

“Being unstable in all his ways” most certainly does not characterize a person with “saving faith,” for the faith that God gives is one that produces a growing, genuine love for Him and thereby a willingness to give one’s entire life for His glory and honor. For James says “unstable in all his ways,” not just in matters that some would relate to “religious practice,” but in all aspects of the unbeliever’s life there is instability, perhaps not as man looks at things, but surely as God does. For whatever is not done in faith is unacceptable to God.

The true believer also grows in understanding the infinite value of God’s love in Yeshua, and is led and strengthened by the Ruach to grow in becoming more and more like Yeshua. Granted, this is a process, and not every believer progresses at the same rate. But the one thing that is true of those who are genuinely born from above is that they endure and persevere in the faith, for they belong to God and He will lose none of those He has purchased with the very sacrifice of His own dear Son, Yeshua.

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. (Jn 6:37–39)

9–10 But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away.

The opening “But” (*δέ, de*) connects these verses to the previous context, and ultimately to the opening exhortation, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials...” In the previous context James first has in mind those believers who are strong in the faith, and are therefore able to endure the trials they face, knowing that as they persevere through the trials their faith will be strengthened. As such, they are able to face the trials with a settled, inner joy.

But secondly James addresses those who may be weak in faith and who therefore lack the wisdom that comes from a mature faith. He then admonishes them to ask God for wisdom, but they must do so fully believing that He will grant them the wisdom to know without doubting that by the grace He provides, they will be given strength to endure the trials they are facing and in doing so to be living witnesses of God’s

love and power.

Now, in our current text, James centers our attention on another contrast, namely the contrast between those who are “lowly” (*ταπεινός*, *tapeinos*), i.e., in “humble circumstances” and those who are “rich” (*πλούσιος*, *plousios*). The Greek term *tapeinos* can carry the sense of

1. being of low social status or to relative inability to cope, lowly, undistinguished, of no account.
2. being servile in manner, pliant, subservient, abject, a negative quality that would make one lose face in the Greco-Roman world.
3. being unpretentious, humble.¹

While this Greek word was used in the 1st Century to denote a low social status, or a person of low social status, in our text James contrasts a “lowly” person with one who is “rich.” Yet even though monetary wealth or poverty seems to be the contrasting criteria employed by James in our text, we should reckon with the fact that often in human society, the wealthy gain a social status which is unattainable for the those who are impoverished.

That James contrasts “lowly” (*tapeinos*) with “rich” (*plousios*) would most likely indicate a contrast of material wealth, as often seen in the Gospels. For in the Gospels, the same Greek word *plousios*, here translated as “rich,” is always related to monetary wealth² and often contrasted with those who are impoverished in terms of material wealth.

Historically some have understood this text of James to be teaching against wealth and as a result, have taught that the true believer in Yeshua will shun so-called “worldly goods” and show themselves to be holy through their impoverished lifestyle. But this is not what James is teaching, for the Scriptures themselves indicate that God Himself gives riches to some.

The LORD was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David’s earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. So the LORD established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. (2Chron 17:3–5)

1 BDAG, “ταπεινός,” p. 989.

2 Matt 19:23–24; 27:57; Mark 10:25; 12:41; Luke 6:24; 12:16; 14:12; 16:1, 19, 21–22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; 21:1.

The rich and the poor have a common bond, the LORD is the maker of them all. (Prov 22:2)

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Yeshua. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Yeshua. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. (Matt 27:57–60)

If, in fact, there is no sin in being rich, how are we to understand James teaching in our text? For it could appear, as some have taught, that James is telling the rich person to give up his wealth and glory in his humiliation of being poor.

First, it is clear in this text that James is describing both the poor and the rich as believers in Yeshua, for he uses the term “brother” when describing the one of “humble circumstances,” and though he does not repeat the word “brother” when speaking of “the rich man,” the context makes it clear that “brother” should be carried forward to apply to the rich man as well. In fact, it is obvious throughout this epistle that James is writing to those who profess themselves to be followers of Yeshua, so the “rich man” he addresses is also to be viewed as a believer.

Second, James has already admonished his readers and us that we are to find lasting joy, even when we are experiencing various trials. For faith itself lays hold of the very promises of God and, by faith, we affirm that He is faithful to keep His promises. Therefore, the trials that come our way will only strengthen our faith and provide us with endurance to persevere as witnesses of God’s grace and power. This is the same whether a person is in “humble circumstances” or is “rich.”

Thus, given that both the one of “humble circumstances” and the one who is “rich” are addressed by James as believers in Yeshua, what is His point? It is this: whether poor or wealthy in material things, both are to recognize that trials will come, and both are to accept such trials as the Lord’s means to strengthen their faith to rely more and more upon God’s faithful promises.

