

The Letter of James
A Study Guide

Part I: James 1:1-27
Weeks 1- 5

Week 1, Day 1: James. misunderstood, maligned . . . magnificent!

Although the letter of James is probably the earliest book written of the New Testament writings, it was one of the last to receive general acceptance as Holy Scripture (Luck, 1954; Moo, 1985). Three reasons are usually given for its late acceptance. Firstly, it was written at Jerusalem to the Jewish believers residing primarily in Palestine and Syria. The Gentile church that would later be established in the west, was not so willing to accept it (Moo, 1985; BKC, 1983). In addition, the Jewish revolts in A.D. 66-70, which hampered the work of the Palestinian church, may have slowed the letter's circulation (Moo, 1985). It would be a century and a half before the letter was circulated among the churches at large (Kistemaker, 1996). Secondly, there were questions of its authorship. James was a common name and no one by that name was considered an apostle (Kistemaker, 1996; Moo, 1985). It wasn't until the church as a whole recognized that the author was almost certainly the half brother of Jesus – the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church – that the epistle was accepted as inspired (Ryrie, 1995). Thirdly, the content of the letter of James appears, on the surface, to contradict the teachings of Paul. In A.D. 397, at the Council at Carthage, James was established as part of the canon (Kistemaker, 1996).

Years later, during the Reformation, this topic surfaced again. Martin Luther questioned the value of James in relationship to the 'chief books' of the New Testament (Moo, 1985). As Kistemaker (1996) puts it, Luther felt that “the epistle teaches little about Christ, is not apostolic, stresses law instead of gospel, and opposes Paul on the doctrine of faith and works.” Actual quotes by Luther include: “[James] mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture” (Moo, 1985) and “[James] is an epistle of straw, and destitute of evangelical character” (Luck, 1954). These are hardly kind words and, as Luck (1954) puts it, “dangerous ground on which to stand. If one book of the Bible is to be rejected because of personal dislike and lack of understanding, where will the process end?” A careful study of James reveals that Luther greatly misunderstood this book of the Bible. One can understand why Luther viewed it this way. He was fighting against a Roman Catholic understanding of that time that salvation was achieved by human works, the very topic that Paul fought so ardently against. But when it is understood that James was not addressing the issue of salvation, but the living out of the salvation already received by grace, “it will be clearly seen that there is not a shadow of disagreement between James and Paul” (Luck, 1954). The issues that James and Paul were addressing were different, and “their arguments [were] accordingly different” (Moo, 1985), but each add to the fullness of our understanding of what faith is, as do the other epistle writers. We shall see in Day 3 the marvelous blending of doctrine that Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude teaches about the full meaning of faith in Jesus Christ.

Though James has been misunderstood and maligned through church history, it is never more a 'must-read' than today. With our 21st century mindset of instant availability of services and products via the phone or internet, nightly 'entertainment' of television and movies without leaving our homes, quick delivery of fast-food and prepared meals, one is tempted to forget that God has called us to live our lives in the world. We are not to conform to the world's standard of behavior, but we are not to be isolated either. Our faith must touch the lives of those who have not yet heard. Or, as James might

phrase it, our faith must touch the lives of those who have not yet seen it. Christ said that we were not to take the light of truth and hide it, but rather:

“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 5:16)

A faith that is a sweet aroma to the unbelieving (2 Cor 14), is a faith that “loves its neighbor as itself” (Gal 5:14). It is the application in tangible terms of what one believes that catches the attention of not only the unbelieving, but also gains the approval of our Father in heaven:

“My Father is honored in this, that you produce much fruit; then you will be My disciples.” (John 15:8, MLB).

What James writes is absolutely vital to a healthy faith. When first read, James may appear choppy or disjointed. But when we dig deeper and see the perspective from which he is writing and the issue that he is addressing, we will see that James has written one of the most practical and flowing discourses on faith. It is well-structured and moving. It touches lives and urges us on to action. James epistle is nothing less than the inspired instruction of the Holy Spirit that meets us at our greatest need: our conduct. This epistle is nothing short of magnificent!

Week 1, Day 2: James . . . who?

The author of this letter identifies himself only as James, the bond-servant of God (vs 1). Unless one was familiar with the author before receiving the letter, one would wonder who he was. The New Testament mentions four men with the name James.

James the son of Zebedee, was called early in Jesus' ministry to follow after Him and be one of His disciples (Matt 4:21-22; Mark 1:19-20). This James is almost certainly not the author of the epistle as he suffered an early martyrdom (Acts 12:1-2). According to Blue (BKC, 1983), this occurred before the generally accepted date of the writing of the epistle in A.D. 45. James was the first of the apostles to suffer martyrdom. His brother, the Apostle John, lived the longest of the apostles, having written his gospel account, letters, and the book of Revelation around A.D. 90. Both James and John were one of the twelve disciples of Christ.

James the son of Alphaeus was also one of the twelve disciples of Christ (Matt 10:3). He was probably younger than James the son of Zebedee as he is referred to as James the 'less' or 'younger' (Mark 15:40). He is only mentioned in the lists of the twelve and in Mark 15:40 (Moo, 1985). He is not considered by most commentators as a likely candidate for the author of the epistle.

James the father of Judas (Luke 6:16), not Iscariot, is also an unlikely candidate. His son Judas, or Thaddaeus (Matt 10:3; Mark 3:18), was also one of the twelve. This James is only mentioned in the Bible because he was the father of one of the twelve.

