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**Faith Brought to Life:  
When the Bottom Falls Out  
James 1:1-5  
By Matt Hook**

*This is the first in a series on Faith Brought to Life: The Book of James.*

*“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”*

Their circumstances are as different as their responses. Perhaps some of you will understand their circumstances and their responses.

Colleague and fellow pastor David Walls shares these: The date was February 4, 1988. The school bus stopped to let out the boys, the Gragg brothers. It was Aaron’s 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, and as he headed toward the farmer’s frozen pond, the school teacher and a friend of his yelled: “Don’t do that, be careful; don’t do that.” But he did. And as he went sliding across the frozen pond, suddenly it wasn’t frozen anymore and he plunged into the bitterly cold water. His older brother Chad – 12 – instantly did as he’d been taught to do, which was look after his brother, jumped in to save his life. And the younger brother Steve – 8 – but strong for his age, jumped in to do his part. Onlookers instantly called the firemen and ambulances, and they got there and got them out of the water – all 3 of them after 30 minutes – but there were no signs of life in any of them.

Each was sent to a separate hospital. The parents went to the first hospital to find out, “Your son is dead.” Then to the second hospital, “I’m sorry, but we lost him,” and then to the third hospital, “He didn’t make it.” And Mary and Charles Gragg – 43 years old, parents, suddenly find themselves without their 3 sons. And in a town of 2,800 people, where no one knew them particularly well, suddenly they were on everyone’s lips – and the heart of that community went out to them. They kept asking the question of the parents “Is there anything we can do for you?” To which Mary and Charles Gragg simply replied, “No, there is nothing!”

Today, even these examples aren’t too remote. Listen carefully to the following slice of a typical Sunday morning audience at church.

A man and woman, sitting board straight, smiling at every piece of funny piety, are hating each other for letting the romance in their marriage collapse.

A widow, whispering “amen” to every promise of God’s provision, worrying to death because her savings is dwindling.

A father who taught the parenting Sunday School, fuming in his own failure, because he can’t understand the antics of his slightly crazy son. His friend at the end of the row is fuming, but for a different reason. He is always fuming and taking it out on his wife.

An attractive woman in the 10<sup>th</sup> row is absolutely paralyzed, sure she has breast cancer.

A middle-aged guy, with his new Lexus, an obvious Christian success story, wondering if he'll have the guts to tell his boss to take his lousy job and shove it.

A submissive wife of one of the church leaders is terrified because she is being pushed to face up to her closet alcoholism.

And what do you say to Vickie's family, especially Russ and Sarah, about losing your mom as a teenager?

Ordinary people, all of them, and there are a lot more where they come from. What they have in common is that everything is all wrong where it matters most. The bottom has fallen out of their world, different as those worlds may be. And they respond differently.

James, (whose sarcophagus may be traveling the world right now), the half-brother of Jesus, understood our natural responses. As a pastor he had the ability to connect with people and walk with them when life was hard. He wasn't removed from the reality of life. He understood so well that he wrote a New Testament letter that bears his name: the Book of James.

Over the course of this year we will be looking at this very practical book, written to deal with the really tough parts of life. If faith doesn't protect you, does faith even matter? How do you bring your Christianity to bear? We will look at bringing "Faith to Life." And we need to listen to James, because the pressures of our life are immense.

And then there are the little things – the mosquitoes of life, in addition to the tigers. And when you've grown up in the society that pioneered such things as instant pudding, Minute Rice, freeways, one-step cameras, and fast-food restaurants, waiting doesn't come easy. (And when you live in the jungle, it ain't the tiger that kills you, it's the mosquitoes).

In this aspirin age of ours, we've also come to expect instant solutions to our spiritual problems. We don't want a timely struggle with our problems – we prefer to catapult over them. We just want a spiritual "fix" for them, and if one church can't provide, we'll try another one.

And so, James addresses his letter to his scattered and battered audience, and to us. Look at how he addresses his letter: "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.*"

By calling them the "*twelve tribes*" we know that he is writing to Jewish people who had accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior. They had lived in Jerusalem, where James was one of their leaders, but now they are "*scattered among the nations,*" to other cities and countries. After Stephen, the first martyr, was killed, persecution began against the believers. They had been forced to leave, simply to survive. A situation millions and millions of displaced people around the world are still living in. As a result, families and friends were separated, and everyone had to start over.

If you've ever been forced to move from home, your town, or even your church, you understand "*scattered.*" Perhaps it was unemployment, transfer, merger, or buy-out. Or maybe it was for "something better," a new start in a new place. Either way you understand being lonely and isolated, maybe even ignored, as if nobody cares whether you live or die.

