Endure Suffering, Seek Wisdom

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Preacher: Joey Snodgrass

[0:00] So tonight we're beginning our series through the book of James that will go through the rest of the semester. So you can open with me to the book of James. James is immediately after the book of Hebrews towards the end of your Bible.

And I'm really, really excited about spending time together in this book for the rest of this semester. There are some portions of scripture that are deeply theological.
You've really got to nerd out and kind of lock in to pay attention to what's being said and track with the argument that's being made. There are some portions of scripture that are beautifully poetic in their description of life and who God is and what we're called to be in this world.
But the book of James is just right in our face. There's not a lot of things that are difficult to understand in the book of James. There's nothing in the book of James that's going to really make us scratch our heads and try to figure out how James arrived at this conclusion or what words he's using to describe what he means.
It's just straight up, will you obey Jesus? Do you live for Jesus? James, from the jump, will not let us escape the fact that the only way to know if you believe in the book of James is the book of James.
[1:51] The book of James is the book of James is the book of James. That's the only proof positive that you actually believe the gospel.

What does your life tell the people around you about what you believe? The book of James is all about action. This book has more commands per verse than any other book in the entire Bible. There are 108 verses in this book and there are about 60 commands that James places on our lives. So every two verses, James is telling us to do something, to live a certain way.
And so James is very practical. It's very much like reading Proverbs or the Sermon on the Mount. It's very wisdom oriented. It's very obedience and action oriented.
And I don't think we should shy away from that. I think sometimes we can get a little squeamish when someone's just telling us what to do and placing commands on our lives and we can think, okay, yeah, but we're not earning our salvation.
[2:56] We're saved by grace. We're saved by Christ's death for us. We're not saved by what we do. So let's cool it with the obedience talk. But I don't think we need to shy away from books like this and portions of scripture that are like this.

Yes, Jesus saved us by grace. There's nothing that you've done to earn that. But why did he save you? Why has Jesus saved us?
It's for good works. The purpose that Christ saved his people for is so that they would obey him and do good works. And so both these things fit together in Ephesians 2, 8 through 10.
Ephesians 2 says, By grace you've been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It's the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one can boast.
In verse 10 he says, We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. Why? For good works, which he prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.
[4:00] If you're a Christian, the reason Christ saved you by his death is so that you would obey him and glorify him. And that's what the book of James is all about.

But the goal of our study of James isn't for me to just tell you week after week, Hey guys, do better. Hey, do more. Do better.
Be more obedient. That's not the only goal. Because if you don't believe in Jesus, you can't do better. If you're not a Christian, you can't get rid of sin in your life. You're enslaved to it.
And you'll continue to struggle against it. And so if you don't believe in Jesus, you can't do better. You need to know Christ by faith. And if you do know him, if you are a believer, you must live for him.

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And so if you're not a Christian, I hope this book will convict you this semester. But until you know Christ, you won't be able to obey this book.
[5:02] You must know him. And if you are a Christian, this book will convict all of us. This book will get in our face and show us our sin.

It'll hold up the mirror of God's word to our hearts and show us how far short we fall. And the goal isn't just to be like, okay, I'm a bad person. Let me just try harder. The goal is to lead you to repentance.
We are Christians, but repentance should mark our lives. We fall short. And when we recognize our sin, we should go to God and confess our sins and turn from them. But the good news is, if you're a believer, through the Spirit's help, you can obey this book.
You can be faithful to live this book out. Not perfectly, but you can be obedient. So we'll cover verses 1 through 8 this evening. We'll cover it in three sections.
The first one is the greeting in verse 1. Greeting. So if you look at James 1 verse 1 with me, this book begins with these words.
[6:07] James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes in the dispersion, greetings. Who is James?

James is the half-brother of Jesus. James' parents are Joseph and Mary, and he's just a half-brother of Jesus because Joseph wasn't actually Jesus' father.
Mary was his only earthly parent. But this is Jesus' half-brother. There are several men named James in the New Testament, so how do we know it's Jesus' brother?
There was another prominent James. He was a disciple of Jesus and an apostle that Christ sent out. How do we know it wasn't him? That other James was the brother of the apostle John.
The reason we know it wasn't him is because that James was killed very early on. You can read it in Acts 12. He's one of the first people to be killed for their faith in the book of Acts.
[7:08] There's another James that rises to prominence, Jesus' half-brother, and he rises to prominence to be the leader or the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, there where Christianity was born, in the capital city where Christ was crucified.

