James 1:1-18 *A Faith That Works: Trials and Temptations*

***The “Proverbs” of the New Testament***Today we are going to begin a new series of sermons on the book of James. I am planning a six-week series. James is a five-chapter book. So we are going to move through it rather quickly. I hope to go verse by verse; but because of how rapidly we are going to be moving, some verses will get more attention than others.

Let’s jump right in. First verse. **James 1:1:**

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

This is the salutation of the letter. Like other New Testament letters, the first thing we are told is who the letter is from. I always imagine these letters being written on scrolls; and it is hard to read the bottom of a scroll without unrolling the whole thing, so the sender’s name gets listed right at the top.

This letter is from James. It is most likely that this James is the half-brother of Jesus. That alone makes this a very interesting letter.

Jesus’ birth, of course, was miraculous. He was born to a virgin. But after he was born, Mary and Joseph went on to have other children. These siblings of Jesus get mentioned from time to time throughout the gospel story. But the thing is, whenever Jesus’ siblings appear, they are skeptical about Jesus. (That’s probably not too hard to believe, if you grew up with siblings, imagine how difficult it would have been for one of them to convince you that they were the Son of God.) For the most part, they appear to be embarrassed by Jesus, and quietly try to get him out of the public eye.

But at some point, that changed for James. At some point, he became convince that Jesus really was the Messiah. We don’t have the story of what exactly happened, but Paul gives us a clue in 1 Corinthians 15 when he specifically mentions James as somebody Jesus appeared to after the resurrection. (Again, that makes sense. If one of your siblings died a very public and violent death, and then a few days later showed up and started talking with you, eating with you, telling stories about old family trips, etc. that would change the way you thought about that sibling.)

Look, then, at the way James describes himself: “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” He doesn’t lean into the whole “Jesus is my big brother” thing; but describes himself as a servant. A slave. He is saying that he is proud to belong, body and soul, to Jesus.

We know that James became a leader in the early church. He shows up in the book of Acts as the main guy in the Jerusalem church. He’s not an apostle, but he is a part of the so-called Jerusalem council and he has a number of important interactions with Peter and Paul. The fact that he addresses this letter “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” points to the idea that he is the pastor of the church in Jerusalem writing this letter to those early Jewish believers who have been forced to leave the city because of persecution. Scholars believe that this letter may be one of the earliest writings in the New Testament, dating it just over a decade after the resurrection.

James’s letter, then, is filled with practical advice about living for Christ. It is encouragement to keep growing in Christ despite the difficulties presented by being scattered all over the map.

The title I chose for this series is: **“A Faith that Works.”** The symbol we chose for this series are these clocks. And the point is not so much on the passing of time—though there is a passage later in the book about making plans—but rather, the workings of a clock. The thing about clocks is the way all the gears and sprockets work together to keep time. (Most of these clocks belong to my father-in-law, who repairs them. I don’t think he would be impressed by my description of “gears and sprockets”).

The idea is that we want that symbol of precision and cooperation to represent the way James looks at our faith. For James, being a Christian is not a one-time decision you made at a rally some years back; it is an ongoing lifestyle that you keep working at. Doing and working are key words in this book. I heard somebody describe James this week as the “Proverbs of the New Testament.” That’s a pretty good description. Not because it is filled with pithy statements; but because it is full of practical advice on how to live for Jesus. We can call it “practical holiness.”

Let’s get going with chapter 1 then. The first 18 verse are about two closely related things: trials. And temptations. (There’s a song on Christian radio by Matt Maher called “What a Friend We have in Jesus” and the first line is “we all have trials and temptations.” That’s the song that played as the soundtrack for me while I worked on this sermon. We all have trials and temptations.)

James starts with practical advice for dealing with trials and temptations. And for both, he gives us four steps. That’s our outline for today: four steps for dealing with trials, followed by four steps for dealing with temptations.

