

FAITH TRACKS

JAMES 1:1-11

I live in the middle of a forest. My house is situated on a wooded lot. And its every man's dream yard... Here's why? I have very little grass to mow. I live on three acres, but 90% of my yard is a bed of pine straw. Right after we moved into the house I noticed these indentations all over the yard. At first I didn't know what they were. I thought some rodent was burrowing into the straw. Finally, it dawned on me, these were tracks. Every morning I would see the tracks. I knew some big critters were hiding nearby, but I had never seen them. They had to be nocturnal. And then one night I met them. They were eating crabapples off a tree in the front yard. Evidently the suburban sprawl had forced them out into the open. A family of deer were migrating back and forth across my yard. But understand, I saw the deer tracks, long before I saw the deer. I live a mile – as the crow flies - from Highway 78. Before I saw the tracks in the pine straw I would've never believed a family of deer used my yard as a crosswalk. But the tracks were definite proof. Deer leave tracks. I could tell you a unicorn lives in my backyard... Or Bigfoot wanders around the lower part of my property... Or a herd of wild buffalo cross our front yard from time to time... But with no tracks would you believe me? Real animals leave tracks. Imaginary animals don't.

And the same is true with faith! Real faith – legit faith - solid gold faith – genuine saving faith – leaves behind tracks. It doesn't just exist in a person's imagination. It's not just a product of self-deception, or wishful thinking... you can see its tracks! This is the theme of the book of James... faith leaves tracks! In fact, faith leaves behind multiple tracks...

Faith shows up in how we handle trials, and money, and temptation.
Faith doesn't just stir up intentions, it provokes action.
Faith effects how you treat folks less fortunate than you.
Faith isn't like the co-worker on a perpetual break, faith actually works.
Faith effects how you talk and what you say.
Faith doesn't conform to its surroundings, it seeks wisdom from above.

Rather than blend in with the world, faith stands up and stands out. Faith walks humbly and bows to God. It leaves behind knee prints. Faith lives today in light of eternity... Faith endures... Faith connects with other believers... Faith prays... Faith confesses... Faith cares... Faith seeks to restore a fallen brother... [Real faith shows up in real life!](#)

And if your faith doesn't leave tracks... there's an obvious explanation that you need to seriously consider... [perhaps your faith is a unicorn faith](#). It's a nice sentiment - it's wishful thinking – it's a series of assumptions you've held on to in hopes that they're true... but the faith you claim to have just doesn't exist! It's a figment of your imagination. It's pretend faith. The book of James was written to expose a unicorn faith. If your faith is real you'll see tracks all over your life!

This letter begins as a modern letter would end... with a signature, "[James](#)." But which James? Think of all the famous James' in the world... Got a Top 10 this AM... The Top 10 Most Famous Men Named James. [10\) King James](#) (your reading his Bible), [9\) James Taylor](#), [8\) James Bond](#), [7\) James Dean](#), [6\) James Dobson](#), [5\) James Earl Jones](#), [4\) The James Gang](#), [3\) Lebron James](#), [2\) Jesse James](#), and [1\) James](#)

Brown! Actually, there are quite a few men in the Bible named “**James.**” There was James the son of Zebedee. Along with John, Jesus called them “**sons of thunder.**” This James was on the 12 apostles. He died a martyr’s death in 44 AD. Acts 12 tells us Herod killed him with a sword. Also of the 12 apostles was a little known, “**James, son of Alphaeus.**”

Most Bible scholars believe the author of the book of James was the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. Matthew 13:55 tells us Mary had other children – four boys and at least two girls - the oldest was named “**James.**” But this means James had some initial doubts. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, John 7:5 tells us, that “**even His brothers did not believe in Him.**”

I’m sure James looked up to his big brother, but I suppose it would be difficult for any guy to admit that his brother was the Son of God. James would walk around singing to himself, “**He’s not heavy, he’s my brother.**” Think about it, Jesus and James played together in the sandbox. They were on the same Little League team. They wrestled in the front yard. And can you imagine growing up in the Jesus’ shadow? Every year James listened to Mary scold him, “**James, why can’t you behave like Jesus?... James, your big brother makes straight As, why can’t you?... James, a ‘C’ in conduct? Jesus always gets ‘A+’ in conduct!**” Poor James had big shoes to fill. He might’ve been resentful? There’s an old saying, “**Familiarity can breed contempt.**” James could’ve been a bit too prideful to admit his brother’s true identity – at least at first.

