

Faith and Wisdom

Bible Background • JAMES 1:1–11

Printed Text • JAMES 1:1–11 | Devotional Reading • ISAIAH 40:1–8

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: CONSIDER the relationship between wisdom and perseverance through trials, AFFIRM the value of trials and hardships in making us more wise and productive disciples, and PRAY for godly wisdom by which to endure life's trials and temptations.

In Focus

Cornelius' ancestors were careful keepers of their family history. His great-grandmother inscribed their family tree onto the pages of a large Bible, and his grandfather continued to add to it. Cornelius was amazed to see his name written on a family tree that stretched back to the 1840s. The African Diaspora consists of millions of people like Cornelius whose ancestors were stolen from the Motherland for the Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade. Their faith gave them strength and their experiences gave them wisdom to pass on to successive generations. The first name on Cornelius' family was a man named John who was born a slave in the 1840s. John became a Christian after he was freed from slavery. The church operated a school that taught John to read and write. Eventually, John became a preacher, and the church paid for his college education. John organized schools so that other people could attain college educations. Cornelius is a member of his ancestor John's church and attended a historically black college that his ancestor helped support. Cornelius learned that faith and wisdom can help believers overcome life's trials. What wisdom was passed down to you through the experiences of your ancestors?

What wisdom have you learned through your own experiences? What role did faith in God have in your ancestors' experiences and your own experiences?

Keep in Mind

“If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking” (James 1:5, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Temptations (v. 2) *peirasmos* (Gk.) — Trials that have a goal in mind

B. Entire (v. 4) *holokleros* (Gk.) — An animal that can be used for sacrifice or a priest who can represent the people

Say It Correctly

Diaspora. dee-ASS-purr-uh.

Pax Romana. POX roe-MAH-na.

KJV

James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

6 But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

7 For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.

8 A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:

10 But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away.

11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.

NLT

James 1:1 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.

The People, Places, and Times

Diaspora. This term is used in biblical writing to refer to the Jews who were scattered abroad and living outside of Israel. Owing to the Assyrian invasion of Israel and the Babylonian exile from Judah, the twelve tribes of Jews were dispersed and settled in the civilized countries of the world at that time yet remained connected to the mother country.

Compare and contrast the Jewish Diaspora with the African Diaspora.

Background

The epistle of James teaches its readers that behavior should reflect belief. It is composed of short sayings that are reminiscent of those found in the Wisdom Literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. According to some scholars, the sayings are organized by “minor association of thought or language,” which contrasts with much of Paul’s writings that are intentionally sequenced to build one unifying argument. Thus, the structure of the epistle of James does not allow us to easily define the main idea of the text. However, James 1:22 seems to

aptly describe the aim of the epistle when it instructs its readers to “be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

” Many scholars believe that the epistle’s writer is James, the half-brother of Jesus. The epistle itself does not include any biographical information that directly identifies its writer as the half-brother of Jesus. However, the writer’s chosen title may offer an indirect connection. The writer identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The title is unique in the Bible insofar as it is the only time that two very common titles are coupled together. The Old Testament includes several people who are described as “servants of God.” New Testament personages are often described as “servants of the Lord Jesus Christ” or some variation of the title. The unique title employed in the epistle’s salutation may reflect the ministry of James to the Jewish Christian community.

What does it tell you about Christian leadership that the most influential apostles call themselves servants?

At-A-Glance

1. To the Diaspora, Rejoice! (James 1:1)
2. Joy In The Midst of Trial and Difficulty (vv. 2–4)
3. The Way to Wisdom: Prayer (vv. 5–8)
4. The Poor Shall be Raised (vv. 9–11)

In Depth

1. To the Diaspora, Rejoice! (James 1:1)

The epistle is addressed to the Christian Jewish Diaspora. The “twelve tribes which are scattered” is a reference to the children of Israel who live outside of Palestine. By the first century AD, there were many Jewish communities outside of Palestine. Many of the oldest communities were comprised of the descendants of slaves who were dislocated from their homeland during the Assyrian conquest and Babylonian captivity. The youngest communities were comprised of Jews who used Roman roads to settle in centers of commerce made possible by the Pax Romana peace. The diaspora is a diverse array of people separated by empire and experience but united by race and religion. The verse concludes with the usual salutation of the time which most translations render as “greetings.” However, it is worth noting that this word literally means “rejoice, be glad.”

2. Joy In The Midst of Trial and Difficulty (vv. 2–4)

James addresses his readers as “brothers” (or “brothers and sisters”). Many Bible commentaries note that he is the brother of Jesus, but he chooses to emphasize that he is the brother of all believers. James demonstrates that the spiritual closeness of those in Christ can conquer the vast geographical distances that separate the scattered diaspora.