James, the half-brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19), held a very prominent role in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal 2:9). Jesus had four half-brothers, with James being the closest in age to Him (Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). And though, in the early years of Christ's ministry, James did not believe Jesus to be who He said He was (John 7:2), the Lord visited James after His resurrection (1 Cor 15:7), singling him out for His special consolation and calling. It is highly likely, that James followed his big brother around as he was growing up. Can we not imagine the incredible insight he must have received during those years? What younger brother doesn't try to emulate the brother they look up to? Jesus was a perfect brother and mentor to James. Look how closely James teachings parallel the teachings of Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5 – 7). It was probably the claims of His divinity which put James off for a while. But having seen the proof of His claims in the resurrection, James wholeheartedly followed His Lord and Savior, probably claiming from that moment on only to be His bond servant (James 1:1). It is this James that most certainly penned the letter of James. And is it not fitting that after all those years of training while growing up with Jesus, God would put this man into the service of leading the church at Jerusalem? We often think of the letter of James as harsh and demanding. But it is nothing in comparison to the godly demands of the Sermon on the Mount. We may have viewed James as legalistic or misguided, partly due to the maligning of the church leaders of the past who misunderstood his message. But at the end of this epistle, you will see a concerned and loving shepherd of the early church who has nothing but love and compassion for those under his care. James message to that early church was much needed during its time of stress and growing pains. And now in the 21st century barrage of hedonism and compromise, James letter stands as a beacon of light in a dark world. Let us fully embrace his loving exhortation to us today.

Week 1, Day 3: The 'orchestra' of epistles.

Several years ago, the late Dr. John Mitchell, professor of Multnomah School of the Bible in Oregon, had a radio Bible teaching ministry that affected the lives of many Christians. He not only believed in the inspiration of the Scriptures, but he inferred that the order of books in the New Testament was divinely planned. He would say that the book that one is reading “defends” the book that is before it. For example, he would say that the book of James defends the book of Hebrews. Given some thought, one can see what he meant. Hebrews was about men and women of faith who would not give up. Their faith was one that endured the trials set before them. James can be said to speak of a faith that puts what it believes into tangible action. Putting the two together, one can conclude that the men and women described in Hebrews put their faith to the test by believing God's promises in spite of the trials and temptations; even in spite of never having received them on this earth. They put what they believed into action.

One of the tenets of good Bible exegesis (discovering the meaning of a text) is to compare Scripture with Scripture. A doctrine that is taught in one verse of Scripture will be supported and defended by other verses of Scripture. In fact, one cannot come to the conclusion of some Biblical doctrines without combining Scriptures. The doctrine of the Triune God is one example. Though a few Scriptures hint at this doctrine in one

statement (e.g. Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14), it is in the combining of many Scriptures that demands the conclusion that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A very brief example would be the following verses: John 8:58; 10:30-33; John 14:17; Col 1:27.

In a similar manner, understanding what “faith” is requires more than just the understanding of a few verses. In fact, faith can be a rather nebulous term for some of us. Is faith the mental assent that something is true? Is it the confession of one's lips that somehow solidifies what one thinks is true? Is it the certainty of things invisible? What is it that defines faith? Faith is vital to our salvation and sanctification and also to the work God has called us to. Shouldn't we understand what faith is? God thinks so. So much so, it appears that He has orchestrated the letters of the New Testament to help us get an understanding of what it is He wants from us. In all that follows, we must understand that all of this is predicated on one huge concept: our love for God. Apart from loving God and others, we cannot please Him (Mark 12:30-31; 1 Cor 13:1-3). And apart from faith, it is also impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). Faith and love are impossibly inseparable.

Let us look at how the letters of the New Testament 'complement' (Ronald Blue, BKC, 1983) and 'defend' each other.

- Paul's letters speak primarily of a faith that saves. We cannot begin our relationship with God without first being born into God's family. Paul felt compelled to preach the Gospel, primarily to the Gentiles who had never heard (1 Cor 9:16; Gal 1:16; Eph 3:8).
- The author of Hebrews writes of a faith that endures. Our faith must be deep rooted in order to withstand the trials that come our way. The exposition on the men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 illustrates a faith that never gives up.
- James speaks of a faith that works. It is love in action. It is a faith that affects the lives of others.
- Peter writes of a faith that hopes. In the midst of trials and turmoil, the hope of Christ's return stabilizes our faith and causes us to conduct our lives in the knowledge of His soon return. Hope, as Hebrews described it, is the anchor of our souls.
- John preaches of a faith that loves. This is foundational. Apart from loving God and others, our profession of faith has no meaning. And lastly,
- Jude briefly exhorts us to a faith that is pure. Jude is especially important in its 'defense' of John's letters. Love is indeed the most important of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13). But a love that compromises the truth is weak, humanistic love. Jude exhorts us to “contend for the faith.” God's love is tough love. It loves without compromising His righteousness. “Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Together these give us a well-rounded picture of what faith is. It is trusting solely in the work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. It is a commitment on our part, even to the death of our body. It is a faith that works in the lives of others by providing food and clothing or whatever is needed by our brethren and those who need our help. It is a hope for His return and the blessing of being with Him forever, where there is no more

sorrow or pain. It is loving God above everything else. Everything we do is to be because we acknowledge that He first loved us. And, in like manner, since He loved us, He expects us to love others. Lastly, it is a faith that does not compromise the truth, whether in doctrine or godly living. We cannot live lives that are dishonest and seek earthly gain.

In this picture of faith, James stands to meet the needs of a slumbering church. His call to us is to wake up, stay the course, meet the needs of others, and seek our satisfaction only in the eternal realm which Jesus will soon establish. Let us read what James has to say and respond to his call.

Week 1, Day 4: To the twelve tribes. (James 1:1)

James begins his letter by identifying himself as a bond-servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He makes no claims on his authority as one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church, nor that he is physically the half-brother of Christ. He clearly acknowledges that Jesus Christ is God and that he is His servant.

