

TEXT: James 1:1-4

THEME: James—A Practical Man with a Practical Message

1. A Practical Man
2. A Practical Message

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. *NIV*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Among the four men named James in the New Testament was one we call James of Jerusalem. He was not one of the Twelve chosen by Jesus. Instead, he was among those identified as the Master's brothers and sisters, very likely later children of Mary and Joseph. Even though he was part of Jesus' family, he apparently did not accept his brother as the promised Messiah until the risen Lord appeared personally to him, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: **"Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."**

From that time on, James of Jerusalem stands out as a pillar in the early church, having great influence among Jewish believers. It was this James with whom Paul consulted when he went to Jerusalem after his conversion. It was this James who at the first church convention in Jerusalem stood up and gave practical advice as to how to integrate gentile believers into what had been up to that point basically a Jewish church. Most scholars also believe it was this James who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit penned the New Testament letter bearing his name, a letter that Dr. Martin Luther once had a great deal of difficulty understanding.

A PRACTICAL MAN

Notice what this James calls himself. **"A servant [actually, slave] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."** This is how he identifies himself to his readers, the Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman world of the first century. There is no reference to position or prominence, only to that which really matters, his relationship to his Lord and Savior. Here was a man whose heart and will were humbly obedient and whose life was completely committed to Jesus Christ, his God and Lord. Here was a Christian whose heart trusted in Jesus and whose life showed that he did.

Notice also how quickly James gets down to brass tacks. Without skipping a beat, he plunges ahead with some very practical advice as to how the Christian is to view adversity. If we were to flip ahead in his letter, we would find the same practicality, so much so that some Bible students have labeled his book the "Epistle of Practicality." From beginning to end, it presents an urgent demand for reality in religion. His words are painfully practical, urging his readers to match profession with performance and creed with conduct. Repeatedly he reminds his readers that "high talk and low walk" are out of place among us Christians.

We dare not misunderstand James, which is something Luther did at first, although he came around to eventually appreciate the Letter of James. James is not promoting

Christian living as a means of earning heaven. That Jesus Christ has done once for all by his perfect life, innocent death on the cross, and glorious resurrection from the dead. What James is saying is that those who are filled with and fueled by Christ's great love will live like Christians. Though James seldom mentions the Savior by name in his letter, we soon see his bright light shining on every page and his love moving behind every one of James' practical admonitions.

Do you think we can benefit from listening to such a practical man? Each generation likes to think that the questions it asks and the problems it faces are new. Listening to James will show again that though problems may vary in shape and size, little more than the calendar separates the Christian of today from the Christian of James' day.

A PRACTICAL MESSAGE

For example, listen to what James has to say about facing trials. Quite a few of our church family members can relate to that situation right now. Many of us are facing some very real, very severe trials of health, employment, relationships, and so on. When trials come, James urges his readers, including you and me, don't resent them as intruders but welcome them as friends. When trials come, James advises, consider them pure joy, not because they've come but because of what they can develop.

Trials can develop that beautiful trait called perseverance. We might even call it "Christian staying power," the ability to meet the bitterest of life's blows—the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of personal freedom—with confident victory. Such staying power is not ours by birth. It needs to be developed in the crucible of life's crises and fired in the furnace of everyday living. Like the maturing oak tree, it needs storm and stress or else it will remain spindly.

Such staying power also gets its start in only one place—in God's Word with its sustaining message of what his love has done for us in Christ. Those who know what God has given them in the Savior will also have the knowledge that he will give them whatever they need in whatever trial he sends.

The Christians of James' day had no corner on the trouble market. Our troubles are as many as the names we carry and as varied as the lives we lead. When those troubles come, our reaction is all important. We dare not let those trials become wedges between us and our gracious God. They need to be kept on the outside and viewed from long range lest they depress our minds and damage our faith. What trials do for us is the important point, not what they do to us. It is in troubled waters that Christians develop their sea legs. There in the troubled waters we learn that Jesus is both present and precious. When we follow James' practical advice and learn to view trials as tools used by God to develop our Christian perseverance, we can find joy even in them.

A Christian farmer had on his barn a weather vane with the inscription "God is love." An ungodly neighbor scoffed, "So, God's love is as changeable as the wind." "No," the believing farmer replied, "God is love, no matter which way the wind blows." One look at our Savior on the cross and we know that God is love. Only when we join James in viewing our trials in the light of that love will we be able to consider them pure joy. Amen.