

FAITH
MADE
PERFECT

FAITH
MADE
PERFECT

Commentary on James

HERMAN HANKO



REFORMED
FREE PUBLISHING
ASSOCIATION
Jenison, Michigan

©2015 Reformed Free Publishing Association

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews

Scripture cited is taken from the King James (Authorized) Version

Cover design by Christopher Tobias/www.tobiasdesign.com

Interior design by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK/www.theDESKonline.com

Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison, Michigan 49428

616-457-5970

www.rfpa.org

ISBN 978-1-936054-86-2

ISBN ebook 978-1-936054-87-9

LCCN 2015936711

*To the memory of Herman Hoeksema,
a superb exegete, from whom I learned all I know
concerning how to interpret sacred scripture*

Seest thou how faith wrought with his works,
and by works was faith made perfect?

—JAMES 2:22

CONTENTS

PREFACE	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Authorship</i>	1
<i>Date and Purpose of the Epistle</i>	2
<i>Outstanding Characteristics</i>	4
JAMES 1	7
<i>Salutation</i>	7
<i>Joy in Trials</i>	9
<i>The Prayer for Wisdom</i>	19
<i>Poverty and Riches</i>	27
<i>Enduring Temptation</i>	34
<i>God's Good Gifts</i>	46
<i>The Responsibilities of Regeneration</i>	56
<i>True Religion</i>	75
JAMES 2	83
<i>The Warning against Respect of Persons</i>	83
<i>Fulfilling the Royal Law</i>	98
<i>The Relation between Faith and Works</i>	114
<i>The Examples of Abraham and Rahab</i>	129
JAMES 3	151
<i>The Sinful Use of the Tongue</i>	151
<i>Two Wisdoms</i>	174
JAMES 4	191
<i>Friendship with the World is Enmity with God</i>	191
<i>The Humility of Repentance</i>	201

<i>Another Warning against Speaking Evil</i>	218
<i>Living in Submission to God's Will</i>	225
JAMES 5	235
<i>God's Judgment of the Rich</i>	235
<i>An Admonition to be Patient in Suffering</i>	245
<i>The Oath</i>	261
<i>Spiritual Help in Trouble</i>	263
<i>Prayer for Fellow Saints</i>	274



PREFACE

I had just finished preaching a series of sermons on Galatians in the pulpit of Hope Protestant Reformed Church. I was enthralled with the glory of the gospel of justification by faith. It was doctrine that fed the hungry soul, comforted the heart of one burdened with sin, and directed us to the one great goal of all our lives, the glory of God alone.

I am aware of Rome's denial of this grand truth and that it formed the sharp dividing line between Rome's apostasy and the gospel of the Reformation. I also am aware of the dreadful error of those who teach what they call the federal vision and their open and often contemptuous denial of justification by faith alone and promotion of salvation by faith and the works of the law. My study of Paul's epistle to the Galatians gave me opportunity to weigh these errors in the glowing light of Paul's epistle.

Rome appeals to James to defend its doctrine of justification by faith and works, and the proponents of the federal vision follow Rome. The argument is simple. James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?" (2:21). Rome's appeal to James in support of a doctrine that apparently flatly contradicts Paul requires an answer.

The answer is not to be satisfied with a reassertion of Paul's statements in his letter to the Galatians, nor is the answer an appeal to Paul's glorious letter to the Romans, which teaches emphatically the truth of justification by faith alone without the

works of the law. An answer has to include an explanation of James' epistle and his words in James 2:21.

This required a careful study of James that proved to be extremely valuable because it clearly demonstrated not only how the epistle in no way contradicts or amends Paul's writings, but also that the epistle is a necessary and important addition to what Paul fiercely defended in the arena of Judaistic errors in the churches of Galatia.

It is not surprising that no contradiction exists, for that is in keeping with scripture, which is not a collection of the writings of individual men from Moses to the apostle John. But scripture has one author, the Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit wrote Galatians. He knew what he was writing. God the Holy Spirit wrote James. He knew what he was writing. Both are part of the gospel of God's sovereign grace through the work of Christ and are given to the church through Christ's Spirit poured out on Pentecost.

