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FAITH BROUGHT TO LIFE: FIGURING OUT WHAT REALLY MATTERS

~ **Scripture: James 1:5-11** ~

by Steve Bringardner

INTRODUCTION

The Epistle of James was most likely written by the brother of Jesus. It is most likely the earliest New Testament book written. It was written to “*the 12 tribes scattered among the nations*” [v.1]—Jewish believers forced to leave Jerusalem during the persecution that broke out after the stoning of Stephen. James was the leading elder at the Church in Jerusalem and felt the need to give some pastoral guidance.

James is a very practical book. It is a book that deals with a variety of topics. It appears that he jumps from one subject to another: trials & temptations, the rich & the poor, the use & abuse of the tongue, patience & prayer, faith & works to name but a few.

You can look at this book like a chain OR like beads on a string: “*A handful of pearls dropped one by one into the hearers mind.*” [Edgar Goodspeed]

Now the key word for today is WISDOM: Wisdom in the handling of trials (the downside of life) and wisdom in the handling of wealth (the upside of life).

I. JAMES 1:5-8 -- “*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. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*”

James seems to be saying that these testings and trials are going to come. And if we use these experiences in the right way some good things will emerge. For one thing, we will develop perseverance (a constancy) and a wholeness (completeness) we couldn't get in any other way. But, oh, how we need WISDOM! James writes: “*If you feel you don't have the wisdom to handle these experiences in the right way—and which of us does—then ask God for it.*”

What are we asking for here? Metaphysical enlightenment? NO! Secret knowledge! NO! We are asking for a very practical perception of how God would have us proceed in a given situation. Another way of putting it is that we are asking God to take us across the bridge from “*what we know*” to “*how we put into practice what we know*” (e.g.: what actions to take, what to say & how to say it).

Goodness knows we all need wisdom in raising children, in making major life (or business) decisions, in handling ticklish family dynamics and conflicts.

Now God loves to give. It is in His nature to give generously. How we receive is another matter! We want the whole picture all at once. Sometimes it's more like a *Polaroid*, coming clearer a little at a time.

We are often given to doubting either the *power* or the *goodness* of God. . .or both. What James warns against here is not the doubt of the skeptic who says “I’m not sure if I can believe” (that’s honest doubt). . .but the doubt of the believer who believes on the one hand, but can’t trust on the other.

Illustration: I may believe that a certain chair will hold me, yet can’t bring myself to sit down in it!

This kind of doubt will make us unstable (like someone who is drunk): staggering from one side of life to another. . .getting nowhere. Being DOUBLE-MINDED (literally, two-souled) is like having two minds inside: we’re torn apart; we’re a “walking civil war”.

So, if we are to use the experiences of life in a good way to develop strong moral & spiritual character, we must ask wisdom from God—knowing & trusting He generously wants to give—then allow Him to give AS and WHEN He sees fit!

II. JAMES 1:9-11 – *“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.”*

This is a 2nd area where we need godly wisdom: in our relation to the things of this world.

Christianity levels the playing field. Jesus is the great equalizer: He exalts the poor and humbles the rich. . .He elevates the brother in humble circumstances and brings down the “high and mighty”.

The “brother in humble circumstances” is someone lacking what this world considers essential to living. That could be education, financial resources, physical attractiveness, good manners. It could be that a person is handicapped or their health has failed. To that person He gives a sense of worth and self-respect.

If you are among that number this morning:

- (1) You matter to God! Christ died for all.
- (2) You matter in the Church! There are no class or social distinctions here.
- (3) You matter in the world! Everyone has a gift—something that God can use.

The “well-to-do” person has what this world considers essential to living. That could be financial assets, talents & abilities, education, possessions, great connections. There is nothing wrong with having these things in and themselves. They are great blessings. Certainly the Early Church was not without its (financially) wealthy disciples: Joseph of Arimathea, Barnabas, and Aquila & Priscilla (known to be wealthy merchants).

But there are great dangers in being well-off:

1. Material comfort is addictive (the more you have, the more you want AND the harder to let go).
2. Pride is a risk (the tendency is to rely on self—what I can do, my ingenuity). It becomes hard to acknowledge our need of God.
3. A false sense of security (a feeling that I’m safe, indestructible, invincible. . .I’m in control. . .I’m bigger than anything life can throw at me).

Lest we get too far out there in our pride, James has a way of bringing us back in focus. He paints a picture that would be familiar to the people of Palestine (to whom he was writing). But it’s one we can identify with too. In the desert place, there is a shower of rain which produces thin green shoots of grass. They’re fragile; not much grass grows in that region anyhow. And the next day’s scorching sun makes it vanish as if it had never been.

