

## 5. Keeping the Faith

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*The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*

*(James 1:9-12)*

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### **The Circumstances of Life**

In the previous chapter, we looked at the necessity of trials. Our faith must be tested, not to see if it is weak, but to be strengthened as ore is tried in the furnace. We need to become mature in faith in every way. One of the first requirements for spiritual maturity is wisdom. We do not readily or easily understand why things happen in our lives the way they do, but we may freely ask the Lord for the wisdom needed to respond to the trials and pressures of life. Wisdom is not that we know why something occurred, but that we learn how to deal with what has happened. *Learning how is more important than knowing why.*

Having pointed out that the element of wisdom is the basic ingredient for maturity, James moves on to discuss the circumstances we encounter in life. He deals with two major factors, namely, poverty (“humble circumstances”) and riches. When he has made some remarks about these circumstances in 1:9-11, James again returns to his theme of persevering under trial in 1:12.

It is difficult to determine whether 1:12 looks back at 1:9-11 or points forward to 1:13-15, in other words, whether it is part of our text or belongs to the next passage. It is a transitional passage, typical of the writing of James. I have connected 1:12 with the preceding verses, although it also has a bearing on

what follows. In James 1:9-12, therefore, we see how the Lord instructs us to keep the faith in the trying circumstances of life. We must accept our place in faith, esteem our worth by faith, and expect our reward through faith.

## **Humble Circumstances**

As we noted earlier, we must ask God for wisdom, and we must do so in faith. We must not ask the Lord for anything we think he cannot deliver, for a doubter will not receive. When it comes to the circumstances of our lives, the same faith must be active and fruitful. How can we deal with our circumstances if not in faith? So we may continue with the theme of faith also in the verses we are currently studying.

There are, as previously mentioned, two specific situations about which James writes. The first is about “the brother in humble circumstances” (1:9). When we see how this is immediately contrasted with being rich, we may conclude that “humble” in this context means “poor”. Yet it does not have to mean this exclusively, for being poor brings with it a certain social status, a stigma that is very hard to remove.

In the early church, most of the members were relatively, if not outrightly, poor. At that time, many church members were still slaves who had no possessions of their own, and whose situation was indeed humble. When James writes “humble”, he means then that someone has a low social status, no independent means, and is bound to a life of service, even servitude.

This seems to have been a general picture of the church in the apostolic times. Think of what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (I Cor 1:26). The church did not have many intellectuals, officials, or aristocrats. The members were generally lowly and weak.

## **Acceptance of Humble Circumstances**

It is never easy to be poor, but it becomes even more difficult when there is no way, humanly speaking, out of the poverty. It is a vicious circle: once poor, always poor. The American dream was not alive in the Roman Empire. Very few, if any, could tell a rags-to-riches tale. There was an immense gap between rich and poor, just as there still is today in third world nations.

The word “humble” suggests more than just poverty or meager income. It means to not have any position of note, always being subservient and

dependent on the goodness of others. It is difficult to accept such a position in life. By nature, most people want to climb the social ladder, have a good income, be free and independent, and so enjoy life to the fullest. But many Christians, also today, live in very humble circumstances. They cannot change reality, but they must accept their place in life.

Acceptance is an easy word to use, but a very hard thing to have. People may resign themselves to their lot in life, but they are not happy, and anger and resentment always bubble beneath the surface. Some societies are like a volcano, waiting to explode, for the wealth is divided over a few and the majority has almost nothing. Often extreme force must be applied to keep the impoverished masses under control.

Notice how James speaks about the *brother* in humble circumstances. He uses this address for a specific reason. Whatever status a person may have in this world, in the church of Christ there is no distinction of any kind. There should be no class struggle. Slave and free, rich and poor, princes and paupers are all alike in this sense: they are brothers and sisters in the Lord. As such they are equal in status, for everyone shares in salvation through Jesus Christ. Later in his letter, James specifically writes about favoritism and how the Lord forbids it.

## **A High Position**

The situation in the church of James' time may have been that in daily life a man was a slave, subject to his master, but in the church of Christ he was an elder, called to instruct and admonish even his master. Nowadays, it can happen that an employee is called to be an office-bearer and in that capacity must exercise supervision over his employer.

There is no real hope for social change in the world. A popular saying is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. But in the church of Christ, a "brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position" (1:9). This part of the text literally reads that such a brother ought to glory in his elevation. This is because he did not achieve this high position himself; rather, it was given to him in Christ. By faith he became a brother to his earthly master—if that master is a believer—and so all the circumstances change, also the ones in his master's house.

A high position does not necessarily mean that an office is received. It can mean very simply that the man of humble circumstances comes to stand on par with those who are rich. The distinctions that govern society do not govern the church. They continue to exist, for in the church we also have rich and poor,

but they are not determinative. As members of God's church, we are all one in Christ, and even the lowly are exalted in the Lord.