James does not contradict Paul, for the Holy Spirit does not contradict himself. Nor does James make a necessary amendment to what Paul wrote, for the Holy Spirit does not need to amend his writing. James is a wonderful and necessary implication and development of the truth of justification by faith alone without the works of the law. What James teaches is found in Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Galatians. Paul could and did say amen to what James writes. James develops what Paul wrote, for the Holy Spirit develops his theology in this part of his writings.

Some commentators seem reluctant to find contradictions in scripture, but they want to maintain their heresy of justification by faith and works. Their way of achieving this goal is to reinterpret Paul's writings in Romans and Galatians in such a way that Paul's condemnation of justification by faith and works applies only to the self-righteous Jews of his day and is not a fundamental truth of the saints' confession.

PREFACE

There is an answer to this type of argumentation that is almost as strong as any proof can be: an appeal to common sense that is impossible to refute. To deny justification by faith alone without the works of the law is to repudiate the validity of Martin Luther's agonizing and soul-wrenching experience in the monastery as he searched for peace with God. It is to repudiate Luther's overwhelming joy that came from heaven when the truth of justification came into his heart. It is to turn one's back on almost five hundred years of Luther's scholarship, all of which is united in affirming that justification by faith alone was the one doctrine that forced his break with Rome and became the pillar of the entire sixteenth-century Reformation.

Besides, to give Paul an interpretation that the scriptures cannot possibly sustain is to scorn the Westminster divines and the fathers at Dordrecht as being sadly mistaken, when their scholarship and spirituality make today's theologians look like pygmies. It is to take from the grasp of countless saints a treasure to which they clung when they faced death by torture.

Anyone who values and understands his own salvation would not dare to trust his salvation to his own keeping of the law and his righteousness to his own works. He brings nothing for his salvation but simply clings to the cross of Christ. Without that truth he would despair.

To follow the proud claims of those who support the federal vision it is necessary to do violence to scripture in the interest of retaining the shattered remnants of one's sinful pride. Pride alone puts man in conflict with scripture's scathing denunciation of man, the sinner. Pride lies smashed at the foot of the cross.

Heretics in Paul's day claimed that justification by faith alone without the works of the law had a necessary consequence: the complete destruction of the law. Paul battled them and wrote in answer to their objections, "What shall we say then? Shall we

continue in sin, that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1). The church throughout the ages has been plagued by these pests who attempt to destroy the gospel of grace by similar whining complaints. Luther fought those enemies of the truth when his close friend Agricola turned against him and pleaded for the crucifixion of Moses and the need to throw the law in the dump.¹

Similarly, the truth of justification by faith alone has been criticized for denying the responsibility of man. This is more subtle because those who make this criticism imply that by itself the truth of justification by faith is unbalanced and incomplete. It needs additional definition so that man can be responsible for what he does. This is the claim of those who hold to conditional salvation and want to make justification conditional as well.

James does not cater to their complaints. Neither does the Holy Spirit. James asks in defense of the truth of justification by faith alone, “Was not Abraham justified by works?” Then he writes immediately, “Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?” (2:21–22). That is the clearest statement of justification by faith alone one can find in all of scripture—justification by faith that produces works, not justification by a faith that needs works added to it. God forbid!

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches the following regarding justification and the necessity of doing good works:

Since, then, we are redeemed from our misery by grace through Christ, without any merit of ours, why must we still do good works?

¹ For further information on the controversy see Herman Hanko, *Contending for the Faith: The Rise of Heresy and the Development of the Truth* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010), 171–78.

PREFACE

Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, renews us also by his holy Spirit after his own image, that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for his blessing, and that he may be glorified through us; then, also, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by the fruits thereof, and by our godly walk may win our neighbors also to Christ.²

² Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 86 in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:338.



INTRODUCTION

Authorship

Conservative scholars generally agree that the author of this epistle is James, the brother of Jesus.¹ Roman Catholic scholars deny this and claim that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Christ. Rome has adopted this false doctrine in connection with its worship and adoration of Mary.

