

God, Just Tell Me What to Do

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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Cover design by Left Coast Design, Portland, Oregon

Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates. Inc.

GOD, JUST TELL ME WHAT TO DO

Copyright © 2014 by Michael Youssef

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Youssef, Michael.

God, just tell me what to do / Michael Youssef.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-7369-5297-2 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-5298-9 (eBook)

1. Bible. James—Commentaries. I. Title.

BS2785.53.Y68 2014

227'.9107—dc23

2013045511

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Printed in the United States of America

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 / VP-JH / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Roy Anthony Adams
in thanksgiving for thirty years of giving me and my family
faithful and wise counsel and advice.*

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Jim Denney and Don Gates for using their gifts to help make this book more relevant and practical.

Special thanks to the entire team at Harvest House Publishers—and especially to Bob Hawkins Jr., LaRae Weikert, and Rod Morris, who shared my dream and helped to enlarge the vision of this book.

Finally, thanks to the people of The Church of The Apostles in Atlanta, Georgia, for their constant encouragement and support. They were the first audience for this message, and they helped me to refine the message with their questions and helpful comments.

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Introduction

A First-Century Letter to Twenty-First-Century Christians

People used to cross the Amargosa Desert in western Nevada on a lonely, seldom-used trail. There was just one spot along the trail where hardy travelers might find drinking water for their journey. At that spot there was an old-fashioned pump with a tin can tied to the handle. Rolled up inside the tin can was a note that read:

This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium-fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith.

When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller.

(signed) Desert Pete

P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold.¹

What do you think Desert Pete means when he says, "Have faith"?

First, Pete is telling the thirsty traveler to believe that there's water in the well, that the pump will work as promised, and that the well has never run dry. He's also telling the thirsty traveler to take the risk of faith, to uncork the bottle of water and to pour every drop into the pump instead of yielding to the temptation to drink it.

Moreover, Pete is telling the thirsty traveler to take action, to add work to his faith, to grab the handle and pump it like crazy in order to bring more water out of the ground. And finally, Pete is telling the thirsty traveler to refill the bottle, bury it under the white rock, and leave it as he found it for the next thirsty traveler.

That is what faith means, as it is defined in the book of James.

The book of James is all about having faith, taking risks for that faith, putting that faith into action, and sharing the refreshment of authentic faith with others. The book of James is like a well of cool water in the desert of this harsh, dry life. It's not good enough to merely believe there's water in the well. We have to prime the pump, seize the handle, and vigorously put our faith into action.

That's why I've written a book that explores the practical insights of the book of James. I call this book *God, Just Tell Me What to Do* because James tells us how to set our beliefs into motion. It tells us, specifically and concretely, how to transform our *creeds* into *deeds* day-by-day.

There's nothing theoretical about the book of James. It's filled with practical advice and insight on how to live for God, whether in the first century AD or the twenty-first century AD. The book of James is short enough to read in fifteen or twenty minutes—a perfect length for today's on-the-go, high-speed-Internet Christians. It's made up of

108 verses into which James has distilled many clear, concise insights for living the life of faith in these difficult times.

These principles will transform our family relationships and friendships, our business relationships and church relationships, and even our interactions on social media. The instructions in the book of James will show us how to live effectively for Christ whether we are rich or poor, successful or struggling, on a spiritual high or in the valley of persecution.

If you need comforting, the message of James will sustain you. If you need to be confronted, the message of James will convict you and point you in the right direction. Because James wrote his letter to persecuted first-century believers scattered across the pagan Roman Empire, it still speaks to us today—twenty-first-century believers who are increasingly mocked and hated by the pagan, post-Christian culture that surrounds us. We live in an age of conflict, and James has a message we desperately need to hear.

The book of James challenges the “easy believism” of “churchianity,” and urges us to take our faith to a deeper, more dynamic level. Real faith, James says, is demonstrated by action, not mere words. He wants us to know that the only faith that lasts, the only faith that has real meaning, is *a faith that works*.

The five chapters of the book of James pulsate with life-changing power. Whatever you are going through right now, the book of James has an intensely personal message for you.

Have you lost your job, your business, or your home? Are you struggling in your marriage? Have friends or family members turned against you? Have you lost your reputation? Are you being persecuted for your faith? Then James 1:1-12 is for you.

