

Session 1

September 4, 2022

FAITH ON DISPLAY IN HARD TIMES

James 1:1-12

James is my kind of book. It's a great mix of doctrine and practice. Let's face it: all the head-knowledge in the world (even the biblical kind) is useless if it's not put into practice. I guess that's why James said, "Faith without works is dead" (2:17). The book itself is at times moving, and at other times blunt. James encourages, cajoles, lectures, and rebukes his readers. In turn, he tells the scattered churches what to do...and what *not* to do. And he does it without mincing words. In the first 12 verses of the book, James (who happens to be the brother of Jesus), suggested three distinct connections between what believers *think*, and how God *responds*.

The trials and patience connection (vv. 1-4). Notice James' unique credentials. Like Jude, he is almost universally accepted as the brother of Jesus. Yet he humbles himself, referring to himself as a servant of both God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 1). The word *Dispersion* refers to those times when, for various reasons, God's people had been scattered like seeds outside of Israel. Hence, the *twelve tribes in the Dispersion* refers to believers who were living in Gentile lands. James' immediate reference to difficulties (v. 2) indicates those believers were facing hardships and needed encouragement. Notice that James did not gloss over their suffering as something minor or ordinary. Nor did he simply tell them to "buck up" and "take it." Rather, he encouraged them to see God's *purpose* in those trials: that they might develop enduring, steadfast faith (v. 3), and spiritual maturity (v. 4). For reflection: *To paraphrase Adrian Rogers, "Satan tempts us that we might fail, but God tests us that we might prevail." How can you apply that principle in daily life?*

The wisdom and faith connection (vv. 5-8). At first glance, these verses seem out of place. But the closing words of verse 4 ("lacking nothing") leads directly into an area of frequent lack: *wisdom*. Three specific principles are mentioned. First, whether earthly or spiritual, wisdom comes from God (v. 5). Second, God gives wisdom generously and without scolding us for asking (v. 5). Third, wisdom, like every other request, must be made with full faith and without doubt (v. 6). James then points out three characteristics of the faithless. First, doubters ebb and flow in their commitments based on the circumstances with which they are faced (v. 6). Next, doubters—because of their lack of faith—are underserving of the good things of God (v. 7; see also Heb. 11:6). Finally, because of this ebb and flow, doubters are simply unstable *in all of their ways* (v. 8). For reflection: *What does James mean in verse 7? What do you think "all of his ways" refers to?*

The humility and blessing connections (vv. 9-12). Once again, James appears to make another sudden turn, moving from wisdom and faith to those who are impoverished. But verse 12 puts the subject back into the general context of suffering. Here, he uses an example of one particular (and no doubt familiar!) trial: *finances*. Hence, those who have little need to be reminded that their time of want on earth will be fully recompensed in glory (v. 9), while those with riches need to be reminded that such earthly trappings are only temporary (v. 10). The section ends with the encouragement that those who endure trials in a godly way are doubly rewarded: they gain steadfast, mature faith in this life, and a *crown of life* in eternity (v. 12). For reflection: *Some*

skeptics have suggested that religion is for the weak; it keeps people “in check” as they drift through this life by dangling the dream of eternal life that awaits them. How would you respond to such a skeptic?