



James: Real Faith – Real Life Week 1/9: Real Faith... is Tested

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect *How could you model humility on your frontlines this week?*

Warm-Up

1. Amongst the most mature Christians that you know, do you know if they have experienced and persevered through suffering?
2. What are the ways in which trials tend to make us either *bitter* or *better*? What is it dependent on?

Read James 1:1-4

3. What do you know about the letter of James? Who is James? To whom does he write?
4. What is significant about James' transition from *unbeliever* to being a *devoted Christian, significant church leader* (in Jerusalem and beyond), and – eventually – *martyr*?
5. What were the trials that were being faced by the recipients of the letters? What are the types of trials that we are likely to experience today?
6. Is James saying that the bad things aren't really that bad? How is our response to trials what matters?
7. Is the presence of trials a failure of faith? How can we hold grief and gratitude together?
8. How can our response to trials actually be an opportunity to grow in Christian maturity?
9. Can you think of any examples in your own life in which *the way that you have responded* to difficult circumstances has actually caused you to grow in Christian maturity?

Read James 1:5-8

10. According to James, what is the power that enables us to face trouble?
11. Who is the *source* of wisdom? What are the alternative sources that we sometimes run to?
12. On what basis can we have security of receiving wisdom? How should this cause us to act?
13. What is meant by believing and not doubting? Why can we not be 'double-minded'?
14. How has community helped you to respond to trials with godly wisdom? How could it?
15. Have you ever asked for wisdom? Is there a challenge right now in which you need God's wisdom?

Apply *What is one area of challenge that you need to seek God's wisdom?*

Pray *Gracious God, please help us – in the face of trials - to respond with a wisdom that comes from you. Please, would you be at work in your gentleness and mercy shaping us in your likeness, even amidst and through the suffering that we experience. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*



GOING DEEPER

James: Real Faith – Real Life Week 1/9: Real Faith... is Tested

Small Group Discussion Questions

On Your Front Line this Week

This is the best invitation window to invite someone along to the Public Lecture on Friday 29 July. Who are you going to personally invite this week?

For Families

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- *LISTEN:* “Joy in Trials” by Mike Paget:
<https://www.barneys.org.au/talks/joys-in-trials/>
- *LISTEN:* “Real Faith is Tested” by Paul Clarke:
<https://www.st-helens.org.uk/resources/talk/53186/>
- *READ:* “The Gift of Suffering, Stress, and Opposition” by Dr Wei-Han Kuan:
<https://www.leadership.ridley.edu.au/resource/the-gift-of-stress-suffering-and-opposition>

SERIES Resources

- *Series Overview* Booklet (and Audiobook): www.stbarts.com.au/james
- *Sermon Series:* Sermon and weekly small group resources: available at www.stbarts.com.au/james
- *Commentary:* James: The Wisdom of the Brother of Jesus (by John Dickson):
<https://bit.ly/3uSZtFo>
- *Course:* Introduction to James:
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/course/james-introduction/>
- *Video:* Bible Project Overview of James:
<https://vimeo.com/195667399>

Week 1/9 (James: Real Faith – Real Life): 17/07/2022

“Real Faith... is Tested” by the Rev’d Adam Lowe

Bible Passage: James 1:1-8

When people heard *that this term we would be exploring the letter of James*, many were excited,

- Probably for a variety of reasons.

*The letter is **short...** so that’s a plus;*

*The letter is **punchy...** full of direction... in only 108 verses there are 54 commands;*

*The letter is **practical...** even though 2000 years separate us and James, *it resonates, readily speaking into the challenges of what it looks like to follow Jesus faithfully today. And the final reason people might be excited is because the letter is written by one of Jesus’ own brothers.**

*It’s short, punchy, practical, and carries **authority**.*

- And whilst some might think that a letter written by a brother of Jesus is not a cause of **confidence** but **concern**, setting off some sort of bias, *conflict-of-interest alarm in your head, of course Jesus’ family and brother is going to be a fanboy,* it turns out that sometimes your family aren’t going to be your biggest fans.
- Not least when you’re making extraordinary claims about yourself, *like, you’re the long-awaited King and – in fact – God himself.*

When my only brother – 2.5 years younger than me – when we were at high school together, one of the things that he most disliked was when he was mistaken for me. In fact he developed a strategy, that whenever a teacher called him by my name instead of his own, he simply wouldn’t respond even if they kept prompting over-and-over again. And that’s fair enough: because he’s not me, he’s got a name, we’re not the same person.