Do you struggle with temptation in your workplace or on the Internet? Then cling to James 1:13-18. Are you prone to anger? Immerse yourself in James 1:19-21.

Does your faith seem dry, impotent, and unreal? Find the prescription in James 2.

Do your words sometimes get you into trouble or stir up hurt or

conflict? Do you have a problem keeping your speech clean? Seek the wisdom of James 3.

Have your thoughts become distorted by the false values of this world? James 4 will straighten out your thinking.

Do you want to understand God's principles for managing money, undergoing suffering, or facing illness? James 5 reveals God's perspective.

The book of James is an intensely practical and realistic book for the age we live in. Technology is constantly changing, but the human condition remains the same. We still sin, suffer, struggle, fight, gossip, grieve, swear, repent, forgive, and pray in the same old ways. And that's why the book of James never goes out of style, never feels out of date. Its message remains as fresh today as when the ink was still wet upon the page.

The book of James is one of the most dynamic and life-changing books in the entire Bible. It is uniquely significant because it was written by the half brother of the Lord Jesus—a man who knew Jesus as no other New Testament writer could.

Matthew 13:55 tells us that the half brothers of Jesus were James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. And John 7:3-5 tells us that the Lord's brothers did not believe in him. It wasn't until the earthshaking events of the crucifixion and resurrection that James realized that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah who was promised in the Old Testament.

Though James grew up with Jesus and knew him well in a brotherly way, James never refers to that unique brotherly relationship in this letter. The humility and reverence of James prevents him from mentioning that family connection. Instead, James refers to his half brother as "the Lord Jesus Christ"—a term of awe and devotion. James truly views Jesus not as his big brother but as his Lord and Savior.

As you build these truths from the book of James into your life, you'll discover depths of strength, courage, maturity, and Christian joy you've never known before. So let's turn the page together and plunge into the depths of this amazing document, the book of James.

Trials Can Be Your Teacher

No matter who you are and what you might have accomplished in life, when you go back to your hometown, you are still the child the townspeople knew way back when. I found this to be especially true in my life because I was the kid brother in a very large family. It didn't matter to my family that I had ministered all over the world. It didn't matter to the people in my hometown that they had seen me minister to thousands of their friends and neighbors—I was still “that Youssef boy” who used to run around town and stir up trouble.

I came home and I occupied the same position in the family I always had. My family members told me what to eat, what to drink, what to do, where to go, and what mode of transportation to take. I was right back to being the little boy in the family even though I had been married for decades. I was still the little boy who used to get into trouble for fighting with the older siblings. I was still the little boy who got his mouth washed out with soap or got grounded for skipping school.

That experience was an eye-opener. It gave me an entirely new perspective on the author of the epistle of James, the half-brother—the kid brother—of the Lord Jesus.

Can you imagine growing up with Jesus as your big brother? Jesus was perfect! He could *literally* do no wrong. Nothing was ever Jesus's fault. So if something went wrong, if something got broken, if cookies were missing from the cookie jar, James got the blame. He *must* have done it because Jesus certainly wouldn't have.

James undoubtedly saw how different Jesus was from the rest of his siblings—and even from the rest of humanity. You would think that James would have believed in his brother immediately, yet John 7:5 tells us, “For not even his brothers believed in him.”

If we had lived in Nazareth at the time James was growing up in the shadow of his big brother, we probably would have seen James complaining to his buddies about Jesus, or making sarcastic remarks about Jesus, or making embarrassed apologies for Jesus. Just as the Old Testament hero Joseph was hated by his brothers and sold into slavery by them, the brothers of Jesus probably found his ideas and actions to be annoying, and at times infuriating. To say that James didn't believe in Jesus might be putting it mildly!

But one day all that changed. A cruel crucifixion silenced Jesus, and he was buried in a grave, sealed up in a tomb. But the grave couldn't contain him; the tomb couldn't hold him. On the third day, Jesus came out of the grave, and for the next forty days, he appeared in person to hundreds and hundreds of eyewitnesses. One of those eyewitnesses was Jesus's kid brother.

The apostle Paul writes of the crucified Lord “that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:4-7). The Bible does not disclose any details of that meeting between

James and his risen brother, the Lord Jesus. It doesn't tell us what words were exchanged between them or what memories and emotions they may have shared. We know only this: James was a changed man after that encounter.

