

The Proving Ground Of Our Faith

James 1:5-18

An Expository Sermon

by David Roper

The book of James gets right down to where we live. One individual said every time he read the book of James, he had the uneasy feeling that James had been reading his mail.

The practicality of the book is seen in the very first topic it tackles: trials and temptations and how they affect us. If anything is universal to mankind, it is the fact that we all have problems. Dick Sztanyo, a teacher in the Brown Trail School of Preaching, entitles this section, "Into Every Life a Little Rain Must Fall." He has a transparency that depicts a cloudburst pouring down upon and engulfing a small figure. As the figure struggles to keep his head above water, he is saying, "I know that into every life some rain must fall, but this is ridiculous!" Most of us know how he feels.

But what should be our reaction to the troubles and trials of life? James has already said that we can be *happy* even when troubles come our way: "Count it all *joy*, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations" (James 1:2; italics mine). The reason, James explained, is because if we meet the challenges of life with *faith*, they can help to develop our character. He said, "Knowing that the proving [or testing] of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, or lacking in nothing" (James 1:3, 4).

As George W. Bailey points out, a gem cannot be polished without friction, a razor cannot be sharpened on velvet, and a smooth sea never made a skillful mariner. Problems, successfully met, make us better people.

But James has *more* to say about problems and trials—in verses 5 through 18—and that is our study for today. Some feel that in this section James treats a series of unrelated verses, but in verses 12 through 18, James definitely returns to

the topic of trials, so many believe that the entire section ties together. That is the approach we will be taking.

The section begins by noting the need for wisdom: "But if any of you lacketh *wisdom*, . . ." (James 1:5; italics mine). Wisdom can be contrasted with knowledge by saying that knowledge is primarily concerned with *facts* while wisdom is primarily concerned with the *application* of those facts. But I would like to go deeper into the meaning of this word *wisdom*. Later in the book, the wisdom of this world is contrasted with the wisdom from *above* (James 3:13-18). Assuming that many (if not all) of James' readers had a Jewish background, what would the word *wisdom* have meant to them? It seems to me that the word most associated with wisdom in the Old Testament is the word *understanding*. We all know that Solomon prayed for wisdom and was thus blessed by God, but did you know that in the KJV the word *wisdom* is only used concerning Solomon's request in the *retelling* of the story (2 Chronicles 1:7-12)? In the original story, Solomon asks for "an *understanding* heart" (1 Kings 3:9), and God replies, "I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart" (1 Kings 3:12). In the book of Proverbs, largely written by Solomon, wisdom and understanding are constantly linked, and often used interchangeably (Proverbs 1:2, 5; 4:7; etc.).

By *understanding*, I do not mean understanding how to replace a faucet or understanding why birds fly south in the fall. But rather I mean coming to understand things as *God* understands things, coming to see things as God sees them. When Solomon asked for an understanding heart, he said, ". . . that I may discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). Perhaps the phrase "divine insight" would well express it.

To return to the topic of the hour, I believe that James is challenging us to rise above our problems and to see them in the proper perspective—to gain an *understanding* of trials and tribulations that will enable us to take whatever life may bring.

I. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT GOD IS ALWAYS READY AND WILLING TO HELP US (1:5-8).

As already noted, verse 5 begins, “But if any of you lacketh wisdom, let him ask of God, . . .” This verse can have a general application. All of us feel the need for wisdom: preachers, leaders of the church, Bible class teachers, parents, personal workers, *all* Christians. James says that when you feel that need, go to *God* in prayer.

But, in the immediate context, I believe James is talking about the need for wisdom when *problems* come. He has just said that we should “count it all joy” when we “fall into” trouble. We may have a hard time understanding that. If so, James says to go to God; *He* will help us understand.

When problems come, we need to utilize *every* resource at our disposal. The Bible teaches that we can gain divine insight, understanding, wisdom from a variety of sources—all provided by God. We can gain this from the Bible. Solomon said that he was writing the book of Proverbs so that men might “know wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:2). Paul referred to “the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation” (2 Timothy 3:15). We can also gain divine insight, wisdom, from those who are themselves wise in God’s sight. “The mouth of the righteous bringeth forth wisdom” (Proverbs 10:31). And experience itself, as we strive to live as God wants us to live, can teach us much. *But* is it not true that all of us at some point of our lives have come to that point where we have apparently exhausted our resources and are at our wit’s end? Then, says James (the man whose knees were calloused like the knees of a camel from kneeling in prayer), go to *God*.

