

How to Grow Your Life

Bible 101:

James 1:22-25

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It was bad! They suffered terribly. The cold was awful. The food was gone, disease rampant. At one point, the ration for individuals was five kernels of corn a day. Within the year, half the settlement died. These were mostly God-fearing people, people who read and believed the Bible. They individually and corporately acted in repentance and faith; and they prayed. Can you imagine your prayers? They were not sinless. They were not all mentally stable, but they sought God... and God answered before they even prayed. Fifteen years before they landed (even as some prayed about this journey), a native was captured and enslaved in Great Britain. There he worked for nine years and learned English. When he returned on a ship, he was betrayed by one of the ship's officers, and taken again as a slave to be sold in France. There some devout Christians rescued him, and somewhere in these European adventures he put his faith in Christ. Squanto, returning shortly before the Pilgrims landed, found that what the ship's officer meant for evil, God meant for good; for he was spared from a terrible plague that ravaged his tribe and decimated most tribes on the East Coast. A native friend led him to the Pilgrims who, after a severe winter and much prayer, were ready to receive him as God's agent to teach them how to grow corn, and find fish and eel. The Jamestown settlement with 90 percent mortality did not survive. Another colony of settlers mysteriously disappeared as well. This group, however, survived and then thrived. Only God knows why he brought his agent Squanto after such a severe winter and so much death. Perhaps, the Pilgrims' prayers were needed, or the

suffering made them receptive to a native. Maybe the democracy they formed and that we received had to be forged in such adversity. Whatever, America's first Thanksgiving resulted from God answering prayer, God saving and sending an American Indian with wisdom and love, and God growing a group of Pilgrims through the Scriptures.

It is fitting, then, to consider how to grow your life through the Bible on Thanksgiving weekend. In the past three weeks we've reflected on *How to Acquire God's Thoughts*, on *How to Restore Your Heart*, and on *How to Meet God* through means of the Bible.

Please open your Bible to James, chapter one [page 945 in the Pew Bible]. (*I hope you have a personal Bible that you read and mark up. If you wonder where to begin in reading the Bible, start with the Gospel of John; then proceed through the New Testament. If you have difficulty finding time to read, you might try a discipline like "no read, no feed." When I had trouble keeping the habit, I made a commitment that I would not have breakfast, lunch or supper until I read from the Bible. Soon, I started rising early enough to read and eat breakfast. Reading the Bible is such a habit with me now, that I no longer need that incentive. I think you could find that true also.*) Read verse two: "**Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy.**" How can you experience joy unless you focus on something greater than your trials? In fact, in the next verses the Bible teaches us that something good happens to us in our trials. The Bible imparts a different focus. Read verse 5: "**If you need wisdom, ask.**" We're to trust that God will give us perspective. Will God give it in a dream? Maybe. Will God give it in some new thoughts? Perhaps. Will God give it in words from somebody else? That's possible. However, God's thoughts are given to us in the Bible. God scripted his thoughts so that we would know what to think and do. Look at verse 9. Those who are poor are not defined by their poverty. In verse 10, those who are rich are not defined by their

wealth. In verses 12 through 16, neither God nor we are defined by our troubles. Troubles do not mean that we're bad, or is God evil. In verse 17 and 18 we learn that we are God's own children, his choice or prize possession, and that is true regardless of circumstance.

God handed this world over to us like a father hands his car over to his son. He gave us the keys. So like a son we are temporarily in control; and since we've been deceived by the evil one and acted in sin, that evil one temporarily dominates the scene. He tricks us with all kinds of temptation. Some are enticing. Some are intimidating. There are temptations to pride, greed, discouragement and rage. Consequently, we need to be careful about how we view and react to circumstances. They often mislead us. Turn now to verse 20:

Your anger can never make things right in God's sight. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the message God has planted in your hearts, for it is strong enough to save your souls. (James 1:20-21, NLT)

That term *message* is actually *word*. It refers to what God gives the Christian community that has been written and proclaimed. This word can wash our minds clear of thoughts that lead to destructive actions. Instead, it puts into us the thoughts of God that restore our hearts and open our eyes to God's presence. When acted upon in belief, this scripted word can lift us to be who we were created to be: God's children who become intimate with our Father and who bless the world we've been put in charge of.

Look now at verse 22. I'm going to read it from the New International Version.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. (James 1:22-24, NIV)

Did you know that the power of any counsel is not in knowing it, but in doing it? I wonder how many of us have read a ton of self-help books, but still have the same problems.

The key issue for all of us is not what we know with our minds, but what we do with our lives. Most children know that their parents want them to pick up after themselves. However, the children, who experience the pleasure of their parents, don't just know they're to pick up after themselves, they actually do it. Only the children, who actually do it, know the benefit of listening and obeying their parents.

Jesus stood out among all humanity not because he believed what was in the Scriptures – and it was Jesus that said that the Scriptures can't be broken (John 10:35). No, he stood out because in his believing he actually did what his father said and fulfilled the Scriptures in obedience and living.

When you and I fail to act on what we read, we quickly lose its value. It easily escapes our memory, and its true meaning is yet to be tested and discerned. We are like people looking in a mirror, doing nothing about it, and forgetting what we saw. Is our hair in place? Are our clothes on right? Is anything soiled or stained? Are we prepared for what we are about to face? All of that eludes us if we don't act when we look in the mirror? Similarly, we only deceive ourselves if we think we become like Jesus when we hear or read the word, but don't do anything differently. I really haven't helped you a bit, if you hear what I preach, but do nothing differently. Your study of the Bible does you no good if it doesn't end up in new behavior. Jesus' worst enemies read the Bible and knew each verse. They just didn't do what it said.

Last week, we heard that the most foundational truth is that God wants to be with us. The Bible reveals that our Creator and Father in heaven has reached with every muscle tensed, every ligament taut, with even the pain of rejection and death on the cross, God has reached out to be with you. God has not done all this to silently accompany you and witness your confusion or rebellion. He has not done this all so that he can watch you walk into walls, trample your

neighbor or fall over in pain. God did not do all of this so that Pilgrims who put their trust in him would be destroyed or succumb to despair. God did all of this for their joy and for yours. God has done this so that as you believe and obey, you experience the joy of growing as his beloved child. He has done all of this so that you share in the joy and destiny of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. So let's talk to him now:

God and judge of all, I've been wayward. I've been rebellious. I've been deceived. You rightfully judge me. Yet, that is not your pleasure. You want me forgiven. Forgive me and cleanse me of my sin. Fill me with the Spirit of Jesus. Open your heart and mind to me as I read and listen to the Scriptures, and help me in response take each step of faith and obedience that will grow me as your child in intimacy with you and in the business of your redeeming ministry; in Jesus name, Amen.