***Trials***First, trials. And the first step for dealing with trials is: we have to **Recognize what is going on. James 1:2-3:**

**2**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3**because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

First thing we need to talk about is the difference between trials and temptations. If you have your Bible open, you can glance down to verse 13, where James starts talking about temptation. Oddly enough, in the original language it’s the same word. But context shows us that James is talking about two different things.

I’ll put it like this: trials are circumstances in our life that challenge our faith. Frequently, trials are not our own doing. They are the result of things happening around us: whether the actions of others or just the consequence of living in a fallen world. Temptations, on the other hand, do come from within us.

Another thing, as verse 13 makes clear, is that temptations do not come from God. Trials often do. Often, it is God who sends trials our way.

That might not sound too great at first. You might think: why would a loving God make me go through trials. If you are undergoing a trial right now—and chances are good that you are—you might be questioning why God would let that happen. But verse 3 tells us: “the testing of your faith develops perseverance.”

John Piper writes:

Strange as it may seem, one of the primary purposes of being shaken by suffering is to make our faith more unshakable.

Faith is like muscle tissue: if you stress it to the limit, it gets stronger, not weaker. That’s what James means here. When your faith is threatened and tested and stretched to the breaking point, the result is greater capacity to endure. (*Future Grace*, p. 347)

That’s perseverance.

And that’s what I mean when I say we need to recognize what’s going on. As you encounter trials—and you will, James says “when” not “if”—you need to see that there is a purpose behind it. You might think of it as the school of faith. Or God’s training room.

Thomas Watson, 17th the century puritan pastor wrote, “Affliction works as our preacher and tutor. Sometimes a sickbed can teach us more than a sermon. Affliction is often the medicine that God uses to carry off our spiritual diseases.”

So, step two, and here’s where it gets even harder: we need to **Embrace God’s growth process.** As you realize that God is sending this trial your way to grow your faith, you need to find a way to participate in that process. **Verse 2 again:**

**2**Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

When was the last time you were joyful that you got to face a trial? This is a hard word. I don’t think it means you need to be happy about the trial. It’s not like: “Oh boy, I have cancer! I’m so privileged!” It’s not like we are supposed to give thanks to God for stress in our family; or challenges at work.

But as we see the need to rely more on God; as we see our faith muscles grow; as we lean more and more into God; there can be joy even in the midst of trial.

Of course, we need to do those things. Instead of running from the trial, we need to lean into God. Instead feeling sorry for ourselves, we need exercise our faith. **Verse 4:**

**4**Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Perseverance is an active thing. It is an intentional thing. William Barclay, who wrote a dictionary of Bible words, says that perseverance is not the patience that passively endures; instead it is the quality that enables a man to stand on his feet facing the storm. (cited by Burdick, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 168). Engaging in God’s school of faith is the path to maturity.

I heard a story that may apply here. A successful man was once asked the secret of his success. He said: “Two words: ‘good decisions.’” Well, the questioner said, how do you make good decisions? “One word: “experience.’” A little exasperated, the questioner said: How do you get experience? “Two words: ‘bad decisions.’’ I think the point is that we learn in the midst of the trials. The challenges which force us to God are the places where we grow the most.

Third step, **Ask for God’s wisdom.** If trials and tests are really going to have God’s intended purpose in our live, we need to ask God to help us see it. **Verse 5:**

**5**If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

There is no doubt that trials are one of the best ways to jumpstart our prayer lives. We might go months without saying a serious pray; and then we get knocked backwards by some trauma and we find ourselves driven to our knees. Like the little boy, who was asked why he said his prayers at night, said: “I’m not scared in the daytime.”

But the thing to notice here is that James is calling us to say the right kind of prayers. More than just praying “God, get me out of here”--which is appropriate—James says we should also pray “God, what do you want me to learn?”

This is a different way of thinking. I’ll admit it is not my first thought when I am facing trial. But if God’s purposes in our testing are to be fulfilled, we need to ask for the wisdom to see how these trials are pushing us to Him. “Lord, get me out of here; but also, Lord, teach me along the way.”

And the good news is that God is generous. He wants to grant those kinds of requests. He wants to see us grow and mature. John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, had this little poem about prayer:

Thou art coming to a King.
Large petitions with thee bring,
for His grace and power are such,
none can ever ask too much.

