

**James 1:1-12**

James, the Brother of Jesus (Pen 20)

**Lessons for the Day: Acts 15:12-22a; James 1:1-12; Matthew 13:54-58****No Straw Here!**

October 22, 2017

*“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

As many of you know, after our worship today we are going to have pie! Our Board of Fellowship has organized a pie social to celebrate *Pastor Appreciation Month*. I'm sure that I speak for both Pastor Eric and myself, when I say that we are thankful to God for the love and care you show to us. We also hope you know that you are appreciated. As your pastors, we love you, our dear brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray for you. We thank God for His grace at work in you. We hope and pray that you will continue to grow in grace and faith, serving one another; working together for the sake of God's Kingdom, and reaching out to the lost and dying around us with the hope that is found in the Saviour, who gave Himself on the cross as the ransom cost for the sins of all people; and who destroyed death as He rises again from the dead to give life to all who believe in Him.

I don't know if it was incidental or deliberate that October became Pastor Appreciation Month. I do know that there are a number of commemorations and feast days on the Christian calendar this month, dedicated to various workers in the church. Some of those we celebrate you probably won't recognize, but they all have had a role in the growth of the church. Working our way through the month, we remember Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, who helped establish many Lutheran congregations in the 1700s, and who was the guiding force behind the first American Lutheran synod, the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, founded in 1748. Then we remember Philip the Evangelist (Acts 21:8), who proclaimed the Gospel in Samaria and led Simon the Sorcerer to become a believer in Christ (Acts 8:4-13). There is Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Syria at the beginning of the second century A.D., and an early Christian martyr. On his way to Rome to be martyred, he wrote beautiful, pastoral letters to the Christians at Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralles, Rome, Philadelphia, and Smyrna, warning them against false teachings. We also remember St. Luke, St. Simon and St. Jude, who all served their Lord through their ministry as apostles and evangelists.

Today we remember St. James, the brother of Jesus. His actual feast day is tomorrow, but it seemed like a good day to remember this faithful servant of the church, too. While we don't think of James as a pastor, he was an early leader of the church, perhaps even the first "president" of the church in Jerusalem. He is also the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of the Epistle that bears his name.

In his preface to the book of James, Martin Luther said something that has been either a joy for unbelievers or a problem for the faithful. He referred to James as an *epistle of straw*. Luther said: *“In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”* (AE 35:362)

Luther was a brilliant theologian, and a faithful man. But like all pastors, he wasn't perfect. In fairness to Luther, there were moments when he seemed to like this epistle, calling James *“a good book, because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God”* (AE 35:395). But when there were those who used James, and especially the verses that say: *“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* (James 2:17, ESV), to deny the clear Scripture truth that we are saved by grace, through faith and not by works of the law, I can understand that Luther was concerned that James wasn't clearer that

it the Gospel, and only the Gospel, that saves.

Yet there is no straw here, but God speaks through James to give us some good, solid guidance on practical issues. There is no conflict between faith and works. James speaks of the life that flows from faith in Jesus Christ. We see that as James introduces himself in the Epistle. He calls himself *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. The word for servant can also mean slave. James sees his life under the Lordship of Jesus, his half-brother. But James didn't always feel this way. There were times when James wasn't all that sure about Jesus. Mark tells us about a time when *"the crowd gathered [around Jesus] again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind.""* (Mark 3:20–21, ESV) Where there was once jealousy and uncertainty about Jesus' ministry, now James trusts his life to the Lord, who had suffered, died and risen for him.

James also sees hope in the midst of suffering. He says: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* Like Paul, who says that we *"rejoice in our sufferings"* (Romans 5:3, ESV), or Peter, who says *"Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name."* (1 Peter 4:16, ESV), James knows there is hope, even when things seem hopeless. That hope is not a pie-in-the-sky dream, but a sure and certain confidence that comes because we know and believe that Jesus died to bring us to God, and lives that we, too, will live with Him in glory. James even knows that it can be hard to understand why we suffer, if God loves us so much. Think of that—how often have you asked God, "why?" So many people think that bad things only happen to bad people. If we are doing what we should do; if we are good people, then we will prosper. That is why we seem flustered and confused by the problems, the worries, the struggles of our lives. We wonder if God knows what we are going through, or if He really wants to help us. James says that we lack wisdom, so we should ask God, in faith, for wisdom—and God will help us understand. The Spirit helps us see that the devil is doing all he can to lead us to doubt God. He works against us, just as he worked against Job. But in God's wisdom, we see that his attacks are empty and meaningless. They only lead us to lean more and more on Christ in faith, knowing the sure and certain hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

There is so much in this Epistle that simply speaks about faith being alive in all we do. This isn't worthless straw. It is a great treasure to know that we have a wonderful new life in Christ. As Paul tells us: *"For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."* (Romans 6:14, ESV) Through His death on the cross, Jesus sets us free from sin and its condemnation. United with Him in that death through our Baptism, we also live in the new life we have in His resurrection from the dead. James knew that faith saves, but faith also changes us. This is why James gives the advice he does when the disagreement arose in the early church regarding the inclusion of the Gentiles among the Christians. There were many who thought that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow all the laws of Judaism. James doesn't tie the Gentiles to the ceremonial law that God gave to the Jews. Rather, he says: *"Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood."* (Acts 15:19–20, ESV) James is simply saying, "if we are alive in Christ, let's live as those alive in Christ. That is true for the Gentiles, too. We will turn from those things that are sinful, and live by grace. We will cling to the Saviour, and walk in the light of His truth.

Sorry, Martin. There is no straw here. Rather, the Holy Spirit speaks through James with little treasures that help us see faith for what it is—a life changing confidence, that knows all that Jesus has done for us, and which comes to life in all we do as forgiven and free people in Christ. Trusting in Jesus, we walk by faith, knowing what James knew: *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.* Amen.