

The Path to Perfection

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[0 : 00] Well, there are a lot of promises in God's Word and this morning we're going to delve into some of them. So open up to James, chapter 1, the book of James. I'm going to pray and then we'll get stuck into James. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, thank you that you give us your Word. Please help us to be good hearers of your Word this morning. Help us have hearts to hear, minds to understand and lives to obey.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So James, chapter 1. We'll read down to verse 18.

However, I'm going to preach up to verse 15. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and that steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

[1 : 17] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that's driven and tossed by the wind.

For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He's a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass. Its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. And let no one say when he's tempted, I'm being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.

But each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it's conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it's fully grown, gives forth death.

[2 : 34] Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Of his own free will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Well, when Jesus was with his disciples, he told them what it meant to be one of his followers.

And he said in Matthew 5, verse 48, Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect. And for many Christians, the book of James is their favourite book, because, well, it seems very practical and tells you how to live.

And it does do that. James is full of commands, full of imperatives, telling us what we should do. And it's possible to think that if I do what James says to do, I will be perfect, I'll be acceptable to God.

And the danger is then that we can read James like a Jew or a Muslim would read James, and agree with everything that we get from the book. And the danger is then that we could preach sermons on James that a rabbi or an imam would be quite capable of preaching as well to their followers.

[4 : 05] To think that we can be perfect without the gospel of Jesus is legalism, and it leads to arrogant moralism, which is far from how God would have us live.

And yet it's rife, right? It's rife within all religions, and many people who would call themselves Christians are also given to this problem.

Perfection's a lofty goal, but who amongst us is perfect? Perfection's a lofty goal. Least of all me. See, ever since sin entered the world in Genesis chapter 3, nothing has been perfect.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It's impossible to be perfect in this world. And yet we're told by James, in James chapter 1 verse 4, let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

So in what way does steadfastness then bring about perfection? And the way to tackle that question is actually to dig into the book of James. Now James, we see James and Jesus' relationship there in verse 1.

[5 : 26] James is a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's actually a slave of God, that's who he is. And a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now a slave's welfare is dependent upon his master, who he belonged to.

If your owner's good and kind, then your welfare will be good. Your life will be okay. If your owner's mean and nasty, then your life will be misery. And those who are a slave of the loving and true God are blessed, for he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve. Because those who are a slave of Jesus Christ are blessed. Because Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many.

To be a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be saved, is to be in the kingdom of God. Now if you're looking in the book of James where the gospel is, you might think you'd be hard pressed to find it.

But in fact, thinking about it this week with the staff team, it's there in the very first verse. It's a very Christian thing to be slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ. The big emphasis in James is that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[6 : 48] And the very first verse talks about him being there. He's the one where to serve and to trust. We see that James is a very Christian book beginning in the first verse. Jesus is clearly written as Lord.

And I don't know about you, but if you've got a big brother, how your big brother treated you. I don't know. I am the big brother in my family, so I'm not quite sure how my little brothers got treated. Well, I do. I get shot in the head with a... once. With a slingshot. He's alive. He's okay. Now, you might be the big brother in your family.

The big brother might have been the king of the backyard, right? And treated you badly. You might have been the big brother in the family. James was most likely the little brother of Jesus.

That's who he is. Same mum, Mary. Same earthly father, Joseph. And yet, James recognises Jesus as Lord and King, Lord and Christ.

[7 : 59] It follows then that those who would teach that Mary was perpetually virgin are in error. And James was one of the pillars of the church in Acts chapter 15. He and Peter were the ones that are the leaders of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

He's the one who, in Acts chapter 15, that they came up with the council and they decide the things of who was in and who was out and where circumcision and all that kind of stuff landed in Acts chapter 15.

They're the leaders of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And he's writing to the 12 tribes in the dispersion. 12, doesn't it, reminds us of the nation of Israel, God's people.

And yet, physically, those tribes were no longer present. I mean, after the Assyrian and the Babylonian exile, the tribes had diminished, wrapped, there's no sort of, they don't exist.

The idea of the 12 tribes is a way of speaking of Christians, those who had become God's people by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, James' big brother. 1 Peter speaks about the people who had been saved by Jesus' sacrificial death as God's chosen people in the dispersion.

[9 : 11] Revelation chapter 7 speaks about God's people as the 12 tribes of Israel. It's the whole people of God. It's a way of speaking of God's saved people that he's called to himself who own Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

That's who he's talking about in the 12 tribes of dispersion. It may be a reference to the Jewish believers who had been scattered, maybe, in Acts chapter 8 after Stephen's persecution.

But there's also a physical dispersion but there's also a spiritual dispersion as well. Another way is a metaphorical dispersion that includes us who are here, living on earth but away from our true heavenly home.

