

00:00

Introduction

Well, hello and welcome to Ponder.

We're having a conversation about the word of the Lord, as it was preached to us on Sunday, and as we encounter it in our everyday lives. My name is Jack, and pondering with me today are Ben, Jono and Tristan. How are we going?

Very well, thanks.

Yeah, doing good, right?

Awesome.

Today, we're looking at Ben's sermon on James, that he preached just yesterday.

0:34

Sermon recap

Ben, give us a little recap of that sermon and what it was about.

Yeah, sure thing. I love the letter of James. James was one of the brothers of Jesus, and he writes a letter to the people of God scattered throughout the world.

And he's really encouraging them to grow up to be like Jesus, to become like our telos. That Greek word means end or goal or vision or destination. And so the reason James wrote his letter is to help us on our journey in becoming like Jesus.

We worked through all of Chapter 1, and the three sort of points that James passes through is test your faith that trials are one of the big things that God uses to make us like Jesus. Trust the Lord.

We need to hold the truth of who God is and reject the false ideas of who God is not. And try His Word, not only to be readers and listeners of the Word, but doers of the Word.

And so we looked at the idea that those three things are what James says are part of the ways that God makes us like Jesus when we grow up. That's the sermon.

Awesome. Yeah. Becoming like Jesus when we grow up.

1:45

Can we fail tests from God?

I kind of want to start by looking at this theme of trials, because this was sort of a big part, at least, of your sermon. You talked about a test versus a temptation.

A test is something that's meant to grow us in our faith versus a temptation, which Satan is trying to sort of distort us and lead us away from God. Can we fail tests from God? Is there a way to fail when we're in a trial?

Like, what do you guys think?

Oh, absolutely, there is. Hence why James encourages us to persevere in the trials, to pass the test, to be formed in the image of Jesus, in the midst of the test. If it wasn't possible to fail the test, he would have no need to write that.

That's why he says in verse 5, if any of you lacks wisdom to get through the test, ask God and He will help you.

Adam and Eve failed the test in life.

Cain failed. Abraham failed many of the tests. He passed one of them, the important one, but he failed a lot of them.

I think it's also sobering is that we fail tests every day.

That's just a part of life.

2:54

Do we have tests every day?

Do you think we have tests every day?

I would say so because just as a part of life, or at least I have found, is that you always have an opportunity and you have a point of decision, whether it's to do one thing or to do the other thing.

I find that as a test. I don't know. What do you guys think?

Yeah.

James talks about trials of many kinds. I think obviously there's the big moments, the big trials of life, big seasons of suffering that the Lord particularly uses.

But then the point that I was making in the sermon is that we are constantly faced with a choice to choose the way of God or the other way. And every time we choose God's way, we say yes to God.

It just strengthens the muscles of our faith a little bit. And God uses those things to test us for good. What's also interesting is reflecting on the fact that God teaches us in failure as well.

So when we do fall to temptation and we go down that route, it's not that God abandons us, but he actually uses even that bad choice to form us and to use us for good. And so Paul says then in Romans, what should we do?

Should we sin in order that God might bring good out of it? He says, no, no, no, don't intentionally walk into sin, but know that the God that we serve and the God that we love and the God who loves us is the one who brings good out of everything.

He's constantly pouring out more grace to form us into the image of his son through quote unquote success and perhaps more so through failure.

4:26

What do we do when we fail God's test?

Yeah, that's great.

Cause that was really sort of going to be my next question. Is this idea if we can fail a test, what do we do when we do that?

I know I get the sense that like, oh, if I choose the wrong thing here, if I make the wrong mistake here, I'm going to mess up my whole life or my spiritual journey is going to be set back or something like that.

I mean, I guess how should we respond to failure?

Yeah, it's interesting. We spoke on this podcast a couple of weeks ago about the consequences of sin.

When we sin, there are consequences, but maybe God is not pronouncing them on us as much as the things that we do naturally result in those consequences.

The promise of the gospel is that God uses all things to form us, that when we turn back to Him, when we repent, He is quick to forgive constantly, giving us more grace. And so there's no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Paul says that in Romans 8.1. I quoted the end of Romans 8 that nothing could separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So for anyone feeling like they have failed a test, you have not fallen out of God's love.