Which leads to the fourth step for dealing with trials: **Maintain faith.** If trials are given to us to strengthen our faith, then it is important that we are singularly focused on God. **Verses 6-8**:

**6**But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. **7**That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. **8**Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

The word for “doubt” here refers to a person who wants to rely on God AND on someone or something else. It refers to an individual who seeks God’s will but wants to do her own will at the same time. It’s like someone who prays to God and then checks the horoscope.

James says that such a person is double-minded and unstable. I get the picture of a man with one foot on a boat that is leaving the dock and the other foot on the dock. A swim is inevitable.

And it is also inevitable that we will miss the maturity lessons God wants us to grasp if we don’t put our complete trust in Him during tough times.

Now, I don’t have time to get into **verses 9-11**—they are a preview of a theme, wealth, that James touches on a couple of more times in the book—but they also give an example of two types of trials:

**9**Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. **10**But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. **11**For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

One trial—one that makes sense to us—is being in humble circumstances. Poverty can be a real test of faith. The other trial isn’t as obviously a trial--but James says it is—is wealth. Being rich can also be a test of faith. We’ll talk more about this when we get to chapter 5.

But James ends the discussion of trials with **verse 12:**

**12**Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

If we persevere under trial—if we lean into God and exercise our faith—then we are blessed. We receive the crown of life. Obviously, that refers to the prize at the end of this life, when we get to heaven. But, more than that, I think James is saying we experience blessing right now. He’s saying that a “crowned” life is the result of enduring tough times.

Someone once said, “The pay for being a Christian is not much but the retirement plan is out of this world.” But I would challenge that. The retirement plan is wonderful, but the Christian life is not just about putting your joy on layaway. By enduring--by keeping faithful to Jesus no matter what comes, we gain true happiness--we experience life in its deepest and fullest sense. We really can count it all joy.

***Temptations***Those are James’s instructions for enduring trials. Now he turns to **temptations.** As I said earlier, the word in Greek is the same word. Clearly trials and temptations are similar. Both can lead us either closer or farther from God. But a temptation is a different kind of trial.

As with trials, we’ll break James’s advice into four steps.

First, we must, again, **recognize what is going on.** We need to recognize the difference between a trial and a temptation. **Verses 13 and 14:**

**13**When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; **14**but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

The main difference between trials and temptations, according to James, is that God provides trials; God does not provide temptations.

Temptations, when indulged, lead to sin. That’s what temptation is. It is not sin itself, but it is something meant to induce us to sin. Dragged away. Enticed. Both those words come from the world of hunting and fishing. In the original language, the word translated as “dragged away” would have been the same word for baiting a trap. The word for “enticed” would have been the word you used for a fishing lure. The idea is that temptation is something that looks good and appealing that hides a hidden danger. You see the juicy worm, you miss the deadly hook.

Well temptation is like this because it always carries with it some bait that appeals to our natural desires. And the “bait” not only attracts us, but it also hides the fact that yielding to the desire will eventually bring pain.

And the point here is: that doesn’t come from God. God is not in the business of enticing us into sin. God may arrange trials in your life, He never arranges temptation. He is never the source of evil.

And, though James doesn’t say it, neither is the devil. It would be wrong to think of Satan out there setting traps and baiting hooks. The devil is not the source of our sin. Not primarily, anyway. Instead, James says, it springs from us.

When we yield to temptation, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Satan might push temptation. God might allow it. Circumstances may make temptation more appealing. But sin happens when a person is “dragged away by their own evil desire,.”

So, if you and I want to look for someone to blame, all we need to do is look in the mirror. We are responsible. The problem with temptation lies in the nature of humanity, not the nature of God.

