

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

JAMES 1-2

I live in the middle of a forest on a wooded lot. Right after we moved in, I noticed these indentations all over the yard. At first, I didn't know what they were. I thought some kind of rodent was burrowing into the pine straw.

Finally, it dawned on me, these were tracks.

I knew some big critters were hiding nearby, *but I had never seen them*. They were nocturnal.

Then late one night, I met them, eating crabapples off a tree in the front yard. Evidently, the suburban sprawl had forced them out into the open. A family of deer was migrating back and forth across my yard.

But I saw the tracks long before I saw the deer.

I could tell you a unicorn lives in my backyard... Or Bigfoot... Or a herd of wild buffalo criss-cross my property...

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 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!*

And this is the theme of the book of James... *faith leaves tracks!* In fact, it leaves behind multiple tracks...

Faith shows up in how we handle trials, temptation, money... It's more than intentions; it produces action.

It affects how you treat folks less fortunate... Faith works... It affects *how you talk* and *what you say*... It doesn't conform to the world but seeks wisdom from above... It walks humbly and prays fervently... Faith connects with other believers in meaningful ways...

Real faith shows up in real life!

And if your faith doesn't leave tracks... *perhaps it's a unicorn faith*. It's a nice sentiment. It's wishful thinking. It's a figment of your imagination... *but the faith you claim to have doesn't exist!* It's a pretend faith.

The book of James was written to expose a unicorn faith. If faith is real, you'll see its tracks all over your life!

Chapter 1, "**James...**" *But which James?* I can think of a lot of important folks named James. In fact, here are the **Top Ten Most Famous People Named James...**

10) King James, 9) James Taylor, 8) James Bond, take your pick.. 7) Jesse James, 6) James Comey, 5) James Earl Jones, 4) The James Gang, 3) Lebron James, 2) the king of soul, James Brown... and we have a tie for 1) Pastor James and Vernon James!

But there's also a few "**Jameses**" in the Bible.

Two of the twelve apostles were named "**James**" - "**The son of Alphaeus,**" and "**the son of Zebedee.**" Acts 12 tells us Zebedee's boy, who was also the Apostle John's brother, was martyred by King Herod in 44 AD.

Most Bible scholars believe the author of this book was the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. **Matthew 13:55** tells us Mary

had children after Jesus - *four boys and at least two girls*. The oldest child was named *“James.”*

And 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 imagine having to admit your sibling is divine. *That's tough to swallow.*

There's a maxim, *“Familiarity breeds contempt.”*

Jesus and James played together - they were on the same Little League teams - worked together in their dad's carpenter's shop. *Imagine growing up in Jesus' shadow?* How could James stack up? Like a lot of kid brothers, he might've carried a chip on his shoulders.

Yet 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 little brother.

When James realized that Jesus had conquered death, it all clicked. **James' bro was God!** Instantly, he went from a *doubting brother to a devoted believer!*

And James grew rapidly in his faith. Known as **“James the Just,”** he became a leader in the Jerusalem church. In Acts 15, it's James that takes charge of the church council. He was a leader of extreme devotion.

The church historian, Eusebius, wrote, *“James would 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." They called James, "ole camel knees"

In 62 AD, James died a martyr's death. The Jews took him to the highest point of the Temple - *without a parachute!* They ordered him to recant his faith before all the people. Instead, he boldly preached the Gospel.

The Jews were so angry they pushed him off the pinnacle of the Temple. 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 some street cred behind his words! *James' faith had left deep tracks in his life!*

He introduces himself, "James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Recall James was the blood brother of the Lord - on his mother's side.

If a family affiliation ever counted, this would be it! James could've flaunted his status and called himself, "*the Savior's closest sibling*" or "*the kid brother of God...*" Instead, he refers to himself as "*a bondservant.*"

After spending his whole life in Jesus' shadow, this is his chance to take name drop and advantage of the relationship, but no way. James is only a servant. Like us, he's a sinner saved by grace. It was honor enough to be "*a bondservant*" or "*love servant*" of His Lord! James now worshipped the Brother he once resented.

