



WHICH ROAD WILL YOU TAKE? A STUDY IN JAMES *A Radical Approach to Trials*

We live in a world of radical thinking. However, the radical attitudes of the world lead people away from Christ. The book of James points to a radical attitude that will lead us to the committed Christ-like life and away from what the world considers ‘casual and cool’.

Before we begin our study of the book of James, let’s take a brief look at James, the author of the book. There were two disciples named James: James the son of Alphaeus and James the brother of John who became the first of the Twelve to be put to death. Jesus also had a brother named James. We read in *Matthew 13:55 (ESV)*⁵⁵ *Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?*

In the third and fourth centuries A.D., the Catholic Church began to teach the ‘perpetual virginity’ of Mary. Church fathers began to argue that James was a stepbrother to Jesus by a former marriage of Joseph. There is no scriptural evidence of this. Others say the mention of Jesus’ brothers was actually a reference to cousins. However, the Greek word for brother is always used in the scripture. The New Testament indicates that Mary and Joseph bore children together after the birth of Jesus. Paul wrote in *Galatians 1:19 (ESV)*¹⁹ *But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.* After the ascension of Christ, James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Not one of Jesus’ brothers is mentioned as a disciple during His earthly ministry. When large crowds began following Jesus, we read in *Mark 3:21 (ESV)*²¹ *And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”* After Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, everything changed and James, the half brother of Jesus believed. I say half brother since Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and James was not.

Although not recorded in scripture, James eventually was led to martyrdom according to historians, Josephus and Hegesippus. They record that shortly before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army (around A.D. 64), the Sanhedrin commanded James the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, to proclaim from one of the galleries of the Temple that Jesus was NOT the Messiah. But, instead James cried out that Jesus was the Son of God and Judge of the World. His enraged enemies hurled him to the ground, and stoned him.

In the 1950s TV show *Dragnet*, one major character in the story was Joe Friday, a no-nonsense cop. His famous line was, “Just the facts, Ma’am.” He didn’t want to hear anything irrelevant to solving the case. If somebody went off on a tangent, he’d say, “Just the facts, Ma’am.”

Bible.org calls James the Joe Friday of the New Testament. He cuts to the bottom line without messing around. He’s not really interested in hearing our professions of faith. He wants to see us practicing our faith. Several writers refer to James as the least theological book in the New Testament, except for Philemon. It’s not that

James discredits the importance of sound doctrine, instead he wants to see Christian principles affecting how we live.

Read James 1:1 (ESV)¹ *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

James could have pulled rank by opening the letter, “James, the son of the virgin Mary, brother of none other than Jesus Christ.” But, he did not. James does not claim to be an apostle like Paul did. Instead James describes himself as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. He addressed the letter *to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*. The use of the word dispersion is an interesting one. In the Hebrew, dispersion is a term that refers to the scattering of the Israelites among other nations – sometimes voluntary – sometimes forced. However, in the Greek it is a term that refers to scattering seed. When the Jewish believers were scattered in that first wave of persecution, it brought about the sowing of the gospel seeds in many places; and much of that seed bore fruit.

Let’s Get Radical!

Read James 1:2 (ESV)² *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.*

James suggests a radical attitude: *Count it all joy... when you meet trials of various kind*. Please note that James did not say IF you meet trials. He said WHEN! Peter wrote something similar in **1 Peter 4:12 (ESV)**¹² *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*. Many Christians naively think our obedience should protect us from trials.

Recently, John and I have been ‘attacked’ with an onslaught of threatening phone calls and emails with threats ranging from our power being cut off to having our Social Security number suspended. I have wondered “what have I done to cause this to happen?” Upon talking to others who are receiving similar calls and emails, I realize I have done nothing. What I must do is stand firm and not respond to the traps of scammers.

The Bible gives abundant testimony that all of God’s saints encounter trials whether we are obedient or disobedient. Either way, God uses trials to test us and grow our faith. Throughout the Bible we find people who turned defeat into victory and trial into triumph. Instead of being victims, they became victors. We can too!

A radical attitude is not natural. For example: **1 Thessalonians 4:13 (ESV)**¹³ *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*. The believer’s responses to the trials we face should be what sets us apart from the world. Even in the loss of Christian loved ones, God’s Word confirms that we can have confidence that God is in control. Biblical joy in times of trials is not natural optimism. It is the joy of hope in God and His sure promises.

