

## JAMES: TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

By Andrew Wilson  
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Luke 9: 57-62  
James 1: 1-8, 12

My wife Mary has a cousin in Ohio who runs a thriving family business. David Horth is not only a successful businessman, he's also a model husband and father and a key leader at his church.

David's company, ACME Construction, builds railroad lines. When business is slow, as it often is, ACME does earthmoving work at new construction sites.

David has everything going for him as a leader – he's smart, he's confident, he's likeable, he has decades of experience, and he knows how to balance risks and rewards. But most important of all, David is bursting with energy. When opportunities open up, he swoops in. When problems arise, he's all over them.

The last time I saw David a few years ago he was feeling both excited and stressed. The widening of the Panama Canal, he told me, would require increased shipping capacity on both coasts. That would require increased railroad capacity to haul goods from the ports, and, potentially, lots of new business for ACME.

"So how have things changed for you over the years?" I wanted to know. "In the old days your biggest challenge was competition from bigger companies. What's your greatest challenge today?"

David's answer hit me hard. He said, "Nobody wants to work."

"You mean in this rotten economy," I said, "with the unemployment rate pushing 10 percent, you have a *labor* problem?"

"Yep," he said. "I've actually got plenty of work for people who want to work. And I've got plenty of people who want jobs. But there isn't one person in 20 who's motivated to do what I need them to do."

David went on to describe the sobering reality he faces. "We require a drug test and that eliminates a lot of applicants right off the bat," he said. "Many of them haven't finished high school, but we don't require a diploma – I'm a lot more interested in the person's character and motivation. When our new hires first show up I tell them, 'We're going to start you off at \$17 an hour. I'm going to teach you everything you need to know to lay down track and make it in this industry. And at the end of 6 months, if you follow directions and put in a full day's work every day, I'm going to give you a \$10 raise.'"

I was amazed. I said, "You hire people who haven't finished high school at \$17 an hour, and you bump them up to \$27 an hour in less than a year."

"That's right," David said. "But as I said, most of them – the vast majority of them – just aren't willing to work. They come late to work – they hold back and let the older guys do the hard jobs – they grumble

and complain. That's the new normal. In the past people were motivated by the money, but not anymore. Now most of my new guys leave within a few weeks or months for lower paying jobs that don't require them to break a sweat. Or so they can collect unemployment."

I thought about that conversation for weeks afterwards. I don't want to believe that we've become a nation of slackers. I don't want to believe that what David is experiencing at ACME is the new normal for America. I know lots of ambitious young adults who are ready and able to work.

Yet there's plenty of evidence of a change in our culture. So many of today's parents have trouble getting their kids to do even the simplest household chores. Huge numbers of students go off to college not to learn and grow, but to party and hook up. Corporations complain that their new hires lack motivation, but expect high salaries and lots of time off.

Many older Americans are quick to pick up on these trends and to comment on them. But the signs of trouble point to people of all ages, and not just to Gen Xers and Millennials. Over the last six years, for example, the number of people who are either working or seeking work dropped from 66 percent to 62.8 percent. Put another way, there are more than 7 million fewer Americans working today than there were in 2008 in large part because many older Americans are choosing not to work. Over that same period, the number of people who rely on some form of federal aid has increased dramatically.

Meanwhile, there's also widespread evidence of a serious lack of discipline when it comes to money and personal finances. *Businessinsider.com* reports that half of Americans have less than one month's income saved for a rainy day. More shocking still is the fact that 61 percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck, up from 49 percent in 2010. More than one in 5 of those people earn over \$100,000 per year.

There are all kinds of reasons why ordinary Americans are struggling right now. Stagnant wages and rising costs are squeezing the middle class. Public schools receive more and more money, yet never seem to improve. Young adults are leaving college with mountains of debt. Entitlement costs are threatening to undermine our entire economy. Respect for government and other civic institutions is eroding.

I have strong opinions about the causes and solutions to all these problems. Most of you do as well. But I didn't stir all of this up so I could impose my views on you. The main point I want to make is that these issues aren't just political in nature. In other words, they aren't the sorts of problems that can be solved simply by getting the right party in power, or by implementing the right set of policies. Rather, at the most basic level, they're issues that relate to personal ethics and our relationship with God. What they reveal, I think, is that we're not taking responsibility for our lives. We're not doing the hard and scary things that lead to personal fulfillment and growth. Instead, more and more of us are passing our responsibilities off to other people and choosing the safe and easy road. And it isn't working.

