

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

James 1:1-18

22 August 2021

## Endurance

### *Opening Prayer:*

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to any guests with us this morning. We are so glad that you are here.

Let us pray: God of sustaining grace and unending mercy, we look to you this morning in the midst of our busy and hectic lives, asking for energy and endurance. Thank you for your Spirit and its comforting presence in our lives in the midst of difficulty. We ask this morning for your wisdom that we could more truly and honestly walk in your way. Fill us with your patience and love as we seek to become more like Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### *Message:*

Over the next 5 weeks, we will be exploring the letter of James. Located between Hebrews and the letters of 1 and 2 Peter, it sits near the end of the New Testament. I think though that we are in a unique season that calls for this particular letter. First, James gave his audience in the first century a better understanding of what influences were to be shaping them as Christian communities, which is why we hear echoes in the letter from Jesus, Paul, and the Old Testament. In the same way today, we often need an anchor holding us steady in the cultural and societal winds and waves that shift around us. James re-centers us in the story of God saving and restoring humanity and creation through Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. In a time when political,

religious, economic, and cultural leaders are all trying to convince us that they have a corner on the truth or what is really happening in our world, James reminds us of where we have been and what is central to our mission as followers of Jesus.

So, let's dive into the first 18 verses of the letter of James. Starting with verse 1: "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion: Greetings." Like Paul in his letters, James offers a standard greeting to his audience along with his particular status in the church. Unlike Paul, who is constantly defending his authority as an apostle, James speaks of himself as a servant of both God and Jesus the Messiah or Christ. We must note here a resonance in Jesus's teaching to the disciples, that the greatest among them must be like a servant. Most likely, the author of this letter is James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church mentioned in Acts 12, 15, and 21 as well as the gospels and Paul's letters. However, much scholarly debate continues over how it came to be the letter that it is today. Most likely, the audience of this letter is the Christian churches across the Roman Empire in the first century, thus making it a general letter. Depending on when it was written though, the twelve tribes in the dispersion could have been Jewish Christians who had left Jerusalem because of persecution after Jesus's ascension or because of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE; that could be thinking too much into it; this phrase also could just be a veiled reference to the renewed people of God, all of those who have joined Jesus and God the Father in their mission to renew and restore all people and creation.

In verses 2-18, four themes shine through strongly and reflect powerfully the teaching of Jesus. The first theme is that of becoming or being on a journey. None of us has arrived at maturity or all that God has called us to be. We are all works in progress, being transformed and shaped by the Holy Spirit. We know that the journey is taken one step at a time, one prayer at a time,

one trial or temptation at a time. We face our present situations with joy, not worrying about the future trials or temptations that may come because God is gracious and generous and walks alongside us. We are all attempting to live into the way of Jesus, reflecting God's love and grace to all people, but we are also at different places on that journey. We hear this sense of journey in verse 4 when James tells us to stand firm in the midst of trial and temptation, **so that we may be** mature and complete and later in verse 18 that **we would become** the first fruits of his creatures.

The second theme is that God is gracious and generous, or as James writes, "God gives to all generously and ungrudgingly." We are reminded in this moment of Jesus's assurance in the gospels that God cares about us as parents care for their children, that we only need ask, seek, and knock. We can trust that God will provide the wisdom, humility, and energy that we need when we need it. But just because we can trust does not necessarily mean that we will. We will face external and internal pressures to our faith. James calls those external pressures on our lives, trials or tests to our faith caused by the evil and destructive forces of our world. We must stand firm against those external pressures, seeking God's sustenance and knowing that God will give us what we need. Unlike we, who often hold grudges against our neighbors or our enemies and find ways of withholding our love or trust or hope or resources, God provides.

James also highlights how difficult holding to God's promises can be when he explores our tendencies to doubt, to hold onto our resources, and to succumb to our desires. The third theme then is our tendency to be absolutely independent or to try to live our lives entirely in our own power. In the same way that loving God and trusting in God's provision for us will bear fruit in wisdom, humility, and endurance, so will going our own way bear fruit, but James warns that it's not the fruit that we desire. Our greatest temptation lies in our pride and arrogance. We think that we know better than God does, that we know the way to life and peace better, and that

we can accomplish it by our own volition. Standing firm against this tendency built into our own sense of autonomy is our greatest challenge, especially in a culture that rewards rugged individualism, selfish consumerism, and wanton indulgence. James warns that we must be careful with our possessions, our doubt, and our desire. Echoing Jesus's teaching throughout his ministry, James reminds his listeners that possessions and wealth will wither and perish under the scorching heat of life's circumstances, so we must be careful to trust in God's provision, God's planning, and God's generosity. Second, James warns us of the power of doubt and how it can lead us down paths of instability and paralysis. I do not take this to mean that we cannot ask questions of God or express our frustration when things do not make sense to us. However, when doubt bears fruit like lack of love for our neighbors or lack of purpose centered in Jesus's calling and mission, we have journeyed too deeply in doubt's shadow. Finally, James warns us of the possible danger of desire. We might be tempted to blame God for those difficult situations when desire seems too strong for us, but James has already offered us a way to stand firm: we ask God for wisdom and humility, for strength and fortitude because God is gracious and generous. James continues with a warning. If we seek out ways to meet our desires in our own power and control, those desires will give birth to sin or hurting our neighbor and God. When that sin is fed and nourished by our continued attempts on our own, it can lead to death, both physical and spiritual. What James is spelling out for us in verses 13-16 is the complex web of brokenness that envelops all of creation. Desire can give birth to sin, which can develop and grow into death.

Finally, as we journey together through trial and temptation in the power of God's gracious and generous Spirit, we develop the fourth theme over time, which is endurance or patience, a character trait. Like an athlete who is able to throw farther or run faster or run farther, each decision, each workout is building toward a better habit, a more vibrant and sustainable

faith, a more mature and complete faith. As James writes in verse 18, God has given birth to us through the gospel, the word of truth, the good news that Jesus has shown and made the way for us through his life, death, and resurrection. But we do not stay spiritual infants for the rest of our lives waiting on God to do everything for us; As we live in community with other followers of Jesus and stand firm in the midst of trials and temptations, we grow into the new creations that God has been working in us.

So, I wonder which of the themes resonates with you most today? Do you sense in your life today how God has been gracious and generous with you? Or maybe you needed to hear that each of us is on our own journey of becoming more like Jesus. Walking through life in the power of the Holy Spirit is not a competition. Each of us is trying to figure it out with God's leading and Jesus's example. Or maybe what you have realized in this season is that you are not able to do everything on your own, that you need help, not only from God but from the community around you. Sometimes the hardest confession to make is that I cannot do it by myself. Or maybe you are in the middle of some different trials or temptations, and you're not sure if you are going to make it, if you will be able to hold on. Take it one day at a time, one prayer at a time, one decision at a time, and in the Spirit's power, you also can develop endurance or patience. Most importantly, no matter where each of us is on the journey, we continue to walk together.

*Closing Prayer:*

Let us pray: God of hope and development, thank you for your Spirit's transforming presence in our lives. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear you in the midst of our trials and temptations that, with your help and the help of our church family, we would stand firm and become some of the

first fruits of your in-breaking kingdom. We ask you for wisdom and humility as we journey together in the way and work of Jesus. In his name. Amen.