OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

The Basis for Steadfastness

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As we think about how James connects steadfast faith to perfection and completeness ([1.2-4](#)), we wonder what it should look like. Is it something we can exhibit from the beginning of our Christian walk, or does it develop over time? Is there room in steadfastness for failures? For hard questions? For occasionally wondering what God is doing in our lives and why? Are we still being steadfast when, despite our fierce determination to do right, we keep struggling with the same sins?

It would help to have an example of steadfast faith, wouldn't it? Paul and James apparently thought so for both referred to Abraham as a model and recalled the statement in Genesis 15.6 that he "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Paul quoted that verse in two contexts (Rom 4.3, 22; Gal 3.6); James quoted it just once but added that Abraham was thus called the "friend of God" (Jas 2.23; cf. 2 Chr 20.7; Isa 41.8). Since his elaboration on Abraham's example in chapter 2 shows that James thought him worthy of emulation, it is reasonable for us to think about what his faith was like as we look for a model for our steadfastness.

We first observe that Abraham's faith did not always involve unquestioning perfection. His fear of physical harm led him to lie about his wife's identity—twice (Gen 12.11-13; 20.1-2, 11). His impatience led him to ask God to let his servant Eliezer be his heir; of interest is that this

proposal appears in the same context where we read that his belief was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15.2-3, 6).

When told his wife Sarah would give birth to a son at age 90, he "fell on his face and laughed," incredulous at the very idea that "Sarah, who is ninety years old [would] bear a child" (Gen 17.17). After being warned about Sodom's impending destruction, he wondered about the kind of God he was serving (Gen 18.25).

Even when he offered Isaac, the event James referenced when he cited Genesis 15.6, Abraham was "reasoning" about what God was doing (Heb 11.19). "Reasoning" (λογίζομαι; *logizomai*) was a mathematical and accounting term which meant "to reckon or calculate; to think about, consider, ponder, let one's mind dwell on; or to think, believe, or be of an opinion" (Bauer 2000, 597-598).

When we step back to look at Abraham's decades-long faith journey in its entirety, we see a man whose life looks much like ours. We learn that it is possible to live a life of steadfast faith and still experience failures, deal with struggles, give in to temptation, and ask hard questions. So, if these things are not inherently excluded from steadfastness, what should it look like? In what is in effect an elaboration on steadfastness in action, James answers in 1.5-12, noting: (1) the basis of steadfastness, (2) the commitment it requires, (3) the attitude we need in order to be steadfast, and (4) and its ultimate goal.

We turn now to the first of these.

The Basis for Steadfastness (1.5)

James is well known for emphasizing personal action and accountability, but he is also clear that steadfast faith is rooted in dependence on God. Although he says trials should lead to a steadfastness that has its full effect in perfection and completeness that lacks nothing, he acknowledges that we often find ourselves lacking the wisdom we need to cope with our trials (Jas 1.4-5). We can elaborate more, but it is sufficient to say that "wisdom, generally speaking, is skill at life, particularly the ability to make sound judgments and speak the right words." As used by James it "is not just skill at life, however, but the divinely given ability to live in a godly way" (McCartney 2009, 88).

So, James says, if we want to fully develop steadfastness and grow closer to the perfection and completeness he envisions, we "must ask"—another of James's imperative verbs (from αἰτέω; *aiteō*)—God. As wisdom's true supplier, he is the source we really need. Furthermore, because God is who he is, we can be confident that when we ask, he "gives to all without reservation [or

'unmixed motivation'] or shaming" (Jas 1.5b; my translation of the adverb ἁπλῶς, *haplōs,* and the participle ὀνειδίζοντος, *oneidizontos*).[1]

McCartney notes that *haplōs* in verse 5 is intended to contrast with "the 'doubleness' of the doubter in 1:8" and then comments,

> The point is that unlike the giving done by many humans, God's giving is not devious; it is without complications or double-dealing; it comes "without strings attached," "without reservation." … Whatever nuance is intended, God's giving stands in contrast to that of pagan deities, whose gifts frequently came with twists and undesirable consequences. God's gift is sincere, openhanded, and free of hidden motives or trickery (McCartney 2009, 89).

James's exhortation to steadfastness, or consistency in endurance, is thus grounded in the character of God. His promises are sure, his gifts are consistent, and his desire for us to be in relationship with him is pure. Consequently, we know that when we remain steadfast, we will be rewarded, no matter how severe our trials or intense our temptations.

Works Cited

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV

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[1] In translating the adverb ἁπλῶς (*haplōs*) "without reservation" ("generously" in ESV) I am following Bauer whose first definition of the word is, "pert[ains] to being straightforward, *simply, above board, sincerely, opening* of guileless response to someth[ing] that arrests one's attention." He then suggests the translation, "without reservation" in James 1.5 (Bauer 2000, 104). See also Danker 2009, 43, who defines *haplōs*, "with unmixed motivation" and parenthetically adds "with μὴ ὀνειδίζειν *without shaming*." Elsewhere, Danker defines the verb ὀνειδίζω (*oneidizō*), "find fault with in demeaning fashion" (Danker 2009, 252).