

Understanding Temptation

DAVE BAST

Every week in worship many Christians repeat the words that Jesus taught His disciples to pray; the Lord's Prayer; and in praying that prayer we ask God, among other things, to lead us not into temptation; but James, the New Testament letter we want to study in this and several more Groundwork programs, says this in its opening chapter: Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted of God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. So, what gives here? Well, that is just one of the interesting things we will be looking at today on Groundwork, as we open the letter of James and dig into it. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and as I said in the introduction, Scott, we are beginning a series. I think we are planning, what, seven programs?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Seven programs.

DAVE BAST

That will work our way through pretty much all of the book of James, which is not a huge book in the New Testament; it has five fairly short chapters; but it is also one of the more interesting – perhaps even controversial – of the New Testament letters.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, indeed; and in Church history – and this fact is somewhat well known – but in Church history there have been a few people who were not so sure about James; the most famous being Martin Luther, right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Martin Luther kicked off that monumental reformation of the Church with the declaration: We are saved, not by works; we are saved by faith; we are saved by grace alone, not by works. So, I mean, Luther really bet the farm on that whole thing; and so, when Luther did some more studying of the New Testament and translated the New Testament into German, as he eventually did, he gets to James and James is always saying things like: You are not saved by faith alone; you have to be saved by your works.

DAVE BAST

Or at least he seems to be saying that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; well, there are sentences where he says directly that, and Luther did not like that at all.

DAVE BAST

Right; he famously dismissed James as the letter of straw, or a letter of straw.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I also heard one time he wrote... You know, he had these table talks that people took transcripts of – these conversations he would have with people. I also read one time he was referring to the letter of James and he said: Yeah, Jimmy made me so mad I almost threw him into the kitchen stove.

DAVE BAST

Right; Jimmy; which is kind of shocking to us who have been raised on the idea of the authority of scripture and all scripture is inspired, as Paul says; and that includes the letter of James; although there was also some controversy or question in the early Church about whether James should even be included in the New Testament. It was one of those that some of the early Christian Church fathers judged doubtful or questionable; and no doubt for exactly this reason, because it seemed to be saying something other than what Paul said: The great Apostle.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and if you look at it, and I did this recently when I had to preach a sermon on James, all told, James has one hundred eight verses in it; sixty of those verses are in the imperative mood; that is, they are command statements. So, fifty-six percent of the verses in James have an exclamation point after them because he is ordering his readers to do something. So, you can see why – and we will have occasion throughout this seven-part series to see examples of this – you can see why people thought James might be a little moralistic, a little works righteousness, a little bit too hard on people, and a little bit too soft on the goodness of grace. That is not true; James is very much a part of the New Testament tradition, but seeing exactly how his words fit in will be an interesting part of this program and this series.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; and I think it is important to take James in the context of the whole New Testament. One of the things, again, that we learn from the early Church is to operate according to the Rule of Faith – what they called the Rule of Faith; by which they meant: Take the whole message of the New Testament and use it to interpret the parts – the different parts – of the New Testament. So, James standing alone by itself is not the whole Gospel; it is not even a particularly clear statement of the Gospel, but it is a wonderful teasing out of the implications of the Gospel. Again, to quote Luther – we are saved by faith alone, but Luther added: But the faith that saves us does not remain alone. It always leads to a change in our behavior; to what James would call “good works;” and that is the point he is trying to stress here. He is trying to keep us – or protect us – from the phony idea – to quote another great Lutheran Church leader of the Twentieth Century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the phony idea of cheap grace, or “easy-believism;” all you have to do is sort of believe certain things and it does not matter how you live.

