

## Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

The Great Reversal

James 1:9-11

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*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. (James 1:9–11, ESV)*

“Our house is destroyed, but my wife and kids are safe. That’s what matters.”

I’ve heard countless testimonies similar to this from people after some kind of natural disaster. You can probably imagine the scene behind them: a leveled house after a tornado, a subdivision flooded by the surge from a hurricane, or a family huddled under silver blankets as the fire department tries to extinguish the remaining flames of a house fire.

I don’t think it would be a stretch to say that the perspective about the destroyed house was different in the weeks previous to the disaster. You could imagine a mom getting upset because a lamp was broken as kids were playing in the house. Or a dad feeling irritated because a bike wasn’t put away, blocking his access to the garage. Or maybe a child was yelled at because they didn’t clean up their room.

In different circumstances, when life appears easy, you can live in a way that doesn’t fit with what you should value. You become upset with your kids and forget the blessing it is that you have kids. You are mad that a friend didn’t stop by this week while not considering what a great friend he or she is. You are annoyed with your boss’s “quirks” and not thankful that you have a job.

Maintaining the right perspective is hard. Sometimes hardship or suffering serve to wake us up to what is actually important in life. “Our house is destroyed. But my wife and kids are safe. That’s what matters.”

Times of suffering are never easy, but they can be quite clarifying.

Hard times can help us reverse the engineering of our lives, to go back to what’s important, and remember who we are and why we are in the world. This great reversal is part of the aim of the epistle of James. It’s one of the ways we can find steadfast joy during seasons of sorrow.

As the pastor of the Jerusalem church, with people suffering under persecution and famine, James wants to help his readers to be faithful followers of Jesus by what they believe and what they do. In

other words, he's interested in faith and works. James believes the gospel, and he believes the gospel changes people.

So far in our journey, we've observed the way that James calls us to lean into hardship, embrace the process of steadfastness, and seek the Lord for wisdom.

In this week's text, we find that James wants two groups of people to think biblically about their lives. He wants them to embrace the biblical narrative, the gospel-centered storyline of how they should live. And what we'll find here is that thinking and living this way is nearly a complete reversal of how people would think apart from biblical truth and the gospel.

## **Two Principles in the Great Reversal**

James regularly calls believers in Jesus to think and act differently from those who do not live by faith in Jesus. And in this text, he specifically addresses two groups of people—the lowly (poor) and the rich. He speaks into this situation because of the commonality of the challenges and the opportunity for spiritual clarity.

Allow me to give you two principles directly from the text:

### **1. Boast Wisely**

James exhorts both those who are poor and those who are rich to boast wisely. Last week I reminded you that wisdom is applying biblical truth to life. Well, this is a great example of the application of that concept as James directs two different groups of people in the way that they should think about what is worth celebrating.

I'm using the word "celebrate" here intentionally. That's really what James means when he talks about boasting. He wants to provide instruction for what Christians should rejoice about. And it runs opposite to what is "normal" in every culture.

As you look at verses 9-10, you'll see that he calls for two kinds of boasting. The "lowly" man should boast in his exaltation, and the rich man should boast in his humiliation. What's he talking about?

Let me first tell you what James means about this kind of boasting, and then I also want to help you understand it in the context of the entire book of James.

In short, James is exhorting believers to celebrate who they are before God not who they are before each other. He wants them to boast in what God thinks of them, not what people think of them. Or you could think of it as valuing your position in Christ over your position in life. We need to boast wisely.

But notice how this boasting is counterintuitive. It doesn't fit with how human beings think or how the "world works." As a general rule, the poor are not famous or powerful. And the rich are generally not humiliated. Typically, most people would rather be rich than poor. They'd rather be praised than humbled. Make sense?

Christians, says James, are to live with a reversal of values.

We are to see through the things esteemed by the world. We are to live for a different kingdom. We are to see everything through a gospel-centered lens.

This is one of the reasons Christianity is filled with such hope. No one was richer than Jesus. No one was more powerful than him. But no one experienced greater loss, unfairness, or injustice than him. He was a suffering savior. And Jesus embraced this hardship willingly—even joyfully—because of what it accomplished. Here’s a summary from the apostle Paul:

*I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor. 8:8–9)*

Notice that Paul connects the sacrifice of Jesus, the concept of grace, and their need to care for each other. They are all linked together. You cannot separate them. Jesus comes to grace people so that they can be gracious to others. Grace wasn’t meant to terminate on you. It’s meant to transform you. You weren’t created just to receive. You were created to bless. You weren’t created to merely believe. You were created to believe and obey.

And we’ll see this concept of faith and obedience throughout our study in James.

This is important because the natural tendency of the human heart is to love receiving more than giving, to love being loved more than giving love, and to love being forgiven more than forgiving. And James is all about showing us how Christianity works.

There are two examples of boasting given here: (1) the lowly is to boast in his exaltation and (2) the rich is to boast in his humiliation.

### **Lowly and Exalted**

Keep in mind the point that James is making—that while you live on the earth, you should keep the kingdom of God in mind. Live for that realm.

The word “lowly” suggests someone who is lower in the socio-economic status. According to Doug Moo, a New Testament scholar, this is someone who is poor and powerless.<sup>1</sup> The word is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament this way:

*He regards the prayer of the **destitute** and does not despise their prayer (Psalm 102:17).*

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Moo, [\*James: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 91.

