

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY AND BECOMING STEADFAST!
FESTIVAL OF ST. JAMES

James 1:1-12

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Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

"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."

We live in a time where we are free to express our views, our most deeply held convictions, even those which may seem distasteful and repugnant to others. For good or bad, protesters today occupy cities around the country because they believe our free capital system benefits only a group identified as the 1%, meaning the wealthiest people in America. They protest because, from their perspective, they have been denied economic equality. Of course, others cringe that such a mentality even exists within a Capitalist society, knowing that economic equality is not a right guaranteed under our Constitution. Some of the protesters have paid a relatively minor price for their civil disobedience, perhaps a few nights in jail. For the most part the majority have been allowed to stage their rights to express their views, even to vent their frustrations.

Again, we live in a place and at a time where we are free to express our views. Some of the views we hold are out of convenience, with very little cost, hardly a price to be paid for holding them. I've always been nauseated by a particular bumper sticker that some folks choose to put on the back of their car. It's the fish symbol with legs on it and the name Darwin written in the middle. You've probably seen it. The actual fact is that it is an anti-Christian message. Christians, of course, used a fish symbol in the early days of the church to identify themselves to one another. In Greek, the word for fish is **ΙΧΘΥΣ (Icthus)**, which happens to be an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." When Christians used the symbol to identify themselves to one another the social climate wasn't quite so free. During such a time men like St. James, whom we honor today, were martyred for the simple expression of their faith. I've often wondered if the person who sports the Darwin symbol would be willing to give up their life for the sake of their belief. I doubt it!!

Sometimes James is called "James the Just" because he lived the life of a Nazarite. From his birth his hair was never cut, he never consumed any form of alcohol; he didn't eat any kind of meat, until his conversion to Christianity. He's also referred as St. James of Jerusalem because he was the first bishop of the Holy City. Some refer to him as James Adelpnos. Adelpnos is the Greek word for brother. James, you see, was the half-brother of Jesus. Armenian Christians consider him a patriarch of their church. In fact, to this day St. James Cathedral stands in Jerusalem, as does an Armenian seminary, both of which form the core of the Armenian presence in Jerusalem that spans over some 1,700 years.

Eusebius, a historian of the early church, gives us the account of the Apostle's death. Actually, since Eusebius lived some years later than James, he quotes from an earlier historian whose works are not quite so well-known. Listen carefully to what he says. *"The Pharisees and Scribes came to James, and said: "We entreat you, restrain the people: for they have gone astray in their opinions about who Jesus is, as if He were the Christ. We entreat you to persuade all those who have come here for the day of the Passover, concerning Jesus. For we all listen to your persuasion; since we, as well as all the people, bear you testimony that you are just, and show partiality to none...Take your stand, then, upon the summit of the temple, that from that elevated spot you may be clearly seen, and your words may be plainly audible to all the people...But to the scribes' and Pharisees' dismay,*

James boldly testified that Christ "Jesus sits in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of glory." The scribes and Pharisees then said to themselves, "We have not done well in securing this testimony of Jesus (which benefits ourselves). Let us go up and throw him down, that the people may be afraid, and not believe him." James was then thrown from the peak of the temple. Seeing the fall did not kill him, the Scribes and Pharisees then stoned him to death.

We honor James of Jerusalem today, not because his life as noble and honorable man, but because he is an example for us of the power of God to sustain faith in the midst of adversity even as death approaches. Before James died a martyr's death, James was prepared by God for such a violent end to his life, evidenced by the fact that, some years before his death, he sat down to pen the words of the Epistle which bears his name. As he closed out the introductory portion of his letter, he wrote, "**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**" (James 1:12). In the year 62 A.D. James was put to the test, he stood up to confess the name of Jesus, and in doing so he received the crown of life and joined the noble army of martyrs who praise God.

