

HOW DO I LOOK?

SERIES: LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

By Danny Hall

We are so absorbed with our appearance in this culture, aren't we? We ask ourselves all the time, "How do I look?" But in this series in James 1, I'd like to challenge us to ask that question in the other sense: not how we appear, but how we see. How do we look at what God is doing in our life, and at the world around us? In James 1 I want us to allow God to open our eyes to some new perspectives and some strategies to walk more closely and productively with him.

The book of James has been called a practical book that deals with many real-life issues. But it is really a book about what it means to approach the common, everyday things of life with eyes of faith. The opening paragraph, 1:2-8, grounds us in some of the truths that are foundational for having the perspective of faith. We're going to look at that paragraph in this message.

James begins with a startling command:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds....

That is a terribly audacious command! But think of the context. Verse 1:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

Greetings.

Early in the development of the church, the Jewish opposition to the proclamation of the gospel began to grow in intensity. The believers began to be scattered out of Jerusalem into the countryside. The persecutions under the Romans and others would eventually become incredibly great. They were already beginning in James' day. The immediate recipients of this letter were not just living a normal, comfortable life. They had been forced out of their home city. They were now dealing with the fact that committing their lives to Christ was costing them in ways they had probably never anticipated. So James is speaking to that when he says, "Consider it pure joy when you encounter trials."

I don't know about you, but when I encounter tough things in my life, the last thing I want to hear from people is "Consider it all joy"! How in the world do we do that? Well, James tells us. To find out how to embrace life as it is with enthusiasm, joy, and anticipation, we have to look closely at what he is saying here. Each of the specific words James uses is important.

Facing trials with joy

First of all we are going to *face* (NIV) or *encounter* (NASB) trials. This word appears in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. The man went down the road toward Jericho and fell among thieves, or *encountered* thieves. The word has the idea of suddenly being surrounded. And you and I don't go out looking for trouble. No, as we walk along, all of a sudden things just happen. We find ourselves surrounded by things that are difficult to deal with, and we have a sense of being overwhelmed by the realities of life.

James says that these trials are *many* (NIV) or *various* (NASB). The King James uses the word *divers*. It means my troubles are different from yours. Most of us approach life thinking our troubles are worse than other people's troubles, until we encounter somebody with really hard troubles, and then we say, "Whew! I'm glad those aren't my troubles!" If we step back and look objectively at our own little world, we see that what we're

encountering isn't really that big compared to the scope of the whole universe. But in the moment it seems big, because it is ours. It can be anything—strains in our marriage, or our relationships with children, parents, friends, the person who works in the cubicle next to us; it can be physical ailments, chaos in our lives—you name it.

The word *trial* here also means test. To be confronted with a test requires some sort of response. It is the same word that we'll find translated "temptation" later in the chapter. It can, in some contexts, have a moral sense of being tempted to sin. But the idea of a test is simply this: Life presents us with opportunities to make choices, and the question is whether we will be able to handle them properly. The troubles of life become like a crucible in which who we are is being forged. This is a testing in a good sense, that of approving us in relation to a good goal.

James calls us to have *joy* in the midst of all the troubles of life. How do we turn the necessity of facing the troubles of life into joy? Well, the only way we can do that is to see where we're headed. Observe the goal James gives us to shoot for in verses 3-4:

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.

The goal is to be mature, complete, lacking in nothing. My working definition for spiritual maturity is this: an ever-growing consistency in the display of the life of Christ in me. When God called me and I became his child by faith, he began the process of changing me, step by step, into the image of Christ, and he made a commitment to complete that process.

As with any worthy goal in life, this never happens instantaneously. In any endeavor—sports, art, technological savvy—we have different aptitudes and abilities. Child prodigies have incredible talent at masterful levels. But even for them, and certainly for the rest of us, the development and refinement of ability takes arduous work.

I love music, and I wish I could play the piano. But in order to do that, I'd have to start out playing *Chopsticks* and scales, and more scales. And when I finished with those scales, I'd have to play more scales! My fingers would have to develop dexterity and my mind would have to learn how to read music. Finally one day all that would somehow become translated into beautiful music.

It is a worthy and noble goal that God is taking us toward, purging us of all the sinful things in our lives, changing us more and more into the image of Christ, drawing us ever closer to himself. But the truth is that it's a process. That process includes his using the troubles of our lives, teaching us over time how to handle them and see them properly. When we confront an issue and see it for the very first time through God's perspective, what he might be trying to do in our life, out of that comes a little bit of growth. That gives us the courage and stamina to face the next challenge, and then the next, and so on. That's why James says facing trials produces *perseverance*. Although we can't figure it all out, we trust the living God who is at work through the troubles in our life.

