

Three Pitfalls In Persecution

(James 1:4-10)

At the 2015 Athletic World Championships in Beijing, American Molly Huddle was competing in the 10,000 meter final and looked to have secured a bronze medal behind Kenyan Vivian Cheruiyot and Gelete Burka of Ethiopia. As reported in London's *Independent* newspaper,

"Huddle had third place assured, and was so delighted with the result that she raised her arms in celebration."

Unfortunately, she also slowed her pace. However, teammate Emily Infield, running alongside Huddle, did not. As the two women crossed the finish line, Infield beat Huddle across by 9/100s of a second - taking the bronze medal. In celebrating before the race was finished, Huddle had deprived herself of the prize.

As we'll see in today's passage, the Apostle James is familiar with this sort of event. James has just explained how trials are a strengthening and maturing blessing from the Father, and so he takes these next few verses to shine light on three common pitfalls - things which can prevent a brother or sister from growing in Christ during these times of persecution. Because we are so often in times of trial, James wants us aware of failings that can sideline a believer when the heat is on, and so he speaks of them in today's passage.

You'll find them on your bulletin on the right hand side, so look at them along with me as we see James noting first that:

1) Lack of wisdom can be a common problem in trials.

Second, James notes in our passage how :

2) Doubt and a lack of faith can hinder our petitions to God.

and lastly, the Apostle reminds us that :

3) God hears the prayers of the humble

As always, it's important to know our context to understand this passage, so we'll go back a verse or two in order to grasp where James is coming from and the situation of those believers he's addressing.

Let's remember that James is writing to Christians in distant countries These are members of his local church who had fled Jerusalem and Israel itself to avoid the great persecution we see described in Acts chapter 8. Their lives have been uprooted, they're most concerned with their families' safety and in meeting their daily needs. Perhaps some were even questioning if the Lord were punishing them with these afflictions.

It is to these people that James sends the encouragements at the start of this letter.

In the previous verses, James has shown us that trials are battles - skirmishes in which the victory has already been guaranteed. James encourages us to stand firm during these tests, because through them we achieve a promised growth and maturity in Christ. Follow along with me beginning at v 1

(read James 1:1-4)

James is reminding us that our trials are various, our faith will be tested, and we must allow patience to work in us - especially when we feel the desperate urge to grab the wheel and steer the craft ourselves. When it comes to those moments of decision, that's where the uncomfortable questions arise in our heart:

Do we truly believe that God is in control?

Do we truly believe that He is working events for our good?

In that moment of our crisis, when we bring to mind a promise of God's providence, do we doubt if He will actually come through in the clutch?

In other words:

- "... *but what if...*?"

What if I don't get that job?

What if my kid gets sick?

What if.

It's all well and good to speak the promises in fair weather, but the storm is raging now and there's water coming in the windows and it's down to brass tacks, so "What if..."

What happens if ... we trust in God?

Today, James is answering these important questions. Once again he's using the situation as an opportunity to instruct and challenge - both his readers, and us as well.

Let's have a look at verse 5 once more:

(read v5)

The first thing James would have us realize is that:

Lack of wisdom can be a common problem in trials.

A lack of wisdom can be characteristic of a new believer. It may not necessarily be expected or usual, but that condition that may exist for some. James didn't say, "Since you ALL lack wisdom" but "If anyone (any individual one) lacks wisdom." So, it can happen. Fortunately, that's not a problem. We have a remedy!

1 Cor 1:30 says,

“.. but of Him,” (that would be the Father,)

“you are in Christ Jesus,

*who became for us **wisdom from God...**”*

One of the hardest things in life to say is the phrase: “I don’t know.” Nobody feels comfortable when they must admit a lack, or a flaw - no one wants to be seen as ignorant.

James knows this as well - this is why we he’s included two very comforting words in verse five, do you see them?

