

# Suffering Successfully

## Part I

James 1:1-8

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I would like to have you turn to the book of James. Martin Luther called this little letter "a right strawy epistle." But with all respect to him I believe the book is a right substantial epistle. The theme of this book is genuine, honest faith. As far as James is concerned, honesty is not the best policy; it's the only policy. The book of James is basically a cry of outrage against hypocrisy. James speaks against some of the great social ills of his day and ours -- racism and oppression and warmongering. But he also speaks out against the secret sins that we all cherish, the sins that we cover up and are never quite willing to judge and put away, the inner sins of pride and defensiveness and jealousy. I get the very uncomfortable feeling when I read through this book that James has been reading my mail, or worse yet, my mind. He puts his finger on some areas that really hurt. There are 54 imperatives in the 108 verses of this book. James believes that the Word is something to obey.

Today let's look at the first paragraph, verses 1 through 8. Verse 1 is a brief introduction:

**James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the dispersion: Greeting.**

It is not clear from the letter itself who the author is, except that his name is James. There are a number of men in the New Testament who bore that name. There were two apostles -- James the son of Alphaeus<sup>1</sup> and James the son of Zebedee -- who are well known to us since they were part of the apostolic band. But we are quite sure that neither of these men wrote this book. There was another James, James the son of Joseph and Mary, who was the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. I believe it is this James who is the author.

I wonder if you have ever thought what it must have been like to have Jesus as an older brother. We know from the Scriptures that he developed as a normal child. He grew intellectually, socially, physically, and spiritually. He was like any other child, with one very crucial exception: he never sinned. And you can imagine what it would be like to have an older brother who never sinned. Jesus always did what his mother told him -- the first time. He always picked up his socks. He always washed the ring out of the bathtub. He did everything right, and I'm sure that, inadvertently, Mary must have favored him, because she knew who he was. It must have been very difficult for her not to have a very special feeling for this boy.

I think the consequence is predictable. His brothers and sisters began to resent him. They did not believe in him. In fact, they thought he was insane and on one occasion tried forcibly to take him and put him away. He was a constant source of embarrassment to the family. He was always saying things that put them on the spot, and they grew up to despise him. But in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul refers to the resurrection of Jesus and recounts the appearances of Jesus to various individuals. He appeared to Cepheus (i.e., Peter), and then to 500 brethren at one time, and then he appeared to *James*. I think this must have been a very emotional meeting, for when James saw the risen Jesus he realized that he had lived all of his life with the Lord of glory. He realized personally what the name Emmanuel meant: God with us.

The introduction to this letter is very significant. If I were writing it, this would be a great opportunity to do a bit of cosmic name dropping: "James, the brother of Jesus." That would have been very impressive. But not to James. Because he realized that his unique relationship to Jesus came through supernatural descent, not through any natural descent. It wasn't his relationship to Jesus through Mary that counted; it was the relationship that he sustained after Jesus became Lord in his life.

We know something about James from early church historians. We know they called him James the Just, which gives us some indication of his character. They called him "Camel-knees," because he had acquired heavy calluses on his knees from hours in prayer. He has a great deal to say about prayer in this book. He was martyred by being thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, and his body was stoned beyond recognition. He gave up his life for what he believed. One indication of the strength of a man's belief in whether or not he is willing to die for it.

Then we have a word about the recipients of this letter:

**"To the twelve tribes in the dispersion."**

The 12 tribes are the 12 tribes of Israel. James is a thoroughly Jewish book. These are Christian Jews to whom he is writing, who were dispersed throughout the world. The Greek word "diaspora" means "to sow throughout." These were Jews God had sown throughout the world as the result of many scatterings and captivities and persecutions. These people had received Jesus as their Messiah. Perhaps Jews who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost had spread the gospel to them. And now James is writing to them to encourage them and instruct them.

These were people who were suffering. This is a constant note throughout the book. They were suffering because they were Christians. Businessmen had lost their jobs, and their shops were being boycotted. Young people had been thrown out of their homes. Children were mocked and turned out of the Jewish schools. They were hated and despised. The Gentiles hated them because they were Jews, and the Jews hated them because they were Christians. They had no place to go. Life was indeed grim.