We know that James was the half brother of Jesus because Joseph was not the father of Jesus, but Joseph was the father of James. Scripture teaches clearly that Jesus was a member of a family with many children, both girls and boys (Matt. 12:46; 13:55–56; Mark 6:3; John 2:12; Acts 1:14). That Christ was a part of a family is in keeping with the general truth of scripture that our Lord was like us in all things except sin.

Our Lord came into the world to form a new family. Earthly family ties had to be subordinate to higher, spiritual ties of a heavenly family. In this heavenly family, the triune God is father, Christ is the elder brother, and all God's people are brothers and sisters of Christ and sons and daughters of God (Matt. 12:47–50; 2 Cor. 6:18).

¹ For a lengthy discussion of authorship, see D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 410–13. The authors conclude that James, the half brother of the Lord, was the author.

James and other members of the family did not believe in Christ during his earthly ministry (John 7:5). We cannot be sure when the other members of Christ's earthly family were brought to faith in Christ, but they were present with the church after the ascension as they awaited the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). James was probably converted by an appearance of the Lord in the forty days between Christ's resurrection and ascension (1 Cor. 15:7).

After Pentecost James became an influential elder in the church of Jerusalem. He represented the Jerusalem church at the synod that considered the question of whether the Gentile converts had to be circumcised. He offered his advice on the matter, and it was essentially his advice that was adopted (Acts 15:13–22). He is referred to as an apostle in Galatians 1:19, where "apostle" is used in the broad sense. It is believed that James suffered a martyr's death about 62 AD.²

Date and Purpose of the Epistle

The date of the writing of this epistle is uncertain, but it was likely written prior to the Jerusalem Council, the history of which is recorded in Acts 15. Most commentaries place the date very early in the history of the church, perhaps around 40 AD.³

The epistle was written primarily to Jewish converts throughout the Roman Empire. After the martyrdom of Stephen, the saints in Jerusalem were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. They also spread throughout the Mediterranean world. On his missionary journeys Paul went first to synagogues (Acts 13:5, 14;

² Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 18.

³ Carson, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 414.

INTRODUCTION

14:1; 17:1, 10; 19:8), where mainly Jewish converts worshiped, for the church until Stephen's death was composed primarily of Jews (Acts 8:1). These Jews had been brought up in the traditions of legal works-righteousness and salvation through the keeping of the law. Such teachings were strong in the church, and many references are found in scripture to the struggles brought about by those who held these views.

Another danger arose among these Jewish converts. There was a tendency among some to go to the opposite extreme of works-righteousness and to abandon the importance of the law. Denying the usefulness and validity of the law, they denied also the necessity of good works. They claimed to have faith in Christ but opposed the doing of good works, because good works would detract from justification by faith alone.

James writes his epistle to counteract this mistaken idea and to define the correct relationship between faith in Jesus Christ and good works. James considers the mistaken position that opposes the necessity of good works to be as dangerous as the errors of those who clung to the Old Testament laws as the means of salvation.

The epistle occupies an important place in the canon of scripture. Many times in the history of the church the saints have battled against the error of what has become known as antinomianism, which comes from the two Greek words *anti* (against) and *nomos* (law). Antinomians are against the law. An outstanding historical example of an antinomian against whom Luther battled is Georgius Agricola, who carried Luther's emphasis on justification by faith alone to a denial of the necessity of good works.

This danger is always present in the church. If theoretical antinomians are scarce, the church is often plagued by those who live wicked lives and justify their conduct on the grounds that they adhere to the doctrines of the church and faithfully attend divine

worship services. But their lives reveal quite the opposite. They are practical antinomians. Against such James directs his epistle.

Outstanding Characteristics

The epistle of James is often used to prove that scripture teaches justification by works and that James directly opposes Paul.

The Roman Catholic Church in the days of the Lutheran Reformation almost continuously threw James in the face of the great reformer of Wittenberg. Luther himself, before he came to understand this epistle and its teaching, called it “a right strawy epistle.”⁴ Schaff wrote, “He [Luther] disliked, most of all, the Epistle of James because he could not harmonize it with Paul’s teaching on justification by faith without works, and he called it an epistle of straw as compared with the genuine apostolic writings.”⁵ Later in his ministry Luther came to see that one could not charge either Paul or James with contradicting the other. As so many since have seen, he saw that James also teaches firmly and clearly the doctrine of justification by faith alone without the works of the law.