James was no longer a cynic and a skeptic. He was no longer critical or apologetic about his brother. Paul tells us that James became a “pillar” of the church in Jerusalem (see Galatians 2:9). He was completely sold out—100 percent committed—to Jesus. He gave up everything to follow Jesus. Ultimately, he died following Jesus.

Tradition tells us that James died a martyr's death for the cause of Christ. The Roman-Christian historian and church father Eusebius (c. AD 260–339) gathered the accounts of the death of James from various sources, including *The Antiquities of the Jews* by Josephus, the *Historia Ecclesiae* of Clement of Alexandria, and the now-lost account of Hegesippus in *The Acts of the Church*. According to these records, a group of scribes and Pharisees pushed James from the summit of the temple while he was preaching about Jesus. But the fall didn't kill him. So the religious zealots began to stone him. As they were murdering James, he prayed the same prayer his brother and Lord had prayed on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.” Finally, when James still showed signs of life, one of the men took a staff and delivered a deathblow to the apostle's head.

I'm grateful to God that he inspired James to write the powerful, life-changing letter that bears his name. The epistle of James is written to Christians who are facing tough times, Christians who are facing opposition, hostility, and testing. His purpose in writing this letter was to help all Christians—including you and me—to learn the lessons of their sufferings and to become mature in their faith. James opens his letter with this greeting:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
Greetings (1:1).

The word “servant” in this translation is not strong enough. James uses the Greek word *doulos*, which would be more accurately rendered “bondslave”—a person who is sold into slavery and whose will is not his own. James is not merely calling himself a servant, such as a butler or maid, who is free to resign and seek other employment. He is a bondslave, a slave in chains, a person whose will is surrendered, who lives solely for the cause of Christ, his Master.

These opening lines are the letterhead of the epistle of James. If I were to write a letter, I would send that letter out on the letterhead of The Church of The Apostles, a sheet of paper imprinted with the logo of our church. James too has a letterhead and a logo. His letterhead is James 1:1, and his logo is the word *bondslave*. That’s the title, credential, and official seal of the apostle James. He confesses publicly, at the beginning of his letter, that he is the property of another. His life and his will are not his own.

You might think he would introduce himself as “a servant of God and *the brother* of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Wouldn’t that be a great way to make an impression on new believers? Wouldn’t that be an impressive credential to display? But James doesn’t mention his genetic relationship to Jesus through their mother, Mary. The only relationship he claims in his opening lines is the relationship of a bondslave, an abject servant of Jesus the Master.

In those days, just as in our own time, people were impressed by your family connections. People were impressed by *who* you knew more than what you knew. James could have easily exploited his family relationship with Jesus. He could have even rationalized, “I’m not doing this to inflate my own ego. I just want to impress audiences so I can share the gospel.” But James wasn’t trying to impress anyone. He simply wanted to be known as a bondslave of Jesus.

If I were writing this epistle, and I wanted to get the undivided attention of my readers, I think I would have milked my half-brother relationship with Jesus to the fullest! I would have written, “Please be advised that I am the Right Reverend Bishop James

of Jerusalem, a chosen Apostle and the Half-Brother (on our Mother's side) of the Lord Jesus, who is the Christ and the Only Begotten Son of the Father.”

Now, that's a set of credentials! That would establish me as an SVIP—a Spiritually Very Important Person. No one would ever ask, “James who?” In fact, I would probably have my family tree printed on a T-shirt so I could wear it all the time.

But James does not want to seek prominence for himself. He wants to lift up and glorify Jesus. That's why he refers to Jesus by his full title, “the Lord Jesus Christ.” He is the Lord, the Ruler and Master. He is Jesus, the Savior; his name means “God (Yahweh) saves.” And he is the Christ (*Christos*), which is the Greek form of the word *Messiah*—“the anointed one.”

James calls himself a bonds slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does he mean? He is saying, “I do the will of the Master. I obey his will, not my own. I give total control of my life to the Master. That is my identity. That is who I am—a bonds slave, a man with no will but to obey the will of the Master.” A slave is not permitted to have a divided allegiance. He cannot serve the Master while looking out for his own interests. A slave has no will of his own.

It's significant that James, the half-brother of Jesus, affirms the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think about what this means. No one knows your weaknesses and shortcomings better than a member of your family. If Jesus had ever lied, cheated, cursed, gotten even, brawled, or behaved in a petty or jealous way, James would have known. Brothers always know.

