

WITH PERSEVERANCE

James 1:2-15

We deal with problems and trials every day. Some problems are beyond our experience and knowledge and for these we seek advice from people who have specialized knowledge in the area. Other problems seem to not have a good answer. In our attempt to remedy a “problem” we may be faced with possible actions that lead to unknown outcomes. These may all appear to be worse than the original problem. A phrase that is popular nowadays to describe this situation is “unintended consequences.” We use various other terms or phrases to describe such situations. Sometimes we say we are on the “horns of a dilemma.” Many situations we call “problems” might be better described as predicaments. Predicaments usually put us on the horns of a dilemma. In such situations we need wisdom to guide us in determining the best alternatives in the face of uncertainty.

Several books of the Bible address how to handle the experiences (predicaments and problems) of life. The best known and most extensive collection of these writings is Proverbs. In the New Testament Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and the letter of James could be classified as “wisdom literature.” The Book of James has been called the Proverbs of the New Testament. It is generally thought that the author was the brother of Jesus. He was the head of the Church at Jerusalem at the time of the ministry of Paul. This Epistle was written to Christians and addresses the issues of everyday Christian living. Not only do we find advice regarding what we might or should do, but we also find help regarding our attitude or the way we view problems.

This letter was written to “the twelve tribes” of the dispersion. Some commentators think that these (twelve tribes) were the descendants of the Israelites who were taken from Samaria and dispersed by the Assyrians. Others think these are the Christian Jews who left Jerusalem following the death of Stephen. The other possibility is that the designation “the twelve tribes” is simply the “Israel of God” or the Church and would then have been intended for all Christians regardless of their genetic parentage. When I read this letter, it speaks to me and I don’t know of any Israelite background in my lineage. So, I would tend to favor the third option as to whom the letter was intended.

Joy Over Progress – 1:2-4

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2-4 (NASB95)

The trials and testings that James referenced in his opening remarks are not thought to be severe persecutions or health problems (different Greek word would be used for this). It is likely that the reference was to things like social rejection or economic boycotts that happened to Christians who were living in areas where pagan religions or even Judaism was prevalent. If these things did become severe even life-threatening, then relocation or becoming a refugee would be a reasonable choice. That option was certainly exercised by many of the Christians in Jerusalem following the death of Stephen.

One thing each of us learns in our Christian walk is that we are not immune from troubles and trials. The Bible tells us that “the rain falls on the just and the unjust” which could be related to positive or negative outcomes. If we are farmers, then the rain could be a blessing. If we are having a picnic or a parade, then rain would be unfavorable. To suggest that problems and trials should be viewed with joy seems rather strange to most people. In fact, to the world, this idea seems ridiculous. Most of us in the church typically think in terms of just “being able to hold up

in the face of adversity” or cope with problems as being the most we could expect.

The real question is “how will we handle the problems and predicaments of life? We have at least two choices: we can go the way of the world or we can follow the advice of James. The way of the world is to fight back, to rebel or to ignore the problems. James has suggested that we do more than just “get by” or cope with the situation. We should use such situations to our advantage by profiting from them. All of us have seen people who let even small problems ruin their day and some let troubles ruin their entire lives. There is little that is more selfish or self-absorbing than the sorrow that comes from encountering problems or troubles that we consider to be unfair or undeserved. When we see a rock in the road, do we think it is something to stumble over, something to avoid, or something from which to build. We make the choice of how we are going to face the challenges of life. Opportunities for spiritual growth are often disguised as trouble.

Whether it is great sorrow or great gladness, wonderful successes or heavy losses, all the things we experience are God’s disciplines of Life. These can either make us wiser, better and more devout, or make us bitter and separate us from Him. Too often these “disciplines” we undergo have “no effect” and leave us “undisciplined” so that it was all in vain. But if we will simply exercise some introspection, these trials will reveal the truth of who we really are in the depths of our very being.

This revelation of “what or who we are” may show that we are very far from the known character or nature of God which in its depth and breadth is totally good. When we realize that we don’t always think, speak, nor act in ways that are aligned with the grace, mercy and love that we associate with God, are we motivated to change or do we simply write it off as “nobody’s perfect?”