The third aspect of the introduction is a brief salutation: "Greeting." But "greeting" is a very poor translation of the Greek term. The word is not "greeting" but "Rejoice!" "Be satisfied!" What a strange word to address to these persecuted people. How could they rejoice in their present circumstances? Well, James answers that question in the next paragraph.

There is one problem that those of us who work on college campuses face, over and over again. It is the problem of the justice of God: "Why do the innocent suffer?" James picks up this issue immediately, because it is one that was on the minds of these people as well. The problem of suffering was not a theoretical problem to them. They were suffering, and they needed to know what relationship this had to their Christian life. James does not provide a complete explanation to the dilemma but he does tell them how they can utilize suffering in their lives. James writes,

**Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials<sup>1</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**

Now there are at least two things that James says about suffering in this paragraph. The first is that suffering is *inevitable*. He does not say, "Count it all joy, my brethren, if you meet trials," he says, "Count it all joy *when* you meet trials." Trials are not optional. Peter writes, "Don't think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing has happened unto you. But rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings; so that when he is revealed in his glory you will be revealed also." Suffering is a normal part of the process God uses to bring us to glory. It is not something strange. Christians will suffer. We must not ignore the inevitability of that suffering.

Recently I heard a story of a man who was riding on a subway. It was quite crowded and he had to face the door. He was prone to motion sickness and he began to get quite sick. The train raced into the station, the door opened, and the man became violently ill. The doors closed and the train sped on into the night. There happened to be a man standing on the platform waiting to get on the train at this particular door. In utter dismay he turned to the man behind him in line and said, "Why me?" I think that is sometimes the way we feel. "Why me, Lord?"<sup>1</sup> But we shouldn't be surprised. Suffering is no accident. It is the normal experience of every believer.

James writes, "Count it all joy when you meet *various* trials . . ." The word translated "various" comes from the Greek word on which our word "polka dot" is based. It means variegated or diversified. The point seems to be that we suffer in different ways. But everyone suffers in some way. That is the first thing James wants us to know. Suffering is inevitable. Don't be surprised when it comes.

The second thing he says is that suffering is purposeful: ". . . for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." The process begins with suffering, which leads to steadfastness or endurance and this results in a perfect and complete man. The word "perfect" means mature; the word "complete" refers to all our component parts. God's goal is to make you perfect and complete, mature in every part, lacking in nothing. What a strong expression -- lacking nothing! God wants you to be a complete person who is able to face any situation. God's desire is to fulfil you now, to give you every resource that you need in order to live the kind of life for which you are looking. He wants to make you mature and complete. And there is only one way he can get you there: through the route of suffering. Suffering will drive you to God, or it will drive you to despair. If it drives you to God, and you lay hold of his resources, then he makes his power available to you and you are able to endure.

The Greek word used for "endurance" is the word "hupomone," meaning to remain under, to hang in there, to persevere in any situation. Vince Lombardi had a plaque on the wall of the Packers dressing room: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." This is a description of God's man or woman. They can be tough, they can stand fast, they can endure, no matter what the pressure may be. And when endurance has its perfect work, i.e., if we continue to endure, then God begins to round us out and fulfil us and complete us.

God looks at your life and mine, and he sees inadequacies and areas of dis conformity to Jesus Christ. So he moves to complete us in those areas. And he does so by bringing suffering into the very area that he wants to build. Suppose he sees lovelessness there. Do you know what he will do? He will bring you into contact with the most irascible, unloving, difficult person you ever met. And you will learn to love him by counting on Jesus Christ. Or suppose there is an area of defensiveness, or maybe there is jealousy, or an unforgiving spirit. He will bring something into your life that will reveal what you're really like, and you'll need to lay hold of the resources of Jesus Christ. By so doing you will become mature in that area. And so the Lord will go right through your life from A to Z, and he will mature you in every area.

The only thing that impairs the process is our refusal to yield. If we do not allow endurance to have its perfect work, if we resist and struggle against God, then he can't achieve his desired end and we fail to mature. You see, Jesus wants to make us into good wine. So he takes the grape and squeezes it between his fingers. And if we be come unyielding and resist his fingers, then he cannot do his work. But if we yield, he makes us sweet wine.