James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes that are dispersed abroad” (James 1:1). Because of the date when this letter was written (ca. A.D. 45), it is highly unlikely that he is referring to both Gentile and Jewish Christians. The idea of Gentiles being able to even become Christians was fairly new and was still in the process of being fully accepted. It was most likely a good 7 to 10 years from the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost before Peter was confronted with the idea of Gentiles becoming Christians (Acts 10). This occurred in approximately A.D. 40 (Boa, 1990). It wasn't until 9 years later at the Council at Jerusalem in A.D. 49 (Kistemaker, 1996) that the church elders and apostles decided that Gentiles did not have to observe the Mosaic custom of circumcision and that it was God's will that Gentiles be accepted into the family of God and without the requirements of the Jewish religion, that both Jew and Gentile were saved by God's grace (Acts 15:11, 14-17). This full acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian church occurred more than 15 years after the church's establishment. Therefore, when James addresses his audience as “the twelve tribes that are dispersed,” he is most likely referring to the Jewish Christians, as these made up the vast majority of believers at that time.

The dispersion could refer to the Jews taken captive by the Assyrians (ca. 722 B.C.) and the Babylonians (ca. 605 B.C.). Most of the captives in Babylon did not return to Judah when allowed by King Cyrus of Persia (around 538 B.C.). These Jews eventually spread to different areas. Many of these became believers when visiting Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Many nations were represented at this festival (Acts 2:5-12). James' reference to the dispersion could also mean those Jewish Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution of the Jews (Acts 8:1-3; 11:19). No matter how they were dispersed, Christian Jews were apparently experiencing various trials, most likely in the financial realm. Ryrie (1995) notes that a famine was occurring in Judea around A.D. 46. In addition, James the son of Zebedee and brother of John, had recently been martyred (ca. A.D. 44) by King Herod (Acts 12:1-2).

With these trials as a backdrop and the need to establish the first generation of

Christians in their faith, James writes this letter to the believers in the surrounding areas to encourage them not to give in to the pressures of the world. They must not give up or compromise their faith for the temporal pleasures of this world. They must not become friends of this world in order to acquire temporal relief. Rather, they must apply their faith to the many needs of their brothers and sisters around them. Their faith must be put into action. By helping each other and looking for the return of the Lord, they would endure the trials set before them.

James opening address to these Jewish Christians is very brief: “Greetings.” It is the Greek word (chairein) which means 'Hello.' Blue (BKC, 1983) sees in this a play on words with the very next verse where James says to count it all 'joy' (Greek: charan). Adamson (1976) agrees with this view in that he translates “Greetings” as meaning 'Joy be to you.' The apparent intent of James is to encourage his readers right from the start. The words that follow this greeting may seem harsh at first reading, but the exhortations of James, when taken in the context of the whole letter, are full of concern and compassion for his fellow believers. The motive behind James' letter is most definitely God's love. This letter is so full of wisdom and practicality that it very well may become one of your favorite books of the Bible.

Week 1, Day 5: Display the light; a call to faithfulness.

Knowing the reasons someone wrote a letter to a group of people many years ago helps us better understand the content of his message today. The early Christian church suffered persecution from the Jews and governmental authorities as well. In addition, the financial stress that they were experiencing – probably as a result of the persecution – caused the believers to yearn for material wealth. They probably were complaining of their circumstances, maybe even getting angry about it. This would not be unlike our reaction today.

James realized that this reaction was not good for two reasons. First, it hampered their growth in the Lord. Real faith is a faith that works, a faith that changes lives. It not only addresses the needs of others with material goods, (food and clothing), but it addresses their own needs. This would include the need to control what one says, which in turn requires controlling what one thinks. In other words, they were not to complain but to receive the trials handed them with submissive, even joyful acceptance. This indeed would require the exercising of their faith. For if they believed that God was in control of all things, they would have to accept even their testing as a good gift from God (James 1:16-17). This was not easy and only their decision to cooperate with God in His sanctifying process would make it possible.

Second, the fact that they were the first generation of believers in Jesus Christ carried with it a responsibility no other generation would have. They were “a kind of first fruits” of a greater worldwide harvest of souls (James 1:18). God was about the business of establishing His church in the world. They were the first assembly of Christian believers. The future of the church was partially dependent on them. God was building the 'first floor' of a greater building. The floors above depended on the success of 'their' construction. It is true that the “gates of Hades” could not prevent God establishing His church (Matt 16:18), but this did not negate the need for their

cooperation. The first generation of believers were aware of this fact (James 1:19). Therefore, James writes to remind them that their response to their trials is not something to be taken lightly. Complaining and getting angry was not the way to achieve the righteousness of God (James 1:20); i.e. reaching the world and growing in sanctification. They needed to correctly respond to their trials; their faith was being tested (James 1:3). Their faith was being pushed into action. To respond to their trials with complaining and seeking worldly wealth did not require faith. The world responds this way. Real faith responds with trust in God. It accepts what God has allowed to come their way and even accepts it with joy. This is faith indeed. Every generation of believers will have their faith tested by God (Deut 8:2). The trials and temptations of this world are unavoidable (Matt 13:18-23). How we respond is observed by God. No child of God escapes the training of their heavenly Father (Heb 12:6-8). God's intent is for us to share His holiness (Heb 12:10) and to be useful in His kingdom (John 15:8).

God is creating a family of believers from every nation and tribe on the earth. Just as the first generation of believers that James addressed needed to respond to trials properly so that the Light of God's glory would shine to all those around them, every succeeding generation has a similar responsibility. Every generation of believers is required to let God's Light shine from within them. Oftentimes it is how we respond to trials that has the most impact on the unbelieving world around us. Obedient and joyful acceptance of God's will in our lives brings glory to God (Matt 5:14-16).

But trials are painful. How can we respond with joy? James will tell us. Let us begin.

