

# "Overcoming under Trial" James 1:2-18

## R H Johnston

James is an intensely practical book, giving step by step instruction in how to become righteous. What matters to James is not theoretical propositional "belief", but living faith that produces a holy life that practices nitty-gritty righteousness. If you are unclear about whether James's challenging message is truth, you will, like Luther, be unable to receive God's wisdom to live the genuinely Christian life, and become an empty professor of the faith.

### **Trials are inevitable**

James 1:2-12 is key to understanding the message of James's whole epistle.

James 1:2 and 1:12 see enduring trials as being a cause for joy, and having a positive benefit, because they produce endurance (v2), to show the person up as tested and reliable, ultimately leading to divine approval (v12), and such people will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him. Note the progression in James 1:3-4 - testing produces steadfastness, and the continued pursuit of steadfastness produces a maturity that lacks nothing.

Such trials are like the old way of testing bridges. They were heavily loading it prior to public service: the test was not to make it fail, but to prove that the bridge would not fail but certainly stand up in normal use.

So, trials are character forming, provided they are handled **with faith** (James 1:6). The big problem when under trial is that you are inclined to think you may be able to escape the trial by "running with the hare and the hounds".

So we need to know how to handle such trials: James says that for that we need wisdom (James 1:5). Without God's wisdom we shall never be overcomers (Revelation 12:11-13), who will receive the crown of life (James 1:12).

Wisdom is not knowledge of facts, but understanding of how to act in given circumstances. There is a worldly wisdom which through accommodation and compromise seeks to avoid the issues in a trial circumstance. But this is not God's wisdom, nor God's way of overcoming. You will never overcome in these trials without **God's** wisdom.

God is very willing indeed to give this wisdom, and will not upbraid us for asking, but we have to ask in faith, being **sure** that God is going to give us the best solution, even if humanly speaking it does not look like it.

If we aren't convinced that God will give us the best answer, how will we respond when we get God's wisdom? We shall doubt it, and begin to look for an alternative solution. Such a person then wavers between two opinions, and becomes unstable, incapable of acting either in God's way, or even in the world's way (James 1:7-8). But this means that we become incapable of receiving anything from the Lord. Even if God were to give us His word we should not be able to **receive** it, and act on it.

Just as we had to receive Jesus to believe in Him, so also we need faith to receive the wisdom from God.

Let no one have any doubts about this, if you waver in these things you will receive nothing (James 1:7). This is, of course, a prayer issue. But this goes far to explain why many Christians get no answers from God: their unbelief prevents any possibility of their receiving. Do you really believe in the God who does miracles, or is he constrained to do no more than can be explained naturalistically?

If you have a double mind, you will be unstable, vacillating between trying to be godly and trying to fit in with the world, and will be comfortable in doing neither. No-one is so miserable as the backslider!

The issue of the poor and the rich is also a key issue. Many early Christians were poor, and their poverty had probably been further intensified by persecution. But they can rejoice that God sees them as the truly rich, exalted to be seated with Christ (James 1:9, Ephesians 1).

The rich are in a more vulnerable position. If you have riches, you fear losing them, and being reduced to poverty, and, worse still, losing the respect of other people (see James 2:1-7). 1 Timothy 6:8-10: *"those who desire to be rich fall into temptation,...., into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs."*

Riches therefore make you inclined to compromise with the world and its demands. James therefore reminds them of the importance of setting such considerations aside, rejoicing if you should lose your riches, because the consequent humiliation to poverty will liberate you from the things that may hinder you from overcoming. The rich man fades away in the midst of his pursuits, just like the man who built the barns in Jesus' story. (Luke 12:16-21)

We live in a rich country, and are generally amongst the richer in society. Am I at risk here, are you?

The contrast is made with the receiving of the crown of life given to those who have come through trials, have been steadfast and faithful, and not snared by the demands of the world and the desire to maintain our wealth. True love for God is manifested in our endurance in trial.

## **Persecution in the 21st century**

2 Timothy 3:12-13: "*All those who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and imposters will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived*". Persecution is not a "may be", but a "will be": if we aren't persecuted our desire for godliness needs serious re-examination.

Our Christian faith is unique in this: the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key spiritual issue - it either happened as an historical event, or not. There is nothing emotional about this fact, unlike the cross, which can produce an emotional commitment. Everything else, including noble death, is mimicked or acceptable to other religions. The Resurrection of Christ is the great stumbling stone.