God is the one who pursues us even still and welcomes us home. And even like I said before, He's the God who still brings good out of our failures. His mercy is new every morning, His forgiveness is fresh, His grace is abundant and overflowing.

But that grace should teach us how to live, how to say no to ungodliness and how to become more like Jesus.

And knowing that there is forgiveness, I think as you look at the text in verse 3 and 4, testing of your faith produces perseverance. So the failure of the test is forming a lack of perseverance. I think that's a key.

So the tests of many types and trials of many kinds, as we grapple with them, holding on to the grace of God, finding a way out, when we're tempted, He'll find a way, give us a way out, that produces a resilience and a perseverance that moves towards

maturity, completion and perfection. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature. So it would seem to me that the opposite of that is if we... Well, you said, what happens when we fail?

We are formed, or probably better say deformed, into a type of person with habits that are growing in power, that are shaping us in a direction that is not perfect, not mature, not like Jesus.

And the scary thing is James actually says, if you let that keep going, that will produce death. There is forgiveness, but the problem is there is formation. And the formation will just make life tough.

Does failure produce perseverance? It's funny, I would have thought it did. But it's not really what the text says.

I think reflected or repented failure produces perseverance.

Failure on its own is not a good thing. It doesn't do anything. But failure when brought to God and reflected on with Him and His grace, good can come out of that, but only if you bring it to God.

7:38

What is the opposite of maturity in faith?

It's interesting. A point that I didn't get to say in the sermon, but I reflected on a lot this week is, you know, I said that this idea of being mature and complete is the reason why James writes this word teleos, to be whole and integrated.

In James, the opposite of mature is not immature. It's double-minded. He says in verse eight, such a person who doubts and doesn't believe God is double-minded and unstable.

The word double-minded is dipsoukos, which means two-selfed, two-selfed, like double-minded person.

And so it's interesting reflecting on when we fail trials, it's not that we swing to the far opposite end of the pendulum of paganism and not being a Christian, but we start to become a double-minded believer, a two-selfed believer, partly faithful,

partly faithless. And so we're always this mixed bag of formation in good and formation in bad at the same time.

It's a complex challenge too, like there's trials that come to us, and you said trials and temptations, the two options of the word test. But in verse 14, it said, each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and entice.

So it's not necessarily that there's an evil power external to us, sort of throwing temptations, it's just the human condition, the flesh desires, that which is not of the spirit.

9:06

How does faith relate to works?

So that sort of discussion sort of raises a question for me.

And actually someone came to me during the week and asked me, they were like, obviously, we've been reading through James on this reading plan. And they were like, Jack, yeah, I'm reading James, it all feels a little bit works based.

Rurally speaking, I guess a lot of us will have been brought up in the Protestant tradition that talks about grace alone and we don't have to worry about works. And James kind of stands, feels a little bit challenging, right?

James says, you know, faith without works is dead. He's talking about you need to persevere or you can't fail. What are we to make of that?

Does James sort of contradict Paul or, you know, is he sort of for a works-based faith or what do you guys make of that?

Yeah, it's a very important question. Martin Luther, who was one of the key reformers, famously wanted to tear the book of James out of his Bible because he called it an epistle of straw.

And so Protestants have been wrestling with this question of how James relates to Paul for 500 years. My own view is that James is making the point that faith is what saves us.

But if that faith is not demonstrated in a life that exhibits the fruit of righteousness, it's not real faith at all.

And so where I don't think James and Paul are in contrast to each other, they're just talking about the same topic from a different direction. I found it helpful to think of the roots and the fruits of faith.

So Paul talks about the roots of faith and James says, if there's no fruit, then what does that say about the roots of faith that you have?

He's making the point that a genuine faith in Jesus will result in a life that exhibits that faith with, Paul talks about the fruits of the spirit.

James talks about 12 areas of life where a genuine faith will impact the way that we live on our journey to be more like Jesus. What do you guys think?

The grace of God allows us to relax into our adoption as daughters, sons and then to not be stressed about my salvation, but to focus on becoming like Jesus.

