

((PREACHING *the* WORD))

JAMES

FAITH *that*
WORKS



R. KENT HUGHES

JAMES

PREACHING THE WORD

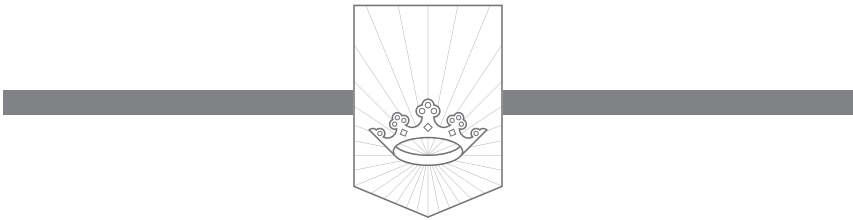
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JAMES

Faith That Works



R. KENT HUGHES

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James

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For my brother
Robert Steven Hughes,
a practical book
for a practical man

*For as the body apart from the spirit is dead,
so also faith apart from works is dead.*

JAMES 2:26

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

*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 pro-
duces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full
effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking
in nothing.*

1:1-4

1

Count It All Joy

JAMES 1:1–4



THE PROSPECT OF STUDYING the book of James is inviting for several reasons. To begin with, it was apparently written before the famous Council of Jerusalem in AD 49, which means it is probably the oldest of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and thus reflects Jewish-Christian teaching in its initial stages of development.¹ Next, because it was composed before Paul's writings, James discusses the subject of faith and works independently from Paul's teaching. James and Paul do not contradict each other, but rather supplement each other. James approaches faith *subjectively*—in the sense of trust or confidence in the Lord, while Paul explains it *objectively*—as the instrument by which a believer is justified before God.²

The Epistle of James enlarges our practical understanding of faith. To be sure, Paul is practical, but normally he begins with an imposing theological argument (for example, Romans 1—11 or Ephesians 1—3) and then gives practical exhortation (for example, Romans 12—16, Ephesians 4—6). James, however, begins right off with a series of practical admonitions and continues on nonstop to the end. E. J. Goodspeed has called James' discussion "just a handful of pearls, dropped one by one into the hearers' mind."³ Some see twenty-five major divisions, others twelve, some four, and some as few as two. One thing is clear—the dominant theme is, *faith that is real works practically in one's life. That is, true faith is a faith that works.*

James shows us how to have a living, visible, productive faith in a fallen world. In this respect, it is significant that this brief book has fifty-four imperatives.⁴ James is a "Do this! Do that!" book that, taken to heart, will dynamically affect our lives on every level. We will not be the same at the end of this study if we prayerfully ask the Spirit to apply what we learn.

James' brief greeting in verse 1—"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings"—serves as an excellent introduction to his letter, introducing us to the author, his self-perception, and his pastoral focus.

James the Man

James was none other than a blood-brother, a half-brother, of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospels mention this fact (see Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). Apparently he was at first an unbeliever—"For not even his brothers believed in him" (John 7:5). However, during the forty-day period between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, Jesus "appeared to James, then to all the apostles"—and James believed (1 Corinthians 15:7). James is mentioned as being in the upper room in Jerusalem, praying with his mother and the rest of the disciples (Acts 1:13) and was presumably present when the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. He had become the leader of the Jerusalem church when Peter was released from prison (Acts 12:17), and eventually he chaired the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13ff.; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12).

James was a late bloomer, but he flowered well! James knew Christ as only a few could. For years he had eaten at the same table, shared the same house, played in the same places, and watched the development of his amazing older brother. And when he truly came to *know* Christ, his boyhood privilege was not wasted, for he became known as James the Just, a man of immense piety. The historian Eusebius records the testimony of Hegesippus that James "used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people. So from his excessive righteousness he was called the Just."⁵

James' Self-Perception

James had so much going for him, yet merely viewed himself as "a *servant* of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." This is remarkable in a world that then, and now, parades its heredity, for James had immense ground on which to pull rank. He could have begun his letter, "James the Just, from the sacred womb of Mary, congenital sibling of Christ his brother, confidant of the Messiah." But James did not even allude to this status, being content with "servant" (cf. Mark 10:45; Philippians 2:5–8; Romans 12:7). James the Just was also James the Humble and so was eminently qualified to author Holy Scripture.

James' Pastoral Focus

Humble James writes pastorally to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” The Jews’ scattering, known as the *Diaspora*, began in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes. Later the southern tribes suffered the same fate when the Babylonians took them captive in 586. Because of this, Jews were spread all over Mesopotamia, around the Mediterranean, and into Asia Minor and Europe (cf. Acts 2:5, 9–11). Some of the major cities of the world—Alexandria, for example—had large populations of expatriate Jews. Also, when Jewish Christians were first persecuted in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, they fled first to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) and then to Jewish communities around the Mediterranean (Acts 11:19, 20). Tragically these Jewish Christians were not taken in by their expatriate Jewish kinsmen, but rather were rejected and persecuted.

