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**James 1:2–8, New Living Translation.**

*<sup>2</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. <sup>3</sup> For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. <sup>4</sup> So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.*

*<sup>5</sup> If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. <sup>6</sup> But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. <sup>8</sup> Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.*

**Ephesians 4:11–16, English Standard Version.**

*<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

**Waves.**

I grew up in southern California, near the ocean. I loved the beach, and I had several friends who were accomplished surfers. I was not. I would go to the beach

after school or on weekends. Various people tried to teach me how to surf. If you have never tried it, trust me: it's a lot harder than it looks to stand on a surfboard as a wave flows under you. I remember one day in particular. I was determined to successfully ride my first wave. Over and over, I got on the board. And over and over, I went flying head-first, sideways, and backwards into the churning ocean. When you come flying off a board, you can find yourself spinning under water, not knowing up from down, fighting that panicky feeling that you're going to drown. Finally, breathlessly, you find yourself above the water, bobbing up and down, your board who-knows-where. I'm going to get back to this. I'm sure you're dying to find out if I ever managed to ride a wave that day.

But let's first look at our first quote. It's from James, the Book that might well have been written by the kid brother of Jesus. We do know that Jesus' brother was very active in the early church, that he was the leader of the Jerusalem church, which was made up mostly of Jewish followers of Jesus. He was very involved in the highly influential Jerusalem Council, where the decision was made to spread the faith to non-Jews. Further, the evangelist Paul referred to James, the brother of Jesus, as an Apostle. So, it would make a lot of sense for him to have written this letter. The only issue is that the letter is written in a very refined Greek, and like Jesus, he probably had little education. But it would have been normal for

someone like him to have gotten help from a Greek writer. It's unlikely we will ever know if the brother of Jesus did indeed write James. But either way, the author wrote the letter to address the spiritual needs of Jewish Christians living in the area immediately around him. The people there lived a very hard life. The Roman Empire had taken land from farmers, turning them into poorly paid farm hands. 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. James is lifting up his readers, giving them hope, strengthening their faith.

James tells his readers this: *be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind.* James is telling us that we should be putting our faith only in God. If we have divided loyalty, if we value the things of the world too much, then our faith will suffer. James is focused on telling us that we must be focused on faith. Those who try to live in two worlds are simply unsettled, like a wave on the sea, tossed by the wind, and crashing on the shore and disappearing into nothing.

Our second quote is from Ephesians. It is admittedly written in a bit of a run-on fashion, and so it is hard to read. In fact, this ponderous style, which runs

through the entire letter, is a primary reason why many people say that Paul probably did not actually write this letter. It is also believed that the letter was written after the life of Paul, when the church had grown into a more organized entity. There is another letter, not in the Bible, that refers to Ephesians, and that second letter was written around 96 A.D. The best guess is that Ephesians was written around 90 A.D., about 25 years after Paul died. But it contains beautiful lessons for all of us to learn. Let me step through these verses. This quote appears in a chapter, 4, where Paul is giving ethical advice, telling us how to live a life worthy of having been made in the image of God. The first few verses tell us that once we identify as Christians, we need to learn to live as Christians. We will serve in different ways. Some people will be teachers of the faith, others will serve as evangelists, others as pastors. All of us must serve to help others become mature and confident in our faith. Once we have done this, we will no longer be child-like in our faith, tossed around by waves, not knowing what to believe, listening to people who teach us things that are very wrong, very evil. We will then work together as a unified church, all helping each other in a loving way.

Our first passage tells us that we must be focused and purposeful in our faith and not distracted by worldly things, because *“a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind”*. Our second

one says that if we are immature in our faith, if we are not disciplined, we will be *“tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”* The first reference to waves, in James, is intriguing in that it notes that waves are, in part, a product of the wind. Just as waves are completely vulnerable to strong winds, a believer whose faith is split between God and the world will be weak and will be incapable of keeping their spiritual direction. The second reference says that if we’re weak in our faith, we’ll feel like we’re being tossed around by waves in the ocean.