Week 2, Day 1: Acceptance with joy . . . you have got to be kidding me! (James 1:2-4)

James makes it clear that his letter is addressed to Christians. His references to my "brethren" (which occurs often in this letter) and the "testing of your faith" (vs 2) indicate that this letter is not about 'salvation by works,' but is, in part, about sanctification (maturation) by obedience. But this does not lessen the rather shocking advice to "consider it all joy" when we face trials. Most of us consider it a joy to escape the trials of life. Can James be serious? Does he really mean for us to be joyful about the persecutions and trials that face us? The believers he was writing to had been driven from their homes and possessions (Kistemaker, 1996) and were scattered among pagan peoples (BKC, 1983). Of course we know the Word is inspired, but maybe he means something else. Maybe we need another opinion.

Paul, in writing to the Romans said:

"And not only this [that we exult in our obtaining by grace our faith in God], be we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." (Rom 5:3-4)

Well, that doesn't sound much better. Tribulation, perseverance, proven character . . . those sound like painful terms. And why are James and Paul in agreement? Martin Luther thought that they were diametrically opposed. What we need to do is

look to our compassionate Lord. He “has compassion on those that fear Him. He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Ps 103:13-14).

Here is what Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt 5:11-12).

Bummer. Now we have to face the reality of what the Bible is saying. How can they say this? Don't they understand how hard life's trials are? Isn't this just like pastors who sit in their nice comfortable offices and give us advice while we, who are under their pastorate, are in the trenches of reality? Is this fair? Unfortunately it isn't about things being fair. It is most definitely about the real world we face. And not just for us in the congregation. If you had to experience what our pastors face almost daily – the counseling of people who have made major mistakes in their decisions, the broken marriages, the impatient singles, the wayward, disrespectful children, the loss of lives of family members of those they counsel and care for – you would want to take the next flight out of here and seek asylum in Argentina, or Australia . . . anywhere.

And we cannot forget the trials that James and Paul went through. James had to witness the persecution and dispersion of his congregation to various parts of the world. Others he saw martyred. And added to the stress of all this was the financial ruin of his congregation that had remained in Jerusalem. A special collection of funds had to be made by the dispersed believers and delivered to the Jerusalem church (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8). James himself was persecuted. According to church tradition, he was martyred in A.D. 62 (Moo, 1985).

Of Paul's suffering and persecution, we have a very personal account (2 Cor 11:23-33). He experienced imprisonments, beatings, sleep deprivation, hunger and thirst, dangers at sea and in the wilderness, exposure to the cold without adequate clothing, and added to this were the concerns of all the churches he had planted. Very few of us have experienced even a part of that. And, finally, in A.D. 67, Paul was martyred.

Of Christ's suffering we are well aware. During His lifetime on earth He experienced the direct temptations from Satan himself and never sinned. He also experienced the rejection of the priests and scribes – those who should have welcomed Him. After His arrest, although being completely innocent of all charges, He was forced to endure false accusations, mocking, blows, and spitting from the priests and soldiers, a whipping that would have killed many, and the terrible crucifixion on that Good Friday with all the sins of the world placed upon Him. We, of course, cannot even come close to imagining the suffering of our Lord. We are often brought to tears when we think of all He suffered on our behalf. We know that we are totally undeserving of His love.

But how in the midst of their trials could they think of them as something to be joyful about? Did they not have the same repulsion to pain as we do? Of course we know that they did. At least three times during all the sufferings and discouraging events that Paul went through, he received encouragement directly from the Lord and from angels. After all his beatings, the Lord encouraged him that he would not be harmed in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10). After his defense before the Jewish Sanhedrin and their violent

reaction, the Lord again appeared to Paul to encourage him (Acts 23:11). Then, on his journey by ship to Rome, when it looked like the storm would kill all onboard, an angel appeared to Paul to encourage him to not be afraid (Acts 27:24). The point is that with all that Paul went through, he needed special encouragement to keep going. In other words, it was extremely tough on him. It was not light-duty service that Paul was called to. Now we may not personally receive visible help from angels – though some today still do (and we probably do unknowingly) – we also have not experienced all the trials that Paul did.

And lastly, we must look at the sufferings of Jesus. Were those somehow easier to handle because He was perfect? Were they less grievous to Him because He was the Son of God? We only need to look at the incredible emotional and spiritual suffering He endured in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion to realize that they were not easy. His soul was grieved to the point of death; He sought three times for permission to escape the crucifixion and the placement of the world's sins upon Himself. And so great was this stress that His sweat became like drops of blood (Matt 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:39-46).

It is obvious that God understands that the trials we go through are not easy. In fact, the author of Hebrews clearly states that the trials do not appear to be joyful, but rather sorrowful:

“All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” (Heb 12:11)

Isn't it encouraging that God understands that all discipline feels hard? The NIV translates this verse: “No discipline feels pleasant at the time.” God is fully aware of the stress and sorrow that trials and testings bring. He is not out of touch with the reality that we face. But, the exhortation to consider it all joy is still there. But how? If God knows it is painful, why are we to consider it joy? What is behind this exhortation? We will look at this tomorrow.

Week 2, Day 2: Maturity and perspective. (James 1:2-4)

James writes that the testing of our faith produces endurance (vs 3). This in turn results in maturity (vs 4). Reaching maturity is very important. It is like seed planted in the ground. If the circumstances are right so that the plant can grow to maturity, it will naturally produce fruit. Circumstances that hinder that process, prevent the production of that fruit. Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the seed and soils (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23). Seed that fell on shallow ground germinated quickly – the shallow soil was warmed quickly in the springtime sun; warm soil promotes early germination. But as the heat of the season increased, it soon became too hot for the plant to survive. It withered and died from the 'stresses' (i.e. affliction, persecution) placed upon it. Seed that fell into deeper soil did fairly well at first. Its roots developed very well, but the weeds that were also growing in the soil next to the planted crop took away the available resources of water and soil nutrients needed by the crop. The resources that

were intended for the crop, were diverted or stolen by the demanding requirements of the weeds (i.e. concerns for this world and the deceitfulness of wealth). The planted crop could not reach maturity; no fruit was produced. The only plants that made it to maturity and produced an abundant harvest, were those that were not hindered by the competing forces surrounding them.

