



Passing the Tests with Flying Colors:
A personal application of the book of James

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This book was written to Jewish believers who were persecuted for their faith and had fled Jerusalem as refugees, looking for new places to live and work; battling homesickness; experiencing poverty, rejection, sadness and difficulties of many kinds. They were figuring out how to live the Christian life in new contexts, under completely new circumstances. Their experience James identifies as being “tested.”

I want to personalize James’ message to those long-ago believers in Jesus, and make it mine. I want to get everything good I can from the book by looking at it intently, understanding it accurately and rubbing it into my soul.

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I’m jolted a bit by the first instruction: to consider it all joy when I encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of my faith produces endurance. “Consider it” is a decision, a conscious choice about what value to put on an experience I’m having, and therefore how I feel about it.

“Various trials” are “encountered.” I did not ask for them. They arrive and hit me in different ways. A number of them can come to me together, layer upon layer, making me feel shocked and attacked. Every now and then I have the luxury of foreseeing them coming, but I can’t really know how they will actually feel till I’m in them.

My feelings are negative. The trials are unpleasant. By definition I am in some kind of pain, whether mild or severe. But what is a trial? It’s a check, a test, a means for someone who has objectivity to watch and discern what another person is capable of. The Olympic trials weed out inferior athletes and qualify others for the final games. So, too, these trials demonstrate to my God, His angelic hosts, other believers (both previous and present), and future generations whether my faith is strong and capable, mature.

My trials, therefore, are opportunities. I can look at them as good and beneficial to me, not evil sprung on me by a malicious God. I can “reckon” them on life’s balance sheet to be “all joy.”

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“Staying under” the trials and behaving in a godly way through them is very important because it leads to the final goal—my “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” character. The problem is that sometimes I don’t know how to behave or what is the way to “let” or “allow” endurance to have its good result. So often when I’m given a trial my emotions are high and my mind is confused.

God is very happy for me to ask for wisdom about what to do in a trial. He won’t scold me at all. Instead, He’ll give wisdom to me generously, with one condition: I must ask in faith, without any doubting. That is, I must be prepared to rely and act on what He shows me, not decide later whether to do it or not.

The wisdom from God will require me to respond somehow. If I’m not committed to doing so, I will be unstable, undependable, like a wind-driven wave of the sea. In fact, anyone who asks for wisdom with such mental reservations shouldn’t expect to receive it or anything else. God doesn’t promise His wisdom to people who don’t intend to obey Him when they get it.

If I persevere under the trial, though, not only can I fully expect God to give me wisdom, but I can also look forward to receiving an eternal reward when Jesus comes back, the “crown of life” which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Perseverance through my trials not only results in my own character being strengthened and perfected, it also serves Jesus, and demonstrates to everyone that I truly love Him.

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When a poor person has troubles, his poverty underscores his lowly status. When a rich person has problems, his wealth seems to be protecting him. But a poor believer is highly honored in God’s eyes, and should not only glory in the trials, but also in his own high spiritual status and wealth. The rich man should glory in his humiliation, his short lifespan and his pilgrim journey on earth. Trials are temporary. Riches and poverty are temporary.

What is eternal is my identity and position in God. He is my Father and my King, and I am His daughter and servant.

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It's hard to persevere through a trial. Hard enough that God wants to reward me with a crown if I do. Hard enough that I am usually tempted to sin at some point in it. Either I want to give up and quit, or I want to endure but be bitter. I can give in so easily to either temptation.

I can rationalize, excuse and "spiritualize" my irresponsibility or my grudge, but it's not God who is tempting me to sin in those ways, it's my own lust to have my way. It can seem like the best thing to do is to either abandon my post, or attack in rage, but that's not true. If I go ahead and give in to sin, either response will lead me eventually to death, not a better life. Like it did with Cain, sin is knocking at my door, and its desire is for me but I must master it.

Temptation carries me away, seizes me, entices me. God never solicits me to sin; He gives wisdom from above about how to pass the tests honorably. His benevolence and generosity overflow in good and perfect gifts, because He's the Father of Lights, in whom there is no unstable change or hint of malice. He is constantly pure, true, good, radiant, kind, and overflowing with life-giving generosity.

He is the One who gave me the new birth. Just by willing it He made me alive! And why? So I would be the "first fruits" among all His creatures. I am the beginning of His harvest of redemption. He has a glorious plan He's working out in the whole universe, pouring out good gifts all along the way, so I should never say He's left no options for me except to do wrong. He's never hoping I sin, never responsible when I do.