The challenges of the world are often subtle: we avoid raising offence in the areas we know will produce conflict and persecution. We are inclined to downplay speaking out on these areas while strongly proclaiming on other areas, that we perceive are less of an issue to the hearers.

Most persecution comes from the religious. This was true in New Testament times, and remains true now. Political correctness is part of the modern "state religion". Thus the modern western secular state demands we accept everyone and say they are all "ok", even if their conduct is abominable in the sight of God. This is a secular "touchy feely" New Age religion. It can look superficially Christian since Christians are called to love. Yet this new religion has godlessness and evolutionary theory at its core, and denies every substantive tenet of the Christian faith. We cannot afford to compromise with it in any way.

English Bishops, for the most part, keep an outward form of religion but deny its reality, for they are part of the machinery of the State, set up to promote social order and conformity, and their stance moves with the times to suit the prevailing world-view. We are always persecuted if we resist the established religion: the challenge was to confess that "Caesar is Lord" in the New Testament period, but the Christians refused, and declared instead that "Jesus is Lord", and they suffered the penalty. Such a social religion always exists in every society - it is the system of rules and customs, upon which the legal system is based, and to which everyone is required to conform, at least in their public dealings with other people. It is forbidden to bring the distinctives of your religion into your day to day dealings with other people, and religion is consequently pushed into an

irrelevant private arena. Today, if you do not conform publicly in this way you may be socially ostracised, lose your job, or risk losing your children into "care" if you discipline them in accord with Biblical precept.

These pressures are very strong, and we have been socialised through secular schooling to accept them. These are the areas where we risk failing to overcome, and it is easy to rationalise the situation as one where we have no choice about conforming, and may feel bound to act so as to cause no unnecessary offence. But that constitutes a failure to overcome under trial. No wonder we need God's wisdom!

Declaim against the tents of political correctness, abortion, evolutionism, materialism and the like and you will certainly be persecuted, for these issues are core to the secular religion. This is the stuff that will bring us trials - not the usually considered temptations to sin such as theft or adultery.

If we aren't persecuted, then 2 Timothy 3:12-13 suggests we have already compromised ourselves.

This is relevant to the deception question of James 1:16, for we think that outward conformity to the established order is acceptable, not recognising the essentially religious character of this conformity. This is a deception that will readily ensnare us, compromising or even destroying our testimony to holiness.

Trials are inevitable, it is not acceptable to God to compromise but we must endure trial and overcome, but will only do so with God's wisdom.

## **How should we handle trials, since they are sent from God, aren't they?**

James 1:13-18 deals with the question "Are the trials from God, and how should we handle them"?

The connection with what has gone before is somewhat disguised by the interpretive character of modern English translations. Essentially the same Greek word is used for temptation in James 1:13-14 as is used for trial in James 1:2 and 1:12. Moreover Jesus uses the same word in teaching his disciples to pray in Matthew 6:13, which may be more precisely translated: "*and do not bring us to an occasion of trial/temptation, but rescue us from the evil (or Evil one)*".

The specific occasion of testing which faced Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane comes to mind, and also the specific temptation to apostasy faced by the Christians to whom the Epistle to the Hebrews was written. One should like, in view of the passage presently under consideration, to be able to translate Matthew

6:13 as "*do not allow us to be brought to an occasion of temptation*", so separating the source of temptation from the Father, but that would be a false translation! The test that Jesus faced when approaching the Cross was certainly ordained by God. So such a trial can be divinely instituted, and the command to pray to be spared from experiencing such a severe test is one that we are therefore wise to heed, notwithstanding that 1 Corinthians 10:13 says that God will provide a means of overcoming. The command to pray for deliverance from trial is, of course, an appointed means to secure such overcoming.

So then, in that case, what are we to make of James 1:13-18, since on the face of it James 1:13 denies God as the source of trials? We must understand James' message as a whole before turning to consider the details.

James has an economical Jewish style, with the transitions from one topic to the next not enjoying the logical connections that a modern writer might consider necessary. This was common in Jewish literature: we see it in the prophets, and perhaps at its most extreme in the Proverbs, where the connection from one proverb to the next is often obscure. Jesus makes similar jumps in his teachings. So we must fill in the connecting logic stemming from comments from objectors, in order to understand the message correctly.

