**Rejoice**

James 1:1-8

James was the half-brother of Jesus, meaning he was the son of Mary and Joseph while Jesus was just the son of Mary, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit. This James is not the brother of John and the son of Zebedee. That James was killed early in the book of Acts (12:2) and we see another James rise to prominence to the point that he makes the definitive statement in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem council.

During Jesus’ ministry, the James who wrote this book ***did not believe in Jesus*** or follow him.

“Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family [lit. “those with him”] heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, ‘He is out of his mind.’” Mark 3:20-21

We can infer that Mary was not part of this attempted family intervention based on the birth accounts and the John 2 water into wine miracle that she prompted. But Jesus had four brothers that are named in Scripture and obviously other cousins and relatives, including John the Baptist. We run into his brothers again in John 7:

“So his brothers said to him, ‘Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.’ ***For not even his brothers believed in him***.” John 7:3-5

So what happened? ***What changed?*** Paul expounds the central tenets of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:

“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time… ***Then he appeared to James***, then to all the apostles.” 1 Corinthians 15:3-6

***Jesus appeared to his half-brother James directly***, personally, after his resurrection. You can see how that would make an impression. James was transformed from a skeptic and a non-believer who thought Jesus was crazy into a believer, a follower and an apostle - one sent out by Jesus to bring the gospel to the nations.

And that’s what this book is about: **TRANSFORMATION**. Genuine faith produces real life change. If you have not changed then you have not yet truly believed. “Faith without deeds is dead.” Your good works are the evidence of your saving faith. How you treat the poor. How you spend your money. How you speak; how you spend your time; how you live your life - all of that shows what is really going on in your heart.

That’s why we’ve called this series ***JUST DO IT***. You’ve heard about Jesus. You’ve put your faith in Him. You know the Bible. You know His teachings. Now DO THEM. Get after it. This series is not about works based salvation any more than this book teaches that. James and Paul were in complete agreement. Both believed wholeheartedly in salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Read Acts 15. If James had believed in some level of works for salvation, based on his Jewish background, he could have insisted on circumcision and Sabbath keeping as the baseline requirements for Gentile converts. There were plenty of Jews claiming to follow Jesus who were doing that and more, Paul addresses them in Galatians.

James was not among them, and neither are we. ***Works are not required for salvation, but good works are EVIDENCE of salvation.*** Are you saved? Then get to work.

Today, as we jump into this new series with the first eight verses of the book, we will see a new perspective and a call to prayer. Really the new perspective is itself a call to prayer. Here we go.

**A New Perspective:**

* **Rejoice** when you face challenges

“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” James 1:2

***How do you feel when you meet trials of various kinds?*** Illness; death of a loved one; persecution for your faith; job loss; chronic pain; disability; a mean neighbor; a difficult family member…

Nobody gets diagnosed with cancer and says, “Oh, the joy!” But James says we should. What in the world? How in the world? Well, that’s the point right there isn’t it? ***We are NOT of this world!*** If this world is all you have then a terminal illness is the worst news possible. But if you belong to an eternal kingdom where you will be with Jesus and reign with Jesus forever then death is not the end but only the beginning and is therefore cause for great rejoicing.

We’ll come back to that later. For now we go back to verse 1 for our new perspective.

**A New Perspective:**

* **Rejoice** when you face challenges
  + Because God is your **Owner**

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” James 1:1

We rejoice in our sufferings first of all because **we belong to another** - we belong to God Himself through our relationship with Jesus Christ the Lord. This first verse shows the transformation of James’ life - from an opponent of Jesus who questioned his sanity to a devoted follower of Jesus who calls Him Lord.

***Is this how you see yourself?*** A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you see God as your Creator, your Owner? And Jesus as your Master, your Lord?

Or are you your own Master?

In the pre-game for the Super Bowl this year they did what was supposed to be a moving, emotional montage of some of the headline players set to the classic ***Frank Sinatra song, “I did it MY WAY.”***

The hymn of heaven is “Lord, have it YOUR WAY.”

The anthem of hell is from Sinatra: “I did it my way.”