God Is Sovereign Over Every Trial

Read James 1:3 (ESV)³ *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*

We could easily do an entire study on the Sovereignty of God. However, for the purpose of understanding how testing is designed to produce steadfastness in our Christian walk and to help us remain steadfast in our journey

with the Lord, I want to look at just a few brief verses that remind us of times where God is sovereign over everything **no matter what we might think.**

God is sovereign over birth defects.

Read Exodus 4:11 (ESV) ¹¹ *Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?”*

The LORD confirmed His sovereignty to Moses when Moses tried to use his inability to speak well as a way out of leading God’s children out of Egypt.

God is sovereign over natural disasters.

Read Genesis 6:17 (ESV) ¹⁷ *For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die.*

Even when people lose their lives in natural disasters, it does not catch the LORD by surprise. We could argue whether God causes natural disasters or simply allows them to happen, but the only conclusion we can draw from Scripture is that nothing in nature happens outside of God’s providence. We should not look at the world and its natural disasters and decide what is just and unjust based on our own thoughts and emotions. God’s Word tell us in **Isaiah 55:8-9 (ESV)** ⁸ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.* ⁹ *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

God is sovereign but not responsible for evil things people do.

Read Genesis 50:20 (ESV) ²⁰ *As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*

This is a direct quote from Joseph, the son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery by his own brothers and yet realized the sovereignty of God all along the way. God used his own brothers’ evil deeds against him to work for good. Through his life’s experiences Joseph understood how God uses the testing of our faith to produce endurance or steadfastness.

Bible.org explains, “Submission is an attitude toward God, where we do not defiantly shake our fist in His face and tell Him that He has no right to do this to us. We are not submitting to Him if we ignore Him and take matters into our own hands, apart from prayer and faith. One of the best examples of submission was Job. After God afflicted him, he said in **Job 1:21 (ESV)** ²¹ *And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”*”

Refining Our Faith

Read James 1:4 (ESV) ⁴ *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

Gold usually exists in nature in combination with other rocks and minerals. Some of these, such as silver and copper, may also be precious or semi-precious, but a variety of base metals are usually also present. The process of separating out the gold is called refining. In addition to the refining of newly mined gold, mints and other facilities also recycle gold scrap, including jewelry, dental filings and metal found in consumer electronics, by removing impurities. There is also a ‘refining process’ in human trials. The word *let* implies our submission in these refining trials. It is true that we do not like the heat but everyone likes the pure perfect gold that comes out of the Refiner’s fire.

We need to understand that perfection in the Bible is not a reference to being flawless. Perfection in scripture is a description of Christian maturity. It is not a quality to be received by human effort alone but through the working of the Holy Spirit within us. James writes that we should make the most of trials by letting our endurance create the result in us that it always does. Namely, more maturity, and more trust in God. In fact, James goes so far as to say that the one who can trust God without stopping, no matter how terrible the trial, will have arrived at perfection, complete maturity.

Yes, we must have a radical attitude that counts even trials as joy. We also have to submit to God’s refining process. But there is another component that we need to endure trials joyfully and to bring glory to God, that is to obtain wisdom from God.

Read James 1:5-8 (ESV) ⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* ⁶ *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.* ⁷ *For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;* ⁸ *he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

Recognizing our need for God’s wisdom is the first step in our journey to spiritual maturity. All of us lack wisdom when we are faced with trials. It is so easy to run helter-skelter, pulling our hair and shouting, “What can I do? What can I do? Someone has said that knowledge is the ability to take things apart, while wisdom is the ability to put them together. Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. All of us know people who are book smart but have no common sense. We are to ask for wisdom in faith. **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.* We show our lack of faith by being wishy-washy. One minute we think we have a word from God and the next minute we are doubting He even cares. We are not to rush ahead in our own plans. We are to pray and follow the Lord’s leading and sometimes His leading is for us to wait for Him.

When you see the rolling of huge waves on the ocean or gulf, you have a picture of divided loyalty which leaves a person as unsettled as the restless waves. If you want to stop being tossed about, rely on God to show you what is best for you. Ask Him for wisdom, and trust that He will provide. Then your decisions will be sure and solid. It may be radical to the world’s way of thinking but seeking God’s wisdom is always the best choice. Let’s be radical and trust God in the trials of life. The LORD asked this question centuries ago in **Jeremiah 32:27 (ESV)** ²⁷ *“Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?”* The answer is always NO because nothing is ever too hard for God.