In other words, when the secondary sources of divine insight fail to satisfy, let us never forget that we can *always* go to the primary source of the wisdom: God Himself!

But what confidence can we have that God will answer our prayers for wisdom? Is He really concerned with our problems? James assures us

if a man asks of God, that God “giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). The original language actually reads, “Let him ask of *the giving God*.” It is the *nature* of God to give to His children.

James tells us several things about “the giving God.” “He gives to *all*”—He doesn’t play favorites among His children. “He gives to all *liberally*”—He is not stingy in His giving. The bank of heaven has inexhaustible resources. And “He upbraideth not.” I am told that the word *upbraid* means “to cast into the teeth.” God doesn’t spoil His gifts by reproaching us for our need for them. He never says, “Do I have to help you again and again and again? Didn’t I help you just a few days ago; what did you do with *that* gift? Well, all right I’ll help you, but let’s see if you can do better this time!” Unlike some of us, God is a *gracious* giver.

When I read that phrase, “upbraideth not,” I wonder if James is not thinking about the way the Lord treated *him*. James didn’t believe in Jesus; he even made fun of Him. But when Jesus was raised with all authority, He didn’t attempt to get even with James. He held no grudges. Rather He showed His love for him by making a special resurrection appearance to him (1 Corinthians 15:7)—thus turning him from unbelief to faith. Don’t you know that James *had* to be impressed with the graciousness of the Lord?

Because of James’ confidence in “the giving God,” he says of the prayer for wisdom: “And it *shall* be given him.” This is one of the great biblical affirmations of the power of prayer.

But James quickly adds that the prayer must be prayed in the right way. Throughout the New Testament, various conditions are noted for effective prayer. In chapter 4, James will note the need for proper motivation (v. 3). In this passage, James stresses the necessity of *faith*: “But let him ask in faith, nothing doubting: for he that doubteth is like the surge of the sea driven by the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord; a doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6-8).

One good sister was greatly impressed with the biblical knowledge of the new preacher. Cornering him, she enthused, “You are *so* smart, You must be one of those *doubleminded* men the Bible talks about.” But *doubleminded* doesn’t mean

twice as smart. It refers to those of us who sometimes have a mind of faith and sometimes have a mind of doubt. Sometimes we think that God *will* answer our prayers and sometimes we think He won't. James uses the tossing of the sea to illustrate those of us who one moment are *up in hope* and the next moment are *down in despair*.

Today some think that doubt is an "evidence of superior learning or unusual intellectual attainment." But James tells us that it is instead "the mark of mental instability, evidence of confused intellectual processes."¹ The KJV used the word *unstable* to describe the doubter. This was the word used to describe the staggering of the drunk. If I may be permitted to put all the images of James together, I have the picture of a drunk man trying to keep his feet on the deck of a storm-tossed ship. As one who has crossed the ocean on a ship, I cannot imagine a picture of greater misery or uselessness!

"Don't be filled with doubt," says James. *Believe*. Believe in a giving God to whom you can go in greatest confidence when troubles come your way!

II. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT IT IS NOT OUTWARD CONDITIONS THAT MAKE US HAPPY OR SAD, BUT OUR INWARD RESPONSE (1:9-11).

Speaking of troubles, James comes now to one of the most common problems of his day and one of the most common problems of *any* day: the problem of *money*, having too little of it or too much of it.

In those days, the vast middle class of twentieth century America did not exist. Most people were either very poor or very rich. Most Christians were poor (1 Corinthians 1:26), but some were rich (Luke 19:2; Matthew 27:57; Revelation 3:17). *Either* condition has its special challenges.

The poor have a trial of body (they are exhausted), a trial of mind (it is hard to get an education), a trial of heart (it may be hard to give), a trial of temper (patience often wears thin). And the rich have their problems: distraction from the really important things in life, special cares and responsibilities, the danger of feeling self-sufficient. The problems of either extreme were under lined by Agur when he prayed: "Give me neither poverty nor riches; . . . Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is

Jehovah? or lest I be poor, and steal, and use profanely the name of my God" (Proverbs 30:8, 9).

But as great as these challenges were (and are), James says that *whatever* your financial situation, you can *still* be happy: "But let the brother of low degree glory in his high estate: and the rich, in that he is made low: . . . (James 1:9, 10).

Some think that the last part of this passage is irony, but I believe that we have here the common grammatical construction where the phrases in the first part of the statement are understood in the second part: "And [let] the rich [brother rejoice], in that he is made low." *Regardless* of your status, James says you can rejoice. Barclay heads this section, "As Each Man Needs," and notes that "Christianity brings to every man what every man needs."