## **No Discrimination**

Why does James write this? Looking at this passage, and others like it throughout the letter, we understand that in the church of James' time, the social pattern of the world was creeping in, as it does so easily. It was not easy for a slave to see his master as a brother. If a person was subservient all week, how could he be equal on Sunday? And how could this carry over to all the days of the week? Would he be able to see his master as his brother? It was perhaps even more difficult for a master to see his servant or slave as a brother. Would that not endanger the relationship during the week?

Besides, was it not somewhat dangerous to take pride in a high position? Would the slave not become bold with respect to his master? Would he still obey and work faithfully, or would he use his so-called Christian freedom to stand up to his master and perhaps even disobey him? It seems like James may have been asking for trouble with this part of his letter.

James, however, is not concerned about the possible negative effect. He is saying that we have to accept our position in faith, in Christ. It is of great comfort to know that we all serve the same Lord Jesus Christ. With him there is no favoritism. With him there is no discrimination on the basis of wealth, intellect, status, or whatever. The Lord looks at the heart. He knows if we are indeed truly humble. And he is the one who then gives us a high position in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not a new concept. God has always looked down with love and grace upon the lowly, the meek, and the poor. He knows them by name. He sees them at work, also in their struggles. The Israelites of the Old Testament had already learned to sing, "Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly" (Ps 138:6). No, it is not a new development, but in Christ it has deepened and become more sure.

## **Accepting Our Place**

There are many differences in society, and it would be naive to suggest that differences do not influence the church as well. But those whose material circumstances are humble should take pride in their exaltation in Christ. We must accept our place in society. There are rules that need to be respected and

obeyed. But we must also accept our place in the church, take that place joyfully in Christ, and be a living member of the church of the Lord.

Accepting a place means working in that place. We must not say that a place is too high for us, that we cannot do it. Instead, we have to believe that if we must do it, we will do so in faith and in the strength of the Lord. That is what we need in the church. Members who otherwise have humble circumstances may rejoice in their high position in Christ. As brothers and sisters, they can and must contribute, and be involved and committed.

Are we all happy with the place that God has given us in this life? Can we find joy in the place we each have among the saints in the church of Christ? Do we praise him for it? Taking pride does not mean claiming any credit for it. It means taking responsibility for it. God pulled us out of the quicksand of sin and death, in which we were sinking forever. He raised us up, cleansed us, and gave us a high place in his church. In return, he wants us to take this place, and work there to his glory and to our neighbor's benefit.

If we do so, then we follow the Lord Jesus Christ. James knows that Jesus Christ never used whatever popularity he had for his own benefit. He did not revolutionize society. He did not call Israel to arms against Rome. His was not a social Gospel, but a Gospel with immense social dimensions and consequences. Jesus Christ accepted his lowly position with great humility. He willingly served in the place God gave him. He knew that he would only receive honor if he accepted his lowly position and fulfilled his earthly task. That is what our Savior did, and he trusted in God to vindicate him.

### **The One Who is Rich**

This leads us to 1:10, where James makes a striking contrast. The brother in humble circumstances must take pride in his *high* position, but the one who is rich should take pride in his *low* position. Those who are rich are accustomed to a high position in life. They display their riches in every way they can. Wealth, and the social status thereof, is accompanied by recognition and power, and so the rich get richer. Their rights and privileges are constantly expanding. We need money to make money, and so it goes.

We do not know how many wealthy people there were in the early church. James mentions them in this letter, at least three times in particular and many times by implication. Thus we can conclude that there were some people in the churches who were rich. This led to certain problems in the churches, problems

that are also addressed in other letters. Recall how Paul admonished the rich for their conduct at the so-called love meals in Corinth (1 Cor 11:17-22).

The rich tend to associate with one another, for people usually feel most comfortable within their peer group. And it is understandable that the rich often talk about riches. Topics can include estimating the net worth of another rich person and how to increase wealth. How much is someone worth? Bill Gates, for example, can lose a few billion dollars in one day and not even seem to notice. There is an annual list of the ten richest people on the earth. Their life histories are studied and their business practices analyzed because they must have a secret, the key to riches.

### **The Rich Christian**

James does not have a very high opinion of the rich in his time. They dragged the poor into court (2:6). They did not tend to the physical needs of the poor (2:16). They were driven by selfish ambition (3:16). They bragged about their business trips (4:13ff). They hoarded money and held back wages (5:3ff). They lived in luxury and self-indulgence. Who could stop them or go against them? James speaks out very strongly against this kind of behavior so that it does not contaminate the church of Christ or destroy the communion of saints.

Hence in our text we read that the one who is rich should take pride in his low position. In the church, a rich man does not stand on his riches and demand the accompanying honor and respect, but he takes pride in his low position. The word “humbleness” is used again. The rich man looks around to see where he can help and serve, and he is there with his care and his gifts. That is his pride. He does not think he can earn something with God by doing so, but he serves the Lord truly and benefits his neighbor.