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Since the reason He made me is to be good fruit in His great harvest, I am a living trophy of His redemption and regeneration, a child of the Father of Lights. So I must behave like this: I should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to get angry.

It's hard during a trial to listen well, measure my words, not get angry but be patient. But getting angry won't result in God's righteousness, either in

my character or in the outcome of the trial. Instead, let me purposefully and intentionally put aside the filthiness and leftover wickedness that lurks in my heart, and humbly accept God's word implanted in me. That word is what will save and change me, not anger or intrigue. To the degree I actually do what my heavenly Father says, I will be changed to be like Him.

Because God's word will only change me if I do it; only then. When a typical man looks in a mirror, he habitually forgets how he looked as soon as he walks away. God's word is like a spiritual mirror that reflects my own true condition back to me, and only if I continue looking at it and doing it will I be blessed in what I do. The word of God is a law of liberty. It frees me more and more to be like Christ and live like Him as I look intently, keep steadily looking, and doing it. Matching my behavior to what I see in the word of God is the way for me to grow up.

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One of the hardest ways to grow up is to pass the tests of love and the tongue. If I consider myself very spiritual but I don't control my tongue, I am self-deceived. My "spirituality" is worthless. Let me be truly spiritual, practicing and living out true religion as my Heavenly Father recognizes it, by reaching out to widows and orphans in their distress, and keeping myself unstained by the world's sinful desires, values and attitudes.

For example, let me not treat rich people well and poor people unkindly, and thus fail the test of love. If somebody comes into my group who is educated and beautifully dressed, and another newcomer shows up looking poor or unattractive, and I warmly welcome the rich one, and I rudely ignore the other, I've made myself a judge of others. That is a very wicked distinction, and I'm a corrupt bigot with evil motives, caring more about money, status and influence than about people.

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Actually, if I only recognized true riches and status from God's perspective, I would know it's those who are economically poor who are usually rich in faith and heirs of God's kingdom because they deeply love Him! Thus the poor are more truly wealthy and important than the rich. When I am tempted to dishonor them it's because I judge by appearance, not by heart.

But the attitude of the world's rich should be obvious to me, even if a poor person's heart is hidden. Many rich are bullies, suing others, pushing Christians around in court, hatefully arrogant. Let me not curry favor with them, but let me pass this test by obeying my King's royal law to love my neighbor as myself.

Whenever I play favorites, I'm committing a crime. Like the rich who don't really love anybody but themselves, I am convicted by the law as an offender. One command of God's law says, "Don't commit adultery," and another law says, "Don't murder." If I don't commit adultery by lusting after another person's spouse, but I do commit murder by despising and dishonoring the poor, I'm still a criminal.

Oh God, let me not break any of Your laws, but resolve instead to keep them by being ruled and compelled by Your great law of liberty, the law of loving You and loving others. If I don't, then I'll be judged by a merciless standard. If I do, Your mercy will cover my sins.

Mercy toward everyone—rich or poor—will help me triumph over my judgmental flesh. And when I live in that freedom, God's mercy will triumph over my sins when I face the Judge.

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The problem with just listening to God's word but not doing it is that a passive faith is not going to save me when I'm tested. It's ridiculously useless to me and to others to say I believe and trust in Jesus but not act like it. Suppose a Christian brother or sister needs food and clothing, and I say, "Go safely; be warm and eat healthy," but I don't give them something to eat or wear, what use is that? Those empty words don't do anything for them at all. They have no power. In the same way, faith that has no works is dead, lifeless, because it's detached and inert.

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I want to pass the test of faith's fullness when it comes. A good challenge to a person who claims to have faith is to ask them how they can show their faith without works? Another person asked to "demonstrate faith" on the other hand, could easily show the resulting effects in his life. Maybe a passive person claims to believe in God. Great! Demons believe in Him

also...and we know it's true because they tremble! It's sheer foolishness to think faith without action is any use.

Why, it's no use at all! Abraham demonstrated he was a godly man when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar. His faith expressed itself in action, and as he took initiative according to his belief and trust in God, this matured his faith even further. He fulfilled Scripture: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. That initial faith that God counted as righteousness led to a life of trusting obedience that gradually made Abraham God's friend, someone God could count on. Action is the clear evidence of faith that everyone can see. Here's another good example of living faith: Rahab the prostitute welcomed the messengers of God and sent them out by another way to protect them. Just like a body with no spirit is dead, it's easy to conclude that faith that never passes the test of responsive action is dead.