The problem is that we do not like the fingers that God uses. Do you realize that the people who are squeezing you right now, the circum stances that are pressing in on you, are the fingers of God? They are simply extensions of the hand of God. That is why Peter says, "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." God is behind those fingers. The suffering you are experiencing now was determined from eternity to perfect you. And so James says, "If you let steadfastness have its full effect, you will be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

That expression is so encouraging to me. Lacking in *nothing*. The Bible tells us that strength comes out of weakness. When you learn to yield to suffering and accept your *weakness* and allow Christ to have his way in your life, then you are strong; but it is only when you are weak that you can learn this principle, and you can become a mature, complete individual, lacking nothing.

James now begins to consider some of the things that impede this pro cess in our life. The first of these impediments is found in verses 5 through 8. If you have a Revised Standard Version it appears that these verses have no connection with the preceding paragraph. But in the Greek verse 5 starts with a connecting word which should be translated "But." James says,

**[But] if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.**

We have all counted upon this passage at times when we have needed wisdom. We discover that God gives wisdom with no strings attached, as he promises here. He is the God who gives, and he delights to pour out his wisdom. He gives it abundantly and fully. We've learned to count on this verse in that way. But that is not the primary application of the verse. The basic application is to times of suffering. When you suffer and don't know what to do--ask God, and he will give you wisdom.

Wisdom is applied knowledge; it is knowledge put to use. Many of us *know* the principle that is spelled out in verses 2, 3, and 4. We know that suffering comes to perfect us. But how do we put that knowledge into practice in a specific situation of suffering? What do we do? Do we stay where we are, do we move elsewhere, do we look for release, or do we expect God to fulfil us where we are? What do we do? "Well," James says, "in a situation like that, ask God. He will let you know what to do. He will let you know how to react in that particular situation. He will not fail you."

But there is one proviso: we must ask in faith. Now, James is not talking about the initial faith that places us in Christ, or even the faith that sustains our relationship with Christ. To James, faith is utter abandonment to the will of God. James is saying that we can have wisdom if we are willing to do anything that God wants us to do. If we are willing to stay in that hard place, if we are willing to go, if we are willing to lose our job, if we are willing to give up our girl friend or our boyfriend, if we are willing to let our child go, if we're willing to do anything God wants, then he will give us wisdom. He will let us know what to do.

But if we are double-minded, if we want what God wants . . . but we also want what *we* want, then, says James, "Let not that man think he'll receive anything from the Lord." To restate the principle: the basis on which God gives his wisdom is our willingness to do anything that God tells us to do. If we abandon ourselves to his will, James says, God will give us his wisdom. Do you see that?

I've learned one aspect of this truth recently. Some time ago one of my Christian brothers, who really loves me, came to me and told me about a problem in my life. He told me that I appear to be afraid to look foolish. He began to cite some examples in my campus ministry. And he was right he really skewered me. And I saw it. I'm willing to do anything except look like a fool. I hate to look like a fool. I don't mind if people disagree with me, but it kills me when they laugh at me and I look foolish. I wasn't willing to be what Paul says the apostles were -- the off-scouring of all the world, the garbage of the world. That offends me. I don't like to look like a fool.

Monday morning I walked onto the campus and there was a front page spread in the Stanford Daily on our college ministry at Stanford. I had spent about an hour with one of the men on the editorial staff of The Daily two weeks earlier, telling him about our program. I was very careful about how I said things, and I went away from the interview convinced that he was going to write that article well. But when it appeared, the article ripped us to shreds. They misquoted me, and I looked like a fool. People all over the campus were laughing, and I knew they were.

My first thought was, "I'm going to write a letter to the editor, and I'm going to defend myself." And God said, "No, you aren't." Then I thought, "Well, I'll write a letter to all the brothers and sisters on the campus." And God said, "No, you won't." And for a week I squirmed. We went in to see the Dean of the Chapel on Wednesday, and I blew it again. And the man who was with me very lovingly pointed out, again, that I was still trying to look good. I was defending myself. Finally I had to come to the place where I was willing to say, "Okay, God. I'll look like a fool." And it is only by the grace of God that I can say that. But I'm willing now to look foolish. And you know, the result of this decision is a tremendous sense of release and peace over this issue. I can genuinely do what James says. I can rejoice in suffering, because I know that God is dealing with an area of my life that needs to be corrected, and I'm willing now to let God do whatever he wants.

*Thank you, Father, for your Word that cuts so cleanly and speaks so pointedly to our need. It will not let us get away with shoddiness and indifference, but deals with us in every area of our life. We thank you for this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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