James says we should "consider it pure joy" when we encounter roadblocks and we're tested to the limits of our strength. In 21<sup>st</sup> century America, those words sound pretty outrageous. Come to think of it,

they probably sounded outrageous to the Jewish Christians to whom James was writing. I mean, what kind of nut case rejoices when bad things happen, and everything suddenly gets more difficult?

James is trying to jerk our chain. He wants our undivided attention. He's setting up one of the main themes of his letter, and by the way, one of the vital themes of Jesus' teachings. Instead of viewing trouble as something bad that can only lead to unhappiness and misery, James argues, we should welcome it as an opportunity to grow. Trouble tests our faith; the testing of our faith produces perseverance; and perseverance enables us to become fully mature.

You might think it's twisted and masochistic to give thanks when trouble arrives, but don't get hung up on that opening blast. The logic of the argument that follows is sound. Our purpose in this life is to mature so we can live satisfying, productive lives. In Christian terms, it's to grow into the likeness of Jesus. But growth comes only when we're tested, and the only choice we have is to persevere or give up.

- Trees grow strong when a steady wind blows against them.
- Blades become sharp only when they're heated and filed.
- Children grow emotionally when they're forced to be around siblings who compete for their parents' attention.
- Runners get in shape by running farther and faster than their bodies would like to go.
- Musicians become virtuosos by concentrating for hours on end, to the point of mental exhaustion, on the techniques they haven't yet mastered.
- All of us grow in grace when we lose our job or our health – or our spouse abandons us – or our friends turn against us, *and we trust God anyway*.

James isn't saying we should go looking for trouble. Nor is he saying we should choose the hard way when there's an easier way to get to the same place. He's saying that when trouble comes, and when the only path that's open is the hard one, there's a right and a wrong way to respond. The wrong way is to shrink in fear, curse the darkness, or pass your responsibilities off to others. The right way is to call forth your inner resources, embrace your duty, and trust in God's strength and guidance.

Perseverance is a quality of the will that makes virtue possible. We may begin our walk with Christ with a meager supply of integrity, compassion or courage. But if we can just persevere in the tasks at hand – if we can just follow through on the simple assignment that's right in front of us, and then do it again, and again – eventually we'll grow in every virtue. A wise person once observed, "Today's mighty oak is yesterday's little nut that held its ground."

Jesus tells his disciples again and again to keep a steady focus on him, and on God's kingdom. In the Sermon on the Mount he warns us not to divide our loyalties: "'No one can serve two masters,' he says. 'A slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other'" (Matthew 6:24). In Luke, chapter 9, the Lord warns us not to get distracted from our work: "'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9: 62).

Most people who stop following Christ do so because the trail suddenly becomes difficult, and they get homesick and start to pine for their comfortable old habits and places. Maybe the journey didn't meet

their expectations. It wasn't how they imagined it was going to be. They were looking for drama and fireworks. They thought they'd be performing miracles. At the very least, they thought their worldly problems would be solved. But instead God led them on a 40-day march through the wilderness. They got hot, tired and sunburned. They became disappointed, disillusioned and disconnected. And they lost interest in the cause and went home.

If we want to persevere, we can't keep looking over our shoulder, wondering if we've made the right decision to follow Jesus. Over our lifetime, our journey with Christ will prove to be the greatest adventure we could ever hope for. But it isn't an endless picnic by a lake. It's sometimes more like a hot, steep, dusty scramble up a trail with no view that you think is never going to end. Living victoriously, in those times, means muscling through the pain or the monotony of the moment. It means taking one more step, and then another, and another, thinking only of the peak or the pass the lies ahead. As Winston Churchill observed, "Continuous effort – not strength or intelligence – is the key to unlocking our potential."

If we want to persevere, we also can't walk the trail alone. Often, like Frank Sinatra, we want to do it our way, but the Lord clearly intends for us to travel with others. He wants us to seek out people who are wise and strong and gifted who can help us. And he wants us to be there for others as they struggle on the trail. The go-it-alone strategy might work for a while, when the terrain is flat and easy and the weather is clear. But when things get rough it's a formula for failure.

