

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

James 1:1-11, New Living Translation

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad.

Greetings!

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

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶ 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. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

⁹ Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. ¹⁰ And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. ¹¹ The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

Hating French people.

A number of years ago, when my mother was still alive and I was a professor, I was teaching a database systems class at the University of Colorado at Boulder. It was a graduate level class and one day, a woman from that class came to my office. I could tell that she was very angry about something the moment I looked

up at her. She sat down across my desk. She happened to be a very well-off student from France. She was dressed in a very elegant way that reminded me of my French mother. She also drove a brand-new Mercedes that her parents had bought for her and had delivered to the house they had rented for her in a very nice part of Boulder. She had a kind of snooty attitude – something that was NOT like my mother. I am changing details of this story to protect her privacy. I asked her what I could do for her. She then proceeded in a very loud voice to tell me that I had given her a C on an exam because she was French. She said that her exam should have gotten an A, and that if I weren't such a Xenophobe, I would have given her the grade she deserved. She said that she had already filed a formal complaint against me. This was very scary news: any kind of complaint of bias by a student is taken more than seriously. Universities are big on making sure that all students are happy at all times - and that nothing controversial could make it into the media. This was my problem to resolve – quickly. She then went on and on about how she could see my hatred for French people in my eyes and she knew from the beginning of the semester that I had it in for her because she was French. I waited for her to take a break from her tirade, and then instead of saying anything at all to her, I picked up my phone and called my mother. Now, my mother was of course French speaking; her parents were French, and she

grew up speaking French in school and at home. She identified heavily as being French. I spoke French as a small child but have forgotten most of it. In times of particular stress, though, if it is really needed, my French tends to come back to me. When my mother answered the phone, I said hello to her, in French, and I asked her how she was doing. My mother said that it was very nice that I was once again practicing my French. I told her that I had a selfish reason for speaking in French, that there was someone in my office that I would like her to talk to. Of course, while I was talking to my mother on the phone, this student, whom we will call Sophie, was sitting there with wide eyes. I told my mother that I had given a graduate student from France a C on an exam and that she was sitting in my office, very angry at me. I said that Sophie was under the impression that I had given her a C because I hate French people. I then gave the phone to Sophie - and I could hear my mother's loud voice being directed into Sophie's right ear.

I'd like to look at the Book of James, in particular the opening of the book, where the author introduces himself and offers a greeting to his readers. This is how it reads: *This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the "twelve tribes"—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!*² *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.* The author says that his name is James. Over the

many centuries since this was written, people have argued about the identity of this James. Is it James, the brother of Jesus? We have waxed and waned on whether we think this is true, and there is today a renewed belief that indeed, Jesus' kid brother wrote this. I'll get back to this in a moment, but first note a couple of things. This letter is representative of a flourishing early Jewish Christian church. In the very general ballpark of 50 to 150 A.D., it appeared there might be a major branch of the Jewish faith that would accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah. This fizzled out. Also, note that James calls himself a "slave of God". This was a common phrase for early Christians to use when identifying themselves. Now, who was *this* James? First, the names James and Jacob are related in Hebrew, and together, they were a very common name at the time. The evangelist Paul refers to James, the brother of Jesus as an "Apostle", and so this adds some credence to the idea that the letter was written by Jesus' brother. It's also recorded in Acts 15 that James was active in the Jerusalem Council, so Jesus' brother was clearly active in the early church. And since the letter is so strongly focused on non-Gentile believers, it would seem that the letter was written by a contemporary of Jesus, someone who lived before the explosion of the Gentile church. But since the letter was written in very polished Greek, if Jesus' brother did write it, he would have had to have gotten some help from a

much more literate person. It's highly unlikely that the son of a small village builder would have had the command of Greek necessary to write this document. Perhaps the biggest oddity, if this was truly written by the brother of our Lord, is that there are only two direct references to Jesus Christ in the entire book – and one of them is in the greeting. In truth, we will almost certainly never know for sure if the younger brother of the son of God wrote the Book of James.

