James Lesson 1 (2022)

**BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO PERSEVERES**

James 1:1-18

Key Verse:1:12

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

From this week, we will be studying the book of James, which is also called “the Wisdom Book of the New Testament.” Even though this book is written in letter form, it’s a collection of various teachings regarding practical issues of the Christian life. One of the major themes of the book of James is that faith without deed is dead.

Some people think that James's teaching contradicts the teaching of salvation by faith alone. But after being justified by faith, we must also be sanctified, which is an ongoing process of inner transformation into the image of Christ Jesus. Even Martin Luther, who claimed that we are saved by faith alone, said, “By faith alone, we are saved, but the faith that saves us is never alone.” In other words, genuine faith should be accompanied by good deeds. The book of James deals with practical issues as concern for the poor, the responsible use of wealth, favoritism, social justice, control of the tongue, and unity in the Christian community, above all, perseverance during times of trial. The spiritual wisdom, which James shares in this book, is timeless and remains as essential to living fully human as Christians, even in the 21st Century.

Let’s explore the book of James in the next two months.

Look at verse 1. “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the Twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.” Here, the author James was not Jesus, who was one of the Twelve, but one of the brothers of Jesus. After Christ’s ascension, James became an influential leader and a pastor of the Jerusalem Church and the entire Jewish Christian communities scattered abroad. Unlike Apostle Paul’s lengthy greetings, which usually occupy at least one or two paragraphs, James’ greetings were very brief. He simply said, “Greetings!” He was a little blunt. James couldn’t waste time and space to deal with the urgent problems his congregation had to face in their day-to-day living.

Most Jewish believers scattered among the nations were Jewish immigrants who left their homeland and adjusted to a foreign land. They had to face language and cultural barriers, not to mention hostility and persecution. It was tough enough for them to survive, with high stress and anxiety. Some of them even got sick and needed long-term care. As the big community leader, James must have felt overwhelmed with many problems and issues while feeling sorry for them.

Look at verse 2. “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” Usually, we regard trials as burdens or something negative. But James encourages us to consider them pure joy, an opportunity for great happiness. The word “consider” means “to think carefully about” or “to hold a view.” Depending on our attitude and perspective, trials can be either a stumbling stone or a stepping stone.

Read verses 3 and 4. “because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” According to James, “the testing of our faith” produces perseverance. In other words, our faith is purified through problems and difficulties. Perseverance is not passive submission but a strong and positive response toward issues and challenges. It’s like building a solid spiritual muscle in our belief system. Perseverance is the driving force of success in every area of life: academics, athletics, arts, business, etc.

But we also notice that James starts his dialogue by saying, “because you know.” What he was saying was not something new. Most Christians already knew the benefit of trials and suffering in Christ. But knowing is one thing, and accepting and applying it into their life is quite another. When someone we know is going through trials, we encourage them, reminding them that trials produce perseverance. Then most of them would say, “*I know, I know*.” They don’t want to hear that. They want to be comforted and be understood. The problem is that people don’t practice what they already know.

Many people sometimes despair when facing trials of life, not just because of difficulties themselves, but also due to cognitive distortion: over-generalizing, over-personalizing, or all-or-nothing thinking (black and white), blaming/denying, emotional reasoning. James tried to change their perspective of life difficulties. Our faith in Jesus saves us, but we still hold false hopes, worldly desires, ambitions, impure thoughts, and emotional baggage from the past. As a result, we cannot be led by or filled with the Holy Spirit. Our faith becomes pure and mature through difficulties and problems in life if we have the proper perspective of life's difficulties in general.

Therefore, we should endure hardship as God’s loving discipline instead of falling into self-pity and doubt. We should let perseverance be fully developed to become mature and wholesome. As Jesus is humble, loving, forgiving, genuine, confident, compassionate, and truthful, we will become like him. We can be transformed as happy people and saints, like Mother Theresa.

Even though we know the spiritual benefit of trials we face, we may feel overwhelmed, not knowing what to do. What shall we do, then? We should pray. Look at verse 5. “If you lack wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” These days, many people try to find immediate answers through google search. Google is more than the encyclopedia. Honest, I google a lot. I asked my second grandchild, Justin, to pray for the meal the other day. He used to recite a simple phrase, like *“Thank you, Jesus, for our daily food. Amen!”* However, this time, instead of praying, he shouted, “*Alexa, pray*!” Alexa didn’t understand what he was asking. Alexa has a limitation.