But while I’m a big fan of allegories and metaphors, and I love reading the Bible in part because it is so literate, there is a problem with using colorful language like this. It can take the edge off the blunt truth. You see, when we see ourselves as waves tossed around by the wind or as people being tossed around by waves, we need to keep in mind that we, along with those waves and that wind, are all humans. We are not a chaotic, natural phenomenon that is uncontrollable. We are people, and so we are in complete control of what we do. The wind that tosses us, as waves, around, is made up of humans who surround us. They may or may not know that they are doing us great harm by drawing us away from our faith. That is what our society does. When you turn on the TV, go online or enter into a casual conversation with another person, people are often telling us that being

greedy instead of generous, seeking revenge for minor slights, responding with anger when we find someone who disagrees with us, and even resorting to violence as a form of protest – are all just fine, that they are modern, sophisticated, and moral ways to live. Those people tell us to live like that because they have been convinced this is true or because they want to see evil overwhelm good. The people who teach us this new faith, this new religion, they are not wind or waves acting ignorantly. We are not waves or any other natural phenomena, unable to make learned, conscious, ethically based decisions. We are all humans – and this is why what is going on in our world today is so dangerous, so intensely evil. No matter what intense disasters we see unfold from the actions of nature, like floods, fires, earthquakes, and tornados, those things are localized, temporary, and do not touch the hearts and souls of people. We, on the other hands, are astonishingly powerful. We can corrupt far, far more effectively than nature.

I think that the authors of the Bible, since they lived so close to the land and since they did not understand the actions of nature at all – they were far more deeply impacted emotionally by natural forces. We on the other hand, can quickly rebuild large structures. Even if we cannot predict or manipulate these forces, we can reason scientifically, thus greatly minimizing our fear response. I believe that the passages that we have looked at today were more intense and meaningful for

the early Christians. Whether we see ourselves as waves being tossed around, or whether we see ourselves as being tossed around by waves, it just doesn't seem that compelling.

Getting back to that day when I tried to learn to successfully ride a surfboard on top of a cresting wave, here is how it all unfolded. I was in a small, protected area, a sort of cove. The waves there were small. There was very little wind. My friend, a girl from school, found me a place with rather small, gentle waves. Meanwhile, just hundreds of yards away, the open ocean was crashing violently on an exposed beach. Experienced surfers, like my friend, were joyfully riding huge, violent waves. I finally did learn to stay aboard a surfboard as the wave rose, charged toward the coast, and then broke. The first time I did this without being tossed off, without finding myself twirling underwater, disoriented, and panicky, I stepped onto the beach lifted up like you would not believe. I jumped up and down. I was a surfer. I never become much of a surfer. I did wear a Saint Christopher medal, which many surfers wore at the time, and I still wear one today. Surfers adopted Saint Christopher as their patron because Christopher, which means "bearer of Christ", was supposed to have carried a child across a wildly raging river. In truth, the Catholic Church has dumped Saint Christopher and taken him off the rolls of the saints because it's now believed he never existed.

But we do exist. We are real, capable, powerful humans. We can protect our moral selves. We can protect the morality of other people. We can be shining lights in the world. We have in many ways lost our confidence in ourselves. That's what these passages really mean. That's what the kid brother of Jesus and the pseudo-Paul are telling us. We need to go out into the world and be strong. We need to courageously model and teach the right way to live.

I walked into see a patient a while back; like many patients and family members, she noticed that I had a cross and a bunch of medals around my neck. I told her that I was raised Catholic but that I am now a Methodist reverend. I said that the cross is how I define myself, but that the medals were more of a reminder of the beauty and the faith of my childhood. She had a similar story. She said that when she got out of the hospital, she would get herself a Saint Christopher medal. She was being treated for kidney disease and was hoping to avoid having to get a transplant. She asked me if I knew the story of Saint Christopher. I said not really. She told me that this is how the myth goes: Christopher was born to a pagan king and queen. He was a huge man, maybe seven feet tall – and back then that would have been an unbelievably tall giant. When he realized that his father was a cowardly man, he decided to test his own courage. That is why he sought out a child to rescue and voluntarily went into a deep, wide raging river and lifted that



kid up onto his shoulders. When his father, the king, found out how brave his son was, he grew jealous and had him killed. That's how he became a martyr.

We need to rediscover that courage, that willingness to confront society and defend what we believe. Here's the great part. When we do this, we are energized. We feel not just powerful but refreshed and renewed. We were a computer with a locked-up screen, the keyboard and the mouse not responding, and then, under our own power, we pushed the reboot button and brought us back to a full life. Remember you are not a wave or the wind. You are a human, made in God's image. And oh, I brought that patient with kidney disease a Saint Christopher medal. Please pray with me.

*God do not let me become powerless and helpless. Let me walk each day knowing that I am truly free. I control how I live. I can impact how others live. Let me use the power that you gave me as a child of God, let me use it the way you want me to use it – and let me do that every day. Amen.*