The rich Christian brings himself down to serve the poor Christians. There is no hoarding of wealth. There is no display of luxury. There is no self-indulgence. There is only the love of Christ and the desire to serve and be humble as the Lord Jesus was humble. Remember how he said that “the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matt 20:28). The Lord Jesus is the Master, and we are all his servants. No servant is higher than his master.

### **Sincere Love**

Let us turn now to 2 Corinthians 8, where Paul writes about the collection for the church in Jerusalem. He urges the Corinthians to collect funds for this

purpose and have them ready when he comes. Note verse 8, where he writes, “I am not commanding you.” We cannot and should not force people to give. Paul is testing the sincerity of the Corinthians’ love by comparing it to the earnestness of others.

And what does he follow with as an example of sincere love? It is not what these others have given, but it is the great sacrifice of Christ! Look at verse 9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

Christ was immeasurably rich. He lived in the glory of the Father in heaven. All things were made by him, for him, and to him. Yet he emptied himself and came to earth in the form of a slave. James and Paul do not say that this is what the rich must do. James says that the rich should take pride in his low position. It should be his pride and joy that he can help those who are less fortunate, out of sincere love. He does not have to give everything. There will still be much left for himself and his needs, but he must esteem his worth by the deeds of faith, not by the size of his bank account.

### **A Special Warning**

James adds to this a special warning by reminding the rich person of an inescapable fact: “He will pass away like a wild flower” (1:10-11). We read about the scorching sun that rises and withers the plant. The blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. On average, desert flowers last only one day. They are beautiful, but brief. In Southern Ontario where I live, we know what heat is, or at least we think so. But James is speaking about tropical or sub-tropical heat, which pounds relentlessly on the earth and causes everything to wilt and wither. It hardly makes sense to plant or sow, because nothing will grow. There is no water, just endless heat.

The rich man is like that desert flower. He “will fade away even while he goes about his business” (1:11). There is no prior warning. He may be on another business trip or just going about his daily routine. But he fades away, and we do not see him anymore. He has to leave all his wealth behind, sometimes for others who may not even appreciate the effort and result of all his labors.

What is the net worth of any man or woman? Do we esteem our true worth by faith? Is it shown in how we live and interact with others? Do we take pride in our low position, the position of service, so that we can each say, “By God’s grace, I have learned to share the riches he has given me”? Can we say that we

have learned from him who has given us the treasure that never perishes, the life that never ends?

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:13, “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.” Everyone must give for the service of the Lord, for the aid of the saints, for the good of all, but nobody needs to become hard-pressed by this giving. There must be equality in giving. He who has much, gives much and he who has little, gives little, but there is equality. The poor may not look only to the rich and say, “Let them pay, they are loaded.” Neither may the rich look down on the poor and say, “If they worked harder, maybe they would have more.” We must each look to ourselves and give what we can, that there may be equality.

It is true that the more we have, the less we are willing to part with it. Our Lord had good reason to say how hard it is for a rich man to enter heaven. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle (Matt 19:24). Our earthly goods—even when we are not rich—are so dear to us that it is hard to let go of them. Blessed therefore are the rich who have learned to glory in their low position.

## **The Reward of Faith**

In 1:12, James returns to his opening theme: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial,” the trial of poverty and also the test of riches. Through the one or the other, who has not fallen away from God? Blessed are those who have stood the test, who have focused always on the true riches and the great goal: the crown of life. This is the greatest of all treasures. It cannot be earned by hard work, nor is it an automatic privilege. It is given by God on the basis of his gracious promise.

We may expect the reward of faith. Why? Because God has promised it to all who believe in Jesus Christ and who serve him with true love. Then it does not matter whether we are poor or rich, for rich and poor alike will come to stand before the judgment seat of God. And God will ask, “Have you taken pride in the position I gave you? Have you acted in accordance with your blessings and calling?”

Note the expression “those who love him.” Only the love for God erases wrong class distinctions. Society’s ills can be solved only by a return to this love of God. If we truly love God, we will love our neighbor also. God has promised the crown of life to those who love him.

The crown of life is like the wreath of victory that, in James’ time, was placed on the head of the runner who won a race. It is like the gold medal for

which so many athletes today strive. Anything else simply will not do. Let us live and work in the circumstances of life with the means that God has given us, in the expectation of the crown of life. This life, with its trials and tests, its poverty or riches, is temporary. The life with God is eternal.

In this life, God is testing us. Remember that he does not do so to show us our own weakness, but to bring out his strength in us. God tells us to go for the gold, the life eternal. But, as James continues in 1:13, Satan tempts us. He tells us to take and keep for ourselves whatever we can get, here and now. We must resist that temptation for it is deadly. Let us simply continue to focus on God's promise of the life everlasting. Go for the gold. Anything else simply will not do.