It seems that a question, not entirely unreasonable, has been raised. "If trials/temptations are so good for us, they must be sent from God, and if they are sent from God then surely it must be right to accept them as a gift from God, and do the thing we are being tempted to do?"

Such a person has missed the point of James 1:2,12 that the virtue of temptations comes from enduring under them, not from giving in to them! But James goes further than this, examining the false reasoning at a deeper level. He shows that the failure stems from a misunderstanding of both human nature and the character of God.

Hence v13: "*If you are tempted, don't say that this temptation comes from God (and hence I will do it), for God is untempted with evil, so does not tempt men (with evil).*" The phrase "*God is untempted with evil*" seems strange, but it is clarified by v14, by analogy with human desire, as meaning "*God has no desire for evil*". God's holiness is dealt with further in James 1:17.

As James 1:14 shows, our **desire** is at the heart of temptation. If you have no desires you cannot be tempted - indeed without desire one would hardly get out of bed in the morning! The old translations used the word "lust", but that word once had a broader significance than the purely sexual connotation it generally has today.

Two metaphors are used here, which are clearer in the original: firstly the tempted man is allured away from the place of safety, as a hunter lures a hunted animal from its lair), and secondly enticed, the original meaning "lured by a bait". Desire is the lure to entice us from the place of moral safety.

In James 1:15 desire is then seen as having conceived, as we might say, it has become "a little bit" pregnant, with the inevitable consequence in due time of bearing sin, and sin leads to death (Romans 5:12). The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). The outworking may take time, but, like pregnancy, the process, once started, has a remorseless inevitability. This explains Jesus statement (Matthew 5:28) that whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. That desire will sooner or later lead to the physical act. I'll say more about desire later.

Verse 16: "*Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.*" To think other than according to this truth is to live in deception. Deception will be considered more later too.

Verse 17 shows why. "*Every morally good gift and every mature/complete gift comes from above, from the Father of lights, with whom change or shadow of turning has no place.*" The Father is eternal unchanging light, and the source of all other light. Light is the symbol of utter righteousness. Being the source of Light, there can be no grey or shadowed side to God. For this very reason He can radiate only light, and radiates it in all directions. He is like the sun, and there are certainly no shadows on or near the sun! God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

God has a clear objective and purpose for us. Thus v18: "*Purposefully, God has begotten us by means of a word/message of truth/reality with a view to our being a first fruit as it were, of His creatures.*" God seeks our holiness: sin is incompatible with it, and so God cannot be the source of sin, nor act to encourage us to sin. God intends us to be morally good and to resist all evil. Holiness will be considered further below.

Let us consider more closely the three issues I identified as needing closer examination: Desire, Deception, and Holiness

## **Desire**

Desire is not itself evil, for there are good desires. (Galatians 5:16-17). Desire is the mainspring of human (and divine!) motivation and action. "Desire" is a very common NT word, and worth a concordance study. God said that "*if we take delight in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our hearts*" (Psalms 37:4), but we have first to "*trust the LORD and do good*" (Psalms 37:3). Subject to this

important condition, God will place within us good desires, and then fulfil them, giving us good gifts (James 1:17).

Desire lay at the heart of the temptation of Eve. There were three elements to her temptation, she saw that the tree was:

- good for food,
- pleasant to the eyes,
- to be desired to make one wise.

These correspond to the three classic aspects of temptation: the desire for the things of the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Jesus's temptations in the wilderness were likewise in these three areas. In each case the desire for something good, leads to a temptation to go beyond what God permits. Matthew 4:1-11.

1. Flesh. Legitimate desire for food when literally at the point of starving to death. Food not evil, but misusing spiritual power to obtain it would be.
2. World. Desire that men should recognise Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God. Legitimate, but not to do so by spectacular display to draw attention to self and fulfil the prophecy "*the Lord will suddenly come to his temple*" (Malachi 3:1)
3. Devil. Desire to obtain authority over all the nations. Legitimate, but has to be achieved via the suffering of the cross that will destroy the Devil and all his works.

The nature of our temptations, reveals what we desire, and hence what we are. We see this in the analogy of the fruit trees Matthew 7:17-20 - "*you will know them by their fruits*".

