

JAMES 1:1–4

“COUNT IT ALL JOY”

22 MARCH 2020

¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. ² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

The author of this letter identifies himself as, **James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. The name James was a popular one in the first century. There are several men named James in the New Testament. That the author thought it sufficient to identify himself simply as James indicates that he was none other than James, the Lord’s brother, who was one of the pillars of the New Testament church (Gal 2:9).

James is writing this letter to the church in his capacity as the **servant of God**. In one sense, all believers are servants of God. But in another sense, **servant of God** can be used as a title to designate someone with a divine commission. Moses, Joshua, and David, for example, were each referred to as **the servant of God**. James, the Lord’s brother, stands in line with them as a leader of Israel. And the title **servant of God** is used here to point up his authority.

James was a pillar in the New Testament church. And that church is the true Israel of God (Gal 6:16). It is the reconstituted twelve-tribe kingdom of Israel. Notice that James refers to the church as **the twelve tribes in the Dispersion**. **¹ James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.**

In the Old Testament, the twelve tribes referred to the people who descended from the twelve patriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob. During the conquest of Canaan, those tribes were allotted certain parts of the promised land. But in 722 BC, the tribes in the north were conquered by the Assyrians and taken into exile. And in 587 BC, the tribes in the south were conquered by the Babylonians and exiled in Babylon. The twelve tribes were dispersed to various parts of the world. They were living outside of the promised land. And that state of affairs was known as the diaspora, **the Dispersion**.

The dispersion of Israel gave rise to the hope that God would reconstitute the twelve-tribe kingdom of Israel and restore the Israelites to their homeland. And that reconstitution and restoration of Israel was the mission of the Messiah. That explains why Jesus appointed twelve apostles. The significance of choosing twelve, rather than some other number, is that he was

reconstituting the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Matt 19:28; Luke 22:29–30). The twelve apostles were the firstfruits of that restored kingdom. In James 1:18, James call the church the firstfruits of God's new creation. It is the firstfruits of the reconstituted twelve tribe kingdom of Israel. It's the beginning of that restoration, which reaches its consummation at the second coming of Christ. The church is the true Israel of God (Gal 6:16). And all who belong to the church, whether Jew or Gentile, are part of the twelve tribes. (cf. Rev. 7:1–17).

In verse 1 that James regards the church in the present age as living in the diaspora, **the Dispersion**. ¹ **James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion**. Christians on earth are living in exile, outside of their homeland. Our true homeland is in heaven. As long as we are on earth, we are exiles from our homeland living **in the Dispersion**. We are strangers in a strange land (cf. Ex 2:22; 1 Pet 2:11). The earth is a foreign land to us because **our citizenship is in heaven** (Phil 3:20).

The Apostle Peter refers to Christians on earth as **sojourners and exiles** (1 Pet 2:11). Peter also calls the present age **the time of our exile** (1 Pet 1:17). And in his first letter, Peter addresses the church as the **elect exiles of the Dispersion** (1 Pet 1:1). That's the same term James uses in verse 1. Both Peter and James regard heaven as the true homeland of believers, and therefore, they see believers on earth as exiles, living **in the Dispersion**.

At the end of this present age, however, our Lord Jesus Christ will return and receive us to himself (John 14:3). He will translate us from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven. Then, we will no longer be sojourners living in exile in a foreign land. Our existence as **the twelve tribes in the Dispersion** will come to an end because we will be translated to our homeland.

For the church, then, there are two modes of existence or two states of affairs: the state of Dispersion (which is the present state of affairs) and the Perfection (the future and final state of affairs). The present state is a time of exile, and it's also a time of testing. In the present age, our faith is being tested by means of trials. And **the testing of our faith produces steadfast-endurance** (v. 3), which we need in order to persevere during the time of our exile, while we are living **in the Dispersion** (v. 1).

Moreover, that patient-endurance, says James, will produce a perfect work (v. 4), which is nothing less than our being brought into a state of perfection at the end of this age when we are translated from the land of exile (earth) to our permanent homeland (heaven). The **trials** that we face in the present age (v. 2) are preparing us for our translation from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven. They're preparing us for the day when our earthly mode of existence as strangers and exiles living **in the Dispersion** will come to an end, and we shall be translated to our permanent homeland in heaven.

This present time of testing in which our faith is tested by **trials of various kinds** (v. 2) leads to the final state of perfection. And God uses those trials in the present to produce in us steadfast-endurance (v. 3), which brings us into that state of perfection. The purpose of our

present trials, therefore, is, as James says, to make us **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing** (v. 4). That's the reason James can say in verse 2, **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.**

James explains how it's possible to consider the trials of the present age occasions for joy. How is it possible to **count it all joy when** we are surrounded by **trials of various kinds** (v. 2)? It's possible because we **know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness.** (v. 3) and we know that when steadfastness has its full effect—i.e. when it has completed its work—we will be made **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing** (v. 4). And for that reason, we can **count it all joy** whenever we fall into **trials of various kinds** (v. 2).

The **trials** of this present age—while the church is living in exile **in the Dispersion**—are designed to bring us into the state of perfection, the state of glory. Our present suffering is ordered to and leads to our glorification. That same doctrine is stated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17, where Paul says that **this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.**

Likewise, in Romans 8, Paul explains that whenever we suffer afflictions in this present age, we are suffering with Christ **in order that we may also be glorified with him** in the age to come (Rom 8:17). Paul adds, **I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us** when Christ returns at the end of the age (Rom 8:18). And it's that perspective of sharing with Christ in both his suffering and glory that leads Paul to say in Rom 8:28, **we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

God's purpose is to fully conform us to the image of the risen and ascended Christ. Or, as James puts it in verse 4, God's purpose is to make us **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** And God uses the trials of this present age to prepare us for our translation into that state of perfection, the state of glory. Our suffering in union with Christ is ordered to and leads to our glorification in union with Christ. It is conforming us to the image of Christ in his suffering and glory. That's the purpose of these **trials of various kinds** (v. 2) that we encounter in the present age during our sojourn on earth, while we're living **in the Dispersion** (v. 1). For that reason, we can **count it all joy when we meet those trials.**

When our Lord Jesus Christ faced his ultimate trial, he counted it all joy because he knew that his suffering and death would bring him into a state of glory. That's what the author of Hebrews means when he says that **for the joy that was set before him, Christ endured the cross.** Because **he endured the cross,** he is now **seated at the right hand of the throne of God** (Heb 12:2). So Christ counted it all joy when he faced the trial of the cross.

And when believers face trials of various kinds in this present age, we too should count it all joy because God is conforming us to the image of Christ in union with him in his suffering unto glory. That's the purpose of the trials that we face in the present age. God providentially

orders those trials to test our faith in order to produce in us **patient-steadfast-endurance** (v. 3), which we need to persevere during the time of our exile while we're living **in the Dispersion** (v. 1).

Therefore, James says, ² **Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,** ³ **for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.** ⁴ **And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

God is testing our faith by means of these trials to produce in us patient-endurance. And when that endurance has had its full effect, when it has yielded its perfect work, we will be brought into a state of perfection. This present age of testing and suffering is temporary, and it's necessary to make us **perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

The **trials** that we face in the present age (v. 2) are preparing us for our translation from the realm of earth to the realm of heaven. They're preparing us for the day when our earthly mode of existence as strangers and exiles living **in the Dispersion** will come to an end, and we shall be translated to our permanent homeland in heaven.

That's what we need to keep in mind. And if we have that perspective in view, then even our trials can be considered occasions for joy. Therefore, beloved, **count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds.** Amen.