But even worse, these people James was writing to were also battered. Look at verse 2: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.*" James doesn't say "Consider it joy IF you face trials...", he says "whenever", because the trials will come. And James says you can't choose your trials. In the Greek, the trials "of many kinds" is the same word used in Genesis, as the "many colored" coat that Joseph wore. You can't pick your colors of trials, so as to avoid those that leave you black and blue. In James' day these might mean illnesses, financial reversals, relationship problems, church conflicts, and many others. And when we get there, (not

“if” we get there), we face a choice: How do we respond to the many, varied trials in our lives? Everything in our rocking world tells us to respond negatively. But James offers another response, which sounds incredible the first time you hear it, and it begins with our attitude: “*Consider it pure joy...*”

James, you’ve got to be kidding. Even when I get the grocery cart with the squeaky wheel? Even when I’m hit with a new boss that seems to have “harass me” as number one in her job description?

I know what you’re saying. “I thought you just told us James was a practical book. How do you expect us to believe you when he says this?”

Well, first, you must realize the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is an internal reaction based on external circumstances. It’s sunny, I’m happy. It’s a good day, I’m happy. Somebody does something nice for me, I’m happy.

But joy is based on an internal relationship that goes much deeper. Joy is the second fruit of the Spirit, or result of having Christ in your life. Joy is a posture, a position. Joy is the deep-settled confidence that God is in control of every area of my life – even the trials. One author puts it “The Christian is joyful, not because she is blind to suffering, but because she is convinced that circumstances, in the light of God’s sovereignty, are never ultimate... Though she can be sad and is often perplexed, she is never really worried.”

And notice what James asks us to do: “*Consider it joy.*” Perhaps you’ve heard it quoted “Count it all joy.” That is a little closer to the Greek implication, which is that of accounting. In other words, in the midst of a trial, be an accountant: rack one up in the credits column when you face your trial and you and God together see your way through it, because it goes into the credit column. And you don’t have to be a Judy Murray in accounting to do this.

But why the credit column? James answers in the next verse: “*because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*” For James, Faith is central to the Christian life. For James, faith is belief in action. But what about when all faith is gone? What about all the seemingly unanswered prayers?

C. S. Lewis in his book A Grief Observed writes: “Meanwhile, where is God? Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.”

That’s how it seems, unless we account that even through the trial God is working on us to produce a deeper, stronger, more certain faith that James calls “*perseverance.*” Perseverance means to hold fast to God and not mistake his power and faithfulness. Literally it means “to abide under the load.”

Significantly, perseverance is only developed in the face of trials. It is not produced without testing. In this short cut world of ours, there is no other “fix.” You might be thinking, “Okay, I know there’s no fix. I know I need an attitude check, and I can see some value to perseverance, but what about results? I need some NOW.”

Realize the result is “*that you may be mature (or perfect) and complete, not lacking in anything.*” Perseverance must finish its work. It’s written in the imperative verb tense. There is no other option for perseverance than becoming mature and complete. You and I may try to short circuit this process in several ways: By thinking that Christians shouldn’t have any problems; by thinking that God should solve our problems immediately; by thinking only those among us with great faith can count on God for help. But James teaches that God wants to test every Christian’s faith – that is, to make it stronger. Not through a miracle, but through a trial.

As you look back at a trial you’ve overcome, chances are you wouldn’t want a second go-around, but you are likely spiritually stronger for them. And then realize God offers help for those trials we don’t understand. .

*“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”* By asking God for wisdom, you go from viewing your trials from a two-dimensional perspective to a three dimensional perspective. We see all our problems on the earth from the earth – 4, 5, or 6 feet off of the ground. But when we seek God’s perspective, we get a whole new view. Like a tapestry from the back, we see a tangled mess. But God sees the finished side – a beautiful picture, *“mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

And hear the truly Good News: God knows what we’re going through, and he has gone through it with us. The author of the book of Hebrews notes *“we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”* Hebrews 4:15. Jesus faced trials too – not just his own, but ours as well. From the words of Isaiah 53: *“Surely our griefs he himself bore, and our sorrows he carried; yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our shame...and by his scourging we are healed.”*

Though you may not sense him near you in your trial, James asks you to “count it joy,” keep God’s perspective, knowing that he is in the deepest part of your pain, your uncertainty, and your shame. Though you feel it, you are not alone. Know that the One who is worthy to keep your very soul in times of trouble is the One who will see you through. He will be waiting for you at the end of whatever you may be facing. He has gone before you to lead you through, and he is walking with you, even in the darkest hour of your trial. Thanks be to God.