How was it possible for this one type of soil to be deep and free of weeds? A diligent grower was there, watching over the whole process. Soil needs to be made deep by cultivation, a process that disrupts and turns the soil. This also destroys the weeds already growing in the field. After planting, the soil needs to be continuously cultivated to prevent further weeds from growing. As the plant gets larger, the grower may need to come in and manually remove weeds that missed being cultivated by his farming implements. This weeding process is necessary; it is even expected. If the soil could take on human character (anthropomorphism) it would probably object to this whole process. Who wants to be plowed and cultivated repeatedly, and then later have shovels and hoes striking at it in order to remove that 'not-so-troubling' weed over there? But in order for the soil to be able to support the plants, it is necessary.

The soil is inanimate. It doesn't have the ability to object. But people do. We don't like it when adversity comes. It is downright painful. But the adversities and trials that come do have a very good effect. It creates in us two important things. First, it develops inner character. We become stronger, more reliable, more able to withstand even greater pressures than the last time. If we accept the trials and stand firm, we will reach maturity and be useful to help others and be able to display the Light that lives within us no matter what circumstances befall us. Second, it develops within us a proper perspective, a right focus for our lives. We understand what is really important in this life. A good way to illustrate this is by considering the mighty storms that have recently pounded various parts of the world. Hurricanes and tsunamis are incredible forces of nature that can easily overpower us. But in some situations, survivors lived to tell their stories. There were some where the children were saved because the child and parent clung to each other. Think of a wave or hurricane force winds suddenly coming upon a small child and its strong and massive dad. If the child runs from the dad, he or she will likely be killed. But if the child runs to its dad and clings like nothing else matters, like nothing is more important than hanging onto dad, then the child is safe. No longer is the child concerned about this or that toy. No longer are the teasing and reproaches of the other children even considered. The only thing that matters is clinging to his or her father. And then, when the hurricane force winds die down or the tsunami wave passes, all that remains is the child firmly clinging to and being firmly held by his or her father. All that remains is what really matters, being safe in the arms of our father. It isn't hard to translate that to our walk with God. When the vicious forces of Satan and the world eventually subside, we then realize where love and security reside. This is indeed our greatest reward. And this is what the author of Hebrews was writing about:

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” (Heb 11:6).

The trials and testing that come our way help us recognize the truth of this verse. He is the most important thing in our lives. He is the source of life. He is the

one with whom our eternity will be decided. A godly fear is one that fears Him who has the power to destroy both body and soul (Matt 10:28). True wisdom is one that reveres this God (Prov 1:7). In the final analysis, nothing matters more than getting right with God and staying that way all the days of our lives. The rewards of this world will pass away. But the rewards that God will give His faithful believers will endure forever. The 'forces' of the trials and testing that come our way help strip away all false conceptions of what we had previously thought important. We learn to lay aside the encumbrances of this world that can so easily beset us (Heb 12:1). For that we can be very glad. We can consider all that comes to us as something to be truly appreciated. For we know that "God causes all things to work together for good" (Rom 8:28). In this light, we can indeed consider it all joy when we encounter various trials.

Week 2, Day 3: Testing must come. (James 1:2-4)

It seems very unfortunate that we have to endure this testing of our faith. We can grumble at the fact that Adam and Eve disobeyed God and caused us all to learn how to obey Him. Wait. Did that make sense? We know the reason sin entered the world was because of one man's sin (Rom 5:12). But what was Adam's sin? It was disobedience to God's command. Even before the fall, before Adam sinned, he was asked of God to obey Him. So apart from sin, God's plan for mankind included training in righteousness. Even Jesus, Who was absolutely perfect, was required by God to learn obedience (Heb 5:8). And He learned obedience "from the things which He suffered." By our way of thinking this makes no sense. Here was God the Son, perfect from ages past, having to learn obedience. Why? Hebrews 5:9 answers, "And having been made perfect [complete, fit], He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." Why does the Perfect Man need to be made perfect [complete]? In the workings of God's righteousness, it is not enough to say He was complete. It had to be proven. He had to be tested in all things, beyond the measure of any man that would ever live, so that He could be shown to be absolutely without sin, without any blemish, and thus be the Perfect Sacrifice that would then be qualified to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). No one, not even the accuser of the saints, Satan (Rev 12:10), could find any fault with Jesus. Thus, God's righteousness was absolutely untarnished in placing the sins upon Jesus as the True Unblemished Substitute for our sins; i.e. He did not have to die for His own sins.

It is true Jesus was tested for different reasons than we are, but amazingly, He was still tested. If Jesus was tested, and Adam and Eve in their sinless innocence were tested, where does that leave us? Smack dab in the center of the bull's eye! Testing is necessary. Trials will come (Acts 14:22; 1 Thes 3:3). Peter tells us that trials refine us, like gold is refined by fire (1 Pet 1:7). Even as severe heat brings to the surface the impurities in gold, severe stress brings to our consciousness our need to confess our sins and yield to the work of His Holy Spirit. Sins recognized, sins confessed, and hearts that surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit get changed. For the heart willing to surrender to God, tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint us because the work of the Holy Spirit, in love, transforms us (Rom 5:3-5; 12:2; Eph 4:23; 2 Cor 3:18).