Yet James recognized that his half-brother was nothing less than God in human flesh. I can't imagine a more reliable and credible testimony than this!

Unflustered hearts and unshaken faith

After the brief “letterhead” greeting, James leaps right into one of his key themes in this letter—the theme that trials and sufferings

can be a great teacher, producing growth and character strength in our lives:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness (1:2-3).

How do you respond when you face intense hurts, disappointments, setbacks, and sorrows? How do you respond when the walls close in? James tells us what a spiritually healthy and godly response looks like. For many of us, these verses are an unpleasant medicine, hard to swallow, difficult to accept. But the truth of this principle is undeniable: trials and sufferings often have a purpose in our lives. Trials have a way of nudging unbelievers toward God and helping believers to grow stronger and more mature in the faith.

Someone asked Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis, “Why do righteous people suffer?” Lewis replied, “Why shouldn’t the righteous suffer? They’re the only ones who can take it.”

We tend to fear trials as if they are the undertaker. But the truth is that trials, viewed from a godly and spiritual perspective, can truly be our teachers to make us wiser and stronger. Notice that James doesn’t tell us to merely put up with our trials. He doesn’t tell us to endure our trials without complaining. He tells us to “count it all joy,” to consider it a *good* thing when we encounter various trials. And he doesn’t say *if* we face trials, but *when* we face trials. In this life, suffering and sorrow are inevitable, but God wants us to face our trials with an attitude of joy.

In many corners of the church today, we see presentations of a “happy talk” gospel, a version of the Christian faith that is nothing more than adding the name of Jesus to your Sunday vocabulary, adding Sunday morning to your busy schedule, and adding a few dollars a year to the collection plate. In this version of Christianity, God does not demand that we change our behavior, change our thinking, or change our ethical and moral standards.

The pale pastel Christianity that is so often declared today would have been unrecognizable to Christians in the first century. James wrote his epistle to Christians who were being persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and killed for simply believing and saying that Jesus is Lord. In the face of all the suffering the early Christians endured, the message of James was, “You must consider all your sufferings as joy.”

Joy? What does that mean? How can we consider our sufferings as joy? What was James suggesting? Is the apostle saying that we should paste a Cheshire cat smile on our faces and put on a brave spiritual front while holding back our tears? Was he suggesting that we should be phony and insincere about our hurts and our emotions?

Was James saying we should say, “Oh, how wonderful, I lost my job!”? Or “This heart attack is such a blessing in my life—it makes me so happy!”? No! Please understand—God does not want us to display hypocritical happy faces. He doesn’t want us to hide our hurts behind a happy Christian mask. Nor does he want churches filled with grim, iron-willed stoics who deny their feelings, who reject their emotions, who pretend their heartbreaks never happened.

But God wants us to reach a place in our walk with him where we can face trials and tragedies with unflustered hearts and unshaken faith. He wants us to know peace in the midst of upheaval and uncertainty. He wants us to experience the peace that surpasses understanding, a godly contentment and honest submission to the Father’s plan.

I often talk to Christians who are going through a time of suffering, setback, or opposition, and they tell me they feel God has abandoned them. They assume that Satan has the upper hand. It’s understandable that people sometimes cry out in confusion because of their pain—but God wants us to reach a place of spiritual maturity where we trust his goodness, his wisdom, and his love in spite of our suffering and pain.

Yes, Satan is the god of this world—but Satan does not have the upper hand in our lives. The power of Satan does not trump the power of God. To ascribe power to Satan in our times of adversity is to deny God's sovereignty over our lives and over the world. Satan operates within the systems of this world, and he has certain freedoms for a limited period of time. *But Satan is under the power and sovereign authority of God.* He cannot do anything unless God allows it.

So we have to ask ourselves: Why does God allow believers to suffer? Isn't he able to prevent our suffering? Doesn't he want to stop our suffering? Why do bad things happen to God's people?

The ultimate answer is that God knows what he is doing. Our sovereign God knows what we need so that we will grow to be mature in Jesus Christ. Trials that seem to invade our lives, trials that are beyond our control, don't happen because God is unhappy with us. Trials do sometimes come to us in the form of discipline, designed to lead us away from sin and back to God, as the Scriptures teach us: "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?" (Hebrews 12:7).

