

## **James: Heroic Perseverance**

Jonathan K. Dodson | September 2013

This morning we begin a series that will take us right up to Advent. We'll be reflecting on the book of James. The reason we selected James is because of our church's stage of life (20s-40s & 10& under). We realize you are facing a lot of big life decisions. Should you switch companies or careers? What should I do for a career? Who should you date? When should you have children? How to raise them? Should I move? What should determine my move? James says that we shouldn't say today or tomorrow I'll will move, live, and make a living, all on your own, but rather, you should say: "If the Lord wills, we will do this or that." How do we discern what the Lord will? What you need, what we all need, is *wisdom*. How do we get it? Well, there are trade-offs to get wisdom. Ezra Koenig of Vampire Weekend sings: "*Wisdom is a gift would you trade it for youth?*" Many of us have, traded wisdom in to enjoy our youth, to comb the city in search of fulfillment, but forgo the gift that comes down "from above" (1:15, 3:15, 17). When we are everywhere, we are nowhere, and we certainly not where we can receive wisdom. James is a book of wisdom, but it also more. Our impulses divide energy, affections, and character, spreading us out wide. Wisdom unites us. It reintegrates a disintegrated person. Wisdom puts divided people back together. It makes us whole. In a wired age, this is more important than ever. We are studying James because he extends more than advice; he offers a whole way of living. Will you open your hands to receive this gift each Sunday, through the week, in community? I hope you will.

### **Who is James & What did He Write?**

Let's introduce the book of James with two questions and three images. This isn't any old introduction. It is foundational to the letter, to your life, to becoming whole. If you understand what James is doing, you won't trade him in. Two questions to start. Who is **James** and what did he write? James was the eldest brother of Jesus. Can you imagine? A front row seat to the messiah, cradle to grave? James must have struggled with envy and pride before he collapsed into humility. He watched Jesus grow in wisdom and stature (Lk 2:52). This made James a great leader. *Great leaders are humble and confident*. James is writing to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." This phrase refers to Jews who were scattered outside of Jerusalem. Many of these Jews would make an annual pilgrimage back to Jerusalem, and there received the gospel and believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Messianic Jews. Now, who would be qualified to address these disparate Jews? Someone with clout and someone from Jerusalem. That someone was James, who led the church in Jerusalem and made some formative decisions for the early church (Acts 15). Paul recognizes James as an apostle and the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19). So we know he was confident, but what about humble? Think about this—if you were Jesus' brother, don't you think you'd drop that name? Not James. Why? I can see two reasons. First, James knew that blood didn't qualify him for ministry; godly character does. Second, James' self image wasn't fundamentally shaped by what kind of stock he came from or by what others thought of him. Instead, his identity, his bedrock security as a person, came from being a "slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). Humility. James possessed deep security from being bound to Jesus. We shirk at being anyone's slave, partly because of civil rights history, but also because we don't want to serve anybody; we're a people of liberty. We're Americans, and that my brothers and sisters is a broken identity. Are you so concerned to exercise

your freedom that you would marginalize your Christian identity? Slave of Christ? You're not that radical? Jesus said "no servant is greater than his Master." Does your glory eclipse the glory of the risen Christ? *I recently read a twitter bio of well-known designer, who included not just what he does, but who he loves. It says: "Lover of Jesus." This means he knows, at some level, his identity isn't in the art he makes. He isn't bound to his art. He's bound to his Savior.* That's James, humble (serving a King) and confident (beloved by a Savior). Now **what is James writing?** There's considerable debate over what kind of letter he wrote. I'll spare you all the details give you this: he isn't writing a letter like Paul, with a sustained argument that can be traced from beginning to end. Read it like that and you'll just get frustrated. Instead, James **is a compendium of wisdom for living as God's whole, new people.** This is perfect for the divided. Things pull at us; we unravel, get stressed, lack energy to serve one another, bless the city, and become anxious, fret about decisions and schedules, failing to live out our new identity. We lack unity and wholeness. **James says we are made for perfection,** not as in flawless, though there is a hint of that, but wholeness, complete. Trials can lead us to steadfastness, steadfastness, to being perfect, complete, lacking in nothing. We're made for perfection. James uses this perfect word group, and synonyms; over and over again. In a sense, this will be a study in perfection, an exploration of wholeness, and we *need wisdom to get it.* But there is an obstacle or two. One obstacle is *doubt.* If you ask for wisdom, but doubt, you won't get it. Is James saying you shouldn't ever have psychological uncertainty? That you should never question your faith? No, wrestling through the uncertainty is actually part of the Christian life. Instead, James is saying don't *diapsycho*s, divide your mind, be a double-minded person. Don't have a foot in one camp and a foot in another. [Reed]. The double-minded person makes (*diakrino*) divided judgments. Some days you make a judgment and say to yourself, "Christ is enough." The next day you make a judgment on Christ, saying he's not enough. Difficulty hits and you end up walking away from your faith. Why? You didn't have faith in Christ. You begin to build your worth, your faith, your trust in something other than Christ, a child, career or a person. That person lets you down, and you crack, get anxious. To deal with the anxiety, you come home, jack into entertainment, plunge into a hobby or the Internet, you might try to sleep it off, but wake up and your problem is still there. You are still divided, anxious, far from whole. Your judgment that understanding from others, or just a little down time, was wrong. You in a hole. If you're a Christian, you might pray, read your Bible, go to church or speak up in city group, making a judgment that they will help. But they don't meet your expectations, so you withdraw, rip on the church, and complain to your friends. Why? Because you're passing judgments, divided judgments, from a divided mind that lacks the healing wholeness of the gospel. You're made for one Savior, not many. You're like Newton's cradle, a metallic ball, slamming against others, swinging back and forth, back and forth. You are double-minded. You need wisdom to reintegrate into Christ, to become single-minded, settled into a whole way of living. How do we escape the click-clack of a divided life? How do we become whole?