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God,

*who gives to all liberally and **without reproach...**”*

James is highlighting an important truth here as our first application,

Believers should not hesitate to boldly ask God for wisdom

James wants to break down those barriers which keep us from drawing on the Vine. Do we lack wisdom? It is wisdom which God promises, it is wisdom which He is pleased to give. And not just a small bit, not just enough to get you by for now, no, we’re getting the ‘supersized’ full meal deal with that word “liberally.”

He will not fail to give it - did you catch that promise hiding in verse 5?

Hear it again:

“...it **will** be given to him.”

This is no mystery, it's not hidden in some strange interpretation, no, James says in plain language - “Do you lack wisdom? Then you must ask for it! You have no reason not to, and you will receive it without fail.”

Do we ask for it? Do we know **how**?

By prayer, yes, but how else?

Perhaps by: meditating on God's word? Consider Deut 32:29 -

*“Oh that they were **wise**, that they **understood** this:
that they would **consider** their latter end!”*

Are we considering Heaven? Have you really dwelled on the idea of eternal life with Christ? Have you imagined what it will be like when you're changed in an instant to a form that's incorruptible?

How much encouragement might we gain if we find ourselves thinking on those things in the dark hours?

How else can we gain wisdom?

How about: fellowshiping and communion with your brothers and sisters, that they might lift you up in time of need?

Proverbs 13:20 -

*“He who walks with wise men will **be wise...**”*

Hey, here's a great one - sharing the gospel! Does that surprise you? It did me!

Truly! Proverbs 11:30 shares this promise from God's Word -

*“The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
and he who wins souls is **wise.**”*

Wisdom is there for the taking, freely and in abundance from God, always there when we need it most. We never have to slow our pace on that account.

But James knows that's not the only reason we might stumble in our race.

That's why he continues on and brings us to our second point this morning. Look on your bulletin along with me as James highlights the often uncomfortable - and convicting - truth that:

2) Doubts and a lack of faith can hinder our petitions to God

As he says in verse 6 (read v6)

Do you understand what he's saying there? Perhaps not, because we're not fishermen from the sea of Galilee. James says a doubter is "...like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed." The words he's using there are telling - what he's saying is that these events, these trials, they're happening *to* you. You're not in control!

In other words, just as a sailor is steered by the wind, and is at its mercy, so also is the doubter when it comes to the winds and waves of life.

There's the irony of the situation- why do we doubt? Why do we fear? Isn't it most often because **we** wish to feel in control? Isn't it usually because **we** think we know better - or, at least, we can think of a less disruptive and more comfortable path than the one which God has laid out before us?

James points out that in fact - listen to this, it's important - James is saying the result of such a mindset will mean that we're taken places we don't want to go.

We're tossed about, we're agitated on the waves - and we may even find ourselves wrecked against some sharp reef. These would be strong meaningful words to anyone who's been on the sea.

They should resonate within our hearts as well, because these words warn us against falling prey to self-reliance. They also warn us that a very likely reason we **fail** to ask direction from God is because, in truth, we **fear** to ask.

Why do we fear? Because we doubt.

We doubt that God will answer.

Or - and is this your case, Christian? - do you fear that God has good reason to turn His ear? To hide His face from you?

Indeed He does!

We know Isaiah 59:2 says:

“Your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.”

Psalm 130 says:

“If you, LORD, should mark iniquities,

O LORD!

Who could stand?”

Our fear may be that asking for God’s provision now will shine a light on all those times we failed in the past. That’s not an unreasonable concern. Again - “Who could stand?”

But thanks to Christ, we are forgiven! Psalm 103 is for us!

“For as the heavens are high above the earth” - get this, now! -

“so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;

As far as the East is from the West,

so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

As a Father pities His children,

So the LORD pities those who fear Him.” (v11-13)

James knows our fear - and he also knows of our forgiveness in Christ!