Further, refused protection by the Jewish community, these Jewish Christians were exploited by the Gentiles. Homeless and disenfranchised, they were robbed of what possessions they had, hauled into court, and subjected to the Gentile elite. They had less standing than slaves. They became religious, social, and economic pariahs. A good way to get a feel for their position is to read modern post-Holocaust Jewish writers such as Elie Wiesel. It is to these Jewish Christian brothers, mistreated ex-parishioners of James’ church, that Pastor James sends his letter.

James’ “Irrational” Call (v. 2)

James wastes no time getting to his imperatives: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (v. 2). Has James lost his senses? He is writing to beat-up brothers and sisters and he says, “Count it all joy,” or as the NEB says, “count yourselves supremely happy.” How nice . . . a letter of encouragement from Pastor Whacko! “Don’t worry . . . be happy!” Then and now James’ command to “Count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds” sounds irrational! Put this verse on a sign next to the expressway and it would appear to be the work of a crazed fanatic. Indeed, to any culture (including ours) determined to insulate itself from trials, even from discomforts, this sounds crazy. Tragically, it even seems irrational to many who identify with Christianity.

What does James’ command really mean? In answer, we must first understand what it does *not* mean. James is not ordering *all-encompassing joyful emotion* during severe trials; nor is he demanding that his readers must *enjoy* their trials, or that trials are *joy*. He knew, as did the writer of Hebrews,

that “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant” (Hebrews 12:11).

James was not commanding that we exult upon hearing that our career position has been given to our secretary, or that the neighbor’s children have leukemia, or that one’s spouse is adulterous. Rather, James is commending the conscious embrace of a Christian understanding of life that brings joy into the trials that come because of our Christianity. James says, “*Count it all joy,*” which means to make a deliberate and careful decision to experience joy even in times of trouble. Is this possible? Yes. Paul told the Corinthian church, “In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy” (2 Corinthians 7:4). Luke reports that when the Sanhedrin “called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:40, 41). Later, Luke tells us, Paul and Silas, having been severely flogged and being in intense pain, were in prison, and “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). Their concert so pleased God that he brought down the house! This apostolic experience is still the experience of the church today.

Several years ago the Presbyterian pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie underwent the worst year of his life. His wife had undergone five major surgeries, plus radiation and chemotherapy, several of his staff members had departed, large problems loomed, and discouragement assaulted his feelings. But he wrote,

The greatest discovery that I have made in the midst of all the difficulties is that I can have joy when I can’t feel like it—artesian joy. When I had every reason to feel beaten, I felt joy. In spite of everything, [God] gave me the conviction of being loved and the certainty that nothing could separate me from him. It was not happiness, gush, or jolliness but a constant flow of the Spirit through me. At no time did he give me the easy confidence that everything would work out as I wanted it on my timetable, but that he was in charge and would give me and my family enough courage for each day: grace. Joy is always the result of that.⁶

James did not say, “Count it all joy, my brothers, *if* you meet trials” but “*when.*” Such trials are a part of every believer’s life. We are to thoughtfully find joy in our own *diaspora* experiences—when we feel alienated, disenfranchised, unpopular, even when difficulty and tragedy come our way that have no apparent connection with our Christianity. Such joy may seem irrational, but in Christ it is perfectly rational.

The Rationale for the Irrational Call (vv. 3, 4)

The rationale for such joy comes from knowing that the various trials we face have spiritual value. James says there is a two-step process through which our trials elevate us.

The first step is to understand that “*the testing of your faith produces steadfastness*” (v. 3) Elaboration on what is meant by “steadfastness” will unlock rich truth. J. H. Ropes renders this “staying power.”⁷ Martin Dibelius calls it “heroic endurance.”⁸ And the NEB translates this as “fortitude.” James is talking about toughness—“the testing of your faith produces *toughness*.”

Here is how this works: we develop toughness or fortitude by repeatedly being tested and *prevailing*. The more tests we pass, the tougher we become. As a boxer engages in bout after bout, he toughens and becomes wiser and stronger. After a time he develops such fortitude, perseverance, and staying power that he can take on the best. There is no way a fighter, or any of us, can develop toughness without testing! The endurance and fortitude of the Apostle Paul or William Carey or Corrie ten Boom did not come overnight and did not come apart from trials. Paul, in Romans 5:3, confirms this truth: “but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.”