He returns to the idea of joy in verse two. However, this time he complicates the idea of joy by adding in sorrow. He adds the troubles of life, but he does not detract the imperative to be glad. From the standpoint of Jewish Wisdom Literature, experiencing the good and the bad of life are occasions when people learn more about God and self. James articulates this viewpoint when he says that trials are testing of faith, an exercise that strengthens faith over time, like a muscle. James’ perspective on trials’ producing character is also reminiscent of Paul (Romans 5:3) and of Peter (1 Peter 1:6).

3. The Way to Wisdom: Prayer (vv. 5–8)

James now turns his attention to wisdom. In the previous section, we can already see that he is influenced by Jewish Wisdom Literature. In this passage, we see the strong connection between wisdom and faith. James

writes that wisdom is attainable from God through prayer to anyone who asks in faith. He issues a stark admonition to the doubter, whom he calls “double minded.” This term is unique in the New Testament and ancient Greek literature. Some biblical scholars believe that James coined the term. The meaning is clear enough, though, referring to people who cannot choose between two mutually exclusive choices.

4. The Poor Shall be Raised (vv. 9–11)

James makes a third turn in the text. He now turns to the subject of poverty and riches. Most of his readers would have identified with the former social location. James assures them that God will not only raise the oppressed, but He will also bring down the oppressor. It is a complete reversal of fortunes, and God stands on the side of His people, especially the oppressed.

Search the Scriptures

1. How does James’ understanding of endurance in this passage compare or contrast with Paul’s understanding in Romans 5:3–4?
2. Where does James advise looking for wisdom?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Discuss the meaning of wisdom. How does wisdom in the epistle of James compare to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Job?
2. The epistle of James has a focus on connecting belief to behavior. Are there any teachings that you believe, but find it difficult to practice?
3. James teaches that whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy. Is it truly possible to remain joyful in any trial? What are the most difficult trials that you have had in your life, and what can you do in those situations to be joyful? Does James offer any hint on how to remain joyful?

Liberating Lesson

The African Diaspora is like the Jewish Diaspora in several ways. First, God is a liberator. Both diasporas experienced the bondage of slavery but were freed. Nevertheless, as James notes in his passages on poverty and persecution, the diasporas are not free from oppression.

The epistle of James is refreshingly practical in its advice to Christians, particularly those who feel the bitter pangs of oppression. God our Liberator remains on the side of His oppressed people, and God is still speaking to them.

The epistle of James, though addressed to a different diaspora, speaks to the descendants of Africa and tells us to rejoice, have patience, and endure because the oppressor will wither away.

Application for Activation

Many people do not create time in their day to reflect on their life experiences, nor do they pray for wisdom from it. Over the next week, please try to reflect on your life and your community.

Take time every day this week to reflect on your experiences the past day and pray that God will grant you wisdom. Additionally, take time each night to reflect on the collective experiences of a group that you belong to and pray that God will grant you wisdom. Remember, while reflection is important, wisdom is an exercise of faith!

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

James 1:1–11

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

Many Bible scholars agree that this James is the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus was here on earth, James was not a believer. However, here he calls himself a servant (Gk. *doulos*, DOO-loce) not only of God but also of Jesus Christ. It is significant to note that he calls himself just a servant. Paul also calls himself both a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ (see Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1). A servant or bond slave had no right or wish of his own. He only wished to do his master's bidding. James writes to Jews who believe in Jesus Christ and are "scattered" or in different parts of the Roman Empire. Today the recipients of this letter also include Christians around the world.

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

James calls the recipients of the letter "brethren" (Gk. *adelphoi*, ah-dell-FOY). The use of this word here shows that there is intimacy between James and the readers. The closeness is made stronger by the use of the personal pronoun "my" (Gk. *mou*, MOO), which could have been left out. They all belonged to the same family. James says, "Count [reckon, calculate, or consider] it all joy." To count indicates a conscious decision of the mind to understand the situation. James is not saying that temptations are pleasurable. Instead, he says the readers should see them as beneficial. This requires an act of the mind. The Greek word translated "fall into" (*peripipto*, peh-ree-PEEP-toe) is more literally rendered "surrounded by." Temptations (Gk. *peirasmos*, pay-rass-MOCE) actually means trials that have a goal in mind. Thus, to "fall into divers temptations" means to be surrounded by trials or tests that are intended to strengthen rather than trip us up and cause us to fail. It is in light of this understanding that James says these trials should be welcome—"count it all joy." The nature of the temptations is not described, but the word "divers" suggests they could include all kinds of things.

3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

The word "knowing" introduces another instruction for using the mind. Know in your mind, not experientially, that the "trying [testing] of your faith" will result in finding it to be genuine. By using "knowing," James teaches that we are not to respond to our sufferings with our body, but with our mind. Likewise, when we respond to trials emotionally, the outcome may not be God-glorifying. The word for "trying" is *dokimion* (doh-KEE-me-own) in Greek. It is also used to describe the process of qualifying gold as a standard (cf. Proverbs 27:21). It refers to something that has been tried and found to be authentic or of solid character. A faith that is tested and found genuine results in patience. Patience here is not a passive attitude. Instead, it is active endurance, which suggests that if one bears suffering well, one will become stronger.