Endurance requires discipline on our part (Heb 12:7). Discipline yields the fruit of righteousness, so that we may share in His holiness (Heb 12:10-11). That is God's goal: "to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14).

To summarize:

- We cannot produce the fruit that God desires from His people (John 15:8) unless we reach a certain level of maturity.
- We cannot mature in our faith unless we endure the trials and training God has set before us.
- We cannot learn how to endure the tests unless we "let endurance have its perfect result" (James 1:4). In other words, we have to stand our ground; we must resist the devil (4:7). We must not flee from the trial, but with God's help choose to remain and endure it. The first trials will be light compared to what will come later in our walk. But with each little victory, more faith is developed. Moment by moment, day by day, each testing grows in us greater faith, greater trust, in the One whom we will grow to love irresistibly. Paul said it this way: "the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal 6:8).

No athlete first runs a 26-mile marathon without first training for it. It takes practice to condition oneself for this grueling race. The race we are in is much more important. God is training us "to run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb 12:1). Our finish line is heaven. That is an important goal to remember when we are in the midst of our trials.

Week 2, Day 4: Fixing our eyes on the joy set before us. (James 1:2-4)

When we read a novel, we have before us all that the author has written . . . a completed story. He has spent much time in its development and undoubtedly wants us to read it from start to finish, without taking a peek at the ending. In many cases, the author wishes that to be a surprise. These are the unwritten 'rules' of fiction. But for some readers, the suspense is too much. They can't get through the details without having the assurance that the main character is going to be all right or that some situation will work out for everyone's good. So they peek at the ending. Having secured that knowledge that everything will turn out okay, the reader then goes back to where they left off and can more thoroughly enjoy the novel. We may look upon such readers as lacking discipline or spoiling the effect the author intended. But the author won't be enormously disappointed, just as long as you do read the book in its entirety and enjoy it. The joy of telling a good story that captivates the reader is the author's ultimate hope.

These unwritten rules of fiction, however, do not apply to discovering the truth in the sciences, the arts, or in acquiring sound wisdom for living. In these disciplines, gaining the knowledge is the real goal. One may acquire knowledge through research along an entirely different and honorable path than the other researcher in another country. But if they have discovered a real truth, they will both have discovered that the law of science they have described is as true in England as it is in Panama. The point is, that a

Truth has been discovered that will stand the test of time. Truth is worth discovering whether one reads a scientific text from chapter one until the end, or whether one reads the text by first reading the solution and then following the progression of thought to the theorem's proof. If the truth is grasped, the author's intent in writing the text has been achieved.

This is true of the Truth of Life. In fact, in the case of eternal life, it is far wiser to know where one is headed and which path is required to get to a desired ending than to be surprised at the end. One might not like the results! And, not too different from the anxious reader of the suspense novel, knowing that the ending will not harm the main character (in this case the disciple of Christ) and that the situation is going to work out for the benefit of all who put their trust in their Savior, can provide tremendous incentive to pass through the difficult and trying details. It's knowing that 'a better country' awaits us, that helps us not feel abandoned in this present life (Heb 11:13-16). It is also knowing that the riches in heaven are far greater and longer lasting than the passing pleasures of this world, that motivates us to endure the ill-treatment from the world that comes to the people of God (Heb 11:25-26). In like manner, it was the joy of the end result that His sacrifice on the cross would accomplish that encouraged Jesus to "despise the shame" that accompanies crucifixion (Heb 12:2). It is the forward 'peek' at our final home in heaven with Jesus that encourages us to endure the "momentary, light affliction" that is producing in us "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17). And although James does not mention in verses 2-4 anything about our final home and reward with Jesus, he will. In James 2:5 and 5:7-8, our share of the inheritance of His kingdom and His soon return to set all things right are great motivations for our author. You see, it is okay to peek ahead in the Bible! The completeness of his exhortation will come in reading the whole letter.

The point here is this: would you rather enjoy temporary pleasure now for a few years, followed by devastating punishment for eternity (Rev 19:10-15), or endure the discomfort of trials and testing and God's discipline for your time here on earth, followed by eternity with Him where there is no pain or suffering or any sorrow (Rev 21:3-4)? This is not rocket science. And why the trials here on earth? They are to make us ready (i.e. 'fit') for the coming new kingdom and the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9).

Thus, when we consider the end result of enduring the trials and testing of our faith, we can see them as vehicles to true joy. Fixing our eyes on the joy set before us, we can endure the trials and let them have their perfect result (James 1:4).

Week 2, Day 5: Wisdom to understand the trials. (James 1:5)

The original readers of James' letter were most likely perplexed by verses 2-4. They might have been thinking: 'Consider it joy when trials come? Even if it is helpful for our maturity, consider it joy?' Those mature in the faith would understand James' counsel; "lacking in nothing" (vs 4) implies that the mature understand God's dealing with them. But most of the readers were receiving James' letter because they needed to mature in their faith. So one can hardly expect them to accept this counsel easily. Nor can these readers easily look to other resources to find corroborating advice. They couldn't compare what Paul, or Peter, or the writer of Hebrews said – none of these

letters had been written yet. In fact, nothing of the New Testament had been written. They were receiving the first part. It is true that they could look to the men and women of faith and see their godly character as they endured trials. But this is hardly to be expected when one is in the midst of trials as these readers were. They were financially strapped and they were wondering how they would survive.

