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James 1:2–4, 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.

A Kid with Seizures: *Receiving the crown of life.*

James, one of the shorter books of the Bible, was written by someone who identifies himself simply as James. This isn't a history book. It also isn't a letter. It's a polished essay, well-honed and tightly written. It's elegant and easy to read. It is often called a homily. The book doesn't identify who this James is. But it is believed by many to be the brother of Jesus. He wasn't a follower of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime but became a believer; Paul identifies James as an Apostle of Jesus. He was also a leader of the Jerusalem church, which was primarily made 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, to 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. One 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. Jesus probably could carry on a casual conversation in Greek, but it's unlikely that a poor man like him would have written the highly literate Greek we find in James. But James might 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, and we might have traditionally sold the people there short, dismissing them as nothing more than illiterate fishermen.

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 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 in much of the Empire, resentment among the population there was extremely high. 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. This was a culture in chaos, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, with many 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. It is to Jewish Christians, who are living in this dangerous world, that the homily of James is addressed.

James delivers warnings to those who follow Christ: 1) the risk of being hypocritical in one's faith, 2) the dangers of pride, 3) the need to view hardship as an opportunity for spiritual growth, 4) the importance of controlling your tongue, 5) the importance of caring for the needy, and 6) finding ways to apply your faith in life. The tone of the homily is one of pragmatism and emotional support. It tells people how to survive, and even thrive, in a brutal environment, and assures them that God is there to give them the wisdom they need to do so. James tells us that the faith we hold within us helps us live ethically and radiantly.

Before we go any further with the Book of James, I'd like to talk about my nickname. If you scream "Roger", my legal name, at me on the street, I might well not turn and look back at you. I have been Buzz all my life, since I was perhaps two. In truth, I started out as Buzzy, and that lasted until ninth grade. I dropped the "Y" when I started high school. Here is how I got my nickname. First, my father was also Roger, so I needed a nickname. I am telling you this story as best I can, which is the way my mother told it to me when I was somewhat older, maybe twelve. My parents were quite unsophisticated when it came to medicine and science, so please keep that in mind. Apparently, 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. My parents put me in a padded crib so that I wouldn't hurt myself, and then later they put me in a bed that was far from any wall. They of course took me to a pediatrician, who referred them to a neurologist, I believe. I can't properly describe my symptoms, what other specialists they took me to, or what theories those specialists came up with – because again, my parents were unsophisticated. But I do know that they went from doctor to doctor, with my father carrying me. My symptoms grew worse and they grew desperate as the months went by. The way my mother told the story, my father was 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. How he found them, I don't know. 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.

Here is the beginning of the Book of James, skipping only the brief introduction where James identifies himself and greets his largely Jewish readers:

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.

Remember that only a small fraction of the population would be literate, no more than 10%, 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. Their faith produces perseverance. If we need wisdom to overcome tough times, God will give it to us – if we turn to God. It's important, though, that there be no wavering in our faith, in putting our trust in God, because doubt makes us *“like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind”*. He tells us that people in high positions will find themselves humiliated, that earthly success is like a flower that quickly withers. And on the contrary, those in humble situations should be joyous, because they will have to fight to persevere – and once we have withstood the test of true faith, we *“will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”*

In some ways, this is reminiscent of the Beatitudes in the early portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Chapter 5 of Matthew. In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us the value of living for the things of his kingdom, of being humble, of being merciful, and of seeking peace. The Beatitudes end with this:

¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

We see that James is echoing the basic teachings of Jesus. He simply puts things in more practical, less theological, terms. Note that at the beginning of our quote, James uses two terms, “trials” and “testing”:

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.

The word “trials” (*peirasmōis*) is used in the New Testament to refer to direct persecution of those who believe in Jesus. “Testing” (*dokimion*) refers to the ways in which our faith is tested or challenged by what happens in this world. But while people who are not believers will make life hard for us, and while the world will often be a tough place in which to live, James doesn’t see the world the way it is presented in Job. James presents a New Testament faith, one rooted in the new covenant. He does not think that God will throw almost anything at us, evil people and the vilest of circumstances, simply to test our faith. He believes that all in all, God treats us with love and grace. And James believes that when we undergo trials and tests in life, we build up our endurance, our perseverance, our courage – as long as we confront trials and tests with unwavering faith.

There is something else that is implied by what James says. Not only does our faith give us the ability to persevere and rise above all that confronts us, but when we do thrive in the face of trials and tests, our faith becomes even stronger.

Perseverance means that we strengthen our relationship with God by cementing our trust in God. Difficulties aren't there to test our faith like they are in the Book of Job: they are there to build our faith, to make it as hard as rock.

Back to the story of my nickname Buzzy and the apparent seizures I had as a very small child. One day, after my parents had apparently had over a dozen doctors look at me, and after several months had gone by, and my thrashing 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 a man of faith. He believed that God would lead him to a solution. All he had to do was persevere. All the while, my mother prayed. She was deeply faithful, too. 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 show them how to get me cured.

But before I get to the tail end of the story of my illness, let me backtrack and tell you how I got my nickname. One thing that my parents noticed was that I couldn't sleep because I was 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: zzzzzzz. My eyes would follow

his finger, as I listened to him making the buzzing sound, and eventually I would be lulled to a calm sleep, at least for a short while. So, my father started calling me Buzzy. My father was an ex-Marine, and he thought it was funny, but funny in a loving way. My mother, who was French didn't really like the name at first because she thought it sounded a bit like the French word for cow patty, *bouse*.

So, back to the last scientist my father took 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 said something about potassium perhaps collecting on my nerve endings, that this could cause uncontrolled firings of nerves. My mother was never sure exactly what this scientist said or how I was eventually cured. But they took me to a doctor suggested by that scientist, and sure enough, it apparently did have something to do with potassium on my nerves. That doctor started me on some sort of treatment, and within a few months, the problem was gone. My father knew without a doubt that God had led him to that man with a Ph.D. Many years later, my father was very proud that his daughter and his son both got Ph.D.'s and

not M.D.'s, because clearly, Ph.D.'s were smarter than M.D.'s. After this experience, he knew that God had been listening, and that gave him incredible confidence in putting his trust in God.

So, here is the last line from our quote from the beginning of James:

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.* The “*crown of life*” refers not just to the promise of everlasting life, but the continued blessing of God in this life, as well. This advice, from a person we believe is the kid brother of Jesus, says it all. My parents did not give up.

Specifically, my father took me to doctor after doctor, and then scientist after scientist. They were desperate. But they did indeed persevere – because of their faith, because they had no doubt that God was with them. They were absolutely determined to find a solution, and they were confident that they would find a solution. 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, as well as my mother's, was strengthened by the experience. Their faith produced perseverance. And most importantly, their perseverance made their faith all the more powerful. They stood the test and they received the crown of life.