And he writes, "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings." Twice in the OT, Israel was conquered by

invading armies and scattered across foreign lands. Many Jews never returned home.

Little Jewish enclaves sprang up around the world.

But as the Gospel spread, it reached these dispersed communities, and many Jews believed in Jesus. James wanted to write them a letter of encouragement.

The fact that his letter is addressed exclusively to Israel's twelve tribes could mean it was written prior to the Gospel reaching the Gentiles, as early as 45 AD. That would make *James* was one of the first NT books!

And its author cuts right to the chase. He speaks to the felt needs 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 was sure to stand out and draw fire. You can bet the early Christians suffered heavy trials for their faith in Jesus.

He begins, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials...” And notice, it's not “IF you fall into trials...” but “**WHEN...**” All Christians will face trials!

I wish I could say being a Christian immunizes you from hardship, *but it doesn't*. James mentions “**various trials**” - that's different types from different sources...

Sometimes we suffer from our own mistakes...

At other times the suffering is unjust...

On still other occasions, the specific reason for our trial is a mystery, *other than we live in a fallen world*...

And at times, we suffer for Jesus' sake...

We suffer “*various trials.*” This is why we shouldn’t fixate on the trial’s source or intensity but on its purpose. The only way to “*count it all joy,*” or be happy over a trial, is to be absolutely locked into its purpose!

Which is why he tells us, “*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 create “*patience*” or *endurance*.

The Greek word is “*hupomone*” or “*remain under.*” We would say, “*stick it out*” or “*persevere.*” Trials are resistance training. When our faith is pushed, it grows stronger. In time, it matures and reaches its potential.

Real faith grows only under pressure. It’s been said, “*No one sharpens a knife on a stick of butter.*” You need friction. And God uses trials to sharpen our faith.

For a time, seafood distributors who shipped codfish from New England to markets across the country had a problem. In the beginning, they tried to ship frozen cod, but the freezing process robbed the meat of its flavor.

The answer was to ship the fish alive, in a tank of seawater. Even then, the fish ended up tasting mushy and flavorless. That’s when someone had an idea...

The cod’s natural enemy is the catfish. So a couple of catfish were placed in the tank. All the while the cod was on the road, they were chased by the catfish. The vigilance it took to survive kept the cod fresh and delicious. This is what trials do for our faith. God puts a catfish or two in our tank so our faith doesn’t get flabby.

And it's interesting, verse 3, James tells us the Christian "*knows*" this truth. *Why would a Christian intuitively know that his trials will produce endurance?*

Well, every Christian has been to the cross, and at the cross of Christ, God turned the *worst trial* into the *supreme triumph*. The heart of our salvation teaches us that God works miracles through trials! *It's His way!*

Verse 5, "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." If you're in the midst of a trial ask God for wisdom *not to waste the trial*. Ask Him to show you what you're supposed to learn by the trial.

"But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind." Doubt is a spiritual flip-flop. I trust God, but I don't. I trust, then I worry. James compares doubt to an ocean wave that rolls in and rolls out, it rises and falls.

Real faith is unaffected by the circumstances.

"For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord..." Write it down, *Doubt takes you out from under God's spout*. Doubt forfeits God's blessing. Doubt robs us of what God has for us!

Verse 8 says of the doubter, "he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." The phrase "*double-minded*" means, "*facing two directions*." In his allegory, "*Pilgrim's Progress*," John Bunyan refers to the doubter as "*Mr. Facing-both-ways*." He's a fence-straddler.

On Monday he walks with God, but by Friday he's sucked back into living for himself. He can't decide his direction and gives 100% to neither. He needs to be **"all in."** He's *an unhappy saint and a miserable sinner.*

Verse 9, **"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."** Spiritually speaking, before God we are all on equal ground - the poor and the rich.

Money has no effect on a person's spiritual status.

"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."

Wealth is temporary. As Shakespeare penned, **"Golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust."**

Death is the great equalizer. We're all here today, gone tomorrow.