Of course we know what opened his eyes! In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul tells us that after Jesus’ resurrection He made several special appearances. One visit was to His half-brother, James. Jesus cared about his kid brother. And when James realized that Jesus had conquered death it suddenly dawned on James why Jesus always made A+s in conduct. He was God! Instantly, James went from a doubting brother to a devoted believer!

James grew rapidly in his faith. In short order he became the leader of the church at Jerusalem. In Acts 15, it was James who took charge at the Church Council. James had become known as a man of extreme devotion. James lived a life of purity. He had a nickname, “**James the Just.**” Eusebius, the early church historian, made the following statement about James. “**He used to enter alone into the Temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel’s because of his constant worship of God...**”

This James also died a martyr’s death. In 62 AD the Jewish Sanhedrin took James to the pinnacle of the Temple and ordered him to recant his faith in Jesus before all the people. Rather than recant, James used the opportunity to preach the Gospel. The Jews got so angry they pushed him off the Temple, then when he survived the fall, they beat him to death with clubs as he knelt and prayed. When James says, “**Be doers of the word, and not hearers only...**” there was street cred behind those words! James’ faith left some deep tracks!

Which leads us to his self-introduction. He begins the letter, “**James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.**” Remember James is the blood brother of the Lord, on his mother’s side. If a family affiliation ever counted this would be the time! James could’ve flaunted his status... He could’ve called himself, “**the beloved family member of the Lord...**” or “**the Savior’s closest sibling...**” or even “**the kid brother of God...**” Instead James calls himself “**a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.**” Rather than name drop - and use his connections - and try to pull rank - and parade his status - James is content to be a servant.

After spending his whole life in Jesus' shadow, this was James' chance to take advantage of the relationship. Not James. He was just a servant. James knew that like everyone else, he was a sinner saved by grace. It was honor enough to be "a love-slave" – "a bondservant" of His Lord! James now worshipped and served the Brother he once resented.

And he writes, "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings." On two occasions in the OT, Israel was conquered by foreign empires. In 722 BC Assyria invaded the north. In 586 Babylon sacked the south. Both times Jews were scattered across foreign lands - some never returned home. Little Jewish communities popped up all around the world. Now, as the Gospel of Jesus reached these communities there were Jews who believed. James wants to write them a letter of encouragement. The fact that James' letter is addressed exclusively to the twelve tribes of Israel causes some Bible scholars to conclude it was written prior to the Gospel reaching the Gentiles. James wrote it - perhaps as early as 45 AD - which would make the book of James the first NT book actually penned!

And James cuts right to the chase. He speaks to the felt need of his audience. For no matter where they lived, the first believers were strangers in a strange land. They were blazing a new trail. Cutting a path where there was no path. The Christian way of life is sure to stand out and draw fire. You can bet the early Christians suffered heavy trials for their faith.

And this is where James starts. Verse 2, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials..." Notice it's not "IF you fall into various trials," but "WHEN you fall into various trials." All Christians endure trials!

I wish I could tell you being a Christian immunizes you from trials and hardships, but it doesn't. Jesus said, "it rains on the just and the unjust." And it's "various trials" we endure - not just one type from one source... Sometimes we're victimized by our own sin and mistakes. On occasion we suffer unjustly. There are times when our suffering seems random. Hardship comes for no good reason, other than we live in a fallen world. And then there are a few times when we're persecuted for Jesus' sake. This is why we're instructed not to focus on where a trial originates, but on what it produces. Don't fret over the source. Fixate on its purpose.