I think when you lock in what Paul talks about so clearly, no condemnation, by grace alone, we can allow books like James and 1 John, 2 John, to just challenge us about walking in the light and becoming more the people we're called to be.

I think the key is that there is a peace and a sense of safety when the Spirit testifies to us, Romans 8, that we are children of God. So what?

Okay, so the coach can come in and say, I'm not throwing you out of the team, let's go, let's work on the areas that are needing work. It just has to be held in the context of the Bible and the New Testament.

Not even the New Testament, the whole Bible, it's all grace.

In some ways, it's a false dichotomy to pit faith and works against each other, because they are one. When done properly, they are inseparable.

And I think when you look at faith and good deeds, the most prompting question that you get every time is, I'm a good person. How would you respond to someone that you'll ultimately face that question as a Christian when you share the gospel?

Oh, but I'm a good person.

Are you saying somebody who has the fruit but is lacking the root?

Yeah.

Yeah, I think by what measure are you claiming to be a good person, so to speak, from the standard that the gospel has set us, we have all fallen, we've all fallen short of that.

I think at the core of it, like what your point is good, that you can have faith lacking works, but you can have works lacking faith. The problem with works lacking faith is the essence of Christianity is a regeneration of the spirit.

Ephesians 2 says, We were dead in transgressions and sins in which we used to live, following the ways of the ruler of the kingdom of the air. Yeah. That means we were dead.

That's the problem. If someone's doing stuff that's good, that's great, but you won't live forever or have a full life now until your spirit is made alive, gone from death to life. Jono says that we transferred from death to life in the sun.

I think that's the key of it all. It's like, works aside, you've got to be alive. You need life.

And then we're like, okay, what does life look like? It looks like this in a flourishing sense. There's obedience and James does a wonderful job of saying, you know, it's not gonna all be easy.

It's life that you have been given, new life, born again life. Yeah, work out how to trust God in the trials and persevere and give your life away.

And also the fundamental purpose of humans, the reason why we existed is for relationship with God. And so it doesn't matter if you're acting in some ways that God intended you to act.

If you're missing the faith element, if you're not actually in relationship with God, then a fundamental part of your purpose is broken.

All right, we've gone down a lovely little theological rabbit hole, but let's come back a little bit to the sermon.

14:41

Should we seek out trials?

One last question sort of on trials. I was reading Julian of Norwich, the medieval mystic. She said something that sort of connects to this.

So James, James 1 verse 2 says that we should consider trials a joy. I guess my question is, should we be desiring trials?

The reason I mentioned Julian of Norwich is that she, in the opening of her sort of revelation, she says, I actively prayed for a life threatening illness so that it might form me to be more like God.

And that, to me, when I read that, I was like, oh my gosh, that's really confronting because I would find that really hard. What does it mean, I guess, to treat trials as joy?

I think more power to you if you have enough faith to desire trials. If that's you, then you are further down the road of being mature and complete that I am. Jesus said in the Lord's Prayer, He taught us to pray, lead us not into temptation.

And it's that same word that gets translated trials here. And so, I think Jesus, I mentioned this in the sermon, Jesus is acknowledging our weakness, not His weakness, our weakness, that when the trial comes, we often fail.

And we've talked about failure earlier this morning. We don't trust ourselves to pass the test. And so we say, God, don't lead us into a trial, because I don't know if my faith can stand it.

But if I am faced with a trial, then deliver me from the evil one and use that trial for my good.

There is a danger that does move towards historically the sort of a masochism type thing. What's it called? I can't remember.

Like flagellation.

Flagellation, yeah.

Like it's, I remember when I was about 20, we were right into Francis of Assisi. And it was, I think this is what Tristan, you were referring to, like a culture in the church of holiness. And it sort of breeds this desire to self-flagellate almost.

And would it be joy to have this? No. Would it be joy to have this?

No, no, no. But if it's suffering and pain and Hessian bags over our heads, walking barefoot in the snow, that's pure joy.

So historically it's been, it's a very interesting question that's taken good people with great hearts for the Lord down pathways that I think were unhelpful.

