

EPISTLE: ST. JAMES

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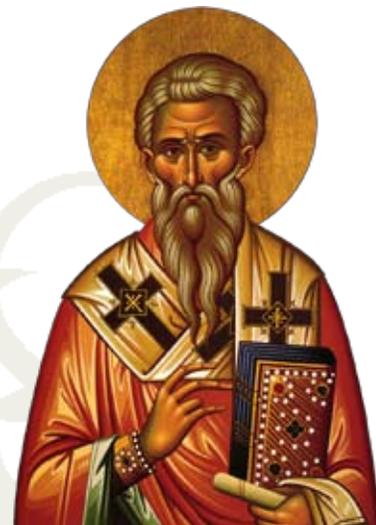
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PRACTICE QUIZ

Take a quiz to test your knowledge of James chapter 1.

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The writer of the epistle of James is traditionally understood to be St. James the Just, the brother of our Lord (Galatians 1:19) and St. Jude (Jude 1), and the first bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21). Proclaiming himself to be a bondservant of God, rather than exalting himself as a bishop, St. James tells us he is writing to a Jewish audience (James 1:1).

He begins with what might initially seem an odd statement: be joyful when you suffer trials, because such trials help you develop patience (1:2-3). This patience will lead to spiritual maturity because, St. Peter of Damascus teaches, “Patient endurance is the consolidation of all the virtues, because without it not one of them can subsist” (1:4).

But how, you might wonder, can we see the value in patiently enduring trials? St. James explains that we can only do this when we have true wisdom—in fact, we need to faithfully ask for this wisdom if we lack it (1:5-6). Why is this wisdom important? Because “when we have been strengthened by it,” Blessed Theophylact says, “we can do anything perfectly.”

A key

to receiving this spiritual wisdom is to avoid being “double-minded”—or as Fr. Lawrence Farley puts it, “double-souled”—by faithlessly attempting to live by both Christian and non-Christian (really *anti-Christian*) standards (1:6-7); such double-minded living shows that we do not put our full faith in God. As an example of how we can wisely respond to trials, St. James presents both poor and rich people (1:9-11): the poor can rejoice that they are rich in being saved (see Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20), while the rich can rejoice that their suffering shows them the importance of trusting in God rather than material riches. The person who can joyfully hold on to this understanding of life—both in poverty and wealth—will be given the “crown of life” (1:12).

St. James goes on to talk about withstanding temptation (1:13-15). Orthodox teachers see two possible meanings for the word “temptation” in this passage: being tempted to renounce God when undergoing trials, or being tempted to give in to such sins as greed or lust. In either case, it is important to remember that the temptation to sin does not come from God Himself; instead, such temptations arise from our sinful desires for comfort and illicit pleasures. As St. Cyril of Alexandria says, “If we ever find ourselves afflicted by illness, grief or trouble, let us not blame God, for God cannot be tempted by evil and does not tempt anyone. Each of us is scourged with the ropes of our own sins.” Instead of temptation, God is the source of every good and

perfect gift (1:17; this verse is prayed by the priest in the dismissal during every Divine Liturgy).

Christians should therefore live like this: being slow to wrath, avoiding filthiness and wickedness, and instead receiving the teaching of Christ and His Church (which St. James calls “the implanted word”) (1:19-21). This means more than simply listening to what is said during Church services, because doing nothing more than listening almost guarantees that you will forget what you’ve heard (1:22-24). Instead, it means incorporating these teachings into your life—being a “doer of the work” (1:25)—through assisting the troubled and “keep(ing) oneself unspotted from the world” (1:26). This, St. James says, is “pure and undefiled religion before God” (1:26).

LIFE TIP

St. Maximos the Confessor talks about how we are tested in life: “Those whom divine providence is leading towards holiness in this life are tested by the following three tests: by the gift of agreeable things, such as health, beauty, fine children, money, fame and so on; by afflictions causing distress, such as the loss of children, money and fame; and by bodily sufferings, such as disease, torture and so on. To those in the first category the Lord says, ‘If a person does not forsake all that he has, he cannot be My disciple’; and to those in the second and third He says, ‘You will gain possession of your souls through your patient endurance.’”

