

James

Lesson 1

James 1:1-18

Participant Guide

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Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. *James 1:2-3*

Prayers

Introduction

Who was James? There are four people named James mentioned in the gospels; The apostle James who was the brother of John (a.k.a. the Sons of Thunder), the apostle James son of Alphaeus, James the son of Mary (wife of Cleopas), and James the brother of Jesus. James, the brother of Jesus is the mostly likely writer of the letter of James. James, the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55), was a prominent leader in Jerusalem (Acts 15:3, Acts 21:18). James spoke with Peter at the Council of Jerusalem (about 49 AD) and refuted claims that Gentile Christians needed to live under Jewish laws to be considered Christian. Instead, he instructed Paul and Barnabas to tell Gentiles to abstain from food sacrificed to idols and from sexual immorality.

James wrote his letter to encourage Jewish Christians who were suffering and persecuted. The stress of their trials was becoming evident in their lives, so James encouraged them to stop quarreling, reign in their tongues, and stop showing favoritism to the rich over the poor. He admonished the rich who were rich at the expense of their workers who were poor and had not been paid. He told the exploiters that misery awaited them. James encouraged Christians to live righteously with examples of holy living versus unholy living. James is probably best known for practical advice on living during trials and suffering, taming the tongue, combining faith with works of action, and praying for the sick.

Martin Luther harshly criticized James, calling it a work of straw and a labyrinth where Jesus was lost. Luther thought James 3:17, "faith by itself, if not accompanied by action is dead," was too similar to the idea of salvation by works, a corrupted view of the gospel taught by the medieval Catholic Church. Today, most Christians regard James' view as simply in keeping with Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan and the command to love your neighbor.

There are no historical references in James to date the letter. Given its message to Jewish Christians, it is likely that James was the first letter to the early churches. Scholars argue for dates ranging between 45 to 60 AD based on references to the suffering of Jewish Christians. The Jewish church was long-suffering. Persecution started immediately following Jesus' death in 30 or 33 AD. Paul, after his conversion, brought an offering to relieve the suffering during the famine of 44-46 AD that struck Jerusalem during the reign of Claudius. Paul also brought an

offering from Macedonia and Greece to James for the poor in Jerusalem before his arrest there in 55-58 AD.

Read James 1:1-18

Jas 1:1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

Trials and Temptations

Jas 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

Jas 1:3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Jas 1:4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Jas 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

Jas 1:6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

Jas 1:7 That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

Jas 1:8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

Jas 1:9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

Jas 1:10 But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

Jas 1:11 For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Jas 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Jas 1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

Jas 1:14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.

Jas 1:15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Jas 1:16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

Jas 1:17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

Jas 1:18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

1. What can we infer about James in his simple introduction in verse 1?

James needed no introduction! He must have been well-known and only needed to identify himself as James. Being humble, he did not mention he was the brother of Jesus, which would have been well known, only that he was his servant.

2. James uses the Greek word “doulos” to describe himself. The word means “slave” but is translated as “servant” because of the strong negative image slave in our society. James, Paul, John, and Peter all describe themselves as a “doulos” to Christ. Discuss what the church leaders were trying to convey about their life using this description. See also Romans 6:17-18 “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness”.

A slave is totally under the control of their master. Formerly they were under the control of sin, but now they were under the control of the Son of Righteousness. Perhaps this was most clear to Paul, who was complicit in the murder of early Christians. Paul writes that we are all slaves to something. We can continue without Christ as slaves to sin – selfishness, fear, prejudice, and all manner of self-indulgence or we can be slaves to Christ in freedom, charity, life, and all goodness. Being in Christ is not a servitude of force but of devotion. Lord, have mercy when we fail to acknowledge your lordship!

3. James uses the full title of Jesus in his introduction, the Lord Jesus Christ. What meaning does each word convey?
 - a. Lord – **emphasizes his rule over our lives and his position as the creator of the universe.**
 - b. Jesus – **emphasizes the humanity of our Lord. He knows our struggles and weaknesses and loves us.**
 - c. Christ – **emphasizes his position as the Savior of the world.**
4. As time permits, look up references to James in the following passages
 - a. Matthew 13:55, Jude 1:1

James was Jesus’ brother. Other siblings were Joseph, Simon, Judas (author of Jude), and sisters.

- a. Mark 3:20-21, John 7:3-5

James and his brothers and sisters thought Jesus was mad during his ministry. They even encouraged him to go to Jerusalem, where they knew the Jewish leaders were planning to kill him!

- b. 1 Corinthians 15:7

Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection.

- c. Acts 1:14, Galatians 1:1

James became a disciple and worshiped with Mary and the other disciples after Jesus' resurrection.

d. Acts 15:12-21

James was the leader who spoke with Peter at the Council of Jerusalem (about 49 AD) and who refuted claims that Gentile Christians needed to live under Jewish laws. Instead, he instructed Paul and Barnabas to tell Gentiles to abstain from food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.

5. In verse 1, James addresses his letter to the Jewish nation by referencing the 12 tribes scattered among the nations. The 12 tribes refer to the sons of Israel (Jacob). The tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were virtually obliterated and scattered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. Only the southern tribes of Judah, Levi, and Benjamin remained, but they were scattered and carried into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Many returned from exile 70 years later.

