

Dependable or Double-Minded?

James 1:1-18

Sometimes people have the mistaken impression that just because they follow God and do what he says everything in life should turn out great. No more problems, difficulties or disappointments. Those who first read James' letter two thousand years ago thought the same. Why does life often seem so hard even after we commit ourselves to Jesus? This is where James begins his letter and this is where we'll begin.

Thought for prayer:

Give us the wisdom we need so that we will remain steadfast when trials come and so that our very lives might become a gift we give back to you in gratitude.

Part 1. Investigate

James 1:1-18

1. How are perseverance and maturity developed in us by enduring trials (vs. 3-4)
2. What role does God play when we face trials and when we face temptations (vs. 2-16)?
3. Think of trials or temptations you are currently facing. How can this passage encourage you to depend on God?

Part 2. Connect

Scripture to scripture

Testing and Temptation

James also offers a brief primer on temptation in this first chapter of his letter. He tells us that God tests, but he does not tempt. The purpose of a test or trial is to reveal what is inside (the character of a person). The point of temptation is to cause someone to fail. When Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the desert (Deuteronomy 8: 2; 13: 1-5) it was not God's purpose for them to fail. Rather, God's purpose was for good. As James says in 1: 12-18, God doesn't give temptations. He gives good gifts instead. Sin brings death (1: 15). God's gifts on the other hand bring us forth, giving birth to new life in us by his word of truth (1: 18)

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What was the purpose of various trials God sent Israel according to Amos 4: 10-11?

We must be careful not to lightly brush away the pain and sorrow that comes with suffering and trials, as if to say they don't really matter. They do matter and they mark us deeply. At the same time, when we are able to look back, we can see that God's hand was in our lives during those troubled times, and that he helped us grow in character, in strength and in our closeness to him. Even more than that, James says the early Christians were a kind of "first fruits of all he created" (1: 18). The first fruits were offerings called for in the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 18: 3-5; 26: 1-10; Numbers 18: 8-12). These sacrifices of just a part of a harvest symbolized that the whole harvest belonged to God. Likewise, for James, the early Christians symbolized a much larger harvest of all God's people who were to be made alive by his Word That is indeed cause for joy.

Part 3. Reflect

The Process of Character

The musical based on Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* begins in France in the early 1800s. An ex-con, Jean Valjean, is on his way to see his probation officer after nineteen years on a chain gang. He stops at the house of a bishop, where he is welcomed warmly with a hot meal and a night's stay; Valjean repays this kindness by stealing the bishop's silverware. The next day he is captured by the police and returned to the bishop for confirmation of his thievery.

Yes, the bishop confirms, this man stayed with him the previous night. Then the bishop turns to Valjean and asks why he didn't take the candlesticks too? They could have been sold for two hundred francs. He should have taken them along with the flatware.

The police are shocked. What Valjean told them was true? He hadn't stolen the silver? It had been given to him, an ex-con, by the bishop? They can hardly believe it. But the bishop insists and sends the police on their way without the thief

Before Valjean leaves, however, the bishop tells him, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!" As a result, Valjean's life is radically transformed, and we see him sacrificing dramatically for others through the rest of the story.

The over sixty million people worldwide who have seen and heard the musical based on Hugo's novel are just as astonished as the police at the bishop's amazing act of grace. In the face of being clearly wronged, the bishop does not call for punishment but literally redeems Valjean, buying him back from imprisonment and darkness and setting him free for a new life. We wonder if we could ever have done such a thing. How could the bishop have suddenly had this stroke of wisdom, courage and strength to give and forgive so generously?

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The answer is that this was not a spontaneous act of mercy. It was behavior shaped and honed over years. This encounter between the bishop and Valjean is where the musical begins, but it is not where the novel begins.

In the novel we learn those years before, the bishop had opened his spacious residence to the patients from the overcrowded hospital next door, while he himself moved into the tiny hospital. He walked to make pastoral visits so he could distribute his own carriage allowance to poor mothers, widows and orphans. When a subordinate refused to visit a murderer on death row, the bishop did not rebuke the subordinate but went to the murderer and showed him how to be reconciled with God. He even convinced a gang of thieves he once encountered to make contributions to the poor.

For over fifty dense pages Hugo chronicles dozens of similar episodes in the bishop's life before he ever meets Valjean. The dramatic act did not emerge from nowhere but emerged out of a lifelong pattern.

This is the very point James seeks to make in his New Testament letter. Character does not result from a single dramatic act of wisdom, and grace is not fully constructed overnight. Rather, they are built, brick by brick and board by board, throughout a life. James spells out the process clearly in 1: 3-4:

TESTING → PERSEVERANCE → MATURITY

While God's grace may come to us in sudden bursts of light and life, our character is built to maturity and completeness over time and through many difficulties. In 1:12, James adds one further stage in this process, the final result of persevering under trial: the crown of life and so we have:

TESTING → PERSEVERANCE → MATURITY → CROWN OF LIFE

Likewise, selfish, unforgiving, angry or foolish character does not become full blown in us in one day. Rather, James says that this kind of character too is the result of a steady stream of decisions and actions in the face of trials. He lays it out like this in 1:14-15:

EVIL DESIRE → TEMPTATION → SIN → DEATH

Comparing the pattern of evil and sin to the life cycle, James explains that evil desire is first conceived, which then gives birth to sin and ultimately ends in death. Notice how this four-stage process parallels and contrasts with the four stages of a mature and complete character. One ends in the crown of life. The other in death

Because character development is a process that can last years or a whole life, one act of grace is not the end of the road. Neither, however, is one failure. The course of our character is not destined by a single episode. We can change course. For good or for ill, character is built, small step by small step

When we tell the truth on a minor matter rather than slant it in our favor, when we support community efforts to help those without financial resources, when we pray to God in trust that he will get us through a crisis— each of these steps, consistently practiced, leads to mature character And this type of character is not one “blown and tossed by the wind” but one that is stable and unchanging like that of God our Father (1: 6, 17) It is character that does not hoard wealth that is temporary but instead gives generously, as God does, without finding fault with others for being weak or lazy (1: 5,

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11) It is character that will lead not to death but to a crown of life (1: 12, 15)— just as was the case with the good bishop in *Les Misérables*.

What is the main idea in this section?

What is one thing that you can act on based on this reading?

Works Cited

Peau, A. T. (2013). *A Deeper Look at James*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.