The arrogance, the independence, the audacity, the defiance. I will not be defined or directed or controlled by anyone or anything else. I will do it my way. ***It’s the personal motto of every toddler and 2-year-old.*** You have to train that attitude out of a child, or it gets engrained in them.

But the apostles show us the better way: to be a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ; to see that our lives belong to another and that is the greatest joy of all. That is how you can rejoice in suffering, trials and tribulations because your life is not your own - you were bought with a price, so what happens to you is not for you to decide. We live under orders. We are people under authority. God is our Creator. Jesus is our Lord.

That is the foundational premise of this book and the call to Just Do It. If you have settled in your heart and mind that God is God and you are not; that Jesus Christ is Lord and that He is YOUR LORD - then everything else will work itself out. ***Your job is to trust and obey***; for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. Just do it.

Second reason to rejoice in trials.

**A New Perspective:**

* **Rejoice** when you face challenges
  + Because testing helps you **Grow**

“For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” James 1:3

***What happens when you are tested?*** Every teacher and coach knows this - you have to check to see where your students and players are. That’s what tests and quizzes and practices and games are for. You set up a trial and see how they do. You shove them into the deep end and see how they swim.

Testing shows what you’ve got.

**Think of your spiritual maturity in terms of WEIGHT TRAINING.** How strong is your faith? How deep is your confidence in the goodness and faithfulness of God? Are you in the little pink two pounder range? You have just enough faith to take Jesus’ hand but not much beyond that. The slightest test and your knees will buckle.

Have you worked with the two pounders to level up to the fives? Tens? Some of you know what these 45s are - they are weights I have never personally worked with and I like my back the way it is so I’m not going to even pick one up right now.

Come back with me in time to my **junior year of high school**. In some ways, I was pretty strong in the Lord. I had memorized a lot of Scripture and could debate creation v. evolution and evidences for the reliability of the Bible and proof for the divinity and resurrection of Jesus. So, my upper body, if you will, was pretty strong spiritually. But I was like one of those guys who never does leg day - like a lollipop - all upper body and little stick legs.

Meaning when it came to standing up to sexual temptation ***I was as weak and flimsy as could be.*** A breeze could knock me over. If you think of a boxer or an MMA fighter, you picture them dropping into a defensive stance, right? Legs apart, strong, balanced, ready to dodge, deflect, parry and counterattack. And you know those guys have done leg day lots of times.

Not me. When it came to my defenses against temptation I hadn’t graduated from the two pounders, much less worked up to the 45s. I certainly wasn’t squatting 300, 400 pounds like an offensive lineman. I was wobbling like a drunk, vulnerable to getting pushed over by the first real trial.

Which is exactly what happened. The first girl who paid attention to me, it was like she tapped me on the shoulder, and I collapsed like a house of cards.

Let’s remember that our enemy is a crafty one. If you are strong in one area, he will attack you in another. I was strong with apologetics and Bible knowledge so the devil left me alone there. I was weak when it came to girls and the desire for attention - so guess where the attacks came?

The good news, over time - through much failure and grace and forgiveness and repentance and accountability - is that ***those trials built up steadfastness.*** Those tests were a sort of weight training that built up spiritual muscle to resist.

***What is it for you?*** How does the enemy come after you? What is your area of weakness and vulnerability right now? You can bet that’s where the attack will come. But you can REJOICE in that coming trial because what will happen, if you accept the discipline for what it is - is that you will come out the other side stronger. Your faith will graduate from the 2 pounders to the fives. Or from the 10s to the 15s.

So rejoice in this new perspective. First, because God is your owner. Second, because testing helps you grow, and third:

**A New Perspective:**

* **Rejoice** when you face challenges
  + Because endurance leads to **Maturity**

“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” James 1:4

Not only do trials and challenges help you grow, they help you grow toward perfection, completion, wholeness and maturity in Christ. We won’t finish this process in this life but we can and should make progress every day, every month, every year.