I have three azaleas in my yard that once blossomed at Augusta National Golf Club. They were my son's gift to his mom. They bloom and stand out for *maybe two weeks* before they turn green like every other common bush. So it is with the rich man. His glory fades quickly.

Verse 12, **"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."** In contrast to material wealth spiritual crowns that last forever. A crown of life is awarded to believers who endure trials and temptation.

Crowns on earth are worn by members of the ruling class. *And it's true spiritually.* A crown is awarded to the believer who has learned to say no to temptation. Resistance to temptation is another track mark of faith.

Verse 13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone." **Don't play the blame game!** *I've heard folks blame their sin on God!*

They talk like it's God's duty to reach from heaven and grab them by the britches and pull them out of temptation. No! **Resisting temptation is our choice.**

And our choices trigger a chain reaction. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed." God doesn't cause temptation. It starts when we're drawn away by our own sinful lusts.

Martin Luther once referred to lustful thoughts as birds. He said, "I can't keep them from flying over my head, but I can keep them from nesting in my hair."

Dwelling on an evil thought, savoring it, is a choice.

For "when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin..." When an inner evil that's been nurtured, meets an opportunity to be acted on, full-blown sin results.

When the egg of desire is fertilized by an opportunity for sin - then presto you've got a baby on your hands.

And hiding that sin is as difficult as hiding a baby.

"And sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

If you never repent and turn from that outward evil, death results. Your life spins spirals downward. *Full-blown* sin turns into a *full-grown* lifestyle of wickedness.

Sin is a slippery slope that ends in destruction. Jot it down, **sin always results in unintended consequences.**

One day, you wake up in *a place you never wanted to go... with people you never wanted to be with...suffering consequences you never would've planned... facing a future you never dreamed you'd have...*

Verse 16-17, **“Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.”**

Here's the key to overcoming temptation. **You won't agree to sin if you're convinced everything good and perfect comes from God.** Satan runs a second-hand shop. Why settle for seconds? God supplies the best!

Once an impulsive buyer froze his credit cards in a block of ice. Before he could make a purchase he had to wait until the ice melted. It gave him time to think.

This is what we need to do when tempted - THINK! *Every good and perfect gift comes from our Father!*

“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” James is speaking of the new birth. By trusting in God's Word, we become a new breed of people - a new crop of humanity never before seen.

He uses a farming metaphor. We're the *"first fruits"* of a spiritual harvest! God dwells in us, and in the next verses, He lists the tracks that prove God's presence...

"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak..." Here's a track God leaves... The person He inhabits is *"swift to hear, slow to speak."* After all, God created us with two ears and one mouth. We should listen twice as much as we talk.

Ever hear of the guy who spoke multiple languages?

He was given the ultimate compliment. Someone said, **"He knew how to stay silent in seven languages."**

In addition, we should also be *"slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God."* **Rarely are God's purposes achieved by our anger.** Our wrath only bruises, and hurts, and further alienates. When we vent we only make matters worse!

"Therefore lay aside all filthiness, and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." Notice it's the *"implanted word"* - the word that takes root in my mind, that infiltrates who I am - this is what saves my soul.

Verse 22, *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."* A word gets implanted when we're more than an echo chamber - **when we act on what we hear.** DL Moody once said, **"Every Bible should be bound with shoe leather."** What he meant by that, is the Bible is for doing, not just hearing!

Some churches are like wine-tasters. Professional connoisseurs who sip the wine, roll it around in their mouth, but don't consume... That's how some people treat the Bible. They *analyze its presentation* and *sample its taste*, without letting it get deep inside them.

They have a superficial appreciation of God's Word, but they remain unaltered by what it truly teaches.

James tells us, "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was."

Imagine yourself glancing in a mirror after eating a hot dog, and noticing ketchup all around your mouth... but you do nothing about it! *This is the "hearer only!"*

Are you always gaining info about the Bible, while never act on what you learn? Some of us know the Bible *out the wazoo*, but we've never let it clean us up.