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I should think long and hard before becoming a teacher in the church, knowing that those who do so will be tested and judged more strictly. Not only will my works be weighed, but also my many words. The thing is, everyone stumbles into saying sinful things. In fact, a test and measure of maturity is my ability to bridle the tongue. Horses are controlled and guided by small bits of steel in their mouths. Ships are huge, powered by powerful winds. Still, a ship can likewise be guided by a very tiny rudder, wherever the pilot wants it to go.

In the same way, even though my tongue is such a small part of my body, it can affect and direct my whole life. It can spark a destructive disaster, like a little spark can start a forest fire. My tongue is a fire; a whole world of sin is in it. My tongue lives in me and behaves in a way that defiles my whole body, sets my future on fire, and is set on fire by hell itself. All kinds of vile things come from it, making me filthy and self-destructive.

Just think: human beings can tame mammals, reptiles, birds, and sea creatures, but no one can tame the tongue. It's restlessly, relentlessly evil and full of deadly poison. The tongue constantly does harm. It kills people. How? By cursing people who are made in God's image, then turning around and praising God. What a strange anomaly.

In nature a spring is either fresh or bitter; fig trees don't give olives, and vines don't grow figs; salt water doesn't suddenly turn fresh. Yet I, with my tongue, bless God and curse people in one breath. That is just not right.

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Instead of using my tongue for destroying my relationships, I can tame it by being filled with the kind of wisdom that demonstrates itself in gentle good behavior. I need God's understanding in order in order to navigate human relationships wisely and pass those tests of godliness.

There is a kind of "wisdom" that is worldly. It springs from bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and results in arrogance and deception. That kind of wisdom is filled with the world's self-indulgence, the flesh's pushiness, and a demonic prideful desire to impress.

Whenever I wonder if this wisdom I'm following is worldly, all I have to do is ask myself whether it's resulting in chaos and every kind of tangled damaging intrigue.

Heaven's wisdom is recognizable by its opposite characteristics. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, unwavering, unhypocritical. With this wisdom, I can make peace by planting peace. Like a gardener plants seeds, I can peacefully do and say small things that will grow into holy goodness and peace in my relationships with people, not disorder and evil.

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Where do my quarrels and conflicts come from? They come from my pleasures that are fighting against me in my flesh. When I'm walking in the flesh rather than in the Spirit I want what I shouldn't have so I hate, which is as bad as murder. I'm envious of what others have that I can't get, so I am tempted to fight and quarrel. I don't have what I want because I don't even think to ask God for it.

Or if I think to pray for it, I don't get it because I've asked for it with wrong motives, just for my own pleasure. I'm like an adulterous wife who prefers other men to her husband when I choose friendship with the world rather than loving my God. Friendship with the world is hostility to God,

so whenever I choose the world's friendship I have made myself God's enemy. He can't be in a prayer-answering relationship with such a traitor. No, His Spirit inside me jealously longs for my complete loyalty and affection.

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Yet when I'm tested and face getting entangled in these situations, He gives me a grace that is greater and can overcome them. That grace is given to me when I stop being proud and choose to be humble. When, like an obedient wife, I yield again to God and resist the enemy, that enemy runs away. Then I have even more room to draw near to my God and He to me.

All the filth and disloyalty that has accumulated on my hands and in my heart can be purified, cleansed, mourned and repented. My trite pleasure-seeking gives way to times of confession, sober reflection, and making up with my Lord. As I come into His presence, lowering and humbling myself, bowing down in great reverence, He will graciously lift me up. He will encourage and promote and honor me eventually.

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He is the One who sets me in the place I belong, and honors each person appropriately. As I'm repenting my own sin, may I resist the temptation to look around at others, judging and speaking evil of them. In fact, when I start focusing on other people's performance, I stop keeping God's laws myself. It's not my role in the universe to be judge and jury, but rather to recognize there is only one Lawgiver, and One Final Judge. He not only makes laws, He has the power to enforce and punish them. He has all wisdom to decide right and wrong. He accurately sees whether people are doing right. He can then punish or reward as He chooses.

Why don't I just relax? Let this process of humbling myself in God's presence extend to biting my tongue and withholding judgment on my brother. Who do I think I am, anyway?

