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James 1:2–12, New International Version

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

My name, again.

James, one of the shorter books of the Bible, is a letter written by someone who identifies himself simply as James. This book isn't a history book. It also isn't truly a letter. It's an integrated, polished essay written as a letter. It is well-honed and tightly written. It's elegant and easy to read. The letter doesn't precisely identify who this James is. But it is widely believed to be the brother of Jesus. He wasn't a follower of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime, but became a believer; Paul identifies

him as an Apostle of Jesus. He was also a leader of the Jerusalem church, which was made up of Jewish converts. As recorded in Acts 15, James was active in the Jerusalem Council, which affirmed the decision to bring the faith to Gentiles, or non-Jews. This meeting took place in the year 49, and it is believed that the letter called James was written before this, making it the earliest written New Testament book. The reason for this estimated date is that James never makes any reference to non-Jewish Christians; the letter seems to assume that the only Christians are Jews. There is some controversy, though, to identifying the author as the brother of Jesus. The letter is written in very polished Greek. Jesus probably could carry on a casual conversation in Greek, but it's unlikely that a poor man like him would have been highly literate in Greek. However, James might easily have employed someone to cast his words into good Greek, something that was very common at the time. It's also true that James lived longer than Jesus and might well have developed polished Greek as he became involved in the formation of the church. There is evidence that our traditional estimation of the Galilee as being backward is not correct; it was a cultural center. So, perhaps both James and Jesus were more literate than we have assumed. To me, though, the bottom line is that it's amazing that we have a document that was almost certainly written by the brother of Jesus Christ.

James wrote this essay to address the spiritual needs of Jewish Christians living in the area immediately around him. The historical context is that the people there lived a very hard life. The Roman Empire had taken land from farmers, turning them into poorly paid farm hands. Farmers who had managed to keep their land were in many cases driven out of business by the astonishing taxes charged by Rome. Many were driven off the land and ended up working in towns as marketplace day-laborers. There was an extreme separation of wealth, with what we might call the traditional middle class being driven in large part into poverty. There were grain shortages that led to rioting elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Violence in Palestine, where Jewish Christians lived, was held in check by force, but like much of the Empire, resentment among the population was extremely high. Eventually, after this letter was written, there would indeed be violence, with a revolt in the year 66 being brutally put down with the widespread massacre of Jews. In the year 70, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and in 73, the final resistance at the stronghold of Masada was crushed. It was to Jewish Christians, who were caught up in these social tensions, that the letter of James was addressed. James wrote his letter to a culture that was in chaos, with wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, with more and more people falling into

poverty, and with people beginning to demand that riches be shared with all people. And violence was constantly threatening the stability of the Empire.

There are two reasons that I am using a quote from James today. One is that I want to talk about the love and dedication of family, and James was a member of Jesus' family. This letter/essay always reminds me that Jesus had a loving family. His father worked hard at a manual job. He was a builder, not a carpenter. The Greek word *tehton* is translated as carpenter, but the father of Jesus was actually a wood worker, a stone worker, and a metal worker – an expert in building materials. Jesus also had a loving mother, someone who was with him all the way through his death. She played a major role in the Gospels. We don't know much about his siblings, but we do have this precious letter penned by his kid brother. Jesus was poor, died young, never went more than a very short distance from his hometown, and was apparently homeless at times. But he had a loving family. This sermon today has a lot to do with family. The second reason I am using a quote from James is that it tells us the true reason that God lets us undergo trials in life.

I gave a sermon recently about writing my name over and over on the living room walls of my parents' house. I'd like to tell you today about how I got that

nickname Buzz or Buzzy. I dropped the Y when I started high school. But first, let's look at our Bible passage for today. This comes from the greeting of the letter, where the author identifies himself and gives some uplifting words to his readership. Remember that only a small fraction of the population would be literate, so most people had this letter read to them out loud, the way we hear it. James tells the people that they are facing crises in their church and their lives. But he tells them that they should consider it a pure joy when they face difficult trials in life. This is when their trust, their faith in God is tested – and when they have the opportunity to strengthen their connection to God. There is a subtlety here that is not obvious to us today. James is taking a stand that is based on a core Christian belief: we don't have to be healthy, wealthy, or even happy to be joyful. It sounds contradictory. James does not feel that God sends us challenges simply to test our faith. He doesn't see the world the way it is presented in Job. His is a New Testament faith, one rooted in the new covenant, not the old. James believes that when we undergo trials in life, we build up our endurance, our perseverance, our courage, our faith. He's making it clear that having little money is a good thing, that we should not seek wealth. In sum, by being faced with challenges in life, we strengthen our relationship with God. Difficulties aren't there to test our faith; they are there to build our faith.