Because James fights the deadly error of antinomianism, the epistle is extremely practical. Almost the entire epistle consists of admonitions. Its emphasis is on the works of a child of God and the necessity of good works. It is clear from the epistle that James condemns those who think good works are unnecessary for the Christian and encourages those with true faith to demonstrate their faith by doing good works.

Because of his condemnation of those who deny good works,

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 35:362.

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), 7:35.

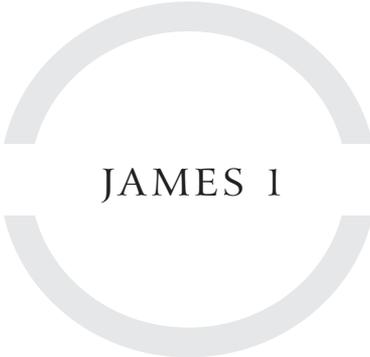
INTRODUCTION

his epistle is sometimes very sharp. James can get angry with those who want no part of good works. He is not at all averse to calling them “adulterers and adulteresses.” Such language includes all those to whom James writes, but especially those who trouble the congregations by their insistence that works are not necessary. The sharpness of these angry words warns God’s people of the seriousness of the whole matter and calls them to live new and holy lives.

The epistle has sometimes been criticized as being without Christ. It is true that on the surface not much explicit mention is made of Christ and his work. But we must not be misled by this, for when James asserts that he is a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1), he says as it were, “What I have to say is Christ’s word, and as such it is part of Christ’s work of saving his people.”

Another outstanding characteristic of the book is James’ references and allusions to the Old Testament scriptures. Fully aware that the Jews to whom he writes were thoroughly acquainted with the Old Testament, he couches his writing in the familiar (to the Jews) language of the Old Testament. Thus James shows how the essence of the old dispensation is preserved in the new, while the form of the gospel used in the old dispensation has fallen away.

It is also characteristic of James to use many concrete and specific illustrations to drive home his point. This makes his writings particularly vivid and easily applicable to our lives in the twenty-first century. His illustrations deal with both people who have only dead faith and with people who have true and living faith. The epistle has much to teach us about a life of faith as it is and must be manifested in us.



JAMES 1

Salutation

1. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)

James introduces himself as the writer in the usual way by putting his name at the beginning of the letter rather than at the end, as we do. “Servant” can be better translated as “slave.” It is somewhat startling that James, a half brother of Christ, should call himself a slave of Christ, but the word is significantly used. James is not ashamed to emphasize that the relationship in which he stands to Christ is not primarily a natural relationship of brothers, but a spiritual relationship of master and slave. The natural fades to make room for the spiritual and heavenly reality.

Because of its position in the sentence, the phrase “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” receives the emphasis. Translated literally the sentence reads, “James, of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, a slave.” As Paul was pleased, so James is greatly pleased that he can give himself this designation. Paul ended his controversy with the Judaizers in Galatia by appealing to his position in relation to Christ as being that of a slave who bore in his body the brand marks (his scars of beatings and stonings) that show him to be Christ’s slave. James does not look on the Lord as a

relative in the flesh, but as his Lord and master, to whom he belongs with body and soul, and whose will is his delight. He writes as a servant of his heavenly Lord and thus writes what he is commanded to write. God and Christ own him. He has been purchased by the blood of Christ shed on the cross. He has been made a slave by a wonder of grace. His only joy is found in obedience to his master.

By the expression “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” James does not mean that he has two masters: God and Christ. By belonging to Christ and serving Christ he belongs to God. Christ is God’s eternal Son through whom God accomplishes all his purpose.

The use of these three names of our Lord is intended to emphasize at the beginning of the epistle that Jesus is the promised Messiah (the anointed one, the Christ) and that this Christ is Lord of all. Hence James’ emphasis on the works of true faith is not a denial of Christ’s all-sufficient work, but is an important part of Christ’s salvation.