I don't think in a healthy environment we're just like, give me pain, give me suffering, but being ready for it is different. That's what you're saying.

There's a difference between just pure pain and a trial.

Yeah.

And I think that draws out in that first part of verse two, it is consider it pure joy. When I read that verse, it's pure joy as in joy from God, an eternal joy that is constant versus what you'd get or what we would perceive as a worldly joy.

It's like, no, there's going to be many trials, and it's only because I have pure joy in the Lord, let that perseverance complete its work so I can be mature.

17:53

How do we get wisdom from God?

Ben, you talked about discernment in the sermon, about, okay, we have these temptations, we have tests.

How do we discern? And there's this great line in James where he says, if you ask for wisdom, the Lord will give it to you. So on a practical note, if you've ever asked for wisdom, how do we receive that wisdom?

Yeah, I'm sure there's a lot of answers.

The way that God speaks to people is different by His Spirit. Certainly, He speaks to us in His Word, which is the Bible. James talks about this wisdom later on in Chapter 3.

He says that the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all, pure, then peace loving, consider it submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

What he's kind of talking about is a litmus test to see if this voice that I'm hearing, this wisdom that I'm receiving is of God or not of God.

And so many different ways that God speaks to us through a brother or sister, through his word, through some sense of his voice, his spirit testifying with our spirit, as in Romans 8.

All of those things are submitted to this test that James gives us. Is this wisdom peace loving? Is it pure?

Is it of God? That's how we can evaluate whether this voice is the voice of God or not the voice of God. That doesn't really answer your question apart from giving it a line to test whether the voice we hear is God's voice or not.

That's certainly a big part of it, I'm sure.

It's a very good question.

You can't answer it without acknowledging the fear of the Lord, I think, as a precursor to finding wisdom. It's what the Proverb says. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. And later on it says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

I think it's putting your question about wisdom into words, but also something that's, you know, really amazing to remember is that God doesn't have to use words to communicate to us. He can just download it.

And He typically downloads it in our sleep, I think. You know, when we talk about sleeping on it, that's... can sound like an almost secular thing, but I think it's deeply spiritual.

It's just like, Lord, renew my mind. Romans 12, offer my body as a living sacrifice. It's holy and pleasing to you.

I would say that to someone, if they've been asking lots of questions, and give me the answer, give me the answer. Be in His presence. Find His presence.

It's going to take time, not five minutes. Hang out, linger in His presence, and fear Him and love Him and be loved by Him. Wisdom sort of finds its way into our head and heart.

You don't know how it comes in, but it's sort of there. It's like, oh, and that's why we use words like, I'm sensing. It's just in there.

Yeah, I think it comes from your third point, where it's like, try the word.

That's your guide to life. And if it's in step with that, it's Romans 12, it's cling to what is good, producing good deeds, therefore, through experience and through faith comes wisdom.

21:08

How much does experience relate to wisdom?

Here's a question. How much do you think experience weighs when it comes to wisdom?

I think it's a fantastic question and point. Clearly, it makes a big difference. It does.

It's like the Bible talks about the elders providing wisdom. Young men dream dreams and have, you know, great ideas and passionate thoughts. Let the older crew speak up and say, steady on, young man.

I mean, that's the whole idea that used to be called dumb tax, you know. It's like wisdom has a lot to do with, I did that and it didn't work. Yeah.

Maybe try this.

That's where failure comes back in again.

Yes.

I have changed about 10 ties in my life. And so I now know how to change a tie quite well. But other people I hear changing the ties for the first time, they don't know how to do it and they do it wrong.

How could you not know how to change a tie? It's because they've never done it before. Wisdom comes from experience and that comes through failure and success when reflected on.

Of course, I'm talking about changing ties, a completely trivial thing.

But in the important things of life, God teaches us through trials, through walking with him through those trials, that's the trusting the Lord peace, and all throughout trying his word, not just hearing it, but reading it and applying it and

integrating it. And then over time, that builds character. Interestingly, the word character that Paul talks about a few times literally means testedness. The fact of having passed a test is what character is.

So character comes through experience reflected with God and integrated. And that's an enormous part of what it means to grow up to be like Jesus.