The moment we face a crisis in our lives, we go crying out to God, "Lord, please change this crisis! Lord, please change these circumstances!" We rarely stop and ask ourselves: "What if God wants to change *me*?"

Facing a marital crisis, we are quick to say, "Lord, please change my wife," or "Please change my husband." In reality, God probably wants to change us.

In a financial crisis, we are quick to say, "Lord, please send money!" or "Please save my business!" In reality, God probably wants to change us.

Facing a health crisis and a frightening diagnosis, we are quick to say, "Lord, please heal my body," or "Please remove this illness," or "Please let the test results be a mistake." But what if God wants

to heal our soul, our spirit, and our relationship with him instead? What if he wants to use your sufferings to make you more like his Son, Jesus Christ?

You might say, “God, if you would change my boss, my job would be perfect!” But God may have placed that boss in your path to teach you something about the Christian life. You might say, “God, if you would change my atheist professor so that he’d stop mocking my faith, I would have a great experience in college.” But God probably placed that professor in your path to teach you how to stand firm for Christ in the face of persecution.

God is constantly teaching us lessons through our daily experiences. He wants us to become spiritually mature. He wants us to master today’s challenges, and he wants to equip us to take on even greater challenges tomorrow. As George MacDonald, that great nineteenth-century Scottish pastor and author, once observed, “The Son of God . . . suffered unto the death, not that we might not suffer, but that our sufferings might be like his.”²

Trials 101

Jesus said that trees need to be pruned in order to bear fruit: “Every branch that does bear fruit he [God the Father] prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2). Pruning a tree is a process of cutting away branches, buds, and deadwood in order to improve the health and productivity of a fruit tree or vine. Every gardener worth his green thumb will tell you that Jesus is giving sound horticultural advice as well as sound spiritual advice.

When a believer gets his or her branch nipped through trials and suffering, it hurts. But it also causes us to bear fruit and have joy in the midst of the trials, because each trouble, each heartache, is designed by the Father to prune us, to improve our spiritual health, and to make us more productive for God.

James wants us to think of the Christian life as a college course called Trials 101. It’s part of the divine curriculum for every believer.

We are students in the School of Hard Knocks, and trials serve as our teacher.

Malcolm Muggeridge was the longtime editor of Britain's popular *Punch* magazine and a cynic and atheist for most of his life. He converted to Christ late in life and became a strong, influential witness for Christ. In a book called *A Twentieth Century Testimony*, he wrote, "I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness. . . . This, of course, is what the cross signifies. And it is the cross, more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ."³

You might say, "Well, my life has been going pretty well. I really don't have any trials to speak of." Look out, my friend, because you are still being tested. There are four stages that every believer goes through:

- *Stage 1: Faith.* You come to Christ and you trust in God. You begin living the Christian life as you believe in his Word.
- *Stage 2: Obedience.* As your Christian experience deepens and God's Word takes root in your life, you begin to obey God more intensely, you take his Word more seriously, and your growing obedience proves that your faith is genuine.
- *Stage 3: Blessing.* God blesses your obedience. You rejoice in him, and everything seems to be going well. Then comes the next stage.
- *Stage 4: Testing.* Blessings always lead to testing.

God permits our faith to be tested for at least three reasons: First, we are tested to prove whether our faith is genuine. Second, we are tested so that our faith will grow and become more mature. Third, we are tested in order to bring glory to the Lord.

The very blessings God brings into our lives are a test. God wants to reveal the reality of our faith and character. The test of blessing will reveal: whether our blessings cause us to let go of faith and begin living by sight; whether our blessings cause us to focus on the blessings and forget the Blesser; and whether our blessings increase our smugness and self-pride or increase our dependence upon God.

As the Scottish Christian essayist Thomas Carlyle once observed, “Adversity is sometimes hard upon a man; but for one man who can stand prosperity, there are a hundred that will stand adversity.”

God’s wisdom for trying times

What is our responsibility in the process of trial and testing? James goes on to tell us:

And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (1:4).

James is saying: Don’t fight God’s perfect work in your life. Don’t rebel against the circumstances he has allowed in your life. Instead, allow the testing process to go on to completion so that you may receive the maximum benefit of God’s teaching and maturing ministry. Allow God to work through the circumstances and challenges of your life. If you rebel against your circumstances, if all you want is to escape your trials and problems, you will never become mature in Christ.

How, then, should we respond to our trials? James goes on to tell us:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him (1:5).