James first speaks to "the brother of low degree" and tells him to learn *self-respect*.

The brother of low degree was the poor man, humbled by circumstances. Today we use the expressions, "low man on the totem pole" or "the bottom rung of the ladder." This is the sort of situation we *gripe* about, but James says, "*Rejoice*." Why? The poor man who is a Christian is actually "exalted" (KJV) in his "high estate." The original language says, "Let him rejoice in his *height*." From the standpoint of the world, he is on the bottom rung of the ladder; from the standpoint of the things that count, he is on the top rung.

He may not have all the gadgets the next man has, but he is "rich" (Revelation 2:9). He has "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). God supplies all his needs "according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). When your Father owns *everything*, you can hold your head up high.

But James also speaks to "the rich (brother)" and gives him divine insight into handling *his* special challenge. He can rejoice, says James, "in that he is made low." Again the contrast of being high or low is used. The rich can be happy if they learn *self-abasement*.

The rich Christian striving to do the will of God is "brought low" in at least two ways: in his own estimation and in service. He has learned the truth of Jesus' statement: "Let him . . . that is chief, [be] as he that doth serve" (Luke 22:26). He has also learned the transient nature of the *things*

that make him rich—so constantly under attack by moth, rust, and thieves (Matthew 6:19, 20). (And today, we would have to add inflation!)

But James puts the emphasis on the transient nature of the rich man himself. Death comes so quickly, and “you can’t take it with you.” He says: “. . . as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun ariseth with the scorching wind, and withereth the grass; and the flower thereof falleth, and grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his goings” (James 1:10, 11).

Christianity has been called “the great equalizer.” It elevates the poor man in his humble estate. It humbles the rich man in his elevated estate. How fortunate is the man who has learned what Paul learned: “I have learned, in *whatsoever* state I am, therein to be content” (Philippians 4:11; italics mine). It is not the outward circumstances of life that make us happy or sad, but rather our inward response, our *attitude*. If we would be happy, there is no more important bit of divine insight than this!

III. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THAT PROBLEMS ARE THE “PROVING GROUND” FOR OUR FAITH (1:12).

In verse 12, James turns from discussing different types of trials and returns to the general attitude a Christian *should* have when problems come. He said earlier that a Christian should “count it all joy” when he had problems because those problems could result in character growth. Now he tells us another value of trials: “Blessed [happy] is the man that endureth temptation; for when he hath been approved, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love him” (James 1:12).

The word *tried* in the KJV doesn’t carry the full impact of the original. The original signifies one who has been tried or tested and who has *met* the test. The idea is *tried-and-true*.

Most of us are familiar with testing laboratories or proving grounds. Whether it be shatterproof bottles or the latest automobile, new products go through grueling tests to assure that they will perform as they should. When they *pass* the test, they are *approved*. If the tests have been adequate, we use that product with confidence.

Even so, says James, this world with all its problems is the proving ground for our faith. If

we have had no problems, we have an untested faith; we do not know whether it will hold up under real burdens or not. But if, with the help of God, we have stood the worst that life can bring, we can go forth into the world with confidence. That Christian *can* be happy who has “endured temptation” and has come out with his faith intact.

But there is more to the “proving ground” than this. The manufacturer watches nervously while his product is tested and rejoices when the product is approved, for now he has a good chance to make a profit. But if *we* meet the tests of life, we have much more than a monetary reward to look forward to. When we have passed the *last* test, then we have God’s “seal of approval” and HEAVEN is our reward. Verse 12 says, “. . . he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love him.” Surely such a prospect can help us over some very rough moments!

IV. WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR ACCEPTING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR SIN (1:13-18).

The last piece of divine insight that James gives us in this discussion of trials has to do with the real *source* of temptation. Verses 13 through 18 could be headed in various ways, but to me the main thrust is the need for each individual to accept *personal responsibility* for his own sin.

James has said so much about the *value* of trials and problems that some might have gotten the idea that *God* personally and deliberately sends us all our problems so that we can receive the benefits. So James quickly says: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; . . .” (James 1:13).

The words *trial* and *temptation* are translated from the same Greek word and can refer to *outward* trials or *inward* temptations to do wrong. In the previous verses, the emphasis has been on the outward problems and trials of life. In verses 12 through 18,² however, that which we usually refer to as “temptation” is in view: “Let no man say when he is tempted [to do wrong], I am tempted of God [to do that wrong]; . . .”