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May I not only pass the test of humility in my attitude toward other people, but also in how I talk about the future. The more humble I am, the less

likely it is that I'll be sinfully cocky when I make plans and talk about them. Instead of saying "I'm moving to a city, will spend a year there, get this much done and see these great results," if I'm really submitting to God I'll say humbly, "If the Lord wills, I'll live. And also, I'm planning to do this or that." May I beware boasting arrogantly as though I can make my own future and am the master of my success. All bragging about the future is evil.

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Actually, I'm not just tested by whether I can keep from wrong. If I know the right thing to do and don't do it, that is also sin.

Let me not be the rich person who has cheated someone else of what is due them, either by laziness or by oppression. Let me not be one of those "farmers" who contracts "harvesters" and then withholds their pay. A person like that should howl with fear and grief because of what's ahead for him. First, everything he bought with that stolen money will rot. Then, he will stand in the judgment and be sentenced for hoarding stolen goods. The very goods will testify against him, rotting and stinking. Then other testimony will fill the courtroom: the cries and laments of the poor people who worked so hard but didn't get paid. Four counts of indictment will be brought against such a rich cheater:

- 1-luxurious living
- 2-a life of careless pleasure
- 3-a fattened heart at slaughter-time
- 4-the unjust murder of the unresisting righteous employee.

The implication is clear: a life of self-disciplined temperance, justice to others, and kind generosity is the godly way for me to pass the test of growing wealth. But a thieving rich man will be judged and condemned by the Lord of heaven's armies.

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When I see the injustices and sins of others, it's hard not to want to retaliate against them. But actually, whenever I suffer injustice I should be patient until the Lord's coming. Just like a farmer attentively waits for the precious produce of the field he's planted, being patient about it, until it

gets the early and late rains, I should also wait patiently and make my heart strong. God is coming to set things right, and His coming is very near.

Even while I am patiently waiting on the Lord to come rescue me, though, I can be tempted to complain against my brothers and sisters who are also waiting around me. I should be very careful to hold back from doing that. Otherwise I will be judged for complaining by the very Lord and Judge whose return is so near. It's like He's standing in the other room, right outside the door, eavesdropping on my private conversations.

To pass the test of patiently enduring unfair treatment, I should think about the example of others who have suffered patiently before me. Think about how many prophets suffered as they spoke in the name of the Lord! May I hold in highest esteem and admiration the ones who endured that suffering. I think of the account of Job's life, how long he endured and through what extreme trials. And then I think of what I learn about God in the story: in all His dealings, as well as in the final result, the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

Most of all, when I'm being treated unjustly, I shouldn't lie. I should always speak the truth and mean what I say, so that it will never be necessary to confirm I'm being honest by swearing to it. It's very important to be the kind of person whose word can be trusted, even when under extreme pressure. Otherwise, if I fail this test and fudge the truth, the Lord will punish me.

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There are some ways I can walk sincerely with others through the tests of life. When I'm suffering, I should pray. When I'm cheerful, I should sing praises to God. When I'm sick because I've sinned, I should call for church elders to come pray for me and anoint me with oil in the Lord's name. I'll then be healed as I confess my sins to them and as they pray in faith for me. Confessing our sins to one another and praying for one another's healing should be a regular part of our church family's life.

Prayer is incredibly powerful when I'm walking with God through a test, not because I'm great, but because He is. I have the example of Elijah, a man like any other, only human. He prayed it would not rain, and it didn't rain for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth grew good fruit.

So we can pray for one another when we're being tested, and thus help each other pass life's tests of faith and integrity. I can also talk to a brother or sister in Christ who is getting off-track, straying off-course from the truth. Suppose I go talk to them, reason with them, persuade them to repent. By turning a sinner from the error of his or her way I can save them from the death that all sin eventually leads to. I've then covered up former sins and protected him from future ones.

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Lord God, Father of Lights, these tests of my faith are given to me as good gifts of life from above, designed to demonstrate the reality of my faith and help me grow in relationship to You. If I fail them, may I quickly repent and humble myself, accepting Your wisdom and obeying quickly. Help me to learn to recognize when I am being tested, and let endurance have its perfect result in my life. As I pass them, may Your Spirit strengthen me in wisdom and power, and draw me nearer to You. I can then help others recognize their tests and pass them, too. We are perfected and equipped for the future together, to our joy and to Your good pleasure. One day You, the Righteous Judge, will give the crown of life to each of us who have loved You. Grant that this word may change me as I look intently at Your perfect law of liberty, the law of love, and abide by it.

In Jesus' precious Name,  
Amen.

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