God, our Father, has an infinite source of wisdom, and he is generous and willing to answer all who ask without finding fault. Most parents are strict with their children. They don’t want to spoil them even though they love them. But when they become grant parents, they are very generous to their grandchildren. I don’t mean God is like a grandparent. He is genuinely loving and willing to give without finding fault.

In verses 6-8, James teaches us what attitude we should have when praying for God’s wisdom. Look at verses 6-8. “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. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.” James’ warning about doubt seems extreme. He said that if we ever doubted, we should not even expect to receive any answer from God. I felt offended by the way he said it. He sounded too harsh.

But if we carefully figure out what he tries to tell us, his point is that we shouldn’t be a flip flop, unstable and changeable in our attitude toward God. Instead, we should acknowledge God as God and trust his integrity as best as we can. Of course, God does not want us to pretend to believe. He wants us to be honest and genuine. It reminds us of Hebrews 11:6, which states, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”

Look at verses 9-11. “Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. 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 face away even while they go about their business.” We wonder why James suddenly deals with the poor and the rich. It’s because there was a conflict between them in the churches.

Even though the US claims to be a democratic society, we see that our country is not a classless society. We see classes based on their income level: upper class, upper-middle-class, lower-middle-class, working-class, and poor. It seems that believers' financial status contributed to division in the church. Poor people felt intimidated and shamed by rich people, while the rich looked down on the poor. Sadly, such discrimination exists even in the body of Christ. However, we must remember that James wasn’t condemning the rich people simply because of their wealth. Instead, he highlighted the importance of their true identity based on God’s grace through Jesus Christ, not on financial status, ethnicity, skin color, etc.

How we can have true unity among different people remains as tricky as it can be. It doesn’t happen automatically, simply because we are Christians. We should be aware of what divides us. And we must make a conscious effort to eliminate any cause of divisions among believers. While struggling with these kinds of trials humbly and honestly together, the body of Christ can become purified, grow mature, and be united.

Perhaps, the worst trials we might experience often occur not in the world but in the church. Unfortunately, some people leave the church bitter, angry, and wounded. The church is a community of faith and love in Christ Jesus. Some people join the church to find emotional and spiritual support as a spiritual family while carrying out the gospel's mission. Yet sometimes, they can be hurt by other Christians in the community. Sometimes, not just young and regular members but also leaders and pastors leave the church wounded and damaged.

Why? It’s because the church is a gathering of humans who have been forgiven but still have lingering problems. So what kind of attitude should we have for the imperfect church? Leave the church and find a perfect one? Yes and no. How can we solve this kind of problem? There is no easy solution to it. However, the best possible solution is to help every believer in the church to build the character of perseverance. That’s what James said in verse 12. “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trials because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

Since college, I have been in the UBF church for more than 45 years. I knew from the beginning that UBF was not a perfect church. I didn’t expect UBF to be perfect. Yet, when some people offended me, I felt hurt. Of course, I offended others, too. Yet, when I felt hurt, I wanted to leave the church. I used to blame those who hurt me. But I am still here, as a pastor. Why? I realized that blaming others does not solve my problems. I gradually experienced God’s healing when I began to take responsibility for my own issues and troubles. I believe that I am not the only one who stood the test. Many of us did the same, expecting to receive the crown of life. Praise the Lord who enabled us to persevere under trials. We are truly blessed.

Look at verses 13-15. “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” When tempted or under trial, it’s easy to blame others and even God. But we should not blame others, not even the devil. Instead, we should humbly and honestly repent of our evil desires. Sin grows like a malignant tumor in our soul. So we should deal with our sinful desires before the malignant spiritual tumor grows and spreads in our spiritual body.

Look at verses 16-18. “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of all he created.” James starts this section by saying, “Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. We should indeed be careful not to be deceived by others or by anything. Yet, most importantly, we should not fool ourselves. We should be honest before God and to ourselves.

God, our Father, is exceptionally generous to his children and willing to give them whatever is the best. The best gift to us is everlasting life in Christ Jesus through the word of truth, which reminds us of what Simon Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (Jn. 6:68) However, unless we are honest before God and to ourselves, the word of God has no place in our lives.

Let me close my sermon. Today’s key verse states, “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.” Life is difficult for everyone because we all have to face trials of many kinds. Christians are not an exception. But when we consider them pure joy, an opportunity for great joy, it can be beneficial. James said that those who stood the test would receive the crown of life.

What does it mean to receive the crown of life? It’s not just a future event. It also means that we become the person God wants us to be and whom God is very proud of here and now. When we face trials of many kinds this year, let us not lose our confidence in God’s love and wisdom. Let us consider them a window of opportunity for great blessings. Let’s build solid spiritual muscle, and I guarantee you with true happiness, approved by God.