

The Epistle of St. James

Messages to Today's Youth

Marina Atalla

The author of this epistle identifies himself as “*James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1:1). St. James, one of the twelve apostles and Bishop of the city of Jerusalem, was known as James the Just, and the “brother” or kinsman of the Lord. Unlike most New Testament letters, St. James does not address a particular church, or even a geographical region. This epistle was written to the Christian Jews, anywhere outside of Palestine. We learn this from the verse that states, “*to the twelve tribes of Israel,*” which would mean the whole of the Jewish nation. But the rest of the verse, “*who are scattered abroad,*” specifically refers to those Jews of the Dispersion. Jews of the Dispersion were the Jews exiled to countries outside of Palestine. Later on in the Epistle it is clarified that St. James is most likely referring to Christians given that he discusses the behaviour and attitudes that are part of being Christian. Although the intended audience of this epistle was the Christian Jews of the first century, today’s youth can benefit greatly from studying the messages from St. James’ letter.

Trials and Tribulations

One of the most central elements of a strong Christian’s life incorporates trials and tribulations, which are part of everyday life for the faithful. The first chapter in St. James’ epistle opens with the somewhat disconcerting matter concerning a Christian’s response towards trials and tribulations.

St. James simply and clearly tells his readers, “*My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations*” (1:2). Our attitudes towards difficult times should not just be accepting, but *joyful!* This seems like an outrageous and difficult command, but St. James provides some reasoning behind this statement.

Firstly, trials, when properly received as St. James instructs us, become food for our faith, and it is only through those trying times, that we may mature spiritually. St. Peter gives us a wonderful

explanation for this! He provides a perfect metaphor, comparing the aspect of having one's faith tested through trials to the refining of gold by fire. When gold is placed in fire, impurities are removed and the result is gold of a higher quality – a purer gold. Trials have a similar consequence on our spirituality and faith.

Also, St. James tells his readers, *“that the trying of your faith worketh patience”* (1:2). This means that when God presents us with trials, whatever they may be, it is an opportunity to achieve and practice patience, a fundamental virtue. On the 'ladder' of virtues, patience is found on the lower rungs, along with obedience. The importance of this virtue, patience, is made evident by the Lord when He speaks of the days of Great Tribulation that will come before His second coming. *“And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved”* (Matt 10:22). And, *“In your patience possess ye your souls”* (Luke 21:19). Through patience, even in the worst of times, one would be able to preserve his soul. So, through our trials and the trying of our faith, patience may be what saves us.

Furthermore, let us always keep in mind that temptations do not come from God. The world's oppression takes place with the *permission* of God. St. James advises us, *“Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man”* (1:13). God may try our faith for our own benefit, but He never tempts us. An example of a trial is found in the old testament, when Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his only son. God was testing Abraham's obedience, love, and faith. We do not say Abraham was *tempted* to kill his son! So even though distressing times and tormenting temptations may come to us from the evil one, to become angered at these circumstances is to be angry with God, who permits them.

Most importantly, there is the greatest reward granted to those who endure with joy and patience. *“Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them who love him”* (1:12). The promise for those who persevere, through all the worldly suffering with joy, is a heavenly reward, the crown of life, eternity.