Some might argue that this line of thinking or questioning may border on “legalism” or “keeping the law.” Perhaps a better way to consider this is in light of Paul’s admonition to the Christians in the Galatian churches that they are to “put to death the works of the flesh” and to “walk in the Spirit” which yields the fruit of the Spirit as the expression of our lives. To the extent that this is happening in our lives, we give evidence or indicate that we are like our Father in Heaven who is perfect (depth) and complete (breath) lacking nothing.

The major objective that God has for each of us in our Christian walk is that we become as He is by being conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29) Who is the express image of the Father (Heb. 1:3). Whether we label such a condition as perfection, fulfillment or maturity, the path that leads to it goes through perseverance or patience. The Bible teaches the importance of sticking with the task until the job is done. This is part of the character of God. In Philippians 1:6 Paul wrote, “And I am confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the Day of Jesus Christ.” Jesus said we shall reap in due season if we faint not. Jesus also reminded us in the Revelation that the rewards of the Kingdom are for those who overcome.

Notice that in both the Romans chapter eight passage and in the above quoted passage from Philippians, it is God Who is using all things and working in us to bring about this transformation. Our part in this process is to cooperate with God in the disciplines He brings to us. That “cooperation” is “active perseverance” rather than just “passively enduring” the problems and trials. The trials and problems would seek to prevent us from faithfully staying on track toward the goal of the high calling we have in Christ. Perseverance is akin to making course corrections when an ill wind tries to blow our ship off course. It is valuable to us to find the wisdom to deal with the situations of life so we can have the right outlook and practice

perseverance. How do we find such wisdom?

Confidence in Him – 1:5-8

⁵ But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶ But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. James 1:5-8 (NASB95)

As we concluded verse four, we saw that we should be “lacking nothing.” The reality is that none of us has “arrived” and we do have deficiencies or that something might be lacking that could hinder us from our growth toward maturity in Christ. James addressed this likely “lack” in verse five.

Wisdom (as used in these verses) is not simply “knowledge and understanding” but involves embracing the truth that the purpose of everything in life is there to cause us to become all that God intends for us to be. Wanting to be like Christ and realizing that is what God also wants for us is the ultimate way we can show the proper kind of respect for God. Such respect is called “the fear of the Lord” in the Old Testament and as we remember, that is the beginning of “wisdom.”

When we come to such a realization, then we will not evaluate nor desire things on the basis of physical beauty, how pleasant it is to our senses, or how much worldly success it might bring us. The only thing that will matter is the ability of the situation to cause us to be more like Christ. Wisdom of this description could be said to be practical Christianity that is focused on daily living and not on rites and rituals.

Throughout our discussions most of our thoughts regarding events that try or test us were probably focused on things that would be seen as negative happenings or undesirable things. Before we go too far, let’s consider what kind of events in life are more likely to draw us closer to God and which ones might tend to cause us to drift off course? Are those things that cause suffering and anxiety and failure more likely to cause us to seek God or things that give us pleasure, peace of mind and great success? There may be more danger in the pleasantries of life than in the sufferings we encounter which could cause us to be diverted from the “Way” in which we should walk.

Let’s return to the question of “How do we find such wisdom?” The answer is simply “ask for it.” What a great promise! God will provide the wisdom for us to deal with the trials and tribulations of life. Notice that we are to deal with them. This is not something we just turn over to God. The trials and tribulations are opportunities for us to grow and become more like Christ.

We quickly discover a significant difficulty most of us face in dealing with tough problems. As we address such issues, we switch back and forth between doing it God’s way and doing it our way. James warns us that if we are not committed to dealing with such problems entirely in God’s way, then we are not likely to get any benefit from the help He gives. One of the things that would help us is to develop some objectivity about problems. This is difficult to do because we are usually too involved to be objective. One series of steps that has been suggested is to do the following: Talk to God about the problem. Read His words and meditate on it. Ask Him to help you to put the problem in the right perspective. State the problem aloud. If it is still confused, then write it down. As we do these things, we do so with the determination to obey regardless of the way God might lead us. We also need to be on the lookout for positive things that can result from having experienced the problem.