4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

The full working of patience leads to three things: (1) perfection, (2) wholeness, and (3) wanting nothing or not lacking anything. Becoming perfect (Gk. teleios, TEH-lay-occe) involves a particular goal. Thus, if borne well, trials will make the bearer of them perfect. This is not sinless perfection; it means maturity and the ability to take on honorable tasks for God because the person has proven to be of solid character. The word “entire” (Gk. holokleros, hoe-LOW-klay-roce) is used to describe an animal that can be used for sacrifice or a priest who can represent the people. It conveys the idea of a thing complete in all its parts. Thus, it refers to the Christian who has overcome those things that may disqualify him or her from ministry. The phrase “wanting nothing”—not one thing left behind or lacking—is another description of maturity. These three things are not to be seen as three levels of maturity but different pictures given to capture the same truth.

5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

Those who have not yet attained perfect patience may still lack (Gk. leipo) wisdom. The word “wisdom” (Gk. sophia, sow-FEE-uh) is not merely knowledge. It is the ability to apply knowledge. Wisdom gives a believer a sense of direction that will help him or her know how to respond to trials in a way that will lead to maturity. Wisdom comes from God (cf. Proverbs 2:6). Similar to Jesus’ promise, “Ask, and it shall be given you” (from Matthew 7:7), God gives wisdom to all “liberally” (Gk. haplos, hah-PLOCE). This word refers to a simplicity and singleness of mind, thereby suggesting that God gives wisdom generously, willingly, and wholeheartedly. He does not give conditionally, recalling our past sins, nor does He constantly remind us how indebted we are to Him for such a great gift. The phrase “upbraideth not” indicates that God will not deride us for our need, but that He delights to give and gives with no strings attached.

6 But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

James now talks about how we are to ask God for this gift of wisdom. This verse can also serve as a guide to help us to pray properly. The word for “wavering” or “doubt” in Greek conveys the idea of a person debating with himself. His mind is not made up. This is a clear contrast to God, who is single-minded (cf. haplos, v. 5). The wavering person is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. The wave does not have constancy. It is at the mercy of the wind. So is the person who doubts. He or she is unstable, without conviction or a sense of direction. Even though this person prays to God, he or she does not have confidence in God. Wavering and doubting here is not due to weakness, ignorance, or immaturity. It is a choice to doubt God because of the attraction of other things, the desire for immediate gratification, or other reasons.

7 For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. 8 A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

A person who prays and then wavers or doubts should not deceive himself by thinking that he is going to receive a response from the Lord. The word “think” in this verse plays into the same rational or correct mindset that James appealed to earlier (vv. 2–3). In other words, any thinking person ought to know the end of such wavering is no answer from the Lord. The term “double minded” (Gk. dipsuchos, DEEP-soo-koce) referring to man literally means double-souled and is analogous to a dual personality. The unstable man is the believer who wants to enjoy God’s blessings of joy and inner peace (v. 2), but also enjoy the sinful pleasures of this world. This condition of “double-mindedness” is serious because it carries over into other areas of a person’s life. In contrast, the pursuit of God must become the sole goal of every believer.

9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: 10 But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. 11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.

This piece of wisdom seems to echo the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 6:19–21; Luke 6:20–25) and Paul (2 Corinthians 8:9); indeed the poor are the recipients of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3), much more valuable than the earthly riches that can be accumulated in this life. Earthly wealth is not bad or evil itself, but it is unwise to trust in earthly riches. Earthly riches are temporary, and those who gain them by unjust means will see them lost just as easily. It is difficult for the rich who trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God as Jesus says (Mark 10:24). Wealth can easily become an idol, but the poor in spirit recognize God alone should be worshiped and served. There is also an embedded assumption here that the rich people that James is speaking about are gaining or maintain their riches by injustice whether actively or passively. Participating in unjust systems for personal gain is just as much sin as committing personal injustice. Flowers are only beautiful for a season, depending on the weather and environment they are in. In the same way, being rich in the world's view looks good for a season and depends on the environment, and their wealth and their status will pass away.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Suffering on Behalf of the Church
(Colossians 1:24–29)

TUESDAY

Saved by God's Mercy
(Titus 3:3–7)

WEDNESDAY

Ask: God Will Supply Your Needs
(Luke 11:9–13)

THURSDAY

Rejoice in Your Sufferings
(Romans 5:1–5)

FRIDAY

God's Loving Actions Toward Sinners
(Romans 5:6–11)

SATURDAY

Grass Withers But God's Word Stands
(Isaiah 40:1–8)

SUNDAY

Wisdom Overcomes Trials and Temptations
(James 1:1–11)