Perseverance is a big theme in the book of Hebrews. In the eleventh chapter the writer celebrates the faith and perseverance of more than a dozen Old Testament heroes. Then, at the start of chapter 12, he brings his long argument to a conclusion. "Therefore," he says, "since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race that is marked out for us" (Hebrews 12: 1). His point is that God has provided us with lots of help – and we need all the help we can get. We should fix our eyes on Jesus, he says, because Jesus is the one who pioneers the trail (12: 2). But we should also look to the faithful but flawed God-lovers who have gone before us, and who now accompany us. They, too, are essential to our progress. God has sent them into our lives not only to keep us from falling, but also to infect us with their faith and their goodness.

All of this, I think, sheds light on our struggles as Americans. More and more of us are choosing the go-it-alone approach to spirituality. More and more of us are choosing to take what we think is the safe, easy, comfortable road to personal fulfillment. More and more of us feel entitled to happiness, and all of the blessing of a trouble-free, middle class life. But still, the battle is far from lost. We haven't yet become a nation of cream puffs. Most of us still admire those who persevere, and aspire to be like them. And if we learn nothing else from those intrepid souls, it's that, with God's help, we can become what we know we ought to be.

I want to end with an old story that some of you have heard told many times. The story of Lewis and Clark and their journey to the Pacific illustrates for us why perseverance has always been a uniquely American virtue. More than that, for Jesus followers the story can be seen as a parable about going against the flow and never looking back.

On July 2, 1803 President Thomas Jefferson received the news that Napoleon Bonaparte had agreed to sell the vast French Territory of Louisiana to the United States. With the Louisiana Purchase, the nation essentially doubled in size overnight. The cost to Congress was \$15 million, or about 3 cents per acre. The purchase included all of the modern day states along the Missouri River drainage as well as the Pacific Northwest. Most of the region had never been explored.

Jefferson was a naturalist and an adventurer to the core, and he ached to know more about the new territories. But Jefferson and hundreds of other statesmen and business leaders in America had another, more pragmatic reason for wanting to explore the region. Many suspected the Pacific Ocean could be reached along a route defined mostly by navigable rivers. If this were true – if the great Northwest Passage could be found – it would only be a matter of time before the American empire stretched across the continent.

The president lost didn't look very far a field in selecting someone to lead the journey. He authorized his trusted personal secretary, 28-year-old Meriwether Lewis, to prepare for the journey of a lifetime. Lewis had less than five years of formal education, but Jefferson arranged for him to receive tutorial training in botany, zoology, navigation, medicine and other technical fields from some of the nation's top scientists. He also secured a large budget for the project from Congress. Lewis chose his former commanding officer, Captain William Clark, as his companion and co-leader. As historian Stephen Ambrose notes, "Lewis knew that Clark's word was his bond, that is back was steel. [And] Clark knew the same about Lewis."

Imagine the excitement, the gratitude, and the sheer terror the two felt as they bought their supplies and assembled their team. They would be traveling without maps through territory that was known to be inhabited by hostile Indian tribes. They would be gone for at least a year and a half, possibly much more.

We know very little about the courageous troop of 30 young men who served under Lewis and Clark. We know them today as the Corps of Discovery. We get some idea of the physical stress they endured from the Captains' journals. We learn, for example, that they were working so hard during the long pull up the Missouri River that they were consuming an average of 10 pounds of meat per person, per day.

After the Corps' winter stay in present day North Dakota, a teenage Native American girl named Sacagawea joined them. She and her husband were brought along because of their linguistic skills, but Sacagawea proved to be useful in other ways. In fact, the journals of the Captains make it clear that the girl saved the entire party from total disaster on more than one occasion. Sacagawea was five months pregnant when she joined the Corps. Incredibly, she gave birth and carried her son with her throughout the entire western portion of the expedition.

The Corps of Discovery suffered enormously. During the spring and summer, mosquitoes were a constant source of aggravation. In present day South Dakota the Corps narrowly escaped massacre at the hands of the Teton Sioux. Farther northwest, Lewis had two terrifying encounters with grizzly bears. One of the bears attacked a whole party of armed men, and continued to chase after them as they fired

on him. It went into the river after one of them, and it certainly would have killed him had the men on the bank not continued to shoot at it. When they got the monster's dead body ashore they found it had taken 8 musket balls to stop it.

Many other obstacles threatened the mission. Diarrhea and fever struck one man after another. It took the Corps nearly a month to portage around the series of waterfalls on the Missouri in western Montana. Pushing with all their might, walking up cliffs and over prickly pear cactus, their progress slowed to a crawl. At one point during the portage they were bloodied by hail balls the size of apples.