SCOTT HOEZEE

James very much wanted us to see the big picture, and we can maybe just in this first segment, Dave, too, just sort of note, there are several people named James in the New Testament. There were two disciples of Jesus; there are James and John, the sons of Zebedee; and then there was another James among Jesus’ circle of disciples, James the son of Alphaeus – sometimes it was James the Lesser, meaning James the Younger; but then we have this James, and we are pretty sure that this James is the brother of Jesus – the brother of Jesus; another son of Mary; and so he is a brother of Jesus who became a leader in the early Church. If you go to Acts 15, it becomes pretty clear that the Jerusalem segment of the Church was headed up by James himself, and when they had sort of an early Church counsel to figure out what to do with gentile believers as they came in, especially through the work of Paul, James was sort of the president of synod. He was the president of the general assembly. That, we believe, is the James who wrote this particular letter; and it is called a

catholic epistle because it was not, unlike Galatians or Philippians, this was not addressed to a particular church; it was addressed more widely.

DAVE BAST

But when James is addressing his letter to the twelve tribes, he is not simply talking about Jews, or even Jewish Christians. James is using this as a metaphor, much the way Peter did in his first epistle, a metaphor for the whole Church. The early Apostles saw the Church as the new Israel now embracing both Jew and gentile; so the twelve tribes is simply a figure of speech saying all Christians everywhere, which makes James one of the universal or catholic epistles, as you said, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and so, the twelve tribes are not literally the twelve tribes of Jewish people only, but of Jews and gentiles together as part of the new Israel; and of course, we also know from the Old Testament history that the ten tribes of Israel had long been lost, but they have now been restored, as it were, in Christ through the Church. So James is using that Jewish metaphor almost, but he also structures this book in a rather Jewish way...

DAVE BAST

Right. Yes, it is very Jewish.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes...

DAVE BAST

As he was, frankly; he is the leader of the Jewish Christian community.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his brother was Jewish, right? Jesus was raised a Jew; and so, you do get this sense – and here is where, if you do not look at James in context, as you were saying, Dave, earlier – if you do not look at James in context with the rest of the New Testament, and look at it in isolation, it can look a little funny; but James is very clear in saying, as the Old Testament would say: Look, Exodus from Egypt came as a gift of grace, but after Exodus comes Sinai. After the Exodus – after God has by grace made you a people, now there is the Law, and so let's talk about what it means to live right; to have a faith that is not just about words, but also about deeds, and that is going to be a big theme of looking at our lives through a certain theological lens that James wants us to use to assess how we are living for God.

DAVE BAST

Right; and let's take a look at how he does that in his first chapter. We will dive into that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and the first program of what will be, here on Groundwork, a seven-part series on the letter of James in the New Testament; and we said as we were finishing up the first segment, Dave, that we were going to go right now to James 1, and hear these verses as this letter begins.

²Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

DAVE BAST

¹²Blessed is the one – we are picking it up just a few verses later – Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him. ¹³When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me,” for God cannot be tempted

by evil nor does He tempt anyone. ¹⁴But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.

So, really, Scott, a common theme weaving through the first half of James 1 is the idea of a trial or the word *trial*, and its related – maybe virtue, you could say – perseverance. Those are the two big words that come out of these opening verses of James.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is interesting to think, as we said in the first segment, Dave, this is a catholic epistle – not Roman Catholic, but small-c catholic in the sense of a broad reach. It was not addressed to a specific city or to a specific congregation the way most of Paul's letters were. He is writing to Christians everywhere; and the fact that we are in verse 2 already and he says, "Count it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds;" what does that tell you? That the Christians were having a hard time, right? If you write an e-mail to your grandma or something, the first thing that you mention is something that is happening right now that is pretty important. Dear Grandma, please do not worry about little Joe. He is out of the hospital and he is better. Well, you know the kid has been sick. That is the first thing you are going to talk about. So, James cannot get very far in this letter without acknowledging that he knows his readers; however this letter is going to get circulated in the first century, the people who read it are going to know hard times firsthand, and so that is the first thing he has to get to, and he gets to it in a very positive way; a way that sometimes is a little hard to take. If you are under duress, the last thing you want to hear somebody say is: Well, be happy about it – be joyful.

DAVE BAST

Don't worry; be happy; even though you are suffering.