We're not there yet. And then, notice how he speaks to us here in verses 2-4. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and that steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

I don't know about you, I don't know what you think about this, but I think it's something I need to hear.

[10:33] I mean, how do you naturally respond when things are tough and not going the way you like it? complain, moan, groan, sulk and generally resent the experience.

But notice how God would have us receive it. Count it all, regard it intellectually, think of it as joy. Are you crazy, James? Are you crazy, God? When things like that happen to me, I don't feel joyful. Like finding somewhere to live, that's a trial for some.

Like getting a job is a trial for some. It's all kind of difficult. But joy is, well, joy can also be, you know, I've become a Christian, that's a great joy, that's the kind of joy you're talking about, is an emotion.

Like learning that someone's pregnant and they're going to have a kid sometime. Then we feel joyful. But this joy is one we're to have, despite our natural feelings toward it, we're to reckon, to think, to consider it as joy.

[11:54] Why? Well, the only way we can do it is by the eyes of faith. When we've been taught something. A few years ago when things were a bit tough for me, I remember saying to Karen, I don't like this.

I don't want to go through this. This is really hard. I wish God would take it away. And she rightly reminded me of James chapter 1 verses 2 to 4.

Thank you very much. Joy doesn't mean your experience is pleasant and you've got a smile on your face. You can be joyful and feel great anguish and pain at the same time.

You can be joyful with tears in your eyes. Joy is a quality of life. It is an emotion but not just an emotion. Remember Romans chapter 5.

Therefore since we've been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

[12:59] Not only that but we rejoice in our sufferings why? Knowing that suffering produces perseverance perseverance character character hope and hope doesn't disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that's been given to us.

Colossians chapter 1 verse 24 Paul rejoiced in his sufferings for the Colossians. In 1 Peter chapter 1 verse 6 in this you rejoice though now for a little while if necessary you have been grieved by various trials so that the genuineness of your faith more precious than gold though perishing though it's tested by fire may be found to result in praise and honour and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

we know or we should know that trials are good for us that they're good for me because God says that the trial we face produces steadfastness Paul Tripp you've heard me quote this kind of quote before has a phrase that goes like this God would not leave me to places I wouldn't go on my own to produce in me things that I could never do on my own or to do in me things I could never do on my own and one of those places is trials God is sovereignly graciously!

in control bringing about the various trials we face for our good and then knowing that they are for our good we trials to do with being persecuted for followers of the Lord Jesus Christ mocked for possibly being like refugees expelled from their homes in Judea and rich people exploiting them but there will be trials of various kinds come we only need to live long enough and the trials will come there will be trials of doubt did God really say there will be relationship trials it can be difficult to trust God when things just seem not to be working out for us I mean things in his word he says seem really difficult to apply like love your enemy or situations where you want a spouse you don't have one or worse have a spouse not wanting that one there can be financial trials there can be physical trials and sickness trials and trials wouldn't be trials if they weren't difficult there wouldn't be trials if they didn't cause me to question my faith to be put in a this is a strange one right but to be put in a position where we question our faith is a good thing that

God is doing for us do we really believe what we say we believe when push comes to shove is Jesus my Lord do we live with him as my Lord do we trust him with our eternal destiny do we believe heaven and hell are real do we believe that this world is not all there is as I understand it

you don't put muscle on unless it's exercise and exercise is something that stresses your muscles and I've heard it actually breaks bits of muscles which then grow back stronger so it makes you stronger think of steel for a minute or two there's a couple of ways to strengthen steel one way is to work harden it this is the engineer in me coming out by running the block of steel through a set of rollers and squashing it down and pressing it hard and that makes work hard it or the other way is to get a hammer and bang it bang it bang it to get that to work harden as well well the other strengthening technique is to heat it up in a furnace and plunge it into water and that will strength harden it as well bottom line is stressing faith without a furnace or being hammered in some way leads to it being strengthened and so we can stand when the next bashing comes and the reason we count it all joy is because it's a trial is good for us it's a testing of our faith and the result is steadfast as you see when we hold on to what we believe through trial it pushes us over and we heed the word of

[18:05] God and we stand on his word we're strengthened and prepared to go for the next trial when it comes steadfast as called in the dictionary is the capacity to hold out to bear up to face difficulty that is we're not moved we stand firm on what we believe now the opposite of steadfastness is inconsistency is disloyalty not holding on to how Jesus would have us live and notice the ultimate outcome come down to verse 12 to perfection is perfection see verse 12 bless blessed the man who remains steadfast under trial for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him Jesus told his disciples in Mark 13 verse 13 that they'll be hated by all for his name but the one who endures to the end will be saved

Jesus is not after people with faith he's after people with a steadfast faith that stands firm through the trials of life we do not receive the crown of life unless we make it to the end we only receive the crown of life when we are welcomed into glory then we receive the crown of life and on that day we will be perfect and when Jesus puts his hand on your shoulder and says well done good and faithful servant welcome into glory then we are perfected and it takes steadfastness to keep trusting God to the end and the full effect of steadfastness is perfection lacking nothing and then our joy will be complete I learned a new equation during the week here we go I teach you a new equation it's in your bulletins there you can see in the outline it goes like this it's in a little book actually this little book here this is a children's book scary stuff by dr.