And this James that wrote the letter, Jesus' half-brother, actually did not believe in Jesus for a long time. You can read in John 7 that none of Jesus' brothers actually followed him.
None of them actually believed what he said. And we kind of look back at them and think, like, really? Like, your brother was Jesus and you didn't believe in him.
But to be fair to them, their parents literally worshipped their older brother. Like, he never did anything wrong. And so you can think maybe there's some jealousy or some animosity underneath the surface there.
But they rejected Christ. But at some point, James came to saving faith in Jesus and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem.
[8:09] But I want you to think about how he started this letter. How could he have started this? How could he have introduced himself to us? He could have flexed and said, I'm the brother of Jesus.

He could have said, I'm the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, the most prominent church in Christianity at the time. Think about all the stories he could have told. Think about all the knowledge he could have given about himself here in this first verse.
But look at where he starts and how he identifies himself. A servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord owns him.
The Lord bought him with his blood. And so James willingly and humbly identifies himself as a slave of Christ. Someone who is subservient to both God and Christ.
And you notice God and Jesus are put on the exact same level here. And he uses the more formal title for Jesus here, calling him Lord Jesus Christ.
[9:18] Lord is how God is referred to in the Old Testament. Jesus is his name and Christ is his title. It means Messiah or anointed one.

How do we want to be recognized? How do we identify ourselves in public when we have the chance to introduce ourselves to someone?
It's most likely using things that we're good at. I wrestle or I play this sport or I'm good in this class or by what we've accomplished or what we're known for.

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But James says, here's what you need to know about me. Here's the most important thing about me. I'm a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the most important fact about my life. James recognizes he was bought with a price. And so now his life is marked by obedience to his master. And James would be faithful to the end.
[10:22] Church history tells us that he was also killed for his faith. He was unwilling to give up his belief in Christ and was killed for it. And he's writing to the 12 tribes in the dispersion.

And so what that means is he's writing to Jews who believe in Christ. And so they're dispersed or scattered or exiled. And so we know that when persecution broke out in Jerusalem, when people started dying for following Christ, the Christians scattered to surrounding regions.
They got out of town. And so James is likely writing to his people, people that used to be in his church. He's writing to encourage them wherever they're scattered now, wherever they're living now.
These are Jewish Christians, people who believe in Christ. And this letter was written to strengthen their faith in the face of their suffering.
He wants them to have strong faith in the midst of their difficulty. And what a relevant theme that is. Only the Bible can do this. The Bible is the only book from ancient history that can speak so relevantly to us today.
[11:33] This book was the first New Testament book written chronologically. It was written 2,000 years ago. And as we read it, it's going to address issues in our hearts.

It's almost like James just wrote it today. Only the Bible has the power to speak with such relevance and clarity to our lives today. And this book is about suffering.
This book is about wisdom. This book is about obedience. And some of you are suffering deeply. But all of us are suffering in some way. Life just refuses to go perfect in this broken world.
Life just refuses to go smoothly. And if you're not suffering now, you will be soon. And so this book is deeply relevant for us.
And he begins by saying greetings. And this word literally just means joy. James is basically saying cheers to these people. He wants them to have joy.
[12:33] He's wanting to greet them in the Lord with joy. Now how do you respond to suffering in your life? When things go wrong, when things go slower than expected, when things don't work out like you expected or hoped they would, how do you respond?

Do you lose your temper? Do you mumble? Do you get frustrated? Do you sulk? My guess is you don't respond with joy. That's not a natural response to difficulty.
But that's exactly what James wants us to do. He wants us to respond to suffering with joy and with wisdom. So that leads us to number two, considering it joy.
Considering it joy. We see this in verses two through four. I'll read those verses for us. James says in verse two, count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.
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.
[13:45] James says to count your trials as joy, to consider the difficulty in your life as true joy or complete joy.