### **The Mirror, the Arrow, & the Crown**

James uses three images that could be considered central to the whole letter. First, a mirror. [SLIDE] The **mirror** appears in a passage describing the difference between a hearer and a hearer who does the Word: "**or if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at**

himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” James tells us the mirror is the “perfect law”, probably a reference to torah, the law of the Old Testament, which is fulfilled by loving God and loving neighbor. **He is telling us to look in the mirror and remember who we are by loving God and loving others.** This, he says, is the law of liberty. When you act out who you are, you experience true freedom. When you resist it, you cage yourself in, you become double-minded. The mirror shows us who we are, in Christ, and if we remember who we are, we will act like him. If we forget our identity, we won’t act like him. James knows this is a process. He knows we forget, that we use the tongue to bless God and to curse men, use wealth to help orphans and widows but also to slight people who are different. This is why he charges us to **persevere**. Our second image, the persevering, like an arrow moving forward, a steadfast person. Earlier James says, “**the testing of your faith produces steadfastness**” (1:2). The word is *hypermone*, one commentator describes it as “heroic endurance.” Think of Aragorn, rightful king of Gondor, who was reduced to the anonymous “Strider.” Snubbed by fellow men, he withstands scorn, and perseveres, contending for middle earth. He leads the fellowship of the ring through the dark mines of Moria, defends the people of Rohan at Helms Deep, and assaults the black gate of Mordor. Swinging off the fortress wall at Helms Deep, he lands right smack in the middle of orcs to defend humanity within inches of his own death. He knows he has to persevere, to hold off Saruman’s forces until *the dawn of the fifth day*. Just before the defeat of Helm’s Deep, the dawn breaks and with it the light of Gandalf the White, bringing deliverance and life. This is heroic endurance, perseverance. When we look in the mirror of the Word, and walk out into the difficulty of the day, the demands of life, will we persevere, remain steadfast, being doers of the word who control their tongues, suffer well, fight temptation, and give preference to the poor? Will we contend with love God and love others. The mirror and the arrow, the holy law and heroic perseverance. Some days are so hard. What do we do then? Double up on duty? **Why** should we persevere? Third image: “**Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life**” (1:12). Appeals to reward are all over the Bible. The reason we persevere isn’t duty itself, but to receive the **crown of life**. The crown compels us. What is it? A crown is something bestowed on royalty and reflects status. It is typically reserved for the king, but God will take off his crown and give it to us. We will be crowned with his affection, and status as royal sons and daughters. Blushingly, become co-heirs with Christ and enter his court. How is that possible? In heroic perseverance, Jesus fights through death and comes out with life. He obtains the name above all names—the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Lord of life, and grants his crown those who persevere. He gives them his very own life: “**Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life**” (Rev 2:10). What he won, through life and death, he gives us. A crown, so that when we look in the mirror, we see our true self, materializing, crowned with affection and everlasting life. Look in the mirror, walk in perseverance, and gain the crown. This arc runs through the whole book. Different images appear, replacing the mirror, the arrow, and the crown, but the substance is all there. If you want to escape double-mindedness, you’ll have to slow down, open God’s Word, look in it until you see, not only Jesus but yourself, sitting next to him, crowned with affection and love. Then get on and do good works, don’t forget who you are. Be yourself, live a whole

live. Fight off evil, but do it with an eye on the east, and you will see the dawn of his light break across this world, gathering you up in his kingly glory. Let the crown compel you.