***But it’s easy to PLATEAU isn’t it?*** This is true with physical training and is also true of spiritual training. If you keep doing what you’ve always done in terms of Bible reading, prayer, worship and small groups you should hold your ground but you are not likely to advance.

What will help you break out of that plateau? Suffering. Pain. Loss. Sadness. Trouble. Persecution. Tribulation.

That’s why we can and should rejoice when we meet trials. ***And notice it’s not IF you meet trials, it’s WHEN.*** Are you ready for your next trial? I’m not saying we should look for trouble. But we should be prepared for it and not surprised when it comes. The only way to build up endurance is to test yourself - to push your limits.

One thing I learned in high school gymnastics is that ***your mind will always stop you before your body does.*** Who thinks they can do 20 pushups? Should we test that claim? [Bring up a younger man and everyone encourages him to do as many pushups as he possibly can - probably reaching 35 or 40.]

Look, your mind tried to stop you at like 15 or 20 right? But your body had more to give, didn’t it? And having a room full of people cheering for you and egging you on made a difference, right?

Let’s remember that James is **writing to BELIEVERS collectively** not just individually. “Count it all joy my BROTHERS,” plural. This letter, like all of the NT letters, was meant to be read by churches. We’ve been thinking about trials and suffering more individually, but some challenges are more collective, especially in ancient times: famines, persecutions, new Roman policies, new Roman governors and local administrators, tax collectors, market changes. All kinds of things could affect whole villages and regions all at once.

But the CHURCH had resources collectively to help each other stand firm and grow in steadfastness and maturity TOGETHER. And we still have those resources today. Which leads us to our second half - from a new perspective to a call to prayer.

**A Call to Prayer:**

* **Ask** for wisdom

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.” James 1:5

James just said that if we learn to rejoice in our trials and let steadfastness finish its work in us we will be perfect and complete, lacking in NOTHING. But on the off chance he says, that once in a while one or two of you here and there might just possibly find yourselves lacking in wisdom - you might just think about praying.

Very tongue in cheek, right?

As you mature, you will not lack anything. But the more you realize that you do lack wisdom the more you will learn to pray and ask God for the wisdom only He can provide.

**A Call to Prayer:**

* **Ask** for wisdom
  + Because God is **Generous** and the source of all good things

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.” James 1:5

Oh the goodness and generosity of our God! He offers His wisdom freely and openly to ***ANYONE who asks for it***! “Without reproach.” God will not be frustrated with you or annoyed with you for coming to him over and over again saying, “I need wisdom.” “Me again; need some more guidance here.” “Yeah, just me. Could use some help.”

No reproach. Just generosity. ***There are some prayers that God will ALWAYS answer.*** This is one of them. Ask for wisdom. Lord, show me what to do here. Help me see this situation correctly. Help me understand what’s going on from YOUR perspective.

Notice it doesn’t say that God will give you WHATEVER YOU THINK YOU NEED - it says what He will always give you is WISDOM. The only condition is that you have to ask.

***Do you believe, deep down, in the generosity of God?*** Do you believe that He is just waiting to give you wisdom and guidance? Not only is God the source of all wisdom, just a few verses down in this chapter we see that “every good gift and every perfect gift” comes from Him. He is the source of all good things. All of them.

So as we embrace this new perspective to rejoice in the face of trials and temptations we must also ***embrace the posture of PRAYER***. If suffering knocks you to your knees that’s a good thing because it means you’re finally ready to pray. As long as you think you’re good and you’ve got this, you won’t pray. You won’t ask for wisdom. And therefore you won’t grow. You won’t make progress. So pray. As you face the regular trials of each day and the major challenges of life, let them be a call to prayer.

That’s our first major application from this book and this series **JUST DO IT. JUST PRAY.**

I don’t know how to pray. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to start.

* Just pray.

I’m too overwhelmed, there’s too much going on. My heart is filled with fear.

* Just pray.

I don’t know the Bible very well. I can’t put together fancy sounding prayers.

* Just pray.

Just close your eyes, bow your head and crawl into the lap of your heavenly Father. He already knows what you need. He doesn’t need your laundry list. He wants your heart. Just pray. Just open up your schedule and open up your heart to make time and space to connect with God through His Word and through prayer.