The early Christians counted suffering for Christ not as a burden or misfortune but as a great honor, a blessing, for in their suffering they could bear witness to their Lord. Tacitus, a Roman historian, wrote of the early Christian martyrs: "*Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths.*" Covered with skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished. They were nailed to crosses; some were doomed to the flames and burned to serve as nightly illumination when daylight had ended. Nero offered his gardens for such events. We are told that the martyrs went rejoicing to their deaths, as if they were going to a marriage festival. They bathed their hands in the blaze kindled for them and shouted with gladness. They marched into the arena as if marching into heaven. When Ignatius, an elderly martyr, was about to die for his faith in 110 A.D, he cried out, "*Nearer the sword, then nearer to God. In company with wild beasts, in company with God.*"

A question within the church today is that we have grown too soft to even envision such a sacrifice for the privilege of confessing the name of Jesus. Many years ago, during a District Convention of the LCMS, a pastor brought a resolution to the floor. The resolution encouraged the leaders of the young people throughout our Synod to make sure our kids knew that there may come a day when it costs them something to be a disciple of Jesus. Essentially, the resolution was simply asking that Christianity, as it is presented to our young people, not be simply be a matter of fun and games, fluff and stuff.

The resolution resulted in a heated debate. It became quite evident that many of the delegates didn't favor passing it because it seemed mean spirited. In other words, they thought it suggested that the leaders of our young people were not preparing the youth to be steadfast. Finally, the pastor who brought the resolution, by the way, on behalf of an elderly woman of his congregation, withdrew it. In doing so, he said, "I'll withdraw the resolution because this delegation is not worthy of its consideration."

He was, of course, labeled a radical and a conservative and, with that, his comments were dismissed. Too often we look at our faith in terms of what we get, what God will give us, namely, peace, hope, joy, certainly forgiveness. And all of those things are most certainly the blessings of life lived in Christ. Still, our faith in Christ may ultimately cost us something. The question is "have we considered discipleship from that point?" Another way to put it is, "Is our theology that of the cross or the theology of glory?"

We suffer from a wrong perspective. Intellectually we know better than to embrace prosperity theology, the name it and claim it, the confess it and possess it theology. But don't we really embrace

prosperity theology all the same. We want a God to never allow any harm, any tribulation, any trials to come our way. And when they do occur we wonder why God is mad at us. To overcome the anxieties of life we need to change our perspective.

I've shared this story with you before. I was fortunate enough to attend a conference years ago where Paul Harvey, that The Rest of the Story guy, was the keynote speaker. He shared this story about perspective. An 84 year old woman in New York called the police department to report a man exposing himself every morning at 7:20 A.M. The next morning an officer was dispatched to the woman's home at 7:10 A.M. there early enough for the 7:20 show. The elderly woman led the officer to a window facing another window directly across the alley. And precisely at 7:20 A.M. a man appeared in his bathroom window without any clothing. Due to the height of the window nothing could be seen on the man except his chest. The officer explained to the woman that this did not constitute indecent exposure. And now the rest of the story. With that the 84 year old woman jumped up onto an overstuffed chair and standing on the arm of that chair, tilting her head like so, leaning out into the window frame, she exclaimed, "See there, there you can see the man exposed! You sir have the wrong perspective!" And that is the rest of the story.

We suffer from the wrong perspective. We see trials as our enemy rather than the tool of God to strengthen us and make us steadfast. We should embrace trials and become strengthened in our faith so that we may become whole. This is the wisdom that St. James encourages us to ask for from God. ***"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him"*** (James 1:5).

Today as we honor St. James, we are encouraged to do so, that is, to look at our faith from the standpoint of what it may cost us. James believed that, even at the price of his death. The Lordship of Jesus was worth confessing. Today James wears the crown of life and he continues to witness to the church, to you and to me. He calls us to remain steadfast in our faith. He bears witness to Jesus, who brought him to faith and who strengthened and sustained him in that faith. That very same (†) Jesus who has done the same for you. ***"Count it all joy my brethren when you encounter various trials for by this testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And this steadfastness produces faith that you may whole complete and lacking in nothing"*** (James 1:1-3).

May God grant you His grace that through life you may embrace all that comes upon you and may become steadfast, whole and complete - lacking in nothing. For in Christ alone are you made steadfast and are able to overcome all the adversities and tribulations of this world. In Jesus' precious name, Amen and amen!

The peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.