

Asking For A FRIEND? Hard Questions About Faith

(4) "How Can a Good God Allow Bad Things to Happen to Good People?"

HIGHLIGHT: James 1:2-18 NLT

H

Below are excerpts from the overall passage for use with the APPLICATION and RESPOND. It will be beneficial for the group to read the whole passage to understand the entire context.

James 1 (NLT)

vv. 2-18

2 Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. **3** For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. **4** So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

5 If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. **6** But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. **7** Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. **8** Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

9 Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. **10** And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. **11** The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

12 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. **13** And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. **14** Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. **15** These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

16 So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. **17** Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. **18** He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

EXPLAIN

The purpose of this section is to deepen everyone's understanding of the Word.

"Then the Lord said to Job, 'Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?'....'Will you discredit my justice and condemn Me just to prove you are right?'" (*Job 40:1-2, 8*). The previous 39 chapters are filled with Job's suffering, his friends' accusations of great sin on his part, and his own questions about what is going on. "Complete trust in God is encouraged by the spiritual perspective of the account and the fact that God exercised total control over Satan" (from the introduction to the book of Job, Hebrew-Greek Study Bible, New International Version). Job stopped his arguing (see *40:4-5*) and repented of his arrogance (*42:1-6*).

Suffering and pain, hardship and adversity have been with us since the beginning (*Genesis 3:2-3, 16-19; 4:6-8*; see *Exodus 1:11; Psalm 27; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9; 4:7-9; 2 Timothy 4:14-18*). Like Job, we wonder Why? The residue of Adam's sin stained the hearts of humanity, and God, in His sovereignty, "abandoned [humanity to their free will] to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired" (*Romans 1:24*). Paul gives us a picture of what that looks like in the rest of chapter 1.

James 1:2-18 James, the half-brother of Jesus, repented of his hostility towards Jesus because of His resurrection (see *1 Corinthians 15:7*), and became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church (*Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18ff; Galatians 1:19; 2:11-14*). Josephus says he was martyred by the High Priest soon after the death of Festus—about the year 62. But before James died he wrote the letter bearing his name to the Jewish believers who had been scattered across the nations because they held dear to the Name of Jesus. He wrote to them about a lifestyle based on a vital relationship with God. He begins by helping them make sense of their suffering and pain.

vv.2-4 James knows you can't always outrun the storms—the troubles that come your way—but there are some tent pegs you can use to hold the tent down when the winds tear through the landscape of your life. James is talking about major storms—not the day-to-day aggravation of leaves blown off the trees that someone has to clean up. It's amazing to see James way of dealing with these "hurricanes of life," **he considers them an opportunity for great joy**. Remember, James wrote to people who had lost family and fortunes—and would likely lose their lives for the sake of Christ. None of us know what is coming our way. It may be "calm winds and placid waters" that allow us to rest for awhile. Or it may be a category 5 storm that demands our best efforts. But everything we faces gives us the chance to **test our faith** and prove that our wings can take us above the storm, **developing our endurance**. "Each victory will help you in some other to win." Then we will know we are growing in grace, resting in the strength of Jesus (*Philippians 4:13*), **needing nothing** but Him (see *Psalm 27:13-14*). Jerry Bridges gets our attention by writing, "For the believer all pain has meaning; all adversity is profitable. There is no question that adversity is difficult.... It often appears completely senseless and irrational, but to God none of it is either senseless or irrational. He has a purpose in every pain He brings or allows in our lives. We can be sure that in some way He intends it for our profit and His glory" (quoted by Samuel R. Chand in *Leadership Pain*). "The sufferings and trials of life are never wasted when we give them and our total selves to God" (Paul Cedar).

vv.5-8 There is wisdom of man that comes from the experiences of life. We call it street smarts. But when we are facing crippling circumstances we need the **wisdom of God** (see *1 Corinthians 1:25*). And we can

have it if we fulfill two conditions: (1) **we ask Him for it**. I recognize I need it. There is plenty of darkness in me that clouds judgment and clear thinking, but there is none in God. Get out of the darkness and into the light (*1 John 1:5-7*). **Our God is generous and He won't find fault (NIV)** with us for asking. (2) **Ask in faith, with no doubting**. Faith and doubting are mutually exclusive terms. You can have faith and you can have doubting, but you cannot have doubting faith. If it's "yes to God" one day and "yes to me" the next, I will never make it safely to shore in the storm. I will be **blown and tossed by the wind**. (3) Receive His wisdom; **He will give it to you**. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." (see *Proverbs 3:5-6*).

