

# "A REALITY CHECK"

Encouragement in Challenging Times  
(James 1:1-18)

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## INTRODUCTION

The search for the topic "reality television" on Wikipedia's computer website results in a list of over 300 current and former reality TV series. Included are Survivor, which is entering its 14th season, Big Brother, Bachelor, Bachelorette and Real World. Reality TV is so pervasive that it now has its own network, and according to The Economist, one out of every seven teenagers hopes to attain fame and fortune through an appearance on reality television.

There is no doubt that reality television is popular; but please understand: these shows aren't reality. Entertaining for some? Maybe. Realistic? Not very close. But that doesn't prevent people from thinking that what they see on TV is how the world really is.

In the same way, many people are confused about the realities of the Christian faith. What they believe is based on what they learned from their parents, or what they think the Bible says, or what they've been told that God is like, or what they've heard that we're supposed to believe — but if we don't examine God's Word carefully a person's view of spiritual things can easily be as inconsistent and ill-informed as the idea that network TV reflects real life.

## Opening Prayer

Before we review God's Word on this subject true reality, let us first ask a quick prayer for God's blessing and inspiration on this topic.

## Specific Purpose Statement

Even though life can sometimes be hard, temptations surround us, and problems continue to come, God wants us to know the reality of His presence in our lives. This morning we will quickly review 3 important reality checks God has provided for us, as recorded in James 1 verses 1 through 18. They are:

- 1. Remember that with God's intervention, problems can work to your benefit.**
- 2. Remember that you're not in this by yourself – God is ever-present.**
- 3. Remember that God isn't out to get you – only to help & encourage you.**

## Body

The Bible tells what the Christian life is about. It tells us what God is like, what he expects of us, how we are to live, what we are to do, and what it means to be a true follower of

Jesus. We see this all throughout scripture, but it is seen most profoundly in the book of James. If you want an example of the Christian life in a nutshell, read James.

James begins with a reality check for believers. There are two ways we can look at the world. One is through the eyes of unbelief — that the world is a random, meaningless, chaotic mess. The other is through the eyes of faith, that God is in control and that He has the power to work things out for His good. (This truism or reality check is also reiterated in *Romans 8:28*)

The first view might seem to be true, it may appear to be real, but that's not the way the world actually is. We live in a world that was created by a wonderful loving God. In spite of our rebellion, it was redeemed by a loving God. Ultimately it will be completely restored by a loving God. God is in total control.

James wanted to make sure his audience understood this, because they were going through some tough times. This letter was written to the Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution. Many Christians were suffering terrible mistreatment at the hands of governmental and religious leaders, and James begins by helping them put their situation into the proper perspective.

There are three "reality checks" in the first half of chapter one that I want us to pay attention to today. These are things that the first century Christians needed to be aware of, and we need to keep them in mind as well. Here they are. Reality Check Number One.

### **1. Remember that problems can work to your benefit.**

James begins by making a statement that may not be easily understood. He said...

*(v. 2) Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.*

An opportunity for joy? What does that mean? He isn't talking about adopting a Polyanna attitude or pretending nothing is bothering you. He's talking about having a realistic, practical, down-to-earth, bottom-line perspective of your problems. Why? Because your problems really can work in your favor. How? He says...

*(v. 3-4) For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.*

He's saying that when you go through problems, you become better, you become stronger, you become more capable of doing everything that God has called you to do. The New King James says that you'll be "perfect and complete, lacking nothing." This is what problems will do for you—they make your life better in the long run, if you're willing to tough them out.

There's one view of reality that says problems are bad and should be avoided at all costs. But James gives us a reality check. He says that problems can work for you. They can benefit your life if you're willing to tough em out. The key principle here is *endurance*, an attitude that says, "I will not quit no matter how tough things get."

Every person in this room has problems, whether physical, financial, spiritual, emotional, you name it, and you have three ways of dealing with them. You can run and hide from them, you can whine and grumble about them, or you can stand up tall and work your way through them. It's your choice. If you choose option three, your problems will prove to work to your benefit. That's the reality of it. The second reality check...

## **2. Remember that you're not in this by yourself.**

There's one view of the world that says, "You have to fight your own fights. You have to solve your own problems. You have to make your own decisions. You have to take care of yourself."

The Christian view is different. It reminds us that even though we have responsibilities to fulfill, we're not on our own, and we're not all alone. For example, James said...

*(v. 5) If you need wisdom — if you want to know what God wants you to do — ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking.*

*Just as we ask for God's help and intervention at the start of our worship services and before our sermon messages.*

Of the eight hundred or so precious promises in God's Word, this ranks high up the chart among my favorites. What an incredible promise. If you need wisdom, God will give it you. When you think about it, you see that wisdom is the solution to just about all of our problems. Wisdom will not only get you out of a jam, it will prevent you from getting into a jam in the first place.

God says he'll give you wisdom. He'll tell you what you need to know when you need to know it, in order for you to move through life successfully. You need wisdom more than anything else. There will be times when you think you need more money, or more time, or more resources, or more people, or more talent — but what you really need is wisdom to maximize your current situation. Where do you get this? Not from your own brilliance—it's a gift from God, our loving Father who offers us the gift and good news of grace.