Sarah it's for kids so if you've got kids who are facing scary stuff this is a really helpful book but it's really helpful for us I read it and I go wow this is a fantastic book it's got big words that I don't understand and it's teaching me what they are really good it's a great book and the equation goes like this you can see it in the bulletins there the situation plus our thoughts about the situation equals the emotion it works the other way around as well so you could say that emotion equals the situation plus our thoughts about the situation which is what's going on here in James but it's helpful when we consider the scary stuff so the situation going on a roller coaster ride for someone maybe the thought could be I could die and that would lead to the emotion of fear or the thought could be wow this would be fun and that would lead to the emotion of happy exhilaration

I want to do it again exhilaration maybe well the situation facing trials what's our thought about the situation this sucks it may lead to the emotions of anger or defeat or just dejection but how would God have us think about it well when we think about it wisely as we now know from God's scriptures that this is from God and produces steadfastness and steadfastness produces perfection and leads to the crown of life when we think this is ultimately for my good and a great blessing well then the emotion can be come on the emotion is going to be what do you tell us to do to feel joy there you go that's how it works right now I'm no sort of

I don't know psychologist or anything like that but there's the scriptures well let's think about wisdom then in verses 5 to 8 yet in this world we'll always be lacking something right if you lack something right verse 6 if verse 5 if you lack if you any of you lacks wisdom let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach notice the connection between verse 4 and 5 this is how we read our Bibles right it seems that one vital thing we'll be lacking now if anything's lacking anything one thing we'll be lacking now is wisdom it's interesting that James singles out wisdom right as a thing we might be lacking and I suppose he raises it because it's one of the most important things we need in Christian life the fool says in his heart there is no God right Psalm 14 but the beginning of wisdom we're told is the fear of the Lord the reverence the respect the honour of our

[24:00] Lord Psalm 9 Psalm 11 we recognise his power we recognise his holiness we bow the knee to him that's the beginning of the wisdom of God wisdom is the capacity to understand things

it's to know what's true and then to live according to the truth you can know a lot of information right but if it doesn't shape our lives then it's and we make decisions not based on that well it's we can be fools our actions in the present are shaped by our knowledge of what we know of this world now and what we know will come and here's the promise of God right which is a check we can take to the bank and be sure that God will be cashing it if we ask God for wisdom he will give it to us not because we can earn it not because we can deserve it but because he's gracious and generous and he gives it without the reproach that is he doesn't look down and say oh you're a dummy you need wisdom right he doesn't look down and mock us for lacking anything he wants to give it to us if we ask him for it and God gives us everything we and we get this lesson on prayer you've got to ask it in faith not being double minded wanting the wisdom but not being willing to live by it you read in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 6 that without faith it's impossible to please God for whoever would draw near to God must believe he exists and he rewards those who seek him prayer is practical faith it comes to Jesus and we need to become complete and confident that Jesus can deal with things that's taking

God to his word doubt is the opposite of faith it's not taking God to his word because he's ultimately committed to doing what he says and capable of doing it you and I make promises don't you you make a promise to someone and you feel disappointed if they don't believe your word they doubt what we say imagine how God feels if we doubt what he says when he promises to do things the doubter makes no progress in life we're blown around by the immediate things of this world like the waves of the sea totally stirred up and going up and down and achieving nothing God promises wisdom and we can cash out the bank and trust God to give it to us it's possible to be a double-minded man and woman and that really doesn't bring honour to God the double-minded person is one who's a fence-sitter straddler to try and have a foot in both worlds trying to live for the kingdom today and another kingdom tomorrow a disciple of

Jesus we learn and remind of over and over again cannot have two masters cannot live in two worlds and then we see this reason for joy here in verses 9-11 James talks about boasting let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation because like a flower of the grass he will pass away for the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass its flower falls and its beauty perishes so also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits it seems strange doesn't it that James goes on to talk about boasting I mean that seems strange and the question we need to keep asking when we're reading the bible is how does this connect with what goes before and the connection here is boasting or literally exalting for boasting is not always bad boasting can be good boasting reflects what we're rejoicing in so not only that but having wisdom to rejoice in what God reveals to us presses home the theme of joy and wisdom further