vv.9-11 One of the major storms that hits us all is finances. We consider ourselves **poor** or we are considered **rich**. Some of us don't have enough; most of us have plenty (though we might wish for more). We begin a series on "Generosity" September 6. So we will not discuss this paragraph any further except to say that God is calling us all (rich and poor) to live with the same priorities: we are the Lord's. The best is yet to come.

vv.12-15 James comes back to the theme of **patiently enduring testing and temptation**. In vv.2-4 he instructs us on "ways to profit" from the troubles that come our way. In vv.12-15 he is walking us through the process of dealing with them so that we don't wallow around in the stench of **death**. Settle it in your heart: **God is never tempted to do wrong, and He never tempts anyone else**. He does not deal in *death and darkness; He is the God of Life and Light*. When we are tempted we shouldn't shake our fist at God, believing He has put us in this position. Rather, we should run to God *who is faithful to show you a way out so you can endure* (see *1 Corinthians 10:12-13*). The devil knows exactly the bait to use to **lure and entice us (ESV)**. It is his clever use of **our desires**. Someone said, "If temptation struck no responsive chord, it would not be temptation." The time to run from temptation is at the first sign of enticement. Don't play with it; don't nibble at the bait, the devil is a clever angler and knows how to work the bait. If you don't run he will hook you every time. All of us can testify to the effectiveness of his strategies (see *Ephesians 6:11*) and the pain of **sin and death** he brings to our lives (see *Romans 1:18ff*). Sin never adds to the quality of our lives; it always subtracts. Be smart! Keep your eyes on Jesus. He will get you across the finish line.

vv.16-18 James concludes this discussion of trials and temptations by screaming at the top of his lungs: **Don't Be Misled (deceived [NIV and ESV]). Good and perfect gifts come from God, the Father of heavenly lights**. Rest assured, the devil does not love and does not have a wonderful plan for your life. If it has the appearance of darkness have nothing to do with it. Satan's domain is darkness (see *John 3:19-21 and 1 Peter 2:9*); he is a murderer and his native language is lies (see *John 8:44*).

APPLY

A

Be comfortable with some silence as people think back to the sermon or reread the text. Answer honestly. You don't have to answer every question.

1. What stuck out to you in what you heard in the sermon or read in the text?
2. What tends to prevent you from having joy in trials? What tempts you to give up instead of leaning into God to endure?

3. Reread James 1:5. In times of trouble, do you ask God for wisdom? Why or why not?
4. In speaking about temptation and sin, Paul Tripp has said, "the evil outside of us hooks to the evil inside of us". Why is it important to know that "temptation comes from our own desires" (James 1:14)?
5. Speaking of God, our Father, James says, "He never changes" (v. 17). In what way(s) is that good news?

R

RESPOND

The purpose of this section is to take action with the truths you're learning. Answer honestly. Find someone who will hold you accountable to living out your response to Scripture.

1. As Christians, we do not want to belittle the role of spiritual warfare (see *Ephesians 6:10-20*, for example). However, we also cannot belittle our own desires that lead us into sin. James 1:14-15 (ESV) says, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death". What are those desires of yours that temptation seems to "hook" onto? Here is a list to get you thinking: love of money (or fear of being poor), love of pleasure, love of approval/acceptance (or fear of rejection), love of ease and comfort, love of respect, love of control, etc... What are some specific ways you tend to be tempted?
2. Troubles of any kind, be they the college student who chose to buy new Nikes and can't pay rent, the daughter who is holding her mom's hand before cancer surgery, the person sick at home with COVID not knowing if they will heal, another missed promotion at work, choosing sin over God's plan, losing a close loved one, feeling betrayed by a friend, a car wreck, miscarriage, pandemic, world gone to pot, whatever the troubles are, how we respond is crucial. How have you responded in the past to hardship? Name a specific trouble and how you responded.

In light of James 1, how does God's truth direct you to respond if that trouble (or any other) comes again?