Here is something I thought about in the opening segment when we were talking about James himself. According to two different reliable Christian traditions from the early Church, James himself was martyred sometime in the 60s, before the destruction of Jerusalem. We know that the other James – the more familiar James from the Gospels – James the brother of John, was martyred and his death is described in Acts 12, killed in Jerusalem. So, the Jerusalem church, and James personally, knew this kind of trial; but it is interesting how he describes the trials, or how he alludes to them when he is urging people not to be discouraged, but in fact, to rejoice. He speaks about trials of many kinds. Now, in the New Testament most often the word trial has to do with suffering that you endure for your faith, as James himself did; but James seems to be broadening that to speak about all the kinds of suffering that just ordinary human beings face; the different kinds of loss that we experience in our lives – loss of job or loss of a marriage or loss of your youth or loss of health – ultimately, loss of life; so it is a broader concept.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it may be that there were some early Christians who thought: Well, if I have faith I will not suffer. In fact, maybe being a Christian will give me a pass on some things. If I am blessed; if I am receiving grace; if I am in Christ, then my life is perhaps going to be charmed, almost; and it was sort of like what Paul encountered when he wrote the Thessalonians, where it looks like the Thessalonians thought if you are a Christian you will not die; until Jesus comes back, you are going to stay alive until Christ returns. And then some people in the Thessalonica church died and they panicked, and so Paul had to write: Look, look, I know some have fallen asleep, but that is... And so also here, there are all kinds of trials in life and James is saying just being a believer does not inoculate you against suffering, but it does not mean you are not a believer. It means that God – God may not be – we do not know why – but God is not going to shelter us from every hardship. He is not going to control our lives like a puppeteer to make sure nothing bad ever happens; but here is the good news, James is saying: When the troubles come, as they do to all, in our case as believers, God is working in them for a greater good. He may or may not be sending them or superintending them or wishing them for you, but He is going to build endurance in you. He is going to bring you closer to Jesus through these things. Trials are not pleasant. We do not give thanks for trials, but we can give thanks in them because God is not undone by them. So, take some comfort, James is saying, to know God does not go off duty when you are suffering; in fact, He is working overtime.

DAVE BAST

These things do not somehow slip past Him, and God says: Oh, my goodness; how did that happen to my dear child, so-and-so. But, as always in the New Testament, when James says: Count it joy, or count it all joy, or rejoice, as you pointed out, Scott, he is not saying: Be happy because these bad things are happening. He is pointing us to what can come out of it – what can emerge from the process of being tried or tested; that is another word for trial. We even use that commonly; we speak of a trial as a kind of test. You try someone in court to test whether they are innocent or not; or you take a car out for a trial run – you are testing how good it is or whether you like it. So, it is a test; the result of passing the test is you grow in perseverance – what James here calls perseverance or I like to translate the word *endurance*; that is just a great New Testament word. It means you hung in there and you stuck it out; you saw it through.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, too, we want to note in this segment yet, there is also that thing that you mentioned at the top of the program, Dave, about temptation; and do not say God tempted you to sin. What might be the connection there? Well, it could be – you know, you are speculating or reading between the lines, here – but it could be that some of the early Christians who were facing trials, either active persecution for being a Christian or the sorrows that come to all people – it could be that some of them were using those bad times as an excuse to sin or say: Hey, look, my life is rotten. I got a bad hand dealt to me, so I am going to live it up, or I am going to drink too much, because God is not there anyway. Now James is saying: Now, wait a minute; God is at work in your trials; do not use your trials as an excuse to sin and then say: Well, God is doing it to me. No, no, no; God is working for your good somehow, so do not say: God is tempting me to sin; and do not use your trial as an excuse to sin. That is the wrong response, James is saying. So, that may be a little distinction here between trial and temptation. God may be at work in the trial, but that does not mean He is tempting you to sin through the trial and do not use that as an excuse to sin therefore, either, and then blame God.

DAVE BAST

Some have suggested that the phrase from the Lord's Prayer: Lead us not into temptation... because James here says God does not do that; God never tempts anyone, that perhaps that phrase should be translated more something like: Save us in the time of trial, or be with us when we are being tried; because God does allow the trials to come to us. The difference, I think, between a trial and a temptation is that a temptation really wants to see you fall. You know, the Tempter, or James says here it is our own evil desires that tempt us – want to see us turn away from God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Trip us up.

