



THE PERSEVERANCE TEST

Today we start a new series, looking at what is probably the oldest and most Jewish letter in the NT – written 40-50 AD – and the punchiest. In fact, it's a bit like a Scotch Bonnet or a Ghost Chilli – it's got a bit of a kick to it. And it answers a question that everyone, if they're serious about following Jesus, has got to ask, at some point.

What's the letter? The letter of Jacob – or, as we know him, James.

Let's take a look at the opening section:

James / Jacob 1:1-12

As I said, the name 'James' in the NT should really read *Yaakov* or Jacob, but once you translate from Hebrew into Greek, from Greek into Latin, from Latin into Gaelic, from Gaelic into English ... well, you get the picture.

Tradition says this was the younger brother of Jesus, and if that's the case, it means we're talking about someone who started out a non-believer (hey, imagine having an older brother with a Messiah complex!). But then, 3+ years later, Jesus ended up on a cross – which I reckon would have broken James' heart. And 3 days after that, something happened which changed that heart: Jesus rose from the dead. And amongst the people Jesus appeared to, according to 1 Corinthians 15:7, was His younger brother. And James was never the same again. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and eventually died as a servant of Jesus, in the AD 60s.

So, what's the theme? This: how can we know our faith is genuine? To which James gives us 10 tests, starting with one we can all probably relate to: the perseverance test. I say 'all', because trials are an inevitable – and varied – fact of life (vs2). How can we keep a hold of Jesus in the midst of such things?

James here gives us 3, very practical, words of advice:

1) Adopt A Joyful Attitude (vs2-4). How on earth are we supposed to regard our troubles as a 'pure joy'? Well, for starters we're talking about a joy that only God can give. But in addition, it's not the trial itself that we're supposed to be joyful about – it's the purpose of it. How joyful was Jesus on the night before His crucifixion? Not very!

So, if it's purpose that gives us joy, what's the purpose? The purpose is maturity and completion, i.e. becoming all that we have the potential to be. It's a bit like growing up. For children to develop, they need to be challenged – whether it's learning to walk or learning to swim or learning to ride a bike. And in the process, they need to be ready to land on their bums, get water up their noses, or go over the handlebars. We even have a name for those things: we call them 'growing pains.' But those negatives are a part – a vital part – of the learning process. To quote a Japanese proverb: "Fall 7 times to stand up 8."

So, if we're going to pass the perseverance test, we need to view it joyfully. Not by wearing a fake smile, but keeping our eyes on the prize: not misery, but maturity.

2) Adopt A Wise Attitude (vs5-8). The word for wisdom here is the Greek *sofia*, or in Hebrew, *hokma*. And in Jewish thought, *hokma* means taking a God's eye view of life, and asking Him to help us make sense of it.

Now I need to make something clear: I don't think it's possible to always understand why God allows things to happen. Author Philip Yancey explains it like this: 1) the reasons may be too complicated; 2) even if we could understand, it wouldn't make it any easier to cope with (like Jeremiah in Lamentations). But I think it's possible to know, deep down inside, that God is in control, and to trust that His way is the best way. And that's what we need to ask God for – on one condition. It's not enough to *ask* for wisdom. We've got to *believe* in it, too. Otherwise, we're like a wave on the sea – one minute up, next minute down.

So, to pass the perseverance test takes wisdom; and as the Book of Proverbs says, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning (or source) of it." So, seek God – continually.

3) Adopt A Humble Attitude (vs9-11). Vs9-10 should probably read as a proverb: "Let the poor brother take pride in his high position, but the rich take pride in his low position." I.e. 'the poor are more likely to be spiritually rich; the rich, spiritually poor.' After which, James compares us to a bunch of wild flowers that look beautiful for a time, and then ... they're gone. The point being: remember how tiny and temporary you are!

It takes hard times – poverty, sickness, bereavement – to help us realise what is most important in life. For starters, no-one is ever going to be lying on their deathbed thinking, “I wish I could make a bit more money or work a few more hours.” But we also need the hard times to remind us that 1) we’re not God, and 2) we need the One who is! To quote Jim Carrey: “I wish that everyone could get rich and famous and have everything they ever dreamed of ... so they’d know that’s *not* the answer.”

Contrary to the way a lot of preachers make it sound, the tough times in our lives are not a sign of God’s anger. They are a sign of His grace, of His mercy. They’re His way of saying, “Wake up! And seek Me while you’ve got the chance!”

The Score

James wraps up this section with vs12, and the fruits of perseverance: blessing or joy (our immediate experience), and a victory wreath of eternal life (our ultimate experience). The logic being: if you know where you’re going you can know a joy in the journey, even if it’s a bit rough sometimes. But to get there, your faith has to be ‘tested’ or literally ‘approved’ – the Greek word *dokimos* (*dokimion* or ‘testing’ is also used in vs3).

This word comes from the market-places of the ancient world. If you were a 1st century merchant, there were 2 ways of testing whether a silver coin was genuine (as opposed to a copper counterfeit, coated in foil). One was wear-and-tear, which would obviously take time; the other was to whack it with a chisel. And that’s what James is saying here: the trials of life are the ‘chisels’ that show what we’re made of; they prove that we’re genuine. Not to God (He already knows), but to us. 1 Peter 1:3-9 says the same.

So, how are you doing with test no.1, the perseverance test? You might be thinking, “I’m not sure I can do this, Steve.” And on your own, you’re right. But if you love Jesus, you’re not on your own. Jesus is with you, He understands what you’re going through, and just as He *saved* you, He can *keep* you – right to the very end.

With all that in mind, here are some questions to consider:

- What faith-challenges have you experienced in life?
- What were the positive sides of those situations?
- How can we help each other to persevere in our faith?