This is why James tells us, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials..." The NEB puts it, "Count yourselves supremely happy..." Here's another translation (NET), "Consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials..." It's "nothing but joy!" And here's one more - the Phillips NT, "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends!" "Nothing but joy..." "Welcome (trials) as friends..." Are you kidding? What a strange command? Why would I be happy when faced with a trial or difficulty? There's only one reason... I'm locked in on its purpose.

Which leads to verse 3, "knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." Trials test our faith. They're like a stress test. When we're pushed past our limits our faith becomes stronger. Tests of faith produce "patience." The Greek word is "hupomone." "Hupo" means "under" – "mone" means "to remain." Thus, "hupomone" means "to remain under" – "to stick it out" – "to persevere and endure." Trials build spiritual muscle. Under stress faith tightens and toughens up. You think faith is going to snap. But the Lord controls the tension.

Truckers who shipped codfish from New England docks to markets across the country had a problem. In the beginning, they tried to ship frozen cod, but the freezing process robbed the fish of its savory flavor. The answer was to ship the fish alive, in a tank of seawater. But even then, by the time the fish had been on the road for three to four days the codfish not only lost their flavor, they had a mushy texture.

That's when someone got real creative. The cod's natural enemy is the catfish. So a couple of catfish were placed in the tank with the cod. For the time they were on the road, the catfish chased the cod all around the tank. When they reached market the vigilance it took to survive the catfish kept the cod as fresh and delicious as when they were pulled from the sea. And this is what trials do for our faith. If God doesn't dump a couple of catfish in our tank we'll lose our godly flavor, and our faith will get mushy.

Faith grows only under pressure. God has to apply some resistance. The faith that goes further, and lasts longer, and holds tighter, and stretches beyond... belongs to the believer who's stayed under hardship. It's so easy to bolt. Every trial has an eject button you can hit before God's purpose is completed. There's always a short-cut – an easy way out. But faith never toughens up and gets strong if you never stay under. Always remember, **“God never sharpens a knife on a stick of butter.”** The trial provides the friction – the resistance – that sharpens our edge.

“Two frogs fell into a can of cream, or so I've heard it told. The sides of the can were shiny and steep, the cream was deep and cold. “Oh, what's the use?” croaked number one. “Tis fate, no help's around. Good-bye, my friend! Good-bye sad world!” And weeping still he drowned. But number two, made of sterner stuff, dog-paddled in surprise. The while he wiped his creamy face, and dried his creamy eyes. “I'll swim awhile at least,” he said, or so I've heard he said; “It really wouldn't help the world if one more frog were dead.” An hour or two he kicked and swam, not once he stopped to mutter, but kicked and kicked and swam and kicked, then hopped out via butter!”

This is why God allows trials, so you'll cultivate endurance – so you'll learn to press through hardships, and overcome obstacles. There will be no resistance - no push back in heaven. The time to build endurance and grow muscle is now! **“God sends trials not to impair us, but to improve us.”** That's how we need to learn to see our trials. How we approach a trial is crucial. Do we resent it? Do we avoid it? Do we try to escape it? Or do we say **“bring it on!”** Do we **consider it nothing but joy – welcome it as a friend?**

How we see the difficulty will determine our response and its effect. Before we move on I need you to notice the first word of verse 3. What do you read? **“Know.”** James is saying that the Christian **“knows”** - and the Greek word implies an intuitive knowledge. He knows it in his gut – deep inside that trials should be welcomed – that God works good through trials. Why would James expect a Christian to know such a truth intuitively? Here's why... **every Christian has been to the cross.** My first act of faith is to trust in Jesus' death as payment for my sin. And at the cross of Christ God turned the world's worst tragedy into the world's supreme triumph. This is why every Christian knows God redeems through trials.