This is a command that is not about feeling. It's about thinking. You won't feel joyful when you suffer, but you need to consider it a joy.
Now trials aren't joyful. Trials aren't happy. Suffering is not fun. But all of that produces joyful results. And that's what James wants us to focus on.
But he says that we'll meet trials of various kinds. That phrase means multicolored or diverse or like it says in the ESV, various. And so you'll meet trials of various kinds.
These are big trials like losing a loved one, big trials like your parents divorcing, or smaller ones like getting a bad grade. Just any difficulty you go through.
[14:44] All kinds of trials are temptations that test our faith. There are things in life that are difficult, and we know exactly why they're difficult.

There are things in life that are challenging, and we didn't expect them to be challenging. When we were at Falls Creek this past year, it rained during high school week.
A lot of you were there for that. There was really torrential downpour, some flooding going on. But it was one of the funnest days of rec of my life. I went up to the amphitheater, had never been up there before, which sounds weird.

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But yeah, we went up there, played basketball a lot. There was water everywhere. Went down from the amphitheater, back to our cabin, ran up the hill. We're soaking wet.
As soon as we get back to the cabin, Hudson Murray comes up to me and is like, I think I left my phone up at the amphitheater. I'm like, all right, let's go. And so Evan went with us. It was me, Evan and Hudson, driving back up to the amphitheater to look for Hudson's phone.
[15:44] And I wasn't paying attention, and there were these two girls that were like walking. I don't know why they were walking in the middle of the rain, but they were walking in the rain. And I drove through this huge puddle at full speed and just soaked them.

And I didn't even notice. And Evan was like, I think you just splashed them. And I was like, oh, my bad. And so these girls were just out enjoying a walk in the rain, and some jerk just splashed them with this puddle.
And so I introduced a trial into their life. I wonder if they think about me. But there are things in life, all that to say, that may not seem like they're going to be a trial that end up being very frustrating or very difficult, and those things test our faith.
Suffering and sadness are just ingrained in this life. Why does James call us to be joyful? It's an unnatural response. It's difficult.
Trials aren't happy. Bad things aren't joyful. So is James just asking us to be fake? Is he asking us just to smile through this difficulty? No.
[16:46] He's not calling us to just enjoy the pain for the sake of enjoying pain. He's calling us to embrace the pain because of what the pain produces.

He's calling us to embrace the pain because of who the pain is making us. It's changing us as people. It's changing us as believers for the better.
And so he says we need to enjoy the trial, not because the trial is inherently enjoyable, because that trial will produce results in us. And that's what he says in verse three.
You know that the testing of your faith, these trials produce steadfastness. Trials make you stronger. And in life, there's no progress without pain.
There's no progress without difficulty. And so we consider trials joy because they change us, because of who they make us. In verse four, he says, and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
[17:57] The ultimate result of trials in your life is perfection. One day before Christ, you will be perfect.

And at least part of the reason for that will be because of the trials you went through. James is saying, you will be made perfect through your suffering.
You will be made like Christ through your suffering. And this is an eschatological promise. This is an end times promise. This is something that we won't fully experience until we're with Christ in heaven.
But James is saying, that's what James wants us to think about. He wants us to think about that day and think about the perfection we'll enjoy because of the suffering that we endured. And there's a hymn we like to sing here in our church.
And one line talking about heaven says, the calm will be the better for the storms that we endured. So in other words, we'll enjoy heaven's peace more fully because of the difficulty we experience in this life.
[19:05] We know what it's like to suffer. And when I was in high school, I played football for Mustang and I enjoyed it, but there were very many moments that were not enjoyable.

Summer workouts were brutal. Any football players in here tonight? Yeah, you know what I'm talking about. Summer workouts were brutal, not fun at all. And I was a freshman going into high school and working out and my body was not ready for that.
I thought I was going to die and I probably almost did. But I hated what it was doing to my body in the summer, but I enjoyed winning games in the fall.
And it fused this lesson into my mind that if they don't make us suffer in the summer, we're not going to be any good in the fall. And so it taught me to start to enjoy the workouts, not because they were fun, but because I recognized what this was leading towards.
I recognized what results this would produce down the line. And so I learned to embrace the pain because of what it produced. And this is what James is telling us to do. This is how James is encouraging us to view suffering in this life.