What does James' reference reveal about his primary audience and what was happening at the time of his writing?

James' primary audience was probably Jewish Christians who were under persecution from their fellow Jews (like Paul's early persecution of the church) and were being scattered - fleeing Jerusalem to escape persecution.

6. The primary theme of verses 1-18 is facing trials with perseverance and faith. What challenges did new Christians in Jerusalem face?

James does not need to list the trials the early Christians faced – they were living them!

7. James' message of facing trials with joy contrasts dramatically with the modern Christian message of receiving God's eager blessing through wealth, prosperity, and comfort. Paul's message to the Romans is very similar: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:3-5).

What benefit comes from trials (James 3-12)?

- a. Verse 3 **perseverance**
- b. Verse 4 **perseverance produces maturity**
- c. Verse 5 **wisdom**
- d. Verses 6-8 **faith**

- e. Verse 9, 12 **humility, recognition that God loves him in his humble circumstances and is preparing him for true riches - eternal life**
 - f. Verse 12 **eternal life**
8. James links wisdom to trial and suffering. How are these related? Also, consider the following scriptures:
- a. Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails (Proverbs 19:21).
 - b. Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).
 - c. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:3-4).
 - d. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you (Psalm 32:8).
 - e. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:7-8).

We learn we are not really in control of our lives when our world comes crashing down around us. Recognizing God's sovereignty in your life is the beginning of wisdom. But there was more. There was also learning of God's provision, love, and comfort. He may have comforted you through his Spirit or sent someone to walk alongside you as an encourager.

Trials can strip away all your best-made plans. The Christians in Jerusalem faced tremendous difficulties – job loss, rejection by friends or family, physical threats, and hunger – to name a few. Should they move away from Jerusalem or stay? How were they going to provide for their families? Should they compromise their Christian faith in silence or return to Judaism? No easy answers. James tells them to ask for wisdom and believe God will provide it.

9. What is the difference between a trial and a temptation?

God uses both trials and temptations to refine our faith. Temptations come from our desires, whereas we think of trials as external circumstances. The Spirit led Jesus to be tempted in the wilderness at the beginning of his public ministry. The temptation was not out of an evil desire but so that he would be “tempted in every way, just as we are” (Hebrews 4:15). Paul wrote that temptations are common to man; you are not the only one struggling with any given issue. God promises to provide a way to stand out so you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Paul’s life illustrates the trials he faced. Twenty verses list Paul’s trials; prison, beatings, shipwrecks, constant danger, hunger, cold, and many others. He shared his learning from his trials in 2Corinthians 12:10, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

10. James describes a familiar cycle of temptation in verses 14-15, “¹⁴but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”.

- a. What are the stages?

Desire, enticement in secret, sin, spiritual death

- b. What are some examples

Some examples of the downward cycle of sin would be lying to cover up some other sin in your life. The sin grows, and the lies become ever more complex and frequent. Recreational drug use leading to addiction, peer pressures can lead to increasingly more dangerous behaviors and crime, or a seemingly harmless flirtation leading to adultery.

- c. Once you recognize the cycle of temptation in your life, how can you better prepare for it and prevent it?

The starting point is recognizing that we are hopelessly weak in our own self-will and cannot change ourselves spiritually. Pray for help from the Holy Spirit; spiritual renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Everyone has different spiritual battles, but we all want to keep them secret. Recognize the temptation and remove it or yourself from the environment where the temptation is secret. For example, many men suffer from pornography addiction and have a private space, a “man cave,” a dangerous combination of temptation and privacy. Some constructive moves would be to move the computer into another room in the house, leave the door open the man cave, remove porn channels from the cable TV subscription, and ask your wife to review the monthly bill to see the pay-per-view choices. Journaling, prayer, devotions, and small group accountability are other tools to remind us that we are God’s children and are called to holy living.

Some addictions, like alcohol, drugs, gambling, and violence, require professional intervention and support.

11. Verse 15 ends with temptation leading to death in sin but is followed by every good gift! Discuss some of the good gifts you have received from God.

I think it is interesting that James follows trials with gifts. I have also received some of the most wonderful gifts of my life through the brokenness of trials. Paths ended, and new directions opened. God's blessings span the full spectrum of our lives; spiritual, eternal, material, and relational. My faith, wife, family, professional success, and home are all counted as gifts from God.

12. In verse 1:18, James refers to us as "firstfruits" of Christ's creation, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

What does he mean that we are a kind of "firstfruit"?

"Firstfruits" conveyed a very common idea to the Jewish community. In Jesus' time, they traveled to Jerusalem three times each year, bringing the first fruits of their harvest. Barley ripened in the spring associated with the feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover, wheat ripened in the summer as an offering for the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the second grain crop and fruit from orchards and vineyards were brought as an offering for the fall Feast of Tabernacles.

Jesus rose from the grave on the day of the Offering of Firstfruits during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Likewise, all people who are brought to faith in Christ and are born again to life in the Holy Spirit are the firstfruits of the gospel message. Praise God!

Closing Prayer