

Introduction to James  
James 1:1-8  
January 7, 2024  
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CenterPoint Church

Read James 1:1-8

*"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)*

## Introduction

Have you ever heard of Doug Pitt, a businessman and the US Goodwill Ambassador to the Republic of Tanzania? How about Natali Germanotta, a New York based fashion designer? How about Antonio Kidman, an Australian journalist and TV presenter? How about James Middleton, a British entrepreneur who has started several companies in the food industry? Last one – musician David Hudson? I would be surprised if you had heard of any of them. But it's possible that you've heard of their siblings: Brad Pitt, Lady Gaga, Nicole Kidman, Kate Middleton, and Katy Perry.<sup>1</sup>

If you have an older brother or sister and you attended the same school, you have most likely been asked if you are so-and-so's little sibling. Often it can feel like you're defined by your older sibling, living in their shadow. Even your parents can put pressure on you - "why can't you be more like your brother? He never gave us this kind of trouble!" The more perfect and successful your sibling was, the more pressure there likely was on you to live up to. It's hard being the sibling of a famous person and it's hard being the sibling of someone who does everything right. Well, this morning we are meeting someone who was the younger brother of a man who was both famous and perfect. His name is James, and his older brother was a famous teacher and healer who had large crowds following Him everywhere He went. And on top of that, He never sinned His entire life. That's an intimidating brother to live up to, but rather than resent his famous brother or avoid anything to do with him, James joined the movement dedicated to honoring Him. More on who James was later.

First, a few thoughts about his letter. The letter of James is celebrated as many people's favorite book of the Bible while at the same time being among the most criticized books in the New Testament. People love it, memorize and quote verses from it, and yet Martin Luther famously called it "an epistle of straw" and that James "mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture." Why would he say that? Luther believed the gospel hope of justification by faith to be the foundation from which we obey God and do good works, and so a book that does not mention the cross, the atonement, or the resurrection of Jesus was very lacking to him. Michael Kruger's answers that charge this way: "James reminds us that one can offer extended moral exhortations without being a 'moralist.' While it is certainly true that we cannot be justified by the law, the book of James reminds us that there is a proper place for... ethics. James offers five chapters of ethical applications and there is no discussion of atonement, or original sin, or grace."<sup>2</sup>

James' favorite book was probably Proverbs, with his writings echoing Solomon's wisdom about wisdom, anger, favoritism, harmful words, the emptiness of wealth, and the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. Where we have Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, James is the closest thing we get in the New Testament to that genre, applying practical spirituality to real-life situations. But James also sounds like the rebuking voice of the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.eightieskids.com/celebs-and-their-non-famous-siblings/>

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Kruger, "Why We Need the Book of James in the New Testament Canon," found at [michaeljkruger.com](http://michaeljkruger.com)

prophets in places, with more frequent commands and imperatives than any other New Testament book. Ultimately, though, James echoes his Lord and brother, Jesus, as he addresses loving your neighbor, embracing humility, refraining from loving money, rejoicing in trials, keeping the whole law, acting upon our beliefs, and pursuing peace.

You don't necessarily go to James for doctrine, to know what and why you believe. You go to James to find out how to put it into practice. Do you know the phrase "you've gone from preaching to meddling"? When a pastor goes from general doctrine and spiritual ideas to application that hits you right where you live; it's also known as "stepping on your toes." James is a world-class meddler whose writings get under your skin and make you rethink how you're living as a Christian. I have called this sermon series "Bringing Faith to Life" because James presupposes that his readers have placed their trust in Jesus, but they need to be challenged to live like true believers.

Let's jump into the text of this letter, which starts by identifying its author and its audience:

### **I. To Those Who are Dispersed (v. 1)**

*<sup>1</sup>James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

There are several men named James in the New Testament, including two of Jesus' twelve apostles, but this one has always been identified as one of Jesus' younger brothers. He is first named in Matthew 13:55 that lists Jesus' four brothers: "*Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?*" According to John 7:5, either despite or because they grew up around Jesus, "*not even his brothers believed in him.*" James did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the God-Man, until after Jesus came back to life - 1 Corinthians 15:7 says that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection. So by the beginning of the book of Acts, James was in the upper room praying with Jesus' disciples and by the middle of Acts, James had become the leader of the church in Jerusalem, giving the final speech in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Jesus said that "*whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (Matthew 12:50), and James was both - a blood brother of Jesus and a brother in faith who believed in Him and obeyed Him.