Second, we need to **Understand the process of sin.** What make temptation so bad? **Verse 15** gives what I think of as an autopsy for sin:

**15**Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

James gives a brief life cycle of sin. First, desire. That’s the temptation, the baited hook. Some thing or thought gets lodged in our minds and we start to fantasize about how much better it things would be if we acted on it. It’s the “grass is greener” mentality. Sometimes it happens in an instant: we see the unattended candy bar, we think about how sweet it would be, we notice nobody is looking, so we grab it. Sometimes, it is the result of long contemplation, like an affair. The desire itself is not necessarily bad—hunger or desire for relationship—but the means of fulfilling it is illicit.

Which leads to the sin itself. James compares it to childbirth. When we give temptation too much head space, sin is born. We act on those illicit desires. We do what we know is wrong.

Which leads then, inevitably, to death. Eventually sin grows up and then it brings consequences. Obviously, death is the big consequence. The penalty that God warned Adam and Eve about and has been a permanent result of the Fall. But I think James may have in mind other kinds of death as well. Even when our sin is forgiven and cancelled by Jesus, that doesn’t mean we escape all the natural consequences of our sin. There might be financial death. Relationship death. Maybe death to our reputation. And so on.

In fact, as we seek to understand the process of sin I think this is something we need to think more seriously about: sin leads to death. I heard a preacher say we need to “amplify the consequences of sin.” If there is some temptation that has been working on you; some fantasy where you keep telling yourself “my life would be so much better if I did this…” Maybe what you need to do is challenge that idea. Maybe you need to make a list of all the repercussions that would come your way if you indulged that fantasy. Maybe you need to remember all the ways sin kills.

Which leads to the third step: we need to **Magnify God’s Goodness.** One of the best ways to resist the allure of temptation is to focus on the greater treasure we have in God. **Verses 16 and 17:**

**16**Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. **17**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

“Don’t be deceived.” On the one hand, James is still talking about the idea that God might be the source of temptation. Don’t buy it. God sends things for our good, not our bad. But on the other hand, he is saying don’t take the bait, don’t be fooled by sin’s false promises. Instead, remember that God is the source of good and perfect gifts. Remember that God is the Father of heavenly lights. Remember that His storehouse is full and He is generous.

More than that, God is constant. He is reliable. Referring to God, an old country preacher put it like this: “Sometimes I trembles on the Rock, but the Rock never trembles under me.”

Stocks go up and stocks go down. Sometimes friends come through for us, sometimes they disappoint. But James says God is utterly dependable. There is no variation or shifting shadow in Him.

Which leads me to the final step. And really, this is the key to resisting temptation as well as enduring trial. We need to: **Fall in love with the one who loves you.**

**James 1:18** is a wonderful verse that, frankly, I was introduced to this week. I’m sure I’ve read it many times before, but it never snagged in my brain the way it did this week. After urging us to persevere in trials and resist temptation, here’s the end of the matter for James:

**18**He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created**.**

Clearly, this is a reference to Jesus’ saving work in our lives. One of the features of the book of James is that it doesn’t give much theology. In Paul’s letters, for example, the first half is usually theology. This is what Jesus did for us. This is what we believe. Then the back half of Paul’s letters is application.

James is different, he just jumps in with the practical stuff. He doesn’t spend much time on doctrine.

But here, James is reminding us of what we believe. He’s bringing it back to what Jesus has done.

Jesus chose us. He chose us to be born again by His word of truth. As much as James wants us to work, to be active in persevering and resisting temptation, he does not lose sight of the fact that Jesus has already done the most important work. Our salvation is by grace. It was finished at the cross.

And look at why Jesus did that: so that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. That’s kind of awkward in English. We don’t really talk like this. But firstfruits are a way of expressing the “cream of the crop.” The best parts of the harvest. The New Living Translation renders this verse in a way that makes it **resonate a bit more:**

**18**He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

We become His prized possession. That’s what Jesus has done for us. That’s how Jesus thinks of us. We are His prize. Like I said last Sunday in our Easter Sermon: Jesus looks at us and He is satisfied. He’s glad.

Jesus is madly in love with you.

So how do we hang in there with God in the midst of trial? How do we stand up in the face of temptation? By loving the one who loves us so much. We say no to sin as we say Yes to Jesus.