To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad (1:1)

It is impossible to interpret “twelve tribes” as referring to the twelve tribes of old dispensational times. The nation of Israel had long ceased to exist as twelve separate tribes. But the church in the old dispensation, limited to the Jews, was called Israel, and sometimes specific tribes were mentioned. This is also true in the New Testament church. The tribes of Israel are mentioned in the sealing of the one hundred forty-four thousand (Rev. 7:4–8). Paul also spoke of the “Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). In these two passages the church of God gathered from Jews and Gentiles is referred to as Israel of the twelve tribes. Revelation 7:4–8 mentions twelve tribes and excludes Ephraim but includes Joseph.

In fact, Israel was composed of thirteen tribes, because Joseph’s

two sons were separate tribes, and although Levi was scattered it was also a tribe. The apostles also numbered thirteen. Judas Iscariot was not numbered among the twelve, but Matthias and Paul were. We might call these numbers “the imperfect twelve,” indicating that the church on earth, represented by the number twelve, is imperfect. It is possible that James refers to the national Jews as part of the New Testament church, so that the reference is not to the national Jews *per se*, but only as they are a part of the church of Christ.

The Jews were scattered throughout many lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Although James’ letter was probably prior to Paul’s first missionary journey, the scattering of the Jews was wide (Acts 8:1, 4; 9:1–2; 11:19).

Greeting (1:1)

The verb *chairo* means to rejoice or to be glad. Here it is used in the present active infinitive as a word of greeting. It has the implication of saying, “I hope all is well with you.”

Joy in Trials

2. My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;
3. Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.
4. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations (1:2)

Although James at times castigates in fierce language those to whom he writes, he nevertheless intersperses his denunciations

with the assurance that he loves them in the Lord as fellow members of the family of God and that his sharp criticisms of their actions are meant for their salvation. They are together in God's family, and it is his calling to bring to them God's word.

The translation of "temptations" in the text is incorrect. It ought to be translated as "trials," as it is translated by most commentators.¹ The Greek uses the same word for both temptations and trials, and that leaves open the possibility that temptations are referred to here, especially because James speaks of falling into temptations. Nevertheless, the translation "temptations" does not work. To fall into temptation means to succumb to temptation. It is impossible to count it all joy when we give in to temptation and commit the sin by which we were tempted.

There are three differences between trials and temptations. First, the author of temptations is Satan and never God. The author of trials is God. James assures us of this in 1:13. Second, the purpose of each is different. Satan tempts to persuade one to sin; his motives are always evil. God's purposes are always good. God sends trials to bring out the good in a man and to purify him. God strengthens faith through trials. Peter spoke of this in 1 Peter 1:7. Third, the result is different in each trial. If one falls into temptation, he has committed sin and needs to confess his sins to God. If one endures trials, he emerges stronger and with a strengthened trust in God.

Although there are differences in meaning, trials and temptations are closely related. That close relation is the reason scripture uses the same word for both. Trials always carry with them a certain temptation. If God sends serious illness to a child of God,

¹ Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James*, 30–31; John Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 278–79.

the illness can be and must be a trial for him, but it can also be a temptation. It can tempt him to question God's ways, criticize him, and be querulous toward him. It is our calling to humble ourselves beneath the mighty hand of God (1 Pet. 5:6) and count it all joy when we are tried. Temptations can well be and ought to be trials. They are trials when we are tempted and resist the temptation and seek the path of righteousness. Such overcoming of temptation also strengthens our faith, and God's grace in resisting temptation has a purifying effect on us.

Although temptations and trials are closely related, James emphasizes trials. This is evident from verse 3, where the text makes clear that trials are a trying of our faith.

The Jews to whom James writes were subject to many trials. It is possible that the persecution that had begun in Jerusalem forced many of the saints to flee to other parts of the empire where persecution was particularly severe at the time James writes his epistle. The Jewish converts were hated by their fellow Jews in whatever country they settled. They went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 11:19–20). Their preaching of Christ crucified would naturally infuriate the unconverted Jews.