Focus on the Crown – 1:9-12

⁹ But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; ¹⁰ and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. ¹² Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. James 1:9–12 (NASB95)

James continues with his paradoxical look at life to help us see things from spiritual insight and not from a worldly view. If the world thinks that rejoicing in trials and problems is strange, then they would think that finding a reason to glory in poverty or seeing the benefit of losing great wealth is really “off the scale” of normal thinking. The argument presented by most commentators is that a believer (brother) who has little material means should realize that he is rich in spiritual things. There is a hymn that has the refrain “I’m a child of the King” and He has all we will ever need. If we look past the material poverty to the spiritual reality, then we can rejoice in having great “wealth” of what **really** counts and is of **eternal** value. On the other hand, a person of great material possession can rejoice as he puts such material wealth in proper perspective to realize that “you can’t take it with you” and that such “things” have no eternal or lasting significance. The key is to keep material things in proper perspective.

It struck me how similar verse nine is to the beatitudes of Matthew chapter five. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Perhaps a general truth to take away from these paradoxes is that we should view all our circumstances (social position, material wealth, intellect, popularity, fame, etc.) in such a way that we see (interpret) these situations as God sees them and not the way the world views them.

Most commentaries address verse 12 in terms of what we will experience when our life is over and we are in heaven. Practically everything else in this chapter (as well as this entire letter) is about life right now. We have already noted how similar this passage is to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount which was focused on the way we live now and the “blessedness” of doing things in ways that align with the character and nature of God.

The result (outcome that we experience on a moment-to-moment basis) of the correct approach and perseverance (not giving up or giving in) to the trials we encounter is experiencing life as God intended for us to have. Compare this to the words of Jesus in John 10:10: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” Could we argue that this is just “the crown of life?” When trials come and we ride through these times and come out victorious (as a result of being obedient to God’s word), then there is a promised reward – blessedness and everything that concept implies. A word of caution for all of us: The judgment of whether the outcome is victorious or not depends on whether we view life from an eternal or temporal viewpoint. Faith assures us that God will show us the way to handle the situations of life as we seek to do His will and to grow to be more like Jesus.

Guard Against Sin – 1:13-15

¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. ¹⁵ Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. James 1:13–15 (NASB95)

In the Greek, the word translated as trials and testing is the same as that which is translated as tempted. The context of the passage is used to understand the different intent of the writer or speaker. In the earlier verses the focus was on an idea similar to doing an assay on an ore or on a metal to determine its purity. In verse twelve the word was used in this same general

sense of anything that might turn us away from being faithful to our calling as followers of Christ. Starting in verse thirteen, the word is used in a way that most people today think of when they hear or see the word “tempt” as being an allurement to do something that is wrong.

It is always wrong for us to blame God for our doing wrong. Though trials come our way, God does not ever entice us to do evil. The tendency to do evil is built into the human nature. There is a progression of events: We start with a strong desire. If that strong desire is not brought under control, then it leads to predictable consequences. Once the idea becomes entrenched (implanted), it is like a pregnancy. It will result in a birth. In this case the thing that is born is sin. But sin is not the final outcome of the sequence. Sin brings forth death if it is allowed to run its course. James is telling us that, in life, we will encounter problems that are just part of life. We will also encounter problems that are a result of our being enticed to sin. The outcomes of these are usually different. The first are opportunities that help us grow. The second will be destructive if we do not repent and turn away from such enticements.

God wants only what is best for us. As we remember how good God has been in the past, we are reassured since we know that God does not change. The good He wants for us is only natural considering we are His children. As we realize this special relationship of being a child of God, then we should behave in a Godly fashion.

These verses can perhaps be considered to be the contrast of what God has for us (the word of truth that leads to life) as compared to what the world, the flesh and the devil offer us which is sin that leads to death.

How can we apply this to our lives? When problems arise we should not despair but view them as opportunities for growth. When we consider the various alternatives of how to deal with problems we must always consider where our actions will take us – will they lead to sin and experience a life that is separated and estranged from God or to following the leading of the Holy Spirit and living a full and meaningful life that has eternal qualities.