My experience in raising children has helped me understand how God views our testing. When my wife and I were young parents and our oldest child was in the first grade, we bought her a winter coat. We had intentionally bought a size too large, but it was a marvelous blue, fluffy, mock-fur coat with gold buttons down the front. The day after we bought it, a most unusual thing happened in California. It rained! It was a perfect day to wear her coat.

I never will forget how she looked as she went out the door—dressed in red boots, her blue coat with gold buttons, a little white knit hat, yellow yarn around her pigtails, and a red umbrella. We were so proud of her. It did not matter that her coat was a little long at the sleeves and at the hem. She was so happy as she walked out the door and down the driveway. Barbara and I stood behind the foggy windowpanes, watching her go.

Two little friends approached from down the street. Although I could not hear them, I saw one of them point at our daughter’s hair, and I knew she was saying something like, “Your hair looks dumb!” Then she pointed to the hem of my daughter’s coat, and my temperature went up. The little girls marched off to school. Holly trudged slowly behind.

I really wanted to set those little girls straight! But I knew that if I continued to step in whenever she experienced such difficulties, she might not develop fortitude and staying power—qualities she now has in abundance!

Nature teaches us the same principle. Free a butterfly from its chrysalis, and thus from the struggle of liberating itself, and you destroy its life, for it will never develop the strength to soar as it should. When fortitude is lacking in one of God's children, he has a time-tested remedy—"the testing of your faith." With this in mind, James' irrational call—"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds"—becomes brilliant.

The rationale becomes even clearer when we observe the second step: *perseverance produces maturity*. "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (v. 4). Spiritual perseverance or toughness produces a *dynamic maturity*. "Perfect" refers to a personality that has reached its full development. Regarding the corresponding synonym "complete," Peter Davids explains: "Perfection is not just a maturing of character, but a rounding out as more and more 'parts' of the righteous character are added."⁹ Thus, maturity is a dynamic state in which a thousand parts of us are honed, shaped, tempered, and brought together, making a dynamic wholeness.

It is commonly taught that trials bring maturity, but it is not so. Rather, fortitude and perseverance in times of testings produce maturity. In troubled times we must practice spiritual toughness. As we endure "trials of various kinds"—economic stress, disappointments, criticisms, domestic pressures, persecution for our faith, illnesses—the multiple facets of our being are touched with grace. Dick Seume wrote beautifully about this:

Life on earth would not be worth much if every source of irritation were removed. Yet most of us rebel against the things that irritate us, and count as heavy loss what ought to be rich gain. We are told that the oyster is wiser; that when an irritating object, like a bit of sand, gets under the "mantle" of his shell, he simply covers it with the most precious part of his being and makes of it a pearl. The irritation that it was causing is stopped by encrusting it with the pearly formation. A true pearl is therefore simply a victory over irritation. Every irritation that gets into our lives today is an opportunity for pearl culture. The more irritations the devil flings at us, the more pearls we may have. We need only to welcome them and cover them completely with love, that most precious part of us, and the irritation will be smothered out as the pearl comes into being. What a store of pearls we may have, if we will!¹⁰

The key to a graced life, pearl-tipped facets of personality, and thus full maturity is constancy, tenacity, perseverance. *Spiritual toughness is the key to saintliness!*

The idea that when we "get it all together" our trials will lessen is a falsehood. Paul told Timothy the truth: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Life will always be full

of testings for the true Christian. We must not imagine they will lessen with time—say, fewer trials at thirty-five than twenty-five, or at forty-five than thirty-five, or at fifty-five than forty-five, or at sixty-five than fifty-five, or at seventy-five than sixty-five. Trials are not a sign of God’s displeasure but are opportunities to persevere in the Lord.

James commands the irrational: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” Is this crazy talk—pious prattle? Not when we embrace the double rationale:

- 1) Testing brings spiritual toughness—“for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (v. 3). When we, by God’s grace, tough it out, our entire person becomes pearly.
- 2) Toughness brings a dynamic maturity—“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (v. 4).

When God wants to drill a man
 And thrill a man
 And skill a man,
 When God wants to mold a man
 To play the noblest part;
 When He yearns with all His heart
 To create so great and bold a man
 That all the world shall be amazed,
 Watch His methods, watch His ways!
 How He ruthlessly perfects
 Whom He royally elects!
 How He hammers him and hurts him,
 And with mighty blows converts him
 Into trial shapes of clay which
 Only God understands;
 While his tortured heart is crying
 And he lifts beseeching hands!
 How He bends but never breaks
 When his good He undertakes;
 How He uses whom He chooses
 And with every purpose fuses him;
 By every act induces him
 To try His splendor out—
 God knows what He’s about!¹¹

Such logic makes the command rational and supremely sane: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.” James calls for a decisive act—to consider our troubles opportunities for joy and endurance. May we in prayer so acknowledge today and in days to come!

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.

1:5-8



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