Trials are "divers," that is, of many different kinds. For Jewish Christians they included persecution, sickness, suffering, pain, disappointment, problems in life, poverty, and the like. The lot of the child of God in this world is cross-bearing and self-denial. God promises trials because they are the means he uses to sanctify his people. The psalmist complains, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous" (Ps. 34:19). He means that the righteous suffer many more afflictions than the wicked do. Asaph had the same complaint and very nearly lost his faith because of the problem it presented to him (Ps. 73).

The way to deal with our many afflictions, whatever kind they may be, is to consider these afflictions "all joy." This comes as a shock

to us. We are not very often advised to consider our afflictions reasons for joy, and we are tempted to do quite differently. We may do as the world does and drown our sorrows in the mad pursuit of pleasure. We may attempt to escape them by alcohol or drugs. We may complain about them and let them destroy our serenity and peace of mind. We may, as we are often taught to do, be stoical about them, make the best of them, steel ourselves to bear them without too much complaint, or in desperation seek the help of a psychiatrist.

James calls the saints to something much loftier: consider your trials a reason for joy, he urges. If that is not enough, consider your trials as a reason for “all” joy. Look at your trials not as joy mixed with sorrow and bitterness, but as reasons for pure and unadulterated joy, for that is the meaning of “all joy.” The admonition is in keeping with other scriptures. James speaks especially of persecution, just as Jesus counts them blessed who are persecuted and admonishes them to rejoice (Matt. 5:10–12).

Joy is the opposite of sorrow. It is the freedom from all worry, anxiety, fear, and distress. Joy manifests itself in happiness, singing a doxology of praise to God, and being thankful—thankful not in spite of our trials but because of them.

Such joy is possible only if in the midst of our sorrows we lay hold on the promises of the scriptures that affliction is for our profit, that God saves us through trials, and that all trials put us in closer communion with Christ so that we suffer with him. If we suffer with him, we will also be glorified with him in heaven (Rom. 8:17).

This joy is very difficult for us, and sometimes the only way to attain it is humbly to seek God’s grace to enable us to count it all joy when we fall into trials.

The text speaks of a “fall” into trials. This seems to be a strange way to express the way in which trials are our lot. This term is intended to emphasize that we do not actively seek trials in our lives. They come unbidden. God, who governs all the pathways of

our lives, sends trials. Frequently they come unexpectedly. They are like holes in the pathway of our pilgrimage that we cannot see because we cannot see the road ahead. They make our pilgrimage harder and our walk difficult. We fall into these trials, but they all come from the hand of our God.

The teaching of James is consistent with the rest of scripture. Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:20, “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The emphasis is on “all things,” which include trials. For all things we are to give thanks (see also Phil. 3:8; 4:6–7).

Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience (1:3)

The connection between verses 2 and 3 is clear. James gives the reason we ought to consider trials as occasions for joy. Trials bring joy because the fruit of them is the wonderful Christian virtue of patience. The subordinate participle “knowing” is causal: we are joyful in trials *because* the trial of our faith works patience.

The Holy Spirit put this explanation of trials in the scriptures because he is very merciful, and he knows how difficult it is for us to rejoice in trials. In boundless mercy he gives us God’s reason for trials. The reason, as described in this verse and the following, is completely adequate to be an incentive to count trials as reasons for joy.

Although the word translated as “trying” refers to the trials spoken of in verse 2, a different word is used.² The difference

² “Trials” in verse 2 is *peirasmois*, while “trying” in verse 3 is *dokimion*. Both words are used in 2 Corinthians 13:5: “Examine [*peirazo*, the verb of the same word used in James 1:2] yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove [*dokimazo*, the verb form of the word used in James 1:3] your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates [*adokimoi*, the adjective of *dokimazo* with the alpha privans—the prefix of negation].”

between the words is not great. Both can refer to the testing of anything, but the one (*peirazo*) emphasizes a favorable result of the test: something is proved to be genuine. Raw gold mixed with many impurities will be purified by fire because the pure gold will be separated from the useless material to which it is attached.