Yeah, and it's so obviously evident that community is God's gift. Brothers and sisters, together making up the body of Christ, the mind of Christ, together we ask people, could you pray? Could you think?

What do you, could you process this? Could you sleep on it for me, with me?

I remember, I can't believe I'm the one to introduce this, but Dallas Willard in Hearing from God, he said that you should actively ask others, like if you've got a situation, bring it to others, ask them to pray and then ask them what God tells

them. I wonder if this also, your point about failure, Ben, sort of circles back to our first question, we were talking about what happens when we fail a test. One advantage of that is you learn from that failure. You learn, okay, how did I respond?

What caused me to respond in this way? That's a learning opportunity as well.

23:54

How do we change our immediate responses?

You talked about lengthening the response time as something that's really key here. When we're talking about instant responses, I think my thought is, how do I stop an instant response? How do we make a beachhead into our instant responses?

Because obviously, by definition, you don't have much time to think about it because it's just your automatic. I guess, how do we break the cycle of instant responses, do you think?

The standard historic response is spiritual disciplines. That's what silence is. The discipline of not speaking is something you can do, just like training.

I'm a pastor, I think of meetings that I go into, and so many in my life over many decades, I'm driving home thinking, why did I do that? I responded too much.

But I find that to remind myself beforehand, be really aware, Lord Holy Spirit, be with me. What would Jesus do, as we've said before, is a question people ask.

But the better question is, what would Jesus have done to train himself to do what he did? And that's the things like the spiritual disciplines.

What we're talking about is indirect effort, that we can't by direct effort tame the tongue, but we can do things which help us tame the tongue. And just on the topic of words that you brought up, this is so practical and is very helpful.

Make a, and I got this from Dallas Wheelhead, make a radical decision to clean up your words after the fact every single time.

And what that means is, if I say something that's not true, and I later realize it was not true, make a commitment to go to that person and fix your words and say, hey, when I said that I was going to do this thing for you, I'm not going to do it.

I lied. What you will realize is how poorly we use our words. You're going to realize that after the fact.

And with enough time, you'll come to have that mindset before you say the words in the first place.

Yeah.

So I think of hard stories in my life of unhelpful words, hurtful words that I've said to a brother or sister.

The discipline of going back and apologizing and owning those words and dealing with them is helpful because it starts to teach you how to have that mindset you have after the fact before you say those words in the first place.

And that's what it means to then learn how to lengthen the time between prompt and response, to pray for God's help. That's been helpful in my life.

That's an awesome little bit of advice.

It's got a lot to do with self-awareness, I think, that distance between trigger and response. Do I go around in my life and in my interactions with my buttons, sort of metaphorically on my chest, they're just big buttons ready for anyone to press?

Or are they protected?

You can't get to my buttons because I'm aware of them through self-discipline and self-reflection and transparency and vulnerability in community because that Johari window idea of help me with the things I can't see because I'm in a relationship

that's close enough for you to have access to me. I think that that's a huge part of just being aware of what's going on inside.

27:04

What is the Johari window?

Do you just want to explain the Johari window for any listeners that might not be familiar?

Yeah.

So you imagine a box with four quadrants and the top left is, say I'm talking to one other person, that's the quadrant that we both know about each other. So that's sort of the quadrant of full awareness.

And then if you head to the right, it's an area that you know about yourself but I don't know. For you to share with me, that would involve some vulnerability.

But if you go to the bottom left corner, that's a quadrant where you don't know that aspect of what you're like, but I do and others do.

And so, in a close relationship that's helpful, that quadrant bottom left is one that you can hang out in a bit and sort of gently offer thoughts about growth areas. And then the bottom right is you don't know and neither do I but God does.

And so that's an area of revelatory growth. And so it's just really helpful mentoring idea. So there's stuff top left that we both know, common knowledge, top right, you know, and I don't so you'd have to be open to tell me about yourself.

But the bottom left is the interesting one for mentoring. It's like, okay, I think I know stuff that's not so clear to you.

And with that, I think we might finish up. Thank you all for coming on the pod and for pondering with us today. And we will see you on the next one.