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[20:15] And this is actually how Christ viewed his suffering on the cross as well. In Hebrews 12, 2, the author tells us to look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter, the one who makes us perfect, of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And so Jesus, through his suffering on the cross, was able to endure it because of his joy. Not joy in the act of being crucified, but joy in looking forward to the results that this suffering would bring. And James is asking us to adopt that perspective about our suffering. One pastor said this, and it's a good quote, so I'm going to share it with you.
He said, if we live only for the present and forget the future, our trials will make us bitter, not better. If we live only for the present and forget the future, our trials will make us bitter and not better. And so this is what faith does. Faith helps us endure because faith focuses on the future and our faith is tested and strengthened and revealed in times of trouble.
[21:36] And so we celebrate trials. Not because they're fun, but because we recognize what it's doing in our lives. And it takes wisdom to view our trials this way.

It takes perspective and wisdom to view your present circumstances in light of future realities. Is anyone in here wise enough to do this on their own?
I'm not. Does anyone have this wisdom? What do we do if we don't have this wisdom? Well, that leads us, number three, to asking for wisdom.
Asking for wisdom wisdom in verses five through eight. James says in verse five, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him. Now, James is structured in an interesting way. So there's not like, it's not necessarily tied together logically in terms of like we can see his flow of thought, but he ties it together in terms of similar words.
[22:45] And so James was likely a very good preacher to listen to because he would connect these themes together by similar words. And so if you look at verse four, he says, trials will make us perfect so that we're lacking in nothing.

And James knows it requires wisdom. And so he says, if anyone lacks wisdom, same word, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach.
What is wisdom? Wisdom is the ability to live out the truth. Knowledge is understanding the truth. Wisdom is living the truth. It's applying what you know to be true to everyday life. And so knowledge is knowing about something.
Wisdom is knowing how to do it. Knowledge understands what. Wisdom understands how. And so to illustrate that, my dad is incredible at fixing things.
[23:49] He can fix anything that's broken. I can barely fix a sandwich. But he can fix any car, anything that's got an engine, anything that's broken, he can fix it. My brain is not wired that way.

And so he can hear the sound a car is making and he can know what's wrong with it. Almost immediately. And I don't understand how he's able to do that. I can take care of our cars, keep them running to an extent, but I'm not super handy in terms of more complex issues.
And so my dad can say, oh, your car's not starting, you need to replace the starter. I can say the same thing. I can actually diagnose that. I'm like, okay, the starter needs replaced.
My dad and I can come to the same understanding of what's wrong with the car. But his wisdom knows how to fix it. I don't know how to fix it. And so that's the difference between wisdom and knowledge.
Wisdom not only knows what's true, but knows how to act on what's true. And so there's a preacher by the name of H.B. Charles. I would encourage you to look him up. He's a great preacher. But he said this.
[24:52] He said, wisdom teaches knowledge how to act. That's a powerful definition. Wisdom teaches knowledge how to act. And so what should you do if you don't have wisdom?

Ask God. The way the ESV reads, it kind of makes it seem permissive almost. Be like, okay, yeah, asking God is an option, but James says this more forcefully.
He intends it more forcefully. If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God. He must ask God. And I think our answer would be different. If one of you came to me and said, hey, I'm lacking wisdom.
I really need to know how to build a career. I really need to know how to do this. I think our answers would be, okay, you need experience. You need someone to teach you. You need to make some mistakes on your own before you figure out how to lead people or how to work this job.

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James says, ask God. Ask him for wisdom. And he says that God gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given to him.
[25:58] That word reproach is like mocking or roasting someone. It's an insult. And so James is saying that if you ask God for wisdom, he's not going to make fun of you.

He's not going to grumble that you're coming to him again and be like, okay, yeah, you need wisdom because you're an idiot. Like, here, try this. God does not reproach us. God does not make fun of us when we recognize what needs we have and we go to him in prayer and ask him for help. And so if you lack wisdom, ask God for it. God wants to make you wise. James says, it will be given him. This is an amazing promise.
Are there times in your life where you feel like an idiot? Do you feel like a fool? I do too. And that's good. That's a good thing to feel at times because we recognize our lack of wisdom.
We recognize that we don't have everything we need to get through this difficulty. I love the story of Solomon when he first became king of Israel.
[27:01] The Lord appeared to him in the middle of the night and said, Solomon, I'll give you anything you want. You're the king of Israel. I'll give you anything you want. Just ask and I'll give it to you.