You might try this exercise if you’re new to the discipline of prayer. Read your Bible for five minutes or so. Focus in on one or two verses. ***Then stop and just be QUIET for 3 minutes.*** Set a timer or you won’t believe that much time has gone by. Don’t try to say anything to God, don’t try to ask for anything. Just be quiet; just be still. Maybe open your hands to show you are ready to receive from the Lord whatever he has for you.

Think of that as ***spiritual weight training.*** Maybe you can grow from 3 minutes to five. From five to 10. From 10 to 20 and so on, until you learn to just BE with the Lord; to rest in His presence.

Just do it. Just pray. First, because God is generous and is the source of all good things. Second:

**A Call to Prayer:**

* **Ask** for wisdom
  + Because God is **Faithful**

“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.” James 1:6

Not only is God generous, and always ready to give more wisdom - God is faithful, completely reliable and totally consistent.

This is hard for us to understand because ***everything in our world is constantly shifting*** and changing, like the ocean. Even the most apparently reliable people can and often do let us down. I don’t even want to list the heroes of the faith I have looked up to who have completely failed and flamed out; who have made shipwreck of their faith and reputation.

But **God does not change like shifting shadows**. Our God is still the same. The same God who spoke the world into being. The same God who called Abraham and promised a child. The same God who parted the Red Sea. The same God who enabled David to defeat Goliath. The same God who filled the temple with glory. The same God who protected Daniel in the lion’s den. The same God who was born of a virgin, who healed the sick and calmed a storm, who raised the dead and walked out of the grave himself.

***That is our God.*** That is who we worship. That is who we pray to. That is who we trust in. That is why we pray in faith - because we know the One in whom we have believed. We know He is faithful and will finish the work He started in us.

How stable are your faith legs? Are you wobbly like you’re trying to balance on a sail boat in a storm? Or are you firm and secure, knowing that your foundation in Christ is rock solid? ***Have you built up the spiritual muscles of a strong, clear, confident faith?***

Have you proven, through all the ups and downs of life, that God is good - all the time; and all the time, God is good? There is something really beautiful about the death of a godly person. I’ve sat by many a deathbed now - dozens and dozens. In the end there are **only two kinds of funerals**: the good ones where there is no doubt at all because the person’s faith was so real and solid and obvious; and the bad ones where there is plenty of doubt.

***If you died today which would your funeral be?*** Would your loved ones easily and quickly be able to talk about your strong and steadfast faith? Would they share about the legacy of joy in the Lord that stood firm through various trials?

Or would your loved ones be left to wonder? Would they struggle to express how your faith affected your life? Would they have lingering doubts about where you stood with the Lord?

Please, for the sake of your loved ones and for my sake if I have to do your funeral - make it a good one. Leave no doubt about what you believe. Here is the clear path to confident faith: it can’t have anything to do with YOU - it must have everything to do with JESUS.

Pastor Colin Smith taught me this line, which I have used at many deathbeds.

“Don’t think about what you have done or have not done. You will not find peace that way. Think about what Jesus has done. Then you will have peace.” Colin Smith (who learned this from his mentor, Derek Prime)

I love that Colin’s mentor was Derek Prime. Makes me think of Optimus Prime. Of course that’s who trained Colin, the great Scottish preacher. Optimus Prime himself. “Autobots, roll out!”

***Do you see the key there?*** Confidence and stability are not found in our works or efforts or goodness - but entirely in the goodness and grace and faithfulness of King Jesus. So when you ask for wisdom and grace and power from the Lord ask in FAITH believing and not doubting.

And that sets up our final point for today:

* **Ask** for wisdom
  + Because this world is not your **Home**

“For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; for he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” James 1:7-8

Let’s get this right **who we are talking about**: this is a BELIEVER, a follower of Jesus. They are coming to God in prayer, in Jesus’ name, but they are DOUBTING. They are not confident in the goodness and power and generosity and faithfulness of God. And above all, they are not clear about what they want - they are DOUBLE-MINDED.