*O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the **oppressed**, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more (Psalm 10:17–18).*

*Those who trample the head of the **poor** into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted... (Amos 2:7)*

As is the case in every culture, the poor are often victimized because along with their poverty, they often lack the resources to fight back. Now I want to be very clear, especially in light of our recent conversations regarding Critical Race Theory and Marxism. I'm not saying that every poor person is oppressed. Some are. But we have to be careful because when you divide people up into oppression categories, you compromise important biblical categories. I don't want to do that. It's not helpful.

Yet we have to recognize why James talks about the lowly here. He does so because, throughout the Scriptures, it's easier to take advantage of impoverished people. It doesn't always happen. But it's more likely to happen, and apparently, it was happening to the Christians to whom James is writing. And it may also have been linked to some persecution they were facing.

This "lowly" position can create a sense of humiliation. And James's encouragement to them is to fix their attention on a heavenly value set. When they feel powerless and ashamed, they need to rejoice in their exaltation in Christ. I can tell you from personal experience that some of the most vibrant worship services I've ever attended have been in some of the poorer places in our country and around the world.

But I can also apply this beyond financial status because there's another currency of influence in our culture. Let's say you're a single adult and your friends find out that you are striving for purity. If they mock you or look at you funny, you can rejoice in another realm. If you're a business professional and you've been mocked because you don't party with the rest of the team, you can rejoice in another realm. If you're a young man in high school who is teased about refusing to talk in a way that is dishonoring or defiling about girls at school, you can rejoice in another realm.

Financial "lowliness" is what James was addressing, but there are other applications as well.

### **Wealthy and Humiliated**

James then turns to those who are at the top of the socio-economic ladder—the wealthy. Again, James is calling those who are rich to look beyond their earthly status in life and remember who they are from God's perspective.

It's always been true that money not only gives you options, but it also creates honor, esteem, and deference. When you have money, people tend to treat you better. Not only are you able to buy nicer things, but there are perks. You get invited to certain parties, you're able to join particular clubs, and you spend time with other people who have money. You can plan better because you're not in survival mode. You can mitigate a crisis.

And all of that can combine into an “air” of self-sufficiency and godless pride. Your talents may have brought you success; and before you know it, you are starting to believe that you are something. Part of James’s warning here is for the rich to remember their place in life. Judgment is coming.

*Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter (James 5:1–5).*

James exhorts wealthy people to not become intoxicated by their wealth. Again, we have to be careful not to paint with too broad of a brush. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty if you are wealthy. James is not saying that to be rich is automatically sinful. But he does say that wealthy people need the same kind of reminder as “lowly” people. They need to be reminded who they are before God.

The wealthy person needs to embrace humility. What does that look like? Let me suggest two things:

- **Theologically** – you need a robust understanding of who God is so when you are treated like a “god” it will abhor you.
- **Practically** – through your spiritual life, service to others, and how you embrace the opportunity to humble yourself so that God can exalt you. When you feel embarrassed, when you don’t measure up, or when others are better, count it as a great reminder of who you are in Christ.

The challenge is that wealth can insulate you from humiliation. And it’s easy to get used to. So, the practical is important, but the theological is really where the key lies. We have to know who we are in light of who God is.

But listen, this is more than about money. You could be rich in other ways: natural good looks, superior intelligence, charismatic personality, amazing conversationalist, great salesman, or super-talented harmonica player (just seeing if you are paying attention!). You get the point. It’s really important to remember who you are and boast in the Lord.

Back to the big picture. In the same way that James would want you to “lean into” the wave of suffering, he’s calling us to go the opposite direction when it comes to how the world thinks about honor and what we esteem. Christians, we have to know who we are—deeply and personally.

## **2. Think Eternally**

The second principle simply drills down even further into how Christians, transformed by the gospel, are to live. While they celebrate their position in Christ (exaltation and humiliation), they also look at life through an eternal lens. In other words, they continually remind themselves that this life is not everything.

James uses one of his many illustrations to make this point clear. He compares the rich man in his pursuits to the flower that blossoms and then dies. James loves the book of Isaiah, and he likely has Isaiah 40:6-8 in mind:

*A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isa. 40:6–8).*

He may also have in mind the kind of wildflowers in the Middle East that quickly blossom, but their life cycle is short because of the scorching heat. And when it's all over, the beautiful flower is nothing more than part of a pile of thatch. Its glory is gone.

The text specifically says, "its beauty perishes." Isn't that a fitting statement? All the glory is gone. James delivers the warning: "so also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits." It's almost as if there's a frenzied sense of activity—working, honoring, conquering, building, doing, pursuing, closing deals, making money – then boom! It all stops.

Sounds like a global pandemic, doesn't it!? What a hard but instructive time. I look back at pictures from December, January, and February; and I can't believe what life was like before the pandemic. In an instant, everything changed.

### **Some Questions**

Let me make this even more practical by asking you to consider five vital questions:

- Who do you live for? I mean this from a spiritual standpoint. Do you know Jesus personally? Has his grace changed your life?
- In what ways are you poor, which require you to exalt in your riches in Christ?
- In what ways are you rich, which require you to embrace humility?
- Are you getting trapped in the concerns and anxieties of the world?
- What is most important to you, and how do you know?

On Monday we'll host the funeral for Don Quass, a dearly beloved member of this church. Besides looking exactly like R.C. Sproul, Don had an amazing love for Scripture, theology, and the church. In the final moments of his life, he was quoting Scripture to his family. He was dying, and yet he was really alive. And even though he's passed from earth, he's present with the Lord.

Dying but living. Sad but happy. Suffering but hopeful. Lowly yet exalted. Rich yet humbled. This is the way of grace when you understand who Jesus is and what he did for us. Jesus was the author of the great reversal.

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