From the beginning, men have played “the blame game.” They wanted to blame *others* (including God) for their own failures: “The woman whom *thou* gavest to be with me, *she* gave me of

the tree, and I did eat" (Genesis 3:12; italics mine). Today we want to blame environment or heredity or God or anybody or anything other than *ourselves* for all our problems. We say, "I couldn't help myself. After all, God made me quick-tempered [or passionate or whatever]."

James says, "Stop blaming God!" Verse 13 says, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man."³ God does not set up some kind of cosmic "sting" to try to trap or ensnare us. By His very nature, He neither sins nor encourages us to sin. As a matter of fact, if you are a Christian, God "will not suffer [allow] you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

If God is not the source of our temptation, what is? "But each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by *his own lust*, and enticed," says James 1:14. (Italics mine.)

Satan is the tempter (Matthew 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:5), but that which enables him to tempt us is *our own* weaknesses. The RSV reads, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by *his own* desire." (Italics mine.) *Lust* is an unlawful desire, an evil desire. Henry Ward Beecher said, "Find out what your temptations are, and you will find out largely what you are yourself."

Satan is aware of our weaknesses and uses these most effectively in luring us away from God. The words translated "drawn away" and "enticed" are words originally used in James' day to describe the art of the fisher and hunter. James is saying that *we* supply the bait that Satan uses to hook us and to trap us! Satan can't "make us" do anything that we don't *want* to do.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, it is stressed that we do *not* have to give in to our lusts, that "by the Spirit," we can "put to death the deeds of the body" (Romans 8:13). James himself notes later that if we "resist the devil, . . . he will flee" from us (James 4:7). But what if we are self-indulgent? What if we give free rein to our baser passions? What if we say, "I just can't help myself"? James says this is the result: "Then the lust, when it hath conceived, beareth sin: and the sin, when it is fullgrown, bringeth forth *death*" (James 1:15; italics mine.).

Dick Sztanyo calls this "Satan's L.S.D."—the progression of *lust*, *sin*, and *death*. This progression is in contrast with verses 2 through 4 of this same chapter. There temptations and trials were met by *faith*, and the result is *patience*, followed by *perfection*. In verses 14 and 15, temptation is met by *lust* and the result is *sin*, followed by *death*.

An excellent illustration of this progression is found in Joshua 7. The battle of Ai was lost because of "sin in the camp." When at last the sin was traced to Achan, he confessed his sin (committed earlier at Jericho) in these words: "When *I saw* among the spoil a goodly Babylonish mantle, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight [*temptation*], then I coveted them [*lust*], and took them [*sin*]" (Joshua 7:21; italics mine). As a result Achan and his family were stoned to *death* that day (Joshua 7:25).

I believe it is very important that we grasp the consequences of the self-indulgent, irresponsible life. I don't want to be crude, but I do want you to see the full picture James paints for us here. He is very plain.

I have already noted that the words "drawn away" and "enticed" (v. 14) were originally used to describe the angler or hunter. But they came to refer to the allurement of the *prostitute*. As James continues to use the figures of conception and birth, it seems to me that James personifies lust, our own lust, as that prostitute, trying to get us to sin. When we *give in* to our unlawful desire, whatever it might be, there is conception, and at last *sin* is born—*sin*, the child of our *own* folly.

But the picture is still not finished. I do not have to let that "child" live. By repentance, confession, turning back to God, that "child" can be banished. *But*, on the other hand, I can flourish that child. I can refuse to repent. I can try to justify myself for what I did. I can watch that child grow. And *then*, when that child is "full-grown" or "finished" (KJV), it also will bring forth a child, a grotesque⁴ monster with a grinning skull for a head. It is my spiritual grandchild, *spiritual death* (v. 15), and I am doomed.

So James says, "Be not deceived, my beloved brethren" (James 1:16). In this context, it means "be not deceived" in accusing *God* of being responsible for your sin. Accept the responsibility

yourself, for God is only capable of giving good gifts. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning," James says in verse 17.

The light from the sun, the moon, the stars may vary, but God does not. He is always consistent with His own nature. Only good comes from Him! As proof James gives one final illustration: *God* is the source of the greatest gift of all, our salvation. In contrast with the lust that brought forth sin, and ultimately death, *God's* will brings forth new creatures in Christ, who live to do His will. Verse 18 says, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

Satan is on one side, despising us, using our own lusts to try to draw us to him. On the other side is God, loving us, using His word to try to draw us to Him. Ultimately, the decision is up to *us*.