In other words, part of this person wants Jesus, but ***the other part wants this world.*** This person is being torn in half. This is Romans 7 and the person who says, “What I want to do, I do not do, but the sin I do not want, that’s what I keep on doing.”

Your prayers will not be answered if you are double-minded. You will not receive ANYTHING from the Lord because you don’t fully, wholeheartedly want HIM above all. Some part of you wants your own glory, your own pleasures, your own advancement in this world.

Do you see this world as your home? Or are you longing for eternity? Deep down do you know that this world is not what we were made for. This body is not the end game. We were made for the kingdom of God and the new heaven and earth Jesus will make when He comes back.

Above all, ***does your heart long for JESUS?*** Or deep down, if you’re honest, you want something else - the world, the flesh… sex, money, power, attention… This brings us right back to verse one:

* **Ask** for wisdom
  + Because this world is not your **Home**

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” James 1:1

Scholars believe this book was written in the mid-40s AD - possibly the first of the NT letters to be written. At that point the church was still mainly Jewish, so this address makes sense. But the “twelve tribes” is not just a Jewish reference, it is meant to include all of the people of God, both Jew and Gentile. And he recognizes that all of us are scattered in the Dispersion.

Jesus told his disciples to spread out from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. But they didn’t, until a great persecution broke out and they were scattered. It could be that James wrote this letter soon after that persecution took place, to encourage and edify the believers throughout the Roman world.

***We are today still a part of that Dispersion.*** One day Jesus will come back and Gather all of His people together. But for now, we are scattered to complete the Great Commission and be His witnesses to the end of the earth. And this is just one more reminder that this world is not our home. We were made to live forever in a new and better world - where Jesus will reign forever as King, and we will reign with Him.

So here is our summary for today.

**A New Perspective:**

* **Rejoice** when you face challenges
  + Because God is your **Owner**
  + Because testing helps you **Grow**
  + Because endurance leads to **Maturity**

**A Call to Prayer:**

* **Ask** for wisdom
  + Because God is **Generous** and the source of all good things
  + Because God is **Faithful**
  + Because this world is not your **Home**

James calls us to ***a new perspective that enables us to rejoice in our sufferings*** - first because God is our owner, and we are His servants; second because we know that testing helps us grow - it builds in us steadfastness and endurance and character. And finally, because we want steadfastness to “have its full effect,” bringing us closer and closer to perfection and maturity in Christ.

This new perspective becomes **a call to prayer**. Should the situation ever arise that you lack wisdom, ask God because He is generous and the source of all good things. He will always give us wisdom when we ask for it. Also pray knowing that God is faithful and good and gracious and merciful - so don’t pray doubting whether God will answer; pray believing in the faithful, covenant keeping God. Finally, pray because this world is not our home - we were made for the eternal kingdom of God, which is coming very soon btw.

James did not believe in Jesus during his earthly ministry. But after seeing Jesus risen from the dead James became one of the leading apostles and leaders of the early church movement, rising to prominence as the head of the church in Jerusalem. Most likely he wrote the letter we are studying in the mid-40s AD. And scholars believe ***he was martyred in Jerusalem in 62 AD.***

The Jews and Christians were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover, and the Jewish officials asked James to quiet down the Christians there in the temple area, calling them back to their Jewish roots and getting away from this Jesus stuff.

“To the scribes' and Pharisees' dismay, James boldly testified that ‘Christ himself sitteth in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven.’ The scribes and pharisees then said to themselves, ‘We have not done well in procuring this testimony to Jesus. But let us go up and throw him down, that they may be afraid, and not believe him.’” Hegesippus (church historian, 2nd C.)

When casting him down from the pinnacle of the temple did not kill him, the Jewish officials stoned him and one beat him to death with a club. So James followed his own instruction to ***be a DOER of the word and not a hearer only***. In death as in life he continued to testify to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

We hope you’ll join us for this series now through June and add to our Sunday study your own personal study of the convicting and challenging book of James.

Just do it.

Let’s pray.