- Yet, *as James opens the letter, he locates - he pins - his entire identity to Jesus.*

Look at Verse 1... James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. (1:1)

- *James doesn't pull the "I'm Jesus' brother card" so listen to me!* No, I'm a servant of the Lord JC. // Here is James, *who grew up a good monotheistic Jew, saying: to serve God with full devotion, is to serve Jesus with your whole life, because he is the Christ, he is the Lord, God himself.*
- But it wasn't always that way. / Before Jesus' crucifixion, during his three years of ministry, his family were completely dubious of his claims.
- We're told in Mark 3 Jesus' family thought he was "out of his mind", We learn in John 7 that Jesus' own brothers did not follow him... For Jesus to be crucified, would have brought incredible shame on his family.
- Yet now, as James writes, as the key leader in the Jewish Christian Church in Jerusalem, writing to the Jewish Christians scattered and living further afield, *he not only thinks that Jesus is both the long-awaited King and God himself, but he goes on to be martyred for upholding these claims to his death.*
- How did James go from: **PAST sceptical sibling** before the crucifixion, to **PRESENT pillar of the church** proclaiming the good news to his *own* death?
- Because James was convinced when he encountered the risen Lord Jesus.
- *Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3...*

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 **Then he appeared to James**, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me...

- After that encounter, James sets about working through the implications of *Jesus' teaching, death and resurrection*, with the desire, that every Christian would get real with their faith, that the news that Jesus is the risen Lord and King, would transform our day-to-day.
- That's James' focus: that Christians would have a *living, visible, and fruitful* faith.
- That's what we're exploring in this series. // Real Faith and Real Life.

And James begins by diving right in, showing us that how we face trials, *the tough stuff of life*, will be one of the most significant determining factors on how we bear fruit for Jesus.

- So in the wisdom of James, he says: that in the face of trials, *we should:*
Consider it Joy; and
Ask for Wisdom.

CONSIDER IT JOY | VERSES 2-4

기쁨으로 여기십시오 | Ne nyiny nyic we ye ke them de gamduon ye guom de piath de piou bei

First, *in the face of trials*, we should **consider it joy**.

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

We don't know the precise nature of the trials of those to whom James writes, but there's a few clues littered throughout the letter, likely they were facing trials of: *religious persecution, poverty, and legal challenges*.

- Many are scattered from Jerusalem because *it was dangerous to be a Jewish Christian there*. In fact, those scattered likely included the likes of those who – we're told about in Acts – whom people like Saul (before his conversion and name change to Paul), chased down even following them from Jerusalem to Damascus in order to lock them up.
 - But regardless of whatever the circumstances were, James' point is not that if you face trials or if you encounter particular types of trials, but whenever you face trials *of many kinds* consider it joy.
 - Note the assumption is that as a Christian you will face trials.
-
- Therefore, vital for me to say: Facing trials is not a failure of your faith. It's normative. //
 - It's a bogus type of Christianity that claims Christians face no difficulties. It's just not true.
 - Perhaps you've just come through trial, or you're in the grip of trial now. James likely has in mind BOTH *normal everyday trials living in a broken world, but also persecution for believing. Right now, there are people in our community who are facing incredible pressure in their workplace, significant challenges as parents, grief for loved ones who have died, longings unfulfilled, financial pressure, unemployment, criticism for following Jesus from their closest.*
 - And if you're not currently in the grip of trial, or haven't experienced much, it is inevitable. So, surely, in loving care, it seems terrible to say, "well consider it PURE joy"? //
 - Isn't that painfully insensitive? Isn't that horribly invalidating of people's pain?
 - I want to say: no. James isn't dismissing the seriousness of our struggles, not at all. He's saying that the way that we face trouble needs not be without benefit. //
 - In other parts of the Bible, we're wonderfully reassured that even amidst challenge, we can delight in God's faithfulness, we can be comforted in God's presence, we can look forward to that day when every tear is wiped away, but here, James is saying, that we can rest in an attitude of joy, by trusting that God can even use our suffering to refine our faith and grow our maturity.

Trying to live trouble free, or just make it through, is not the endpoint!

- The reason why the way we face trouble is one of the most significant determining factor of Christian maturity, is because our response is likely to make us bitter or better. It's...
- **Not a testing** to see if you have real faith, **Not a testing** to see if you are acceptable, But a testing, a refining, of the faith that already exists. //
- Like gold being refined in the fire. // God never wastes the pain of his people. //

When James says, *so that we may be mature and complete*, we can easily think that it means scoring 10/10, of being perfect, blameless, or sinless... but it means that we'd be growing in our maturity in the Lord Jesus, developing the fruit that God loves to see alive in his children.

- That instead of harbouring resentment or letting bitterness take control, *that there would be a crop of love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, gentleness, and self-control.*
- Like a muscle that is getting stronger when it's put under pressure. //
- We all have known Christians like that.

When I think about some of the most inspiring past and present saints in our community, and reflect for a moment of how they got there, it doesn't take long to realise that it wasn't because *they were born that way, woke up one day like that, or graduated with a special gift*, no - can almost guarantee that behind the face of every mature Christian is trial.

Jonathan Wei-Han Kuan , *Australian Director of the CMS*, in an article on the gift of stress, suffering, and opposition observed in his own life, *that I'm always more prayerful when I have the megaphone of pain in my ear...*

- I find that such an uncomfortable truth. How I wish that my faith grew in comfort!
 - It's tempting to desire a trouble-free life over costly transformation for God. //
 - That of course doesn't mean that those struggles are good.
It doesn't mean we need to rush out to be pain seekers - of course not.
But when trials come - as they inevitably do - we can respond differently.
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A few weeks ago I read of a family who - after longing for a child for a very long time - when their first baby was born at 25 weeks, they lived almost moment-to-moment with a sense at times of things spiralling out of control. They said that each brought fresh hope - yes - but also new obstacles. Yet remarkably amidst the tumult, when they were giving an update on an online carepage they had setup, they said.. "All of this brings loads of new fears and anxieties to us. Be we trust in God's faithfulness and mercy. There is fear but we cling to hope". That's how they chose to respond.