Imagine this scenario with me: You possess a piece of paper with a secret code written on it. You can use that secret code to open a safe. Inside that safe are all the resources you need to empower you and strengthen you to live the Christian life—resources beyond your

imagination. What are those resources? They are the insight, understanding, judgment, and discernment that, collectively, are known as the wisdom of God.

The Lord's wisdom is the greatest resource available to you for your spiritual growth. The wisdom of God enables us to know what God plans to accomplish in our lives. His wisdom is the defogger for the clouded lenses of our human understanding. When we ask God for his wisdom, we open ourselves up to learn about life from God's perspective.

Why do so many Christians remain immature in their character and stagnant in their faith? It's because they are unable to see life from God's panoramic perspective. They remain mired in their limited human perspective, so they are never able to see past their circumstances and sufferings. When trials come, immature Christians say, "God, get me out of this mess!"

Godly, mature Christians look at their trials and say, "God, I don't understand why this is happening to me. I need more of your wisdom. Please make me wise to understand my problems from your perspective. I don't expect you to lift me out of my trials, but I ask you to lead me safely and wisely through my trials, so that I can give all the glory to you."

That's God's wisdom talking. Wisdom is God's wide-angle lens on the problems and trials of this life, but wisdom doesn't fall on us like rain from the sky. We have to ask God for his wisdom. When we ask for wisdom, he will give it to us, generously and without reproach. That is God's promise to us in James 1:5.

How do you ask for wisdom in the midst of challenging circumstances? James goes on to give us the answer:

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 is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (1:6-8).

The person who asks for wisdom while doubting God is vacillating between trust and trying to go it alone. That person is hesitant and uncertain about God's love, power, and wisdom. Such people cannot expect to receive wisdom from the Lord. Godly wisdom comes only when we are fully, genuinely, completely, seriously (and any other superlative you can think of) trusting in God.

Don't expect God to be honored by a half-hearted commitment or a part-time allegiance. He is not pleased when we trust him one moment and doubt him the next.

The victory is already ours

James goes on to tell us that trials are a great leveler of the human race:

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits (1:9-11).

The rich pass through trials. So do the poor. Illness shows no partiality. Death does not discriminate. When a godly Christian suffers, whether he is rich or poor, he must cling to the promises of God. The poor are exalted by the riches of God's grace. The rich are humbled by the fact that they are like the flower of the grass, which passes away. The most exalted earthly title means absolutely nothing compared with the privilege of being a bonds slave to Christ.

Earthly possessions have a way of clouding eternal issues and interfering with our fellowship with God. Possessions demand our attention. They claim our affection. And when trials come, those who have great earthly possessions often find their lives complicated. Possessions can be a snare.

We worry about losing the things we have accumulated. Have

we protected our possessions from fire? Flood? Theft? Inflation? Recession? Depression? In challenging times, it's easy to become so focused on our material goals that we forget our spiritual priorities. That is why James warns that, in times of trial, the rich should glory in their humiliation. They should glory in the fact that they can depend on the loving Father. Even if their bank accounts were to evaporate, God will still be there to lean on.

Material possessions are fleeting. Only a relationship with God through Jesus Christ endures throughout eternity. That is the vital, sustaining relationship you can rely on, that you can count on, no matter what setbacks and losses you suffer in this life.

What is our reason for considering it all joy when we suffer trials? James tells us:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him (1:12).

We rejoice because of the victory that is already ours in Christ. Jesus has already won the victory, and God has promised the crown of victory to all those who love him. We can experience joy in our trials if we trust God to use those trials to bring forth Christlike character and growth in us.

In the early church, no one expected a life of ease, good health, and prosperity, as so many Christians expect today. The late preacher Vance Havner observed that more than three hundred delegates attended the First Nicene Council in AD 325. Out of all the delegates who came to Nicaea (in modern Turkey) from around the ancient world, fewer than a dozen were completely whole in body. All the rest had been tortured and mutilated for their faith, losing an eye or limb or hand because they refused to stop preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you are obedient to Christ, you will be at war with this world—and the world will make you suffer for it.⁴

Trials can be our teacher, because God can use the worst that happens to us to build his best within us. When trials come, we can choose resentment and bitterness over the “unfairness” of life’s trials—or we can learn the eternal lessons God wants to teach us.

Which will you choose?