When the Corps left the Missouri and headed into the mountains on the border of present day Montana and Idaho, the game that had been so plentiful on the plains seemed to disappear. During their long trek over the snowy passes of the Bitterroot Range they came close to starvation. They were saved by the Nez Pierce Indians, who befriended them, and traded with them, and guided them to the Columbia River.

At long last, they made it to the Pacific. They spent the second winter of their two-and-a-half year journey on the Oregon coast. Some of the team fell in love with the Western mountains and stayed there to explore and seek their fortunes in the fur trade. Most of them traveled all the way back to St. Louis.

What an awesome journey it had been! They had traveled over 4,000 miles. They had passed through a land of breathtaking beauty. They had gathered dozens of specimens of plants and animals that were completely unknown to science. They had mapped a good portion of the northern and western reaches of the Louisiana Purchase. And, to the great disappointment of their president, they had discovered that there was no easy water route to the Pacific shore.

There were a few basic reasons why the journey of Lewis and Clark was such an astonishing success.

The first reason was that they had been commissioned in their service by Thomas Jefferson. Every person in the Corps of Discovery understood that the President himself was counting on them, and rooting for them, and thinking about them every day. That had to be wonderfully inspiring to them.

The second reason the mission was successful was because Corps had been mobilized to work as a military team. They never could have made it to the Pacific and back by themselves. Each individual depended on the entire group for survival. They conducted themselves with the seriousness of a platoon engaged in battle. Lewis and Clark were brilliant leaders and excellent disciplinarians. And the one who seemed to be the least among them – the teenage Indian girl named Sacagawea – proved to be the most valuable team member of all.

There was one more reason the mission was a success – the most important one of all. Once they left the safety and comfort of St. Louis, *the Corps of Discovery never looked back*. As they pulled from sunrise to sunset against the Missouri's powerful current, they worried about the dangers that lay ahead. At times they doubted they'd be able to survive the physical stress. But the river itself helped them to

focus. The challenge it presented was gigantic, but they learned that it was manageable as long as they faced it one day at a time.

The journey of life presents us with choices every day. Are we going to join the crowd that's drifting comfortably downstream? Or are we going to head upstream, against the current, and into the strange new world God wants to show us? That was the choice God gave Abraham when he told him to leave his birthplace and head to a new land that he was going to give him. That was the choice he gave the Hebrew people as they wandered in the wilderness, searching for their homeland. That was the choice Jesus gave his disciples when he invited them to follow him. And that's the choice the Lord gives us every morning as we wake up and get out of bed.

If the thought of leaving home scares you, remember that you've been called and commissioned by the Lord himself.

If you feel overwhelmed by the work the Lord has assigned to you, remember that you aren't working alone. We're all part of a mighty army. Working together, we can do far more than we could ever hope or imagine. Empowered by the Spirit, our corps is an unstoppable force.

And on those days when you feel weak, and you find yourself looking back, refocus your attention on Jesus. He's the true pioneer. He's the one who perfects our faith. He'll get you up the river, over the mountain, and through the valley so that when the journey is ended, and your work is done, your life will bring glory and honor to the one who sent you in the first place.

The journey of Lewis and Clark doesn't hold a candle to the one God has prepared for us. It's an awesome journey that leads beyond this life, into the boundless regions of eternity. And God is using every setback and every challenge to prepare us for it.

So fix your hand to the plow or the tiller and don't look back. Keep to your post, do your work to the best of your ability, and let the Spirit carry you. If you can manage that, some day the Lord himself may say of you what Thomas Jefferson said of Captain Meriwether Lewis [PAPER]:

Of courage undaunted, possessing a firmness and perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction... steady in the maintenance of order and discipline... of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves – with all these qualifications as if selected and implanted by nature in one body, for this express purpose, I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him.

PRAY WITH ME NOW THIS PRAYER OF ST. AUGUSTINE:

*God of life,  
there are days when the burdens we carry  
are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down,  
when the road seems dreary and endless,  
when the skies are gray and threatening,*

*when our lives have no music in them  
and our souls have lost their courage.  
Flood the path with light,  
turn our eyes to where the skies are full of promise;  
tune our hearts to brave music;  
and so enliven our spirits  
that we may encourage  
the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life,  
to your honor and glory.  
Amen.*