If we expect life to be easy, we will be disappointed. I highly recommend Philip Yancey's marvelous book *Reaching for the Invisible God*. It deals with some really thorny questions. He quotes Madame Jeanne Guyon:

"If knowing answers to life's questions is absolutely necessary to you, then forget the journey. You will never make it, for this is a journey of unknowables—of unanswered questions, enigmas, incomprehensibles, and, most of all, things unfair." (1)

God wants us to trust him as he uses all that to take us on a journey toward spiritual maturity that's worth it all. This goal makes it possible for us to obey the command, "Count it all joy." But he doesn't leave us there. He gives us a resource.

Asking God for wisdom

Verse 5:

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.

What we need in order to get there is *wisdom*. Wisdom is the skill of living in a godly way, seeing life from God's perspective, discerning what God is doing. Interestingly enough, the source of that wisdom is God. It's not seminary or hard work. Many things in life help us get perspective, like conversations with others and good books. God can use those, but ultimately the wisdom to discern what he is doing is a gift from him.

How do we get wisdom from him? We are to *ask*. But wait a minute—it's got to be more complicated than that! That's so simple that it goes against the grain of our humanity. It's got to depend more on us, it's got to be about marshalling our own strength and ingenuity to figure things out. We want to be able to do it on our own. But the truth of it is, the first step toward wisdom, God's perspective, is the admission that we need his wisdom. Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...." This doesn't mean that we never experience confusion. But God says, "If you lack wisdom, ask, and I'll give it to you, freely and without reproach." He won't say, "You idiot, what took you so long?" or, "Who are you to ask?" We underestimate the grace of God in our lives.

The means of getting wisdom is to ask for it, and the key to asking for it is faith. Verses 6-8:

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.

To *believe* in this context means trusting that God's perspective is the right one. The word *doubt* suggests the idea of hesitating and second-guessing. For example, let's say I approach something difficult in life and begin to think it through God's way, but then when I come right down to it I think, "God's way *can't* be right in this instance. It doesn't make sense to me! Surely it would be better if things went this other way." I call into question whether following God is really worth it. There comes a point when we have to ask, "Do I trust God, or my own ingenuity?" That moment of equivocation before we decide whether or not we are going to sell out to God's perspective, is the crux of this whole matter. We must be able to say, "God, I will trust you even when it seems foolish in the eyes of the world, and in my own eyes right now. I will trust that your ways are right."

James says the one who doubts becomes *double-minded*, a person of divided loyalties who wants to follow God, but wants to hang on to his own agenda as well. Double-minded people are always bouncing back and forth. God is saying to us, "If you will trust me, I will give you the wisdom to help you walk through this. If you don't, you will become someone who is unstable in all your ways."

Philip Yancey writes:

"A faithful person sees life from the perspective of trust, not fear. Bedrock faith allows me to believe that, despite the chaos of the present moment, God does reign; that regardless of how worthless I may feel, I truly matter to a God of love; that no pain lasts forever and no evil triumphs in the end. Faith sees even the darkest deed of all history, the death of God's Son, as a necessary prelude to the brightest." (2)

One last phrase to look at is "all he does" (NIV) or "all his ways" (NASB). It speaks of a journey down a path. If we doubt, if we don't fix our eyes on God and trust his wisdom and leading, we are pulled to and fro, distracted on the journey of life.

I would suggest by way of application that we ask for God's wisdom to pour into us. He uses certain resources to let that happen if we will but hear his voice in them. There are many, but I want to point to two incredible resources. This is nothing new, just a reminder.

Two places to find wisdom

First, remember verse 4 where it says what all this produces in us: "So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Where have we heard similar words in the New Testament? "All Scripture is inspired by

God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NASB). One great resource is the wisdom that is imparted through God’s word. He has given us his word not so we can be proud of how much of the Bible we know, but so we might hear his voice and understand who he is. We are never going to have the wisdom of God until we understand the heart and mind of God, which is never going to happen until we let the word of God fill us. As the word of God fills us and we encounter the troubles of life, we are changed; we understand more and more of God’s view of our life, and that whole process helps us to gain maturity.