James writes...

*(v. 9) Christians who are poor should be glad, for God has honored them. And those who are rich should be glad, for God has humbled them. They will fade away like a flower in the field. The hot sun rises and dries up the grass; the flower withers, and its beauty fades away. So also, wealthy people will fade away with all of their achievements.*

Do you know what James is saying here? Don't put stock in your own resources. If you are poor — don't look at that. Look to God, because he will provide for you. If you are rich — don't be too impressed with yourself. Your money means nothing in the light of eternity. He's saying whether they're a little or a lot, you don't live by your own resources. In reality, we are to live by God's resources.

You're not in this by yourself. You don't have to get through life on the strength of your own wisdom, your own wit, and your own charm. If you need wisdom, God will give it to you. All you have to do is ask.

*(v. 6) But when you ask him, be sure that you really expect him to answer, for a doubtful mind is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind..*

This is the principle of dependence. You don't rely on yourself, you rely on God. You don't live by your own resources, you live by God's resources. That means you put all your faith, hope and trust in him. This is what he wants you to do, because it is foundational to living the Christian life. Remember that you're not in this by yourself. God is with you.

*Our Great Shepherd encourages us... Matthew 11:28:  
"Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened and I will give you rest.*

Reality check number three...

### **3. Remember that God isn't out to get you.**

James pointed this out because he wanted Christians to understand that God wasn't trying to trip them up. They were going through serious persecution, trials, financial hardship, homelessness — and in addition to that they were, like all Christians, struggling with the always present temptation to sin. James said...

*(v. 13) And remember, no one who wants to do wrong should ever say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else either.*

Temptation is a fact of life; we all go through it. But we need to understand that God is not the one orchestrating it. He's not trying to set you up for a fall. He wants what's best for you. He's always on your side.

Do you know who isn't on your side? There's someone out there who isn't working toward what is best in your life; this person is working toward what is, ultimately, worst for you. Who is it? It's you. The bane of mankind is that we are our own worst enemy. We seek what we most want, but not what we most need. Therefore, we are foolish and self-destructive. James wrote...

*(v. 14) Temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. These evil desires lead to evil actions, and evil actions lead to death.*

God's not the cause of the sin in our lives. We are. It's our wrong selfish desires that we fertilize and feed, and they give birth to sin. God's not trying to trip us up. He's not testing us or tempting us. He's not waiting for you and me to fall; he's waiting for each of us to follow through. Listen to this...

*(v. 12) God blesses the people who patiently endure testing.*

Let's stop for a minute to better understand what God is saying in His word. The words "testing" and "temptation" are the same Greek word. This Greek word is also sometimes translated "trials." Trials and temptations and tests — they're all similar in some ways; they have common characteristics. One, they're not from God. God doesn't give you trials or problems or difficulties just to see how much you can bear. Trials, problems and difficulties are inevitable, just like death and taxes. God doesn't send these your way, they're just part of the human experience. In fact, the Bible says that God's involvement in this process is that he prevents them from becoming too strong. *"He will keep the temptation from*

*becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) So, you can't blame God for your problems and temptations; you can thank him they're not worse than they are. James continues...*

*(v. 12) God blesses the people who patiently endure testing. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.*

He's not waiting for you to fall, he's waiting for you to follow through. He's waiting for you to endure, to hang in there, to tough it out. Trials and tests and temptations all have one thing in common: they're temporary. You can outlast them. And when you do, there's a reward waiting for you. Please understand: God isn't out to get you, he's out to bless you.

You're going to have all kinds of problems and trials and tests and temptations in your life, and your tendency might be to say, "God, why are you doing this to me?" He's not doing it to you. These things are a fact of life. Don't blame him for making you human. Instead, use this situation to receive his blessing. This is the principle of *favor*: even though we live in a difficult world, God is eager to bless us with good things.

Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights...In his goodness he chose to make us his own children by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his choice possession to love and encourage!

*1 Peter 5:7: "Casting all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you."*

Reality check number three: God isn't out to get you. He's out to bless you in every way!

## **Conclusion**

Even though life can be hard, temptations can be strong, and problems can be plentiful, God wants you to know the reality of his presence in your daily life.

There are some principles all Christian disciples must live by.

One is the principle of **endurance**: we hang in there because we know that our problems eventually work to our benefit.

A second is the principle of **dependence**: we live by God's resources and not our own, because we know and trust that He will give us what we really need most.

A third is the principle of **favor**: we can outlast trials and temptations because we know that God's always with us and His abundant blessings wait for each of us in His coming Eternal Kingdom of Peace and Love.

When problems come your way, they may distort your perception of reality. As often as is necessary, give yourself a reality check. Remind yourself that you belong to God and God our Father is always in control.

It is my hope that you will review these notes and scriptures for encouragement and better understanding of God's will for our lives as we seek to have Him live more fully in us and

through us.