So, my nickname. Buzzy, as I was called from the age of two until ninth grade. When I was a year or so old, I started having what appeared to be seizures. I would thrash about madly, my arms and legs flailing, my head jerking back and forth, right and left. My parents had to put me in a padded crib so that I wouldn't hurt myself. They of course took me to a pediatrician, who referred them to a neurologist, I believe. I can't properly describe my symptoms, what kind of specialists they took me to, or what theories those specialists came up with – because my parents were very unsophisticated people. But I do know that they went from doctor to doctor, with my father carrying me most of the time, apparently. My symptoms grew worse and they grew desperate as the months went by. The way my mother told the story, my father became determined to find someone who could diagnose and cure me. He even went to the laboratories of a couple of scientists who were researching seizures in children. They would, of course, tell him that they had Ph.D.'s, not M.D.'s, and that he had to take me to physicians, not scientists.

Then, one day, after my parents had apparently had over twenty doctors look at me, and after several months had gone by, and my seizures had become extreme, my father took me to yet another scientist's lab. I don't even know how

my father, who barely finished high school, managed to find people who were researching seizures in children. But he was determined – and he found a way.

But before I get to the tail end of the story of my illness, let me tell you about my nickname. One thing that my parents noticed was that I couldn't sleep because I was busy thrashing around at night. My father learned that he could hold his index finger over my face as I lay there on my back. He would make circles over my face while making a buzzing sound: zzzzzz. My eyes would follow his finger, and I would listen to him making the buzzing sound, and eventually I would be lulled to sleep. So, he started calling me Buzzy. What about that, huh? A kid has nonstop seizures and can't sleep, but he can be almost hypnotized into sleeping by making circles over his face and going zzzzzz, so you call him Buzzy? Well, my father was an ex-Marine, and he thought it was funny.

All the while, my mother prayed. She turned to God every night. While my father was helping little Buzzy fall asleep, she would be in their room, with her Bible, asking God to please show them how to get me cured. She was French, her name was Annette Claire DuBois, and she even had a friend of hers send water from Lourdes, a pilgrimage city in France. She got a bottle of that water and sprinkled it on my forehead every night before praying. She got my father, who

went to church every Sunday, but who had never been in the habit of praying, to pray with her. For the rest of his life, my father's faith stayed strong.

Back to the last scientist my father brought me to. The way my mother told this story, my father carried me in his arms into the laboratory of yet another scientist. The man there asked my father what he needed. My father said that his son Buzzy here was having seizures and was thrashing around all the time. The man apparently backed away, saying, hey, I'm not a doctor, this kid needs a hospital, buddy. But then I had a seizure right in front of the guy. He blurted out something about a possible deficiency of a particular hormone related to my pituitary gland. My mother and father could never remember the details any better than that. It might also have involved electrolyte levels in my bloodstream. I don't actually know. But based on whatever that scientist said, they took me to a doctor suggested by that scientist, and sure enough, that was what was wrong with me. That doctor started me on some sort of treatment, and within a few months, I was completely cured. Many years later, my father was very proud that his daughter and his son got Ph.D.'s and not M.D.'s, because clearly, Ph.D.'s were smarter than M.D.'s. It was a Ph.D. who figured out what was wrong with Buzzy. My father remained forever convinced that God led him to that man with a Ph.D.

So, here is the last line from our quote: ¹² *Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* This advice, from the kid brother of Jesus says it all. My parents did not give up. They took me to doctor after doctor, and then scientist after scientist. They were desperate. They did indeed persevere. They kept searching for an expert who could figure out what was wrong - and they prayed. They did not lose their faith in God, and in fact, my father's faith was strengthened by the experience. They became absolutely determined to find a solution. The point isn't that they succeeded, it's that they grew spiritually as a result of this problem they had to confront. They stood the test and they received the crown of life. That's what my illness and the power of God did for them. Please pray with me.

God, let us always see trials in life as opportunities to grow closer to you and to reinforce our faith in you. Let us always see you not as someone who will magically fix our problems, but as a way to grow in our determination to rely on you always. Let us remember what your little brother told us: the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. May we, by never doubting, be rooted deeply so that nothing can uproot our faith, and so that we, through the trials of life, become more and more Christ-like.