The first truly content-full part of the letter written by James is verse 2 of Chapter 1. Here it is: ² *Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.* I did not think of this verse when the wealthy young woman from Paris was accusing me - in a voice that I am sure was heard many doors down the hall - of being a bigot who hated French people. Anyone in our society is very sensitized to this issue. If I had thought of this verse, maybe I would have been more relaxed as my mother lectured this woman in French. Maybe I would have remembered that it is part of Christian theology, part of who we are as believers, that we do not have to be rich, or healthy, or to have things go our way, in order to have joy. This is because our biggest source of joy comes from God. Simply having faith, knowing that God is with us every step of the way in life, reassures us and gives us confidence that everything will be fine, that we will be okay. My mother, whose name was

Annette Claire DuBois, spoke to this woman in a very loud voice; it might be more precise to say that she was yelling at Sophie in French. I could hear my mother say that she, my mother, was French herself. My mother said that her son did not hate his mother. She also wanted to know how the hell Sophie came up with this bizarre form of racism – hating French people? How about English people or folks from Arizona? Did Sophie’s professor hate them, as well? I’ll get back to this.

Looking at the Book of James again, if you’re wondering just what sorts of troubles James is referring to, we can’t be sure. But most likely he’s just speaking in general terms and is talking of the normal trials that face any person in life, including those that impact Christians, such as being shunned because of their beliefs or being put down by others because Christians tended to be poor and to not have much political clout. Several verses later in the Book of James, it says this: ⁹ *Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them.* ¹⁰ *And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field.* ¹¹ *The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.* Indeed, Sophie was rich. But the real point here is that James is saying that there are two kinds of poverty. One involves money and it is radically less important than the other –

the one that involves faith. You are far wealthier if you have faith, if you sincerely live your life in emulation of Jesus' life, than if you happen to have a lot of money. It's intriguing that this implies that society, economics, the stock market, all those things in life that we cannot control have nothing to do with true wealth. All of us are entirely in control of how rich we are. I have always liked the end of our quote. ¹¹ *The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.* It doesn't matter at all how much money you have, how much the world has honored you, how much you are envied – the instant you die. In fact, while many people do not outlive their money and manage to pass on riches to their children, most wealthy people do outlive the joy that money gives them.

I'd like to go back to my mother and Sophie. My mother spoke to Sophie somewhat longer than I might have expected. But finally, my mother fell silent, and Sophie handed the phone over to me. I put it to my ear – my mother had already hung up. I was about to say something along the lines of well, Sophie, I hope you realize now that I don't hate French people. But before I could speak, Sophie said: "I'm sorry, I was wrong. I was just so sure that the answers on my exam were right that I was looking for a reason for you to not give me full credit. I

have also been feeling like an outsider here in the U.S., and I guess I was sensitive to being French. I guess I deserve the C.” Now, I would have preferred that she had yelled her apology as loudly as she had yelled her accusations of bigotry, so that folks down the hall could hear it, but I was satisfied. I did ask her to please withdraw her complaint against me and to explain that she had been wrong. She did do this, and in fact, the next day, more than one professor teased me about being an anti-French racist. In the end, Sophie pulled her grade up and got such a high score on the class project and the final, that she got an A in the course.

Here’s the truth. In the end, I got a lot of joy out of a terrible moment. I have told this story many times. The hard part is having the perspective and the confidence to know that things will indeed work out. The longer it takes for a situation to be corrected, for God to replace pain with happiness, the greater that happiness. Jumping from the beginning to the tail end of James, we read this:

¹³ Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. ¹⁴ Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.

This tells us something very important about turning something horrible into something blessed. It says that we don’t have to sit around, praying to God and waiting in isolation for salvation. It says that we should lean on fellow believers.

That's why we belong to a church, why we attend church, why we are here every Sunday morning. That little thing we do during each service where we share our joys and concerns, where we ask for prayers and offer our prayers, is an extremely long-standing tradition that goes all the way back to the absolute earliest days of the Christian church. We lift each other up. We ask each other for help. We are not embarrassed. We're not ashamed that somehow, something that's not perfect has happened to us. No, not at all. The first step toward finding joy in our troubles lies in turning to the other members of our faith family. Leaning on fellow believers is a good way to get started on that path to joy, to knowing that God is in your life and is walking with you every step of the way. It's also nice when God brings a Sophie into our lives to remind us that we can find joy even in the midst of trouble. So please pray briefly with me.

God, give us the strength and the confidence to know that it is often through pain that we find you. Let us find joy even on very bad days. Let us live with humor and optimism. There will always be very bad things that happen in life. But most of the time, God, we know that it is our choice to trust you, to know that the negative things in life are engineered by you to give us strength so that when those occasional tragedies do happen, we find that we have a reservoir of faith to draw upon. Amen.