James comes to their rescue with this advice: ask God for help. He freely and generously gives wisdom and understanding to those who ask Him (vs 5). The wisdom that God gives, as James will explain later (3:17) is pure, and gentle, and full of mercy and is good. Because God is the source of this wisdom, His allowance of their trials carries with it all of these traits. Their trials and testing have been given to them out of God's love, mercy and goodness. James' readers needed to understand this; and so do we! God is desirous for all of His children to understand what He is doing and why He is doing it. If we lack wisdom and understanding, ask God for it! He wants to give it to us (Matt 7:7). In addition, God is so patient, so loving, He does not begrudge us for coming to Him again and again. He does not "reproach" us or "find fault" with us for coming to Him. When we give someone help and they return repeatedly for the same help, we will often tire of it all: 'Haven't I helped you already! Don't you get it?' But God is not like that. As often as we come to Him, He is ready to help us. He also does not reproach us for coming to Him saying: 'Why should I accept this trial with joy?' He does not want us to feign acceptance of the trials. If we are having problems with our circumstances and our attitudes, He wants us to bring them to Him openly and honestly. He isn't going to answer our questions if we refuse to admit that we have them. If we refuse to admit our problems, His first action will then have to be to confront us with our pride and dishonesty. If we are angry in our circumstances and even angry with God, we might as well admit it. He knows it already. The Physician doesn't heal those who won't acknowledge their need (Mark 2:17). God's righteousness demands our honesty. Entrance into God's Kingdom is predicated on the true acknowledgment of the believer that we enter solely on the work of Jesus Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. We must acknowledge that none of us is righteous, not one (Rom 3:10). In and of myself, there is nothing good (Rom 7:18), and that "wisdom is lacking" (vs 5). We need God's help through our trials.

Fortunately, God is willing and ready to help. All we need to do is ask. He gives His help most generously. As He allows the trials and tests of our faith to come, He is already there, ready to help.

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged –
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness –
Take it to the Lord in prayer!

Are we weak and heavy laden,
Cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge –

Take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In His arms He'll take and shield thee –
Thou wilt find a solace there.

Hymn: What a friend we have in Jesus; 2nd and 3rd stanzas.
Lyrics by Joseph M. Scriven.

Week 3, Day 1: Double-mindedness. (James 1:6-8)

In verse 5, James said that God gives wisdom generously and without reproach, i.e. “without reservation” (Kistemaker, 1996) to anyone who asks from Him. But James exhorts his brethren to go to God “without any doubting” (vs 6), “for that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord” (vs 7). Because James has pointed out a “condition” by which we can expect or not expect to hear from God, we must examine what he means by asking in faith, without doubting.

James describes the one who doubts as a wave of the sea, going up and down, tossed here and there by the wind (vs 6). He is also “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (vs 8). These are not complimentary words by any means. As believers we might possibly hope James is referring to those who have not made up their minds in regard to the faith; that is, whether they wish to put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation or remain in the world. In this light it is easy to understand why God would not answer someone who is not really seeking the truth. If one does not believe in God, God's answer to his doubtful 'prayers' might not have a positive affect on the skeptic's faith. It is much like the Pharisees of Jesus' time. They saw the many miraculous deeds that He was doing, but instead of turning to faith, they accused Him of casting out demons by the power of demons (Matt 12:24). If the person cannot make the connection between the 'cure' or 'solution' and God providing that cure, how will the person benefit from God's answer eternally? Jesus did not do many miracles for those who did not believe Him to be from God (Matt 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6). This view of James 1:6-8 would certainly be more friendly and less unsettling than if James were talking about the doubts of true believers.

But what if James is addressing believers? They do seem to be the intended audience of his letter. After all, he is writing to his 'brethren' (vs 2) about the testing of their faith (vs 3) so that they will become mature in their faith (vs 4). What then shall we make of his exhortation to ask for wisdom in faith without any doubting? Why would God withhold wisdom from those who are struggling with some doubts? We all struggle with doubts. This does not exclude us from receiving from God if we are honest with Him and seek His help (Mark 9:24). What is James saying?

In looking more closely at what he writes in this passage and comparing it with what he will discuss later (James 1:9-11; 4:3-6), it appears he is addressing the issue of single-minded commitment on our part. God gives to all generously and without reproach (vs 5). In other words, as pointed out earlier, God gives to us without reservation. In response, he wants us to come to Him without reservation. We must

ask for God's wisdom in faith (vs 6). The Greek word for faith (pistis) means “being persuaded, faith, belief. In general it implies such a knowledge of, or assent to, and confidence in certain divine truths, especially those of the gospel, as produces good works” (Zodhiates, 1991). It means asking wisdom from God because we are fully persuaded that His wisdom is the only one that counts. If, however, one asks with “doubts,” then that man cannot expect to receive an answer from God. The Greek word for doubt (diakrinō) means “to differentiate” (Moo, 1985), “to distinguish, to judge” (NASBEC, 1981). “The word suggests, then, not so much intellectual doubt as a basic conflict in loyalties – as for instance between God and 'mammon' (Matt 6:24) or God and 'the world' (James 4:4)” (Moo, 1985). The King James version describes the person as “wavering.” James is talking about the believer's heart. Are we trying to decide between whole-hearted, single-minded commitment to God whatever His answer is to us, or are we lured by the 'comforts' of this world? If our hearts are like the 'soil' that is concerned with cares of this world or the deceitfulness of wealth (Matt 13:22), then we are “double-minded” (vs 8). The double-minded man is one who is struggling with his allegiance. Does this man really want wisdom and understanding and the renewing of his thoughts (Rom 12:2), or does he sometimes wish to seek what the world has to offer: riches and social prestige (cf. verses 9-11)? The natural tendency of a believer as they mature in years is to taste the wealth of this world and be greatly tempted by it. It is a real and difficult temptation. But it is very subtle. Most of us don't realize when we are becoming entrapped by its tentacles. A comfortable house, a nice car, an income that doesn't require balancing the checkbook – most of us think this is desirable, acceptable. And, if held lightly, it is not wrong – as long as it doesn't choke out our first love: Jesus Christ. The accumulation of wealth, however, most often deceives us. We begin to expect the comforts of this world and we become satisfied with our lives. We no longer seek the kingdom that is to come (Hosea 13:6).