What a privilege to be one of the "firstfruits of his creatures"—one of the first of many, a guarantee, as it were, that others can *also* follow God and successfully meet trials and temptations. But if I am to be one of God's "firstfruits," I must learn *personal responsibility*. I must stay away from temptation. I must learn to not entertain improper desires. And I must learn to confess my sin and return to the Lord when I fail! But if I will do *my* part, God will be with me, and I *can* be victorious over the trials and temptations of life!

CONCLUSION

I once read of an elderly lady who had an unusual marking in her Bible. Beside each of the *promises* of the Bible, she had two letters: "T.P." Someone finally asked her what these letters meant. She answered, "The first time I *tried* one of God's promises, I put a 'T' beside the verse. Then when God's promise came true, I put a 'P' for *proven!*" She then smiled as she thumbed through her worn Bible: "As you can see, there's a 'P' with every 'T!'"

Into your life some rain *will* fall. But do your best, trust in God and His promises, and all will turn out all right. You will be made stronger and heaven will be your home.

FOOTNOTES

¹Guy N. Woods, *James*, New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1972), p. 45.

²This comment is probably also valid for verse 11, although the exact meaning is not critical in that verse.

³Genesis 22:1 in the KJV says that "God did tempt Abraham," but there the word means to test or try.

⁴The words "bring forth" are from a Greek word for an unnatural birth. The same basic Greek word is used in verse 18. In verse 18, it is used in a good sense, in verse 15, a bad sense.

Visual-Aid Notes

This would be an ideal lesson for a series of transparencies. A tentative list is as follows:

1. Title
2. Idea of Dick Sztanyo's transparency of the little man struggling to stay afloat
3. The phrase, "THE NEED FOR UNDERSTANDING (DIVINE INSIGHT)," adding a picture of Solomon praying for wisdom
4. First main point
5. On the left-hand side of the transparency the words: "BIBLE, WISE MEN, EXPERIENCE"; on the right-hand side, a man praying with the word "GOD" above him (The point: The man has utilized the secondary sources of wisdom but is also turning to the primary source.)
6. The word "GOD" to the left; a bracket in the middle; to the right the words: "AN IMPARTIAL GIVER, A LIBERAL GIVER, A GRACIOUS GIVER"
7. A diagonal line from lower left to upper right; in upper left-hand corner the words: "ASK IN FAITH"; in lower right-hand corner, a stick-figure drawing of a drunk staggering on a storm-tossed ship
8. Second main point
9. A chart with the left-hand side having "TRIALS OF THE POOR: Body, Mind, Heart, Temper" and the right-hand side having "TRIALS OF THE RICH: Distraction, Cares, Danger of Self-Sufficiency"
10. Another chart with the heading: "BE HAPPY!" with the left-hand side having "POOR—Learn Self Respect" and the right-hand side having "RICH—Learn Self-Abasement"
11. Third main point
12. An illustration of proving grounds or

- testing laboratories with cars or unbreakable bottles
13. An illustration of a stick figure successfully clearing the hurdle (labeled "TRIALS") and heading for the finish line, with another figure at the finish line smiling, with a crown (labeled "CROWN OF LIFE")
 14. Fourth main point
 15. The sentence: "Don't blame GOD for your problems; SATAN uses YOUR weaknesses to tempt you."
 16. A Sztanyo idea: a hook with a worm (labeled "ENTICEMENT"); a fish looking at the worm; an arrow pointing to the fish's head with the words: "DRAWN AWAY BY LUST"
 17. Another Sztanyo idea: Satan stabbing a stick-figure with a hypodermic syringe that is enlarged and labeled "L.S.D."
 18. A chart with the left-hand side having "1:2-4" with this list underneath: "Trials, Faith, Patience, Perfection" and the right-hand side having "1:14, 15" with this list underneath: "Temptations, Lust, Sin, Death"
 19. An illustration of Achan consisting of four lines: "TEMPTATION—I saw'; LUST—I coveted'; SIN—I took'; DEATH—Stoned"
 20. On the left a stick-figure prostitute with an evil smile on her face (labeled "LUST") and in her arms a baby (labeled "SIN"); on the right, a stick-figure woman with the same smile (labeled "SIN") and in her arms a baby with a skull for a face (labeled "DEATH")
 21. These words as the heading: "GOD GIVES ONLY GOOD GIFTS," using miscellaneous pictures to illustrate nature, food, families, etc. and having at the extreme right a cross and a Bible (labeled "SALVATION")

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