I mean I'm going to take you to Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 23 listen to this thus says the Lord let not the wise man boast in his wisdom let not the mighty man boast in his might but let not the rich man boast in his riches but let him who boasts boast in this that he understands and knows me that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love justice and righteousness in the earth for in these things I delight declares the Lord that's Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 23 through to the about 25 being known by the Lord is something to boast in to delight in to rejoice in so the lowly brother who sees things with the eyes of faith can boast can rejoice and the rich brother can also boast and rejoice in the things from another angle specifically the lowly brother knows that they have been raised up to be a child of God an heir of the kingdom of heaven and the rich brother knows that this world is only temporary and that life's shorter they are mindful of that and in faith coming to

Jesus they have both humbled themselves before God and they both recognise that their outward disposition doesn't define their identity they are the same family those who come to faith in Jesus the rich and the lowly are the same the rich man's only lasting security comes by solidarity with the Jesus Christ as Lord and the lowly man's only lasting security comes by his solidarity with Jesus Christ as Lord the man of sorrows and both must judge their lives from the eternal heavenly perspective and rejoice in that that's what they're to exalt in and then we circle back again to trials in verses 12 to 15 trials come steadfastness under trial leads to the crown of life faithfulness to God leads to life living for Jesus is a marathon it's not a sprint there's always a temptation to sin to be unfaithful along the way but the crown is what we're after so God gives us trials to strengthen our faith to stand steadfastly and yet temptation to unfaithfulness continues and will come and we see here the nature of trials and temptations verses 12 to 13 there's a difference between testing and tempting it's one of degree have a look at it with me blessed is a man who remains steadfast under

trial verse 12 for when he has stood the test he'll receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him verse 13 let no one say when he's tempted

[31 : 49] I'm being tempted by God for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one being tested is to have the choice between good and evil that's being tested right being tempted is to be tempted to choose the evil that's tempting encouraged to choose the evil God tests us with trials to refine our faith God tested Abraham right with his son Isaac told him to take his son and offer him as a sacrifice even though this son had come to him in a miraculous way and God had told him that it was through this son that the blessing would come to the world Abraham obeyed to the point of almost sacrificing his son

I don't know what kind of trial he was going through but I can't imagine it get much worse than that and having been proven his faithful steadfast loyalty to God told him to stop and provided a ram to die in his son's place Job's wife told him to curse God and die his sinful nature would have been tempted to curse God but he didn't curse God instead he stood through the trial and persevered trusting God and praising him the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted by the devil in the desert for 40 days he was tempted to serve the devil and curse God that is the nature of the Satan is to tempt you tempt me to evil but blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial when he stood the test he received the crown of life our love for God will be proved true as we remain faithful under trial now this test may be short term right or the test might be long term ongoing and brothers and sisters the time to hear this warning and to believe it is now right before the next test comes and having acknowledged that we can apply our wisdom rightly apply our knowledge rightly and be wise as we face the trials

God's at work for our good through trials producing us steadfastness so be with him in glory God's gymnasium is this world where trials and temptations come but God doesn't tempt you see there in verse 13 to 14 that's the work of the devil God's perfect he can't be tempted by evil temptation is evil because it's attempting to us to be deceived into thinking that sin is good when it's actually deadly being tempted is something that we bring upon ourselves you see there in verse 14 that's the work of our sinful nature you see the chain that goes on there each person is tempted right when he's lured and enticed by his own desire and then desire when it's conceived gives birth to sin and sin when it's fully grown gives forth death testing is having the choice to sin temptation is being enticed to sin and you and I know exactly what that's like you see the sign on the grass that Peter has meticulously set out you know it's beautiful green perfect and the sign says don't walk on the grass what do you immediately want to do what do your children immediately want to do when you say to them don't do this grass

I immediately just want to put my toe on the grass that's what I want to do don't think you're any different I know you do don't worry at the sign walking on the grass won't hurt anybody I'll enjoy walking on the grass it's softer than the concrete it's better on your body they just want me to miss out on some fun which is exactly exactly what happened in the garden when mankind first sinned and ever since that sinful nature has been working in us tempting us to sin there's the chain desire sinful desire we're talking about leads to sin breaking the rule falling short of the mark and then sin bears death which is exactly the opposite to what standing against trials of various kind does standing against trials of various kinds leads to life but our passions our desires lead us to temptation to death real

Christianity will involve facing trials of various kinds and yet that's the pathway to perfection a life lived a path walked in steadfast faith joyfully embracing what God brings our way a life that rejoices we recognize that the trials what they are as opportunities to strengthen our faith and so can it joy when we encounter them and then we'll be blessed when we've stood the test for one day the trials will end they will and we'll receive the crown of life which God has promised that's his promise to all who love him let's pray our father in heaven we thank you for your true and life-giving word and we pray that hearing it we'd be encouraged and that you would be at work in us strengthening us through the various trials that you know will come our way to prove the genuineness of our faith and creating us steadfastness and steadfastness when it's finished its work bring about perfection the crown of glory we pray in Jesus name amen