In the case of the believers whom James is addressing, some were seeking relief from their financial trials by seeking the wealth of this world instead of the wealth of God (James 2:1-3; 4:2-4). Seeking 'two worlds' is unstable (vs 8), unreliable. God cannot trust this person. Answers will not be given to them.

This is very sobering. If our hearts are in this situation, how do we get out of it? James begins to address the answers in the next three verses.

Week 3, Day 2: Here is wisdom: this world is temporary. (James 1:9-12)

In next four verses, James continues two thoughts. First, he continues his exhortation to consider it all joy when we encounter trials (vs 2) by stating that “the brother of humble circumstances is to glory [joy] in his high position” (vs 9). The word for 'glory' in the NASB can be translated as boast, or rejoice, or joy (Zodhiates, 1991). Second, James is saying that instead of being double-minded (vs 8) by trying to serve both God and going after the wealth of this world, both the poor and rich in Christ should accept the true wisdom of God and recognize that their present circumstances (poor and rich) are only temporary (vs 11). In verse 9, these two points become evident.

The term humble circumstances “suggests a Christian who is low down on the socio-economic scale – one who is relatively poor and powerless” (Moo, 1985). According to Zodhiates (1991), the term means “depressed, or humiliated (in circumstances or disposition).” Around the time of the writing of this letter, a famine was occurring (Acts 11:28-29; Moo, 1985). Many Christians were probably hurting financially, especially since they were already ostracized by society because of their faith. Kistemaker (1996) describes the Christians dispersed from Judah as living in “grinding poverty” and as filling the “lowest paid positions in society.” Their economic conditions were “oppressive and perplexing.” James writes to encourage these believers. Instead of feeling shame that is often associated with their poverty, James exhorts them to be joyful, or “take pride” (NIV), in the exalted position that they have with Christ. True wisdom does not allow the present circumstances of this world to consume our thoughts, for “the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:18). Instead, our thoughts need to focus on the world that is to come. Godly wisdom “seeks first His kingdom and His righteousness” and knows that God will somehow provide for them (Matt 6:33).

Thinking this way in the midst of poverty is not easy by any stretch of the imagination. Their thoughts would have tended to dwell on the shame associated with their humble circumstances. But James says to dwell on the “high position” they have in Christ (vs 9). Even when we are not struggling financially, it is good to remember that we once formerly lived as slaves to the ways of this world (Eph 2:2). We once were “foolish . . . disobedient, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our lives in malice and envy, hating one another” (Titus 3:3). But then, “the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared” (Titus 3:4). “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). And though we may be poor according to the standards of this world, we “are rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him” (James 2:5). For though we were “dead in our transgressions, [He] made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:5-6). In addition, we will be changed:

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (Phil 3:20-21)

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are.” (1 John 3:1)

The treasures of this world will rust and rot, but the treasures of the eternal world will last forever (Matt 6:19-20). Take your pick. We can seek the temporary relief and praise from this world, or we can seek the permanent relief and praise from God the Father.

Week 3, Day 3: Wisdom for the wealthy Christian. (James 1:9-12)

Just as the struggles of the poor are temporary, because this world is temporary, the ease of the wealthy is also temporary. Thus, James gives wise counsel to the brethren in Christ who are well-off financially (vs 10-11). It should be noted that some commentators (e.g. Kistemaker, 1996) believe the rich referred to in verse 10 are not believers. These commentators feel the advice is in the form of irony; that the rich, if they were wise, would have realized that they will not have possessions when they die and that they will be humiliated in the final judgment. This interpretation, however, is not generally accepted by most commentators. Adamson (1976) states that “the wording in the Greek is significant. We must read brother with the rich (v. 10) as well as with the lowly (of humble degree).” Moo (1985) agrees and says the Greek syntax most naturally supports the idea that the word 'brother' in verse 9 governs both 'the lowly one' and 'the rich one.'

The flow of James' thought also supports the idea that the one who is rich is a believing brother. James had been exhorting his brethren (vs 2) to consider it joy when they encounter trials – that the trials were for their benefit. If this seemed difficult to understand, they were to seek God's wisdom in the matter (vs 5). James then proceeded to give some wise counsel to his brethren by reminding them that the brother of humble circumstances has much to exalt in – his position in Christ (vs 9). In like manner, the brother of wealth also has much to exalt in – that God has revealed to him that he is no better than anyone else. Before his conversion to Christ, the rich person probably valued the praise and exaltation he received from those in the world. But in God's sight there is neither Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, male nor female (Gal 3:28). All are equal before God. God is not a respecter of socio-economic status. All who come to faith in Christ must come acknowledging their absolute spiritual poverty before God. And to grow in Christ, one must maintain that absolute dependency on the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:3). God is not a respecter of social, economic, or national status (Deut 10:16-19; 2 Chron 19:5-7; Acts 10:34). His love and salvation are offered to everyone. So the 'humiliation' of the rich is that they have been brought low (from the world's viewpoint) to equal status with all believers. In this the rich brother should joy (rejoice), for he has escaped the deceitfulness of riches that would have him believe that the riches are something to be depended on.

James then reminds them that the wealth of this world does not endure; they are not to be depended upon. He draws from Isaiah the prophet:

“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
When the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever.” (Isa 40:6-8)

James reminds his brethren that we are all transitory, like “a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). We are like grass that passes away (vs 10). The sun and scorching wind come and withers the grass (vs 11). The

flowers also succumb to time – their beauty is just for a moment (vs 11). The rich man, also, will be