying according to His will.

There is a catch: we must ask in faith without any doubting. If we stop and think about those words for a moment we realize that there is a problem: even on our best days we are guilty of doubt. When we consider our faith we know we have never commanded a mountain to be uprooted and planted in the sea. If we have tried it, we know the mountain is still there. So what does James mean here?

The answer comes in the next couple verses, ending with the reference to the double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways. The word “double-minded” translates what would literally be “double-souled”. This person is acting as two different people at once. Instead of having both feet planted firmly in the Kingdom of heaven, he is trying to have one foot there and one in the world.

This person may ask for the wisdom of God, but he wants to use it for worldly pursuits. So actually, he wants worldly wisdom. That’s not to say that he isn’t attracted by what God offers in Jesus Christ; but he’s not willing to put all his eggs in that basket. See, he has enough doubt about the promises of God that still wants to get all he can out of this world just in case that’s all there is.

There is a serious problem with trying to hold to two conflicting lines of thought at the same time: it doesn’t work. That’s why James says the double-minded man is unstable. Not only that, but unstable in everything because it spreads to all areas of life. What Jesus says in Matthew 6:24 applies here: “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*” Jesus is specifically talking about money here, which is usually where the double-minded man is divided. But even in general, you can’t have two competing views at the same time.

And when it comes right down to it, being double-minded is holding something else to the same level as God. And that is idolatry. The Bible is very clear that God does not tolerate idolatry; so an idolater should not expect that he will receive anything from the Lord.

So, even though sometimes doubts creep in, even though our faith is no where near where we would like it to be, James isn’t talking about those of us who are sold out to Christ. Our good Father know that we are but dust and He knows the hearts that have been turned to Jesus. He is not sitting in heaven scowling at us every time we doubt or lack faith. He is encouraging us; He is lifting us up; He wants us to come closer to Him so He will do what is necessary to bring us to Him. When we ask for wisdom, He will give it to us.

Another good thing is that He will give it to us in measure; He will provide it when needed. Sometimes we may feel as if when we ask, that God will just bestow great wisdom upon us. But it doesn’t work that way. He provides it when we need it; but then He doesn’t take it away either. So there is an accumulation that take place over a lifetime. In this way, we also learn how to handle wisdom.

I think of king Solomon. When he asked for wisdom God bestowed wisdom on him all at once. No one has ever been wiser except Jesus. But look what happened to Solomon; even with all that wisdom, he turned from the LORD. I believe that he really didn’t know how to handle all that wisdom at once and he became proud. It is ironic that Solomon wrote in Proverbs 16:18, “*Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before stumbling.*” When we read to the end of Eccleasties it appears that Solomon finally learned his lesson and turned back to the LORD. How much more pleasant for us if we gain slowly and are spared the fall. Our God is good.

Remember James’ goal throughout this letter, and that is for his readers to develop a spiritual wholeness. Learning from our trials and rejoicing in what God is doing in them; and seeking godly wisdom from our all-wise God are just the beginning of coming to this wholeness. We have our whole lives to go through this sanctification process and God will work in us perfectly.

Prayer

Merciful Lord, it seems that there is no lack of trials and temptations in this world, in this life. In fact, it seems as if both are increasing. But You warn of this in Your word. So this should be no surprise to us. But we confess, sometimes it is. Help us to be more prepared; keep Your warning forefront in our minds; not that we lose hope, but that we more quickly look to You for strength and comfort.

The trials are difficult, Lord. But thank You that they will strengthen us; thank You that they will purify our faith. With purer faith we will be able to do a better job of reflecting the light of Christ in this sin-darkened world. Keep us prepared to always have an answer to those who ask about our faith; for those who wonder that we can rejoice in trouble; and may these things be used by You to increase the Kingdom of Christ.

Lord we also know that the strengthening of our faith helps us to turn from temptation. Temptation comes to us regularly and we need to be ready; ready in Jesus. We ask for wisdom when dealing with temptation; wisdom so that we know when to stand and resist, and when to run. Help us Lord to be pleasing to You; help us to be more like Jesus.

For it is in His glorious name we pray

Amen