Was James the beneficiary of nepotism, the practice of favoring family members for jobs and positions? It's hard to make that case, since Jesus had ascended to heaven before James really joined the church. Perhaps James was revered for being related to Jesus, but his nickname in the early church was James the Just because of his passion for righteousness. The historian Eusebius mentions that James had knees that as hard as a camel's because he knelt and prayed so much.<sup>3</sup> Church history records that James was martyred for his faith around AD 62. He was brought to the pinnacle of the temple by the Pharisees and ordered to persuade other believers to abandon their faith in Christ. When he refused, they threw him off the temple, though the fall did not kill him. So they stoned him and one man took a club to his head.<sup>4</sup>

James could have started this letter with: "James, the leader of the important central church in Jerusalem and the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ." But in humility, he called himself merely a servant of God and of Christ, which is a reflection of what Jesus said in Matthew 20:26, that the one who is the greatest in the Kingdom of God is the one who serves. The letter is addressed to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. This is a way of saying that it was written for any Christian who has been scattered during the persecutions. Since the church is the New Israel, the twelve tribes is a

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<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.christian-history.org/death-of-james.html>.

way of referring to the people of the New Covenant. Like Paul's letters, it was intended to be circulated between regional churches to give them spiritual guidance.

The first thing that James addresses will be one of his themes in the book, coming back to it several times. It's what made the early church scatter and be dispersed – persecution.

## **II. To Those Who are Tested with Trials (vv. 2-4)**

*<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

James starts this section advising his fellow believers to find joy at a time when we usually least feel joyful: when we're experiencing trials. I don't know about you, but when things get hard, when failures stack up, when people are angry at me, when things are difficult, frustrating, or painful, joy does not naturally well up in me. And notice that it's not "if" you meet trials, it's "when." He doesn't say, "In the uncommon, rare off-chance that you might be faced with some difficulty or negative force working against you." It's when trials of various kinds come. You will not reach a level of godliness where you are immune to suffering. You won't reach a point in your spiritual life where God decides you don't need to deal with anything negative or painful. God blesses us by building in us steadfastness; the Greek word is *hyper menos*, which means to stand intensely, endurance, fortitude, staying power, even toughness. God tests how steadfast your faith is through trials, whether you will fall apart and run away from your trials, or whether you will stand firm and endure. This will also be a test of whether you come to Christianity for God to serve you or for you to serve God. Those who expect God to serve them will not bear to suffer.

Our lives are so easy today and comfortable on the spectrum of human experience. We live better than 98% of the world both today and in all of human history in terms of not having to grow our own food or go out in the wild and kill it, having high life expectancy, amazing medicine and technology, ease of travel, all these amazing things. And we love to be comfortable because life is so easy. So we become soft and risk-averse. 1 Peter 4:12 says, "*Don't be surprised by the fiery trials,*" but we are surprised. Previous generations took suffering and hardships as a fact of life. We freak out when we experience suffering because we build our lives to avoid it.

Paul says in Ephesians 4:13 that the job of pastors and the church is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry "*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*" How do we reach this maturity, this stature of fullness? Constantly studying the Bible and praying? That's good stuff, it does mention knowledge. Racking up the spiritual accomplishments and spreading the word as often as possible? Going on as many mission trips and volunteering at the food bank? Also good, but here James says that it's bearing up under trials that does the hard work of making us perfect and complete. Other words we would use are sanctifying us, shaping us. Nobody wants suffering, but nobody grows without it. And if you've been a Christian for any length of time, you've heard that trials help in the long run. But we fall back to our default mode of thinking that trials are God's curse and that we need to avoid them at all costs. Lean into them, learn from them, let them have their full sanctifying effect in your life.

In the next 4 verses, James encourages his readers who are lacking perspective:

## **III. To Those Who Desire Wisdom (vv. 5-8)**

*<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the*

*sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

In 1 Kings chapter 3, God appeared to King Solomon in a dream near the beginning of his reign and said, “*Ask what I shall give you.*” Solomon answered, “*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.*” “*And God said to him, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies... I give you a wise and discerning mind... I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor.’*” God gave Solomon great wisdom when he asked, and James says that He’ll do the same for you.

You might read verse 5 about lacking wisdom and asking God for it as the proverbial student who hasn’t studied for the test throwing up last minute “Hail Mary” prayers for God to reveal the answers to her. But that’s not what this is talking about. Wisdom and knowledge are very different things. You can have all the learning and knowledge in the world and still not have the wisdom to make the right choices in your life. Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge. I’m not anti-knowledge, I say read and study as much as you can. But you’ll still find yourself in plenty of situations where you don’t know which way to turn. That’s when you hit your knees and ask for the Lord’s provision of wisdom. James emphasizes that God “*gives generously to all without reproach.*” In case you think He’ll be stingy, there’s the word “*generously.*” In case you think He’ll be mad or accusatory, there’s that phrase “*without reproach.*” “He does not reprimand us for past failures or remind us endlessly of the value of the gifts He gives. This verse, like the teaching of Jesus to which it is related (Matthew 7:7-11), encourages us to come boldly with our requests to the unwaveringly gracious God.”<sup>5</sup>

A pastor named Sam Allberry talks about watching tourists try to stand next to the Thames River in Oxford, England, hoping to get into one of the boats, called a punt.