But the primary emphasis that James is giving here is that the one who is lowly (“in humble circumstances”) must entirely depend upon God and never seek to find ungodly means to gain material wealth. Likewise, those who are wealthy must not depend upon their wealth or think that their wealth is what grants them security for the present

or the future, or that by their wealthy they will be sheltered from life's trials. Rather, both are to find their joy, their hope, and their strength in the sure and loving faithfulness of God, seeking His strength to endure trials. Indeed, within the body of the Messiah, the *ekklesia* He promised to build (Matt 16:18), all are equal in God's eyes, for all who are truly members in the *ekklesia* are also "in Messiah," and "there is no respect of persons with God" (Rom 2:11).

...because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

The final clause of v. 10 and the following verse 11, fully support the fact that James is not teaching against wealth, but against trusting in one's wealth to protect and guard oneself from life's trials. Even the one who is wealthy must not put his trust in his wealth and the power it brings, nor become complacent in thinking that he is in control of what the future holds. Indeed, James reminds us here of the transitory nature of life in this world.

The picture James draws with his words seems clearly to rest upon the same metaphor used by the prophets.

A voice says, "Call out." Then he answered, "What shall I call out?" All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever. (Is 40:6–8)¹

For the reality is that in this fallen world, death comes to all, whether poor or rich. And no one knows today what exactly will take place tomorrow.

...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.... (Heb 9:27)

Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth. (Prov 27:1)

1 Cf. Job 14:2; Ps 103:15–16.

This message of James fits perfectly with the wider teaching of Scripture.

Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD. (Jer 9:23–24)

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. (1Tim 6:17)

Thus, whether in "humble circumstances" or "rich in material wealth," all believers are to find their true worth to be in their union with Yeshua and thus to "glory in their high position." For all who are "in Messiah" have the sure promises of God as their stronghold for every trial that comes, and assurance that when one's days are completed on this earth,

...we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1Thess 4:17b–18)

And it is this very truth that James emphasizes next.

12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

An initial question is whether v. 12 is connected to the previous context or begins a new unit with vs. 13–18. For instance, the NASB, ESV, NIV, NRSV, have v. 12 beginning a new paragraph, and link it together with vv. 13–18. It seems best, however, to take v. 12 as a recapitulation of or summary of vv. 2–11 which unfold the opening admonition to "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trial."¹

That v. 12 is a summary and conclusion of vs. 2–11 is also strengthened by the fact that the key word "trial" (*πειρασμός*, *peirasmos*) used in

1 So Chris A. Vlachos, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: James* (B&H Pub., 2013), p. 39.

v. 2 is repeated in v. 12, forming “bookends” for this pericope. In addition, the word “perseveres” translates the Greek ὑπομένω (*hypomenō*) which is the verbal partner to the Greek word ὑπομονή (*hypomonē*) translated with the English “endurance” and used in the previous context in vv. 3, 4, and 11.

Thus, we should take v. 12 to be a summary statement of James’ opening teaching that as believers in Yeshua, we are to face trials in our lives and be strengthened to persevere through the trial knowing that the trial itself will, by the strength God promises to give us, make us able to endure to the end.

The opening “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial” is cast in the pattern of the Beatitudes and the words of Yeshua Himself (Matt 5:2–12). Indeed, this “blessing” spoken of by James is one that is given by our Savior, for it is “by His stripes that we are healed” (1Pet 2:24). What is more, James here teaches us an important truth: perseverance in the faith is the ultimate and clear proof that a person truly belongs to God through faith in Yeshua and that all who are His have eternal life. For none who have been bought with the price of Yeshua’s blood will be eternally lost.

...for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life – How is it that our faith is finally and fully approved by God? It is when, by His grace and power, our love for Him increases and commitment to Him is strengthened so that we persevere to the end, that our faith is proven to be genuine. This reality is contrary to the modern day “Prosperity Gospel” which teaches that the life of a believer is one of bliss and prosperity. While surely our faith in God through His Son, Yeshua, brings us into a life of true joy and enduring purpose, the Scriptures teach us nonetheless that in this world we will experience trials and that He will enable all who are His to endure such trials and be strengthened by them. Such perseverance is the true mark of every believer in Yeshua.

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. (Jn 16:33)

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Messiah Yeshua. (Phil 1:6)

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. (Jn 10:27-28)

We find the “crown of life” also in the book of Revelation:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Rev 2:10)

What does the “crown of life” represent? One writer notes:

...the crown of life is the emblem, not of royalty, but of highest joy and gladness, of glory and immortality.¹

Thus the “crown of life” may be reminiscent of the crown or wreath given to the athlete who won the race. Such a “crown” wilted and faded away, but the “crown of life” is a metaphor of having run the race with perseverance, not “giving up” but enduring to the finish line and thus entering into dwelling forever with our Savior, Yeshua.

...which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. – Here James teaches us another very important lesson. The primary motivation by which we persevere in our faith is love for God. For He has given us not only new life, but He has also given us the deep desire to love Him for all that He has done for us. When we contemplate the infinite value of Yeshua’s death on our behalf, we are given both the desire and, by the indwelling Ruach (Spirit), the ability to love Him to the end.

We love *Him*, because He first loved us. (1John 4:19)

1 R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 80.