The other great resource I’ll point to is the body of Christ. Our church is filled with the wisdom of God. The word of God has worked in my life and in the lives of many others through the troubles we experience, and that has matured us all so that we can now speak words of wisdom to one another. This is a truly marvelous, rich resource if we learn how to be the kind of godly friends that God wants us to be.

Ginger and I are avid mystery readers, and one of our favorite mystery writers is Patricia Cornwall. Her lead character is Kay Scarpetta, a medical examiner. Cornwall’s books are always about forensic medicine. She has a marvelous, clear way of depicting the hideousness of sin and the fallenness of man. In her book *The Last Precinct*, Kay’s life is in utter turmoil. She has been falsely accused and attacked, and her world is crumbling around her. In the midst of this chaos she stays for a while at the home of a friend. Kay is someone who keeps everything inside of her, but slowly and surely this friend, following a series of tragedies in her own life, begins to talk Kay through it, explaining what’s going on in her life. As Kay reflects on what it means to finally deal with the troubles of her own life, she says:

“Her living room has become a dark confessional booth where I can be emotionally newborn and naked and feel no shame. I don’t see our sessions as therapy, but rather as a priesthood of friendship that is sacred and safe. I have begun to tell another human being what it is like to be me.” (3)

Don’t we long deep down in our hearts to have that kind of connection? One of the glorious gifts to us is the body of Christ, and the resource of godly wisdom is there, if we connect with it and open ourselves up to it.

As we hear the voice of God through the word, studying and hearing it taught, as we hear the voice of God through the collective godly wisdom of the body of Christ, and as we trust God completely to guide and lead, step by step, in perseverance and endurance, we begin to see God change us into the image of Christ. Then we can step back and say, “There *is* joy on this journey as God works in my life and builds me into the person he’s created me to be.”

My son Christopher is in the process of applying to colleges. One of the applications asked, “How would you define what is good character? Give examples if you want.” His mother reminded him of someone we know, and he built his answer on this person’s story. I asked Christopher’s permission to read to you what he wrote on his application:

“‘My wife is wonderful!’ Mike tells his guests. At fifty years old, Mike is physically and mentally disabled. He met Andrea at my parents’ wedding twenty-six years ago, and they were married a year and a half later. It was only ten days into the marriage that Mike, now confined to a wheelchair, suffered his first attack of multiple sclerosis. As the doctor explained Mike’s condition, Andrea realized that her vow of ‘in sickness’ was going to be tested to the fullest extent. Over the next eight years, despite repeated MS attacks, Mike finished seminary and was involved in church ministry. Mike and Andrea had two daughters, the second of which was born with heart problems that continued to require surgery. The next four years saw Mike’s condition deteriorate even further, with Mike exhibiting the symptoms of Alzheimer’s and epilepsy in addition to his MS. He became physically and mentally disabled to the point where he could no longer perform even the most simple of tasks without assistance.

My father is quoted as asking, ‘If you squeeze an orange, what comes out? Orange juice, right? Wrong. Whatever is on the inside is what comes out.’ When life is good, many people appear to have integrity, loyalty, humility, and perseverance, all words that come to mind when describing good character. But I believe good character must pass the tests of time and pressure. Andrea continues to honor her marriage vows, taking personal responsibility for her family’s needs and serving selflessly and with humility. Along with working a

part-time job, she has been involved in a wide variety of community service activities that range from starting a clown ministry to working with single-parent mothers. When Mike, who continues to live at home, says, 'My wife is wonderful,' he is talking about a woman of good character." (4)

This was Ginger's best friend from her high school days. We have watched God do this incredible thing in her life. There are days that have to be so hard we wonder how she can bear up under it. But we see God developing in her life an amazing strength of character, amazing endurance, and amazing joy and love for Christ in the midst of all of that. We are humbled by it. In comparison we've had it so easy. We've seen that God has graciously used those incredible troubles to make her into a godly woman who is filled with joy. That is what God offers to you and me. Whatever the troubles of our life are, whether severe or not, that is what God wants to use to mold us into his image. Do we trust him? Will we honor him, commit our lives to him as the one who can take the troubles of our lives and make something joyful out of them?

NOTES

(1) Madame Jean Guyon, *Spiritual Torrents*, quoted in *Reaching for the Invisible God* by Philip Yancey, © 2000, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 61.

(2) Yancey, pp. 65-66.

(3) Patricia Cornwall, *The Last Precinct*, © 2000, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. P. 88.

(4) Christopher Hall, untitled, © 2000.

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James 1:1-8

1st Message

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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