James also knows that the only way we are going to trust more fully in God and grow in that faith is when we ourselves have seen Him in action, personally. This lesson is our second point of application today:

God sometimes calls us to exercise faith when circumstances cause us to doubt His provision

(repeat)

When we most fear that God is not for us, that is the moment when we must appeal to Him most strongly. We are not to run, to shrink back, but instead we must flood God with prayers and petitions. Bring your prayers to God and lay everything at His feet! Ask Him to do as **He** will, in every field of your life. Try Him in this, and see your faith renewed!

Our reluctance also asks the question: "Am I afraid to approach the Lord?"

So many voices in our hearts that cry out: "Unworthy!" "Unclean!" - when we consider approaching the Father. This itself is hinting toward another important application, so consider that, perhaps -

Our doubt often points to unmortified sin in our lives.

Are our doubts and fears revealing something about our condition or situation? Are we too ashamed to face the Father with that baggage? Are we selfishly hiding a secret sin, thinking he doesn't see it?

We are in need of cleansing, you and I.

Are you in need? Isn't every trial meant to be a time of need?

So then, every trial is a time to obtain mercy - a time to find grace and renewal in Christ. Don't hide from God, that one who is:

*“... **our** refuge, and **our** strength*

an ever-present help in time of trouble.” (Psalm 46:1)

Cast aside your fear! Drag that sin to Chris and ask Him to honor His promise to **you** to nail **all** your offenses to the cross. Even that one. Maybe you haven't been able to kill it, but He sure will. Come to the cross!

Then you shall see God is both willing and able to refresh you. Then you'll see how He does provide for your every need in times of trial.

Alongside the fearful believer comes one last example from the Apostle James to serve as a warning. Read with me on the right side of your bulletin as he makes the final point of today's message:

3) God hears the prayers of the humble

Just as faith mixed with doubt will not receive answers from God, James notes it's possible to go the other direction in our thinking. Follow with me in verses 7 through 10

(read v7-10)

The fearful will fail to approach the Lord, and the doubter will lack faith - they'll doubt that God will do what He has promised. Some may even believe God is under obligation - to them! In other words, a person can believe that the Almighty is obliged to deliver - and continue delivering - a blessing, or grace, or wisdom, or knowledge, or healing.

That one "supposes" they will receive the desires of *their* heart - and not that of Christ. James warns us of this, and for many reasons. To waver in faith and yet hold some expectation - that expectation will end in disappointment when the prayer goes unanswered, when the "gravy train" fails to arrive at the station.

When the object and foundation of the faith is a desire for comfort -
or prosperity or glory or - let's be honest - when the faith is based on anything other than a desire for God's will done in or around us ,
then those prayers will fail.

That false faith will fail, as it must.

Worst of all, that poor soul will waver once again, falling victim to doubt and fear and uncertainty. That is not the secure and confident condition that Christ intends for His flock, and James speaks this warning at this time to challenge us.

To ask us: What is our foundation? Why are we praying?

The 16th-century writer Richard Turnbull gives us this thought in answer. I quote him here as a recommendation for us all:

"Men pray therefore to God ... to exercise themselves in prayer

and make them capable of those things which willingly He doth give them.”

Turnbull continues - note what he says :

“Therefore, men pray to God, that thereby it may appear
that He is the Giver of all good things,
that the effects and events of things depend wholly on Him,
that increase of His graces is to be looked for only from His heavenly majesty,
and thereby, we taught to behave ourselves more thankfully and dutifully to Him.”
(end quote)

You see, a mindset which reveals a person relying on any number of things other than
Christ,

a frame of mind which thinks that things said or works done,
all designed to secure the attention, and favor and blessings of God
that mindset is no different than that of an unbeliever.

James pulls no punches as he plainly dashes any such hopes by saying:

“ ... let not that man suppose that he shall receive *anything* from the Lord.” (v7)

This brings up some rather uncomfortable but needful applications.

We need to examine at these last verses as we consider that:

Unanswered prayers should be cause for self-examination - and Godly humbling

In time of need, do your prayers go unanswered?