"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

Under the Mosaic Law, people were bound to what it said but lacked the power to carry it out. Whereas the New Covenant, *the perfect Law of liberty*, that's ours in Christ, not only *instructs us* but *empowers us* with love.

We can now be more than hearers, but doers.

The next two verses identify a few of the tracks left behind by real faith. "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and

does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.” Faith that *grabs hold* of a heart also *controls* a wagging tongue.

And verse 27, “*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*” If you want to track genuine faith look for both: *compassion for the lonely*, and a *desire for purity*.

As far back as I recall, until the day she died, every Sunday afternoon my Dad drove downtown to visit his invalid sister in a nursing home. Dad would buy her a Coke, and he and Aunt Ann would sit and chit-chat.

And during the week, Ann would call us incessantly just to make sure Dad was coming on Sunday.

She was lonely *and just wanted to talk*

I’m ashamed to admit it, but whenever I answered the phone, and it was Ann, I’d get annoyed. Dad though always quoted James 1:27, “*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble.*” We can talk all day about God’s love, but *real faith leaves tracks*.

Chapter 2 begins, “*My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.*” In other words, **don’t play favorites!**

“*For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a*

good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" Hey, on the flight to heaven, the cabin isn't divided between *first class* and *coach*.

Jesus accepts me *just as I am* and *right where I'm at*, and this is how I should accept others. Don't treat the rich, or hip, or beautiful any differently than the rest.

The *banker* and *bag lady* should get equal love!

While in South Africa, Mohandas Ghandi became impressed with the teachings of Jesus and thought of converting to Christianity, *until he attended church*.

He saw prejudice among its members, and concluded, "If Christians have caste differences of their own, I might as well stay a Hindu." How sad for anyone in God's family to feel second-class! *It shouldn't be*.

Once a street person went to join a church. The pastor wasn't sure if the church wanted "*her type*."

He told her to give him a week to think it over, but the week went by, and still no decision. He then said he needed another week... and on and on this went.

Finally, in prayer, the Lord spoke to the woman. "My child, don't worry about joining that church. I've been trying for twenty years, and they won't let Me in either."

Verse 5, "Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the

kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man.

Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?" In Luke 4:18, Jesus said the Spirit was upon Him "to preach the Gospel to the poor."

Jesus knew that like the rich, young ruler the wealthy and well-to-do are often threatened by Him. Folks who make money their idol - and assume earthly stuff can bring fulfillment have no interest in making Jesus Lord.

Put a small coin up to your eyeball, and it can block your view of a huge mountain. *And this is the effect money can have on our faith in God.* It can get in the way. Most people dream of being rich, but spiritually speaking excessive wealth can be a disadvantage.

Verse 8, "If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors." The "*royal law*" is the law that reigns supreme, that's above all others, and it's love for my neighbor. And such love should prohibit partiality.

As a Christian, I can have a close circle of friends, as long as it never becomes a closed circle of friends.

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."

Break one of the 613 Laws, and you're guilty of violating them all. The Law required perfection. You had to bat a .1000. This is why we were set free from the Mosaic Law - the odds of us obeying it were zero

“So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.” Instead of God expecting us to obey the Law, He put His love in our hearts. And living out that love is the Law we've now been called to keep.

“For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.” One day we'll stand before God. If we want His judgment to be tempered with mercy **then**, let's show mercy **now**.

Verse 14, **“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith, but does not have works?”**

Is there such a thing as faith without tracks? What if a person claims faith, but his life shows no evidence?

In verse 15, James tells us what true, saving faith looks like... **“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?”** Your blessing was nothing but hollow words.

“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” As we've said, **real faith leaves tracks**. A legit faith leaves an imprint. I'll act on what I truly believe.

Real faith - that is, saving faith - the faith that gets you to heaven - is a commitment to the point of action!

Charles Blondin was a famous acrobat. On June 30, 1859, he crossed Niagara Falls on a three-inch rope - *1,100 feet across the falls and 160 feet above them.*

Over that summer, Blondin did numerous stunts from the tightrope... *he did a backwards somersault, crossed blindfolded, pushed a wheelbarrow across the rope, walked it on stilts, he crossed at night, he even cooked an omelet on a portable stove halfway across...*

But Charles Blondin's most amazing feat on the wire above Niagara Falls came on September 15, 1860.