In James' day coins were made of gold or silver, and their value was determined by the amount of gold or silver in them. Sometimes cheats would mix other, less costly substances with the gold or silver, hoping no one would notice and that the coin would be considered pure gold. To test the purity of a gold coin, one would bite it. Because gold is softer than other metals, teeth marks would appear in the coin if it was genuine. The biting would be the test, and if the result was favorable, the coin would be genuine and unalloyed gold.

According to the figure of the verse faith is put to the test by the trials of life, and faith is both purified and found genuine by the trial. This figure is beautiful and is also found in 1 Peter 1:7. Faith is mixed with many impurities. It is weak and mixed with doubts and fears and is not the strong faith it ought to be. Trials act like fire on gold: they burn away the impurities and make the gold of faith pure and strong.

The faith of the believer is a gift of God, but it operates through our sinful natures. God sends trials to purify that faith, but the purification also is God's work through the instrumentality of afflictions. Faith always has as its object Christ. When faith is tried, the believer seeks closer union with Christ.

The main theme of James' letter is the difference between genuine faith that produces works and counterfeit faith that does not. Already in the early part of the epistle, James talks about genuine faith and how it is purified by fiery trials. Counterfeit faith would be devoured by the fire of trials. But trials, in burning away the impurities of our faith, make faith stronger. The faithful

man, when tried, clings more strongly to Christ. The faith of a believer is like the roots of a small cedar tree on a rocky cliff near a mountain summit. In that high country fierce winds blow and terrible storms rage. Snow and ice, cold and tempests blow against that tree, but forced by the raging weather the tree sinks its roots more deeply into the soil. So the believer sinks the roots of his faith more deeply into Christ when the trials of life batter his soul. That is true because faith lays hold on the scriptures and the promises of God; and laying hold on the scriptures, the believer lays hold on Christ. The more fiercely the storms of trouble beat against him, the more fiercely he clings to Christ, his only hope. In this way his faith is tested, purified, and found genuine.

The trying of faith works patience, which is an important and blessed virtue. It is the gift of God, and it is merited for God's people by the suffering of Jesus on the cross. It is worked in the believer through the Spirit and God's word by the instrument of afflictions or trials. It is next to impossible for us to learn patience except by means of trials, and God is wise in sending these trials upon us.

The Greek word for patience means to abide under or to bear up under. It is a figurative word that depicts trials as heavy burdens placed on us, which we are required to bear as we walk our earthly pilgrimages to heaven. We cannot shuck off these burdens and drop them along the way. We must carry them, for God places them on our shoulders, and only he can take them away. Our inclinations are to groan under their weight, complain about the difficulty of walking with them, and refuse to go another step unless we are relieved of them. Patience means that we bear up under them and continue on our way.

Patience includes, first, knowledge that our trials come not by chance but from the hand of our heavenly Father; second, humble submission to his will and a refusal to force our wills

on him; third, assurance that even if we cannot see the good of it, God's purpose is good and right because it leads to our salvation; fourth, waiting on Jehovah for him to remove the burden we carry or waiting for Jehovah to show us his reason for placing such a load on our shoulders. One who has patience sings the last verse of Psalm 27: "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD." Patience is sometimes only waiting on the Lord.

Because of our sinful natures we are inclined to take a wicked attitude toward our trials, but God uses trials to save us. If it were left to us, we would never have patience. But God works powerfully within us by his word and the Spirit to destroy all our doubts and fears and to sanctify us.

That is abundant reason to count it all joy when we fall into divers trials.

The word "worketh" is used because trials work patience. There is a divine power in the trials that the believer is called to endure, which, because it is divine, brings about the fruit of patience. The power lies in the trials, but only because of the supreme power of the cross of Christ. In trials we are united to his suffering and death. He endured to the end when he bore the heavy load of the wrath of God. Our trials connect us to him and have the fruit of patience because he bore with patience the wrath of God.

The believer with genuine faith knows beyond a doubt that trials work patience. He knows this from the word of God, which points him in many ways to this truth. He also knows this from his experience, for the Holy Spirit seals the truth on his consciousness in connection with the trials he undergoes. It is the knowledge of personal certainty.