James has given us reasons why this is true - are they true of us?

Do we have an expectation that God will hear us - if we doubt his promise? If we shelter and feed a secret sin? If we're asking for our glory and not His own?

Unanswered prayers should concern us greatly - they ask: who are we serving?

Are we 'double-minded?' If so, then perhaps we don't believe what God has said.

The English chaplain Thomas Manton speaks on this - you'll find his words in blue on your bulletin: so look down on the right hand side and consider them with me as I read, and I quote:

“ None walk so evenly with God as they that are assured of the love of God. Faith is the mother of obedience, and sureness of trust maketh way for strictness of life... It is the slander of the world to think assurance is an idle doctrine... Never is the soul so quickened and enabled for duty as it is by 'the joy of the Lord.' “ (end quote)

If we have found our prayers unanswered, it should give us great concern. It should be cause for us to examine ourselves - to ask God to shine the light of truth on our inward parts to :

*“See if there be any wicked way within me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Ps 139:24).*

Another application from James comes in verses 9 and 10. It’s a truth we too easily forget, especially in times of trial, and it’s simply this:

We are all equal in Christ

Did you hear that? We are all equal, and one, in Christ - because He has done all for you, and you, and Me as well. There are no class distinctions in Christ - social, racial, national, political, economic, all of these divisions fall away. Let’s hear James’ example once more, follow with me in verses 9 and 10:

(read 9-10)

Here we see the brother of lowly estate can glory in that he **is** exalted. Notice the verb tense there - that one already is magnified and exalted in the sight of God.

Now check out verse 10 and we see that the rich man, the man of means, will be in “humiliation.”

Don't misunderstand this word by painting it with today's definition. Remember, James is about encouragement during trials. James is saying not only should those of means expect seasons where they shall be brought low, but also that this is, in fact, a reason to glory. To glory that God is in charge, that He provides as needed when needed, and that all of these earthly things and cares and concerns, as James puts it, will pass away:

"...as a flower of the grass."

We are the same, and God is caring for us all. So we shouldn't think higher of one and lower than another, because

We are all equal, and one, in Christ.

So, then. Do we find ourselves in trials? I sure hope you do, brothers and sisters, because that means God is working! He is working with you, He is working on you, and as we exercise our faith James is showing us how God will be working through you.

When we're pressed down, when we're beset on all sides, James is telling us to run to the shelter of the Lord. That is the time to remind ourselves of His promises, to call on Him as James and the other Apostles cried:

"Lord, increase our faith!"

Perhaps you think testing won't come upon you. Yet Christ Himself said it plainly:
"In this world you will have tribulation." (John 16:33)

Would you have your prayers answered?

Would you boldly approach the throne and receive grace?

Would you cast off the cares of this world?

Then hear again and know that :

" 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'

Therefore, humble yourselves under the mighty Hand of God

that He may exalt you in due time,

casting all your care upon Him,

because He cares for you." (1 Pe 5:5-7)

As a final encouragement, James himself tells us in chapter 5 :

"You have heard of the perseverance of Job,

and seen the end intended by the LORD -

that the LORD is very compassionate and merciful."

The Lord is showing us compassion and mercy - so let us stand strong on His faithful promises and keep running to the end of the race that is set before us. Keep running until we receive that promised blessing of increased faith during our times of trial. Amen!

Point 1:

Lack of wisdom can be a common problem in trials

Point 2:

Doubts and a lack of faith can hinder our petitions to God

Point 3:

God hears the prayers of the humble

Quote for bulletin:

“ None walk so evenly with God as they that are assured of the love of God. Faith is the mother of obedience, and sureness of trust maketh way for strictness of life... It is the slander of the world to think assurance is an idle doctrine... Never is the soul so quickened and enabled for duty as it is by ‘the joy of the Lord.’ “ Thomas Manton

Hymn Ideas

491 - Jesus, I Come

597 - Take My Life and Let It Be

630 - What A Friend We Have In Jesus