“As you stand on the river bank, you lower one foot onto a small, rocking piece of wood, and it is not uncommon for the force of doing so to inadvertently push the punt away... Many a hapless tourist has found themselves with one foot in the boat, the other on the bank, and their legs drifting quickly apart, briefly performing the splits before plunging into the water below... The double-minded doubter, like the teeming would-be punter, is in a deeply precarious position.”<sup>6</sup>

James is not saying that you can never have any doubts about God. He’s saying that you should be single-mindedly pursuing Him and confident that He will either give you what you ask or has chosen some other way to answer your prayer. In Daniel 3:18, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were threatened with the fiery furnace if they didn’t bow down to the golden image of the king, said this: “*Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us out of your hand, O king. **But if not,** be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.*” Now, on the one hand, that sounds double-minded, because it sounds like they’re saying: “maybe God will deliver us, maybe He won’t.” But that’s not double-minded, that is concrete belief that is humble enough to not presume to know the mind of God. You can ask with single-minded belief that God will answer you, but also be prepared to obey if He doesn’t give you what you ask for. But you can’t be double-minded, you can’t ride the fence, you can’t have two masters, you can’t hedge your bets. Pray hard and believe that God answers prayer and that God loves you, without demanding that God give you everything you ask for.

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Sam Allberry, *James for You* (England: The Good Book, 2015), pp. 22-23.

## Conclusion

Look back over the three points, that this letter was addressed to those who were dispersed all over the place, to those who were experiencing trials and in need of godly wisdom. That applies to you and me as much as it did to the original audience. The global church today is even more spread out to every corner of the globe, so we are the dispersed who find unity with all other believers in Jesus. And we're in need of guidance and wisdom when we suffer as much as any generation of believers, even if it looks different today. I have to admit that I really hope that I don't have to suffer. I don't like to think that someone in my family will die prematurely or be killed, I don't want to be hurt or even yelled at by people that don't like me, I don't want my marriage to struggle... there's no end to the ways that I want to be safe and comfortable. And there are some good things that come out of avoiding pain – like staying pure for marriage and helping my kids be wise and safe, etc. But there is the possibility that I play it so safe that I'm too afraid to risk things for God that He's calling me to, and the bigger problem that when I do suffer, that it will rock my world and my faith (in a bad way). We don't need to ask God for trials, but we do need to be mentally and spiritually prepared when they come, knowing that there is so much good spiritual fruit that will be produced. Malcolm Muggeridge said:

“Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained.”<sup>7</sup>

If you struggle with believing that trials are used for our good, Laura Story's song “Blessings” might be a great song to listen to: “What if trials of this life are your mercies in disguise?”

You probably know the name of the soccer player, Megan Rapinoe, who has been on the US national team for many years. In her very last professional match right before she was set to retire in November, she blew out her Achilles after her cleats caught on the turf. Along with some choice profanity, here's what she said after the injury: "I'm not a religious person or anything and if there was a God, this is proof that there isn't." “Hmm... you got injured, so there can't be a God.” My first thought was to roll my eyes and say, “Here we go again, she's crazy, she's clueless.” But the more I thought about what she said, the more I thought, “you know, we all think like that to some extent. She just said it out loud.” We all look at our lives and have things that we think have to happen in order for God to prove that He exists. If our hopes and dreams are dashed, if we struggle with chronic illness, if our child gets in a car wreck or is diagnosed with cancer, or any number of other things, we start wondering if there really is a God. And if there is one, does He really love us? And James says, “Yes, the trials are proof that He does.”

Another athlete had a different reaction to loss. When the Minnesota Vikings lost in the first round of the playoffs, Kirk Cousin, their veteran quarterback, told reporters that, “This is probably the worst loss of my career.” If you've seen the Netflix documentary *Quarterbacks*, you know what happened next. He went home and put his son to bed and sang, “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand.”

We have a Savior who never shrank back from suffering and trials. His whole life was submitting to pain and hardship, ending with His sacrificial death. Hebrews 12:2-3 says that “*for the joy that was set before Him (Jesus) endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*”     -> **Communion**

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<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Twentieth Century Testimony* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978).