DAVE BAST

And do the wrong thing; whereas, in a trial, when God is testing us – and I think we can use that language – He does test us, as He tested Abraham in Genesis 22 with the sacrifice of Isaac – God wants us to pass the test. He does not want us to fail; so that is a key fundamental difference; and what James is going to stress here as he goes on is that God is good; always, all the time. “Do not be deceived,” he writes, “My dear brothers and sisters, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” So, God is good. What He does to us is good. What He wants for us is good. Do not give in to despair or sin or temptation when you are experiencing a trial of whatever kind.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in fact, James would have us do what is right, even in the face of that; and he has a few more things to say about that in this opening chapter, and we will see that in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are looking today at James Chapter 1, the first chapter of James, and this is the first of seven programs we are doing on James. Let's just real quickly listen to a few more verses from the end of James Chapter 1, where James writes:

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves; ²³do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word, but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But whoever looks intently into the perfect Law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do.

DAVE BAST

²⁶Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues, deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. (And here is a famous verse) ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: To look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. And that is how James wraps up Chapter 1.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is a theme in his book. This ultimately follows on the trials of life; so James is saying: Do not let the trials derail you. Do not conclude God is abandoning you. God works in your trials. Do not use your trials as an excuse to sin; in fact, God is making you stronger through them, and that strength is there for a reason, and that is to help you do the word of God that you hear.

James, as we will see in this series, is not averse to hitting us over the head with a 2x4; he is not averse to using the absurd to make his point; so he says: Can you imagine looking... You had dinner, and you look in the mirror, and you notice that you have a big chocolate smear – you had a cupcake for dessert and there is a huge smear of chocolate on your face, and you say: Yeah, I have chocolate on my face; and then you turn away from the mirror and you go through the whole rest of the day never cleaning it off because you forgot it was there. What did you look in the mirror for in the first place, James says. You have to clean it up. So, he says too, if you look at God's word and then step away and forget all about it and do not do anything all day long to live as a disciple of Christ, that is absurd, James is saying.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in fact, our great theological patron, John Calvin, loved this image of God's word as a mirror that can show us the spots on our face – that can show us what is amiss in our lives, if we only look at it intently; and then James says: Then practice it. Do what it tells us to do. Because again, what is the point of reading the Bible or listening to the Bible if you walk away and completely ignore the things that it says? That is like looking in the mirror and failing to wash, or refusing to wash. So, James here is just hitting home the point that Jesus made at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount when He told the parable of the two houses; you know, the guy who built his house on the sand and the one who built his house on the rock, and Jesus said: This is how it is with those who hear My words and do them – put them into practice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, we do not need to make a chasm between Paul and James here. We do not need to say this is anti-grace; this is works righteousness; No, James is saying: You read the Gospel – you look into the mirror of the Gospel, and you see all this grace; all this goodness; all this salvation through Christ alone; and of course, it should inspire you to want to live for God. It is classic Reformed theology, in a way, right? Where we have guilt, grace, and then gratitude. You have sin, salvation, service – the Heidelberg Catechism's famous order where after grace comes gratitude; and what is gratitude? Well, it is living the Law of God; it is praying; it is taking care of the widows and the orphans, as James says here; and that is true religion, as John Calvin said.

What is true religion, true piety? It is reverence joined to love; and in reverential love for God we reach out and take care of other people.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I mean, the Gospel is all about faith – the Christian faith – faith in Christ; and we are saved by such faith or technically we are saved by grace through faith – we lay hold of that by faith in Christ; but there is also such a thing as a Christian religion. While we do not talk as much about religion maybe in our circle since sometimes we even give that word a bad twist to it; the Christian religion is simply living out the truths that the Christian faith points to; and as James says here, that means living for justice and for mercy and to heal the wounds of those who have been hurt by life; and inward purity as well – that kind of holiness that God looks for. So, nothing wrong with that; that is what we want to give ourselves to.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; James had such great respect for grace that he knew it could never leave a person unchanged. We are changed people and we live like it.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and tell us topics and passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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Printed on August 15, 2025