And Solomon could have asked for riches. He could have asked for prominence. He could have asked for honor. He could have asked for military power in the surrounding region. And what he asked for was wisdom.
And he asked for it so humbly. He said, I'm just a little child. I don't know how to go out or come in. I don't know how to lead the army. I don't know how to lead the nation. I need wisdom. And the Lord answered his prayer.
The Lord gave him his request. God wants to make you wise. But just because you get older doesn't mean you'll get wiser.
Wisdom isn't automatic. I've met some old people who are fools. I've met some young people who are wise. So don't just assume that as I get older, I'll automatically get spiritually wise.
[28:03] Wisdom must be sought. You must seek for wisdom. Now, how should we ask? As we're seeking wisdom, how is it that we should ask? Well, there's only one requirement given in verse six.

He says, but let him ask in faith with no doubting. For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.
He's a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. We must ask in faith. Faith is confidence. Faith is assurance. Faith is being sure about what you believe. And so faith and doubt are antonyms.
They're opposites. Faith is confidence. Doubting is lacking confidence. Faith is sure. Doubting is unsure.
[29:01] And so prayer isn't something that we just give a shot, like God's probably not going to answer me, but I'll try. Prayer is confidence. Asking things from the Lord that we are sure he will give us because he's a good father who gives us good gifts.

So two questions. Do you have the humility to ask God for help? Do you have the humility to ask God for help? It's easy to recognize, okay, I'm not good at this.
I didn't do a good job handling that situation. But do you have the humility to go before God and ask him for help? And the second question, do you have the faith to trust that God is good and gives good gifts?
Do you have the faith to trust that God is good and gives good gifts? Both of these things are necessary according to what James says here.
We must ask God for help and humility. We must ask with confidence that he will answer that prayer. And he says that the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.
[30:25] And don't picture so much an individual wave as much as just the constant restlessness of the ocean. If you've seen those videos of storms out in the middle of the ocean, the whole ocean is just surging.

It's high and low. It goes left and right. And so any ship that's on those waves is just getting tossed back and forth. And that's what the person who doubts is like. Unstable, not safe, not walking in wisdom.

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And James says that person shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord. Now sometimes we struggle with doubt. Sometimes doubts arise in our own hearts and in our own minds.
And that's a normal thing. That's something that commonly happens to us as sinners. But we need to be honest with ourselves and recognize that doubting is a lack of faith.
Doubting is a normal temptation that believers go through, but it is a lack of faith in that moment. Faith is certainty. Doubting is uncertainty.
[31:33] And so when you doubt, I want you to recognize that there's a difference in doubting God and being uncertain how he's going to work it out.

So doubting God would be like, of course God would send me through this. He's not going to answer my prayer. He's the one who brought this into my life. That's what doubting God looks like. Being uncertain about how he's going to work it out looks like, I have no idea how God could work this out.
I'm going to pray, but I don't know how this is going to turn out. That's a form of doubting, but it's very different from the type of doubting that James is talking about here.
He's talking about habitually doubting who God is. And he says in verse 8 that he is a double-minded man or literally a double-souled man.
Unstable in all his ways. There's an internal struggle. It's back and forth and up and down. He can't make up his mind whether he trusts God or not. He's staggering back and forth like a drunk man, not sure who he's going to be each day.
[32:45] And trials will eat that kind of person alive. This is the opposite of a perfect and complete Christian that's stable as James would have these believers to be.

This is a broken and fractured person. If you're not currently going through a trial, you will be soon. You will go through a trial soon.
How will you respond? How will you respond? Faith is the key to life and wisdom and joy. Have faith in Christ.
If you believe in him and look to him, you will endure suffering with joy and you will seek wisdom with humility. and it's only through faith in Christ that you'll be able to obey these commands and the other ones listed in this book.
And so, look to Christ and pursue obedience. Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you so much for our time together this evening. We're challenged because we recognize that very often we struggle to have the kind of faith that simply obeys in the face of trial, that has joy in the midst of trial.
[34:02] And so, Father, give us the wisdom we need to count all of our suffering and all of our sorrow as joy, knowing that it's your hand and your plan that is causing us to suffer in this way and it's producing results in us that will lead us to perfection.

We pray that we long to see Jesus and that we'd be faithful to him every day of our lives. And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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