The difficulty for us is not ignorance of this fundamental truth, but the spiritual inability to apply it to our lives in such a way that it indeed brings us joy.

But let patience have her perfect work (1:4)

By an admonition James demonstrates the value of patience. Trials work patience. But patience must have its perfect work. It is possible that patience does not have its perfect work in our lives because of the sin that still characterizes us in everything we do. Hence there is a great need for the admonition. We are called not to obstruct the progress of patience that trials work but to give room to patience to accomplish its goal.

The word translated as “perfect” comes from a root similar to the Greek word that means end or goal, that is, something that is considered from the viewpoint of the goal attained or the purpose accomplished. The word does not mean end in the sense of the end of a road in a cul-de-sac but the end of a war when the purpose of fighting is achieved: the enemy is defeated.

Patience may be present in our lives, but it is an imperfect patience that barely holds its own against doubts and fears, worries and anxieties. When patience achieves its goal, the child of God in whom patience works knows complete submission to God’s will, a walk with calmness and serenity in the storms of life, a confident and quiet reliance upon God, and a patient waiting upon his will.

The expression may leave the wrong impression that patience is a power within us that tries to accomplish a certain task, but we impede its progress. The admonition warns us against impeding the progress of patience. Rather than being impatient, it is our calling to cultivate patience and exercise ourselves in it. However, patience is not a power in its own right. It is a virtue given us by the work of God in our salvation.

The tense of the verb is present, indicating that we must continuously strive to exercise patience.³ The work of patience is

³ The verb is *echetō*, the present active imperative third person singular of *echō*.

“perfect.” Taking into account the meaning of perfect, the saints are admonished to cultivate patience so that this Christian virtue attains its goal in their lives.

That ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing (1:4)

The goal of our patience is sanctification. This is a remarkable importance given to patience; if patience attains its goal, the person in whom patience has worked is also sanctified, that is, without sin. Patience, if it performs its perfect work, can transform a regenerated child of God into a sinless saint.

How does God work this miracle? The answer lies in the meaning of patience. Patience attains its end when we are completely and joyfully submissive to God’s will. To be completely and joyfully submissive to God’s will is to walk every moment of our lives in the consciousness of our dependence upon God and in the awareness that all that we have comes to us from him. It is a glad recognition that he, even through trials, draws us closer to heaven. Thus patience means to walk in perfect, uninterrupted covenantal fellowship with God, praising him and giving glory to his name.⁴

Hence the goal of the working out of the Christian virtue of patience is the sinless child of God, sanctified and cleansed from sin. The word translated as “entire” is a synonym of “perfect,” and it literally means in every part. It comes from two words (*holos* [entire] and *kleros* [lot], as in casting the lot). Thus the word means the entire lot.

The phrase “perfect and entire” forms a hendiadys in which the conjunction “and” ties the two words it connects to form one

⁴ The construction is a *hina* clause with the verb *ete*, the present active subjunctive of *eimi*, the verb of being. This is a purpose clause that tells the reader what the purpose of the action of the verb is. It is also possible that the *hina* clause is a clause of conceived result, but this construction is rare in the New Testament.

idea. The perfect work of patience is perfection in the entire man and in every circumstance of life. No matter what trial the believer faces, he walks blissfully conscious that he walks with God.

The perfect work of patience is described negatively as “wanting nothing.” The clause adds negatively what has already been said: the perfect work of patience is so complete that there is nothing lacking in the life of one who has it. No troubles can upset him; no burdens can crush him; no trials can bring him to his knees in despair; no troubles can rob him of his joy. There is nothing lacking in his confident and joyful walk with God.

Perfection is unattainable in this life, but the admonition gives us a goal for which to strive and a glimpse of our perfection in heaven. In heaven we will no longer experience trials, because patience in trials will have attained its goal.

The Prayer for Wisdom

5. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.
6. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.
7. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.
8. A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.

The connection between verses 5 and 4 is unclear. There are two possibilities. One is that James begins a new thought with verse 5 and no connection exists. The other is that James is aware that it requires wisdom to be able to count trials as all joy, so now he points to the source of wisdom.