Wealth is like that! Life is like that! So uncertain! So transient! We are vulnerable! Things may change at any moment: the stock market can crash, you can get laid off, health problems you hadn't anticipated can occur, there can be a natural disaster (like the hurricane this week), or unexpectedly, in the midst of a busy life, the end comes (as it did for many on Sept. 11th).

If none of this happens, still we will leave it all one day! Just as our favorite pair of pants or dress will eventually fade and wear out. Our time on earth is no more permanent than "a desert flower". So why do we put so much confidence, so much time & energy into that which we may lose in the blink of an eye? Put your trust in what you cannot lose. There's a famous statement by Missionary Jim Elliot:

"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

APPLICATION

God may be calling some of us to make our lives less complicated, less busy, less stressful so we can live more creatively and more in tune with Him. He may be calling us to use wisdom, to make some conscious choices to de-clutter our lives, get control of our finances, and start serving Him and one another with more of the talents & gifts He gave us.

Call it *simplifying* or whatever—it's hard for us to get to what we really want to because our lives are too full of "detail". "*Simplify your lifestyle*" was a catch phrase for a popular movement about a dozen years ago. People wanted to get back to nature, connect with Mother earth, and disconnect from a burdensome system. It's a very old ideal, but this version of it probably got stretched a little too far. For instance, selling out and growing your own food may be great (if you love gardening), but avoiding the grocery store will not simplify your lifestyle. That's not simplicity. Simplifying is determining what is really important and stripping everything away to make it happen.

Illustration: At the beginning of the summer when I am preparing for the Make-A-Wish 300 mile bike ride, I make time in my schedule to train—because it's important to me. Now that it's over, I can hardly find time to get on the bicycle.

I would challenge you to make a list of the ten things most important to your life. Then ask yourself:

1. Why is this important to me?
2. Am I spending the kind of time & energy I'd like focusing on this? If not, why not? What is getting in the way?
3. What in my life or my schedule would I be willing to change—maybe little by little over the course of several months—or even give up in order to start paying more attention to this significant aspect of my life?

Maybe we need to practice what they call in forestry "*selective logging*", in which only the trees deemed past their prime are taken out. Can we thin out the things in our lives that take our time & energy without giving either back to us? Can we selectively prune away the things in our lives that are not life-giving, thereby allowing more space for the important things?

Let's get down to some basics.

(A) POSSESSIONS

Each and every possession extracts a toll in time & money. People as rich in possessions as we are have a hard time with Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:19-21: "*Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy.*"

It is our attachment, our fear of letting go that is the issue. It's not that having them is wrong! But the time & money spent maintaining, paying down the mortgage, and making it all work squeezes out time with one another (in the family), time with (and for) for God—there's no time to serve a ministry in the church even if we wanted to—time for the things that matter to us, time to practice our “art”.

The RUMMAGE SALE is coming up. For some, it will be an opportunity to de-clutter; for others, it could be very dangerous (if it becomes an occasion to re-clutter).

(B) MONEY

It's hard to avoid getting entangled in the “consumerism trap”. Either we get control of it or it will control us.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape (the demon) has the job of mentoring his protégé Wormwood in ways of seducing humans to their eternal doom. Screwtape counsels Wormwood that by playing on their addiction to the pursuit of “prosperity”, humans can be brought to their destruction. Screwtape tells Wormwood:

“Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is “finding his place in it”, while really it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his widening circle of acquaintances, his sense of importance, the growing pressure of work build up in him a sense of being really at home on earth, which is just what we want.”

Our preoccupation with money (or the lack of it) keeps us outwardly rather than inwardly focused. A disproportionate amount of attention & energy goes toward getting the car paid off, retiring the mortgage, getting the kids through college, and investing enough to have a retirement nest-egg.

My suggestion would be to do everything you can to: (1) Get out of debt, (2) Spend less than you make, and (3) Save for what you need. Resist easy credit! Send those envelopes offering you a new low-interest credit card back to the sender empty! When your car is paid off, keep stashing monthly payment in the bank for your next one

Follow the admonition in Hebrews 13:5 – “*Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have. For he has said, ‘I will never fail you nor forsake you.’*” Is that a “chair” you're willing to sit in?

CONCLUSION

Simplifying is about letting go of status, material things, and excessive activity in order to have more time and opportunity to engage in what's really important to you.

Not to do so is what James meant when he said in v. 11: “*The rich man will fade away (die on the inside) even while he goes about his business.*”

I believe God is calling you to a higher purpose; He is calling you to be a co-creator with Him. Will you take the risk and trust God to meet your needs as you answer His creative call?