Someone once said, **“Every miracle in the Bible started out a problem.”** If God came to us with a plan to do a miracle we would welcome Him. We would count it all joy. But that's what He does when He sends a trial. A trial is a miracle in embryonic form. Embrace it – don't run – provide a little resistance – and God will turn that trial into a full-fledged miracle. Always remember, **“A great oak is just a little nut that held its ground.”** And even you can be a little nut. At least that's what your spouse says...

James keeps rapping, verse 5, **“If any of you lacks wisdom...”** When you're faced with **“various trials”** the commodity you need most is wisdom! Here's the problem... Trials cause pain, and pain warps perspective, and a skewed perspective hinders faith. Wisdom keeps our assumptions in check. God's wisdom keeps us from jumping to the wrong conclusions.

Recently USA Today did a report on the dangers of “Peephole Driving.” This is a wintertime phenomena more common in northern states, but we southerners are guilty as well. You wake up on a bitterly cold morning to find your car encased in ice. You crank your car and turn on the defrost. Then you go outside and scrape the ice off the windshield. After clearing a circle the size of a large pizza, you head for the back windshield where you scrape off a medium pizza, and from the driver’s side window you carve off a small pizza. It’s hard work – it’s taking too long – you’re in a hurry - so you drive off with about 5% of your normal visibility. Your little head is up against the windshield peering through the peephole.

In a sense trials create a layer of ice. Pain, disappointment, confusion - cover our perspective. We get in a hurry. We hurt and don’t want to think. We don’t take the time or effort to clear off the windshield. We’re in a hurry to move on, so we scrape off just enough ice to create a peephole. We’re stilling driving, but we’re steering through a peephole, and it’s dangerous! Accidents happen. You’re a hazard to you and other people. Wisdom on the other hand, takes the time to clear off all the ice. Wisdom insists on seeing the truth. It tackles life with total, 100% visibility.

In his book, “Flickering Pixels,” Shane Hipps writes of the Internet’s impact on our modern age. He says it’s “created a permanent puberty of the mind. We get locked into so much information, and the inability to sort that information meaningfully limits our capacity to understand. The last stage of knowledge is wisdom. But we are miles from wisdom because the Internet encourages the opposite of what creates wisdom - stillness, time, and inefficient things like suffering. On the Internet, there is no such thing as waiting; there is no such thing as stillness. There is a constant churning.” We need wisdom.

And here’s the good news... it’s available! “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” Ask God for wisdom, and He’ll pour it out lavishly. The opposite of wise is foolish. There’s no excuse for any of us to be a fool. You might not be the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, but you don’t have to be foolish. You don’t have to appear in who’s who to know what’s what. Wisdom isn’t the accumulation of facts. It’s street smarts. Wisdom is the ability to see life clearly - from God’s perspective. A lack of education gets in the way of knowledge. But wisdom gets thwarted by a lack of humility and the refusal to seek God and love God.

This is why when you ask for wisdom, James says, “let him ask in faith, with no doubting...” There are two paths in this life. Jesus described them in the Sermon on the Mount – the broad way and the narrow way. The broad way is your way. Do your own thing. Live as you please. Everybody else does it.... The only problem is it leads to destruction. The narrow way is God’s way. You rely on His wisdom. Do life His way. It leads to life! But it’s harder... because it goes against grain. You meet plenty of resistance. Thus, if you chose wisdom you’ve got to be all in!

There can be no doubting. James tells us, “for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.” Doubt is flip-flopping. I’m in today, but tomorrow I’m back peddling, and making concessions, and conceding little compromises. I’m not being firm in my faith. A doubter is like a wave... controlled by the moon, the tides, the storms at sea. He has no mind of his own - no backbone to set his own rhythms.

Verse 7, “For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” Doubt will takes you out from under the spout of God’s blessing. Let’s say that together, “Doubt takes us out from under God’s spout.” Doubt is the surest way to miss out! Notice, what you find in the

wake of doubt? Nothing. A wave rolls in off the ocean, crashes onto the shoreline, and it vanishes. It was nothing permanent. Doubt doesn't leave tracks. Only faith leaves tracks. Faith provides evidence it existed. It was real.

James continues talking about the doubter in verse 8, **“he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”** The Greek phrase translated **“double-minded”** has a colorful definition. It means **“facing two directions.”** In his classic allegory, **“Pilgrims Progress,”** John Bunyan refers to the doubter as **“Mr. Facing-both-ways.”** Here's the guy who refuses to decide. He refuses to make up his mind. He's a fence-straddler. On Monday he walks with God, by Friday he's sucked back into sinful pleasures. And in facing both directions he's giving 100% to neither side. Here's a man who's never been **“all in.”** He's an unhappy saint and a miserable sinner. Look at me... This morning, am I looking at Mr. Facing-both-ways?

In verse 9 James continues to talk about wisdom, but as it relates to wealth. **“Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away.”** Wisdom understands that money has nothing to do with a person's status. Neither a lot of it or a lack of it can dictate a man's happiness. No less an authority on the subject than the Wall Street Journal, printed, **“Money is a universal provider of everything except happiness, and a universal passport to everywhere but heaven.”** That's valuable wisdom! Riches and money are nothing but tools. I've got a shovel in my garage I use frequently, but I don't think about it all the time. When friends come over I don't say, **“Let's go out to the garage so I can show you my spade.”** When I need it I'm thankful it's there, but life isn't over if it breaks. And it's the same with money. The lowly brother, or poor brother, he doesn't have much money so he exalts in the blessings he has in Christ! His lack of a 401K doesn't diminish his worth! He's spiritually rich in Christ!

Whereas, the rich man... money should make him conscious of his humiliation - for material prosperity is temporary! You can't take it with you. John D. Rockefeller was the wealthiest American in history. When you adjust for inflation, he was richer than Bill Gates. At his funeral one of the guests thought out-loud, **“I wonder how much the old man left behind?”** Rockefeller's accountant overheard him, and answered, **“All of it.”** Wisdom is careful with its price tags. Life is like Wal-Mart - everything has a price tag. And the prices at Wal-Mart are determined by Wal-Mart. Shoppers don't set their own prices. Likewise, everything in your life has a price tag. And you need to be like Wal-Mart and set your own prices. Don't let the culture do it for you. Right now you've got your car priced the same as your family. That's foolish. Your lake house or jet ski might be priced higher than your church involvement. Wisdom will readjust life's price tags in order to please God.

Verse 11, **“For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.”** The other day I bought Kathy a dozen roses – in a large vase, with a red bow, with all kinds of meadow growth added to make the vase look full. I paid \$39.95... It was highway robbery. As the song says, **“The things you do for love...”** And to make matters worse, just ten days later I threw those wilted flowers in with the used coffee grounds and tossed them in the garbage. This is the life expectancy of every person who walks this planet.

You... You are here today and gone tomorrow. Your life is like a puff of warm breath on a cold morning. You need to start thinking about eternity. Shakespeare once penned, **“Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust.”** When you depart this world, you'll stand before God. In that day, all the money in the world won't buy you His approval.

Rather than resent the present trial you're battling to endure, you need wisdom to recognize God's purpose. This trial is preparation for eternity. Trials come from various sources, but the point is always our maturity. I love what Joe Bayly prayed, "Lord, burn eternity into my eyeballs." This is what we need – we need wisdom! Stop steering through the peephole. We need an eternal perspective... on trials, on wealth, on life.

Faith leaves tracks. Begin today to examine your life. Do you see the hoof prints of faith in how you handle trials... and deal with money... and approach life itself? Make sure your faith is not a unicorn faith – one that doesn't exist. Look for the tracks. Faith tracks don't lie – they point to real faith!