- Persevering doesn't mean we ignore, diminish, or try to spin bad things as good.
- It means we can in fact hold grief and gratitude together and not be crushed.
- That whenever trials come, whatever form that they take:
that our response wouldn't be to run from God and lose hope,
but persevere with joy, confident they are not the end,
and delighting that God can even use the difficult things to grow us in him.

ASK FOR WISDOM | VERSES 5-8

지혜를 구하세요 | Na ye ran dak ne nyic ne week ke ne ye Nhiali lim

And if that seems just too much, the incredible news is that God gives us the power, God offers us the resource to do it: we are to: **Ask for Wisdom**. Verse 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.

James says, if anyone is bamboozled in knowing how to count the tough things as joy, *what you need, more than anything is not positive spin, not denial of the problem, not seven steps, but wisdom!*

- And note – in these verses – JAMES tells us about:
The SOURCE of this wisdom: it is from God;
The SECURITY of this wisdom: God promises to give it; *and*
The WAY in which we are to ask. Let's break them down one-by-one. //
- So first, the **SOURCE** of wisdom is from God.
- Sounds so obvious! But this is entirely counter-cultural.
James is saying that instead of searching for the answer or insight within, you have to look up.

- Of course we do, because wisdom isn't the same as being clever or strong.
but understanding how to live God's way in God's world.
- Therefore if God is the source of wisdom, why would we cut him out of the equation?
Good news: as we wrestle in understanding how to live God's way in God's world,
it's not a riddle to figure out who might be best placed to shed some light!
- We must not cut God out of the equation.
- That would be like being in a shop, not being able to find the things you seek,
but refusing to ask the person who stacked the shelf!
- Why would we do that with God? Possibly, because sometimes we resist depending on him.
- In the face of trials, we can resent that God has allowed it to happen.
In the face of trials, it can seem too scary to recognise our creaturely limits.
- But I want to say to you - it is the most liberating news,
that as we're confronted with the stark reality of how much we cannot change,
it allows us to recognise in our need that there is one in whom we can depend.

Rejoicing, that if you go to God and ask for wisdom: it's **SECURE**, for God promises to give it.

- James is emphatic. When you seek God's wisdom in knowing how to face trial with joy;
God gives generously: he's not stingy with it, he's not rationing it out! It's not scarce!
God gives indiscriminately: *James says without finding fault.*
It will be given to you.

- God is not setting us up for failure.
God is not asking us to do something that he isn't willing to equip us for.
He wants to give us the wisdom we need, even telling us **HOW** we should ask. *Verse 6...*
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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. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

As you hear that, you might think - a-ha - I knew there was a catch.

Didn't James just basically say that there's no screening of applicants, *God gives wisdom to all*, but now - in an apparent contradiction, it seems wisdom IS conditional, somehow dependent on the quality of your asking!

But hear what James is saying here.

- James is not endorsing some sort of 'name it' and 'claim it' approach to wisdom. He's not saying, look - if you want wisdom - you've really got to impress God with your confidence, nor is he saying, look, if you ever have any doubts, then you're not going to get wisdom.
- This is not simply the normal *ups* and *downs* of faith,
but having a split allegiance between in ultimate devotion between God and something else. //
- *A two-way bet. A sort of spiritual hedge.*
- It would be a bit like a player in the decider match of the state of origin running on and saying they're playing on both of the teams.

- Note James says, that these people are double-minded, unstable in ALL they do. //
- They're consistently inconsistent in who they trust.
Of supposedly wanting God's wisdom but going elsewhere to get it.
- That's the image of the wave, just getting blown about.
- not willing to trust in the character of who God is,
not willing to let go of the ways of the world,
not willing to let God interfere with their lives.
- When we have the greatest reason to depend on the one,
who for the joy set before him he endured the cross *for us* (cf. Hebrews 12:2)

About five years ago now, I remember hearing the news that one of our members, Dot, had experienced an incredible tragedy in her family. Dot was approaching 100, she was one of the most phenomenal examples of persevering through trial I had ever met. And as I called her that day - I remember it so vividly - I wondered in the face of the loss, how would she be. I was ready to console and comfort her with the Good News of Jesus, of the goodness of God, and the future that we look forward to. But when she answered the phone, and I asked her how she was, she immediately responded, Adam, I do not understand - in the face of these things - how people cope without knowing the Lord. When you reach my age, you have lost almost everyone whom you love dear, but the Lord cannot be taken away from me. //

She didn't need to deny reality or diminish the pain to know the joy of the Lord.

She just had to keep running and resting in the one who gave her the power to persevere.

That's wisdom. And all we need to do is ask.