We are not all tempted with the same things, or in the same way. You can **only be tempted by something you desire**: other things do not touch us at all (An offer of a round of golf is no temptation for me, but would be to a golf enthusiast.) A friend of mine, when a young man, was pursued by a woman who sought to seduce him. Her scheming was unsuccessful, because in his innocence he failed to even perceive what she was doing.

So also Jesus, having only good and godly desires, could only be tempted through them. Hence we do not find Jesus tempted to steal or to fornicate. So, as we become more like Christ, we shall increasingly have the same type of temptations as he did, and not those of carnal men. His flesh was fully "crucified", or put to death as per Galatians 5:24. (compare Hebrews 4:15) Do our temptations reveal our character as Christ-like or carnal?

## Deception

Deception is to think something that is evil is good. Eve has been mentioned already - hers is the archetypal deception. You **can only be deceived through things that have the appearance of being good**. Eve's state of mind was such that she thought she was doing something that was good. Her problem, like so many others, was that she had not "received the love of the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:10), and so was uncertain about what God had said, and so was deceived by the serpent (2 Corinthians 11:3, 2 Timothy 2:14).

The New Testament talks about deception a lot, and enjoins us not to allow ourselves to be deceived, thus, e.g.:

- 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. The unrighteous will not enter the kingdom of God. A long list is given of excluding behaviour. Who said that Paul was concerned only with being justified by faith alone? Although these two men are seen as representing the two extremes of NT theological standpoint, Paul here has the same view as James: there must be practical righteousness and to think otherwise is deception!
- 1 Corinthians 15:33 (quoting "Thais", by Menander, a Greek author). "*Do not be deceived "Bad company ruins good morals"*". Here again we see the pressure of the world.
- Galatians 6:7-8. "*Do not be deceived. God is not mocked, as you sow, so shall you reap. If you sow to the flesh, from the flesh you will reap corruption, but if you sow to Spirit, you will reap from the Spirit eternal life*".
- Ephesians 5:5-8. This contains the same ideas as the two separate texts in 1 Corinthians: sinners will not inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God, and we need to avoid association with unhelpful people.
- James 1:22. We must be doers of the word not just hearers. To think hearing enough is deception. How many times have I heard the message, but am I doing it?

As James implies, deception is most likely when temptation engages with our strongest desires. That is the internal source of temptation.

How many have finally persuaded themselves that it was right to join an unbeliever in business, or marry an unbeliever when the testimony of scripture and the initial inner witness of their own hearts stood against it? The deception is to come to a place when you believe that what is objectively wrong is to act in conformity with God's will.

## Holiness



James gives the same message as that at the core of 1 John, and for the same reason. They are dealing with people with a lack of appreciation of the absolute uncompromising holiness of God. 1 John 1:5-10. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

Men think God accommodates their fudges and accommodations with what is less than pure and holy. Men can't quite believe in such absolutes of black and white. They prefer the mixture of good and evil so beloved of eastern religion (yin and yang). The secular religion of our culture to which I earlier referred encourages us to compromise and accommodate other people and not to "make waves". Just as they are amongst us today, such eastern mystical influences were widespread in the Near East at that time, leading to the Gnostic heresies. We must guard against our own accommodation to this mindset.

We have already seen the warnings about the need for holiness if we are to enter the kingdom of God. We have returned to the same theme as Matthew 7:13-27. The way is narrow that leads to life, and few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14). We are fruit trees bearing fruit according to our nature. To be known by the father we must do his will. We face a choice of build on the rock, or not.

## **Conclusion**

Trials are inevitable. We need God's wisdom to overcome them, but must have steady faith to receive and act on it. Riches are a stumbling block. We must watch our desires, and the nature of our temptation reveal what we are. Don't be deceived, God is not a fudger, He never wants us doing evil, so does not encourage us in that direction. His grace is intended to enable us to become holy, not to provide an excuse to live lives that compromise with the world (1 John 2:14-17).

---

This is based on an exposition to Victoria Hall Christian Fellowship, Camberley on 24 March 2002. Readers are responsible to test all things and hold fast to that which is good. You may make COMPLETE copies for yourself, but you may not alter the material, or publish it in whole or in part without written permission (email rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk).

(24.3.2002, 5.9.2018)

© R H Johnston, 2002, 2018.