Before crossing that day, he asked the crowd, "Do you believe I can carry a man across the rope on my back?" Everyone roared, "Yes, we believe!" That's when he asked for a volunteer. And of all the folks who claimed to believe, none would climb on Blondin's back. Their *lack of action* betrayed their *claim of faith*.

Finally, one man stepped forward. The crowd didn't know it, but it was Blondin's manager, Harry Colcord.

Harry had already tied his future to Blondin's daring, so why not go all out and trust him with his very life?

And this will be our reaction if we really trust Jesus.

We'll climb on the Savior's back and let Him carry us. We'll tie every area of our life to Jesus. *Real faith, saving faith, faith that gets you to heaven* - is not a sideline faith. It's a faith that acts on what it believes.

Verse 18, "But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

It's true, **faith is faith and works are works.**

Don't turn faith into another work. You're made right with God not by what you do, but by what Jesus did, and your faith in His work. **Salvation is by faith alone, but if you're really saved, faith will never be alone...**

It will be accompanied by works and loving action.

Some folks point to a supposed conflict between Paul and James. Especially, later in verse 24 where James says, **"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."** That seems to contradict Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."**

Martin Luther was so upset with the book of James he called it **"a right strawy epistle..."** He included it in the canon of Scripture, but failed to put it on the same level with the rest of the NT. *It was strawy, not golden.*

But the supposed conflict between Paul and James clears up when you realize the vocation of the authors.

Paul was a theologian. He was adept at breaking down abstract ideas. He deciphered steps - dealt with causes and effects... Whereas **James was a carpenter.** He cared about the end results. The steps and procedures you followed while building a chair, didn't matter if you end up with a handsome, sturdy piece of furniture.

And this is how these two men dealt with salvation.

Paul untangled individual threads. Faith alone is the cause. While fruits of the Spirit and good works are the result... Whereas James sees it as one giant cross stitch. He was so sure that faith produced works, he saw salvation as a package deal. If a life didn't show *good works*, then it obviously didn't possess *real faith*.

Paul x-rayed the roots of faith... James admired the fruits of faith... Paul says faith comes first and should never be confused with works. But James says works always follow faith. Works are the evidence of faith.

Put both viewpoints together and you see a complete picture... **A faith that saves is a faith that works!**

Verse 19, "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!"

Faith is obviously more than an intellectual assent. Even the demons are orthodox in their doctrine. Just an agreement on the facts doesn't constitute real faith!

Here's a side note, the demons "*tremble.*" The word means "to bristle up." It's the idea of a hair-raising experience. A demon's faith in God doesn't save him, it frightens him. He believes in God's judgment, and it causes the hair on the back of his neck to stand up.

"But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" And here's an example...

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made

perfect? If Abraham had not obeyed God how can you say he actually trusted Him?

If you pray for rain, then leave the house in the morning without an umbrella - *you didn't pray in faith.*

Verse 23, **"And the Scripture was fulfilled (Genesis 15:6) which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God."**

Abraham was declared right with God 22 years before he was told to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. The point being, faith came first and stood alone. It was later confirmed by his obedience.

"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." And in the context in which James is speaking, he's right. If faith inevitably produces good works, then you can't have real faith without works.

Again Paul is breaking down the Christian life into parts, whereas James sees it as a continuum. James isn't worried about where faith ends, and works begin. He sees both as an unbroken chain. Certainly, they do end and begin, but that's Paul's concern, not James'.

In James' mind, we are *justified by both faith and works.* How can you separate the *root* from its *fruit*?

Here's another example, **"Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?"** It's the same idea, faith in God led her to assist the Jews.

"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Notice, here we're given God's definition

of when death occurs, **when the spirit departs the body.** Once the spirit, the eternal part of a person vacates, the body is an empty shell. It's dead.

And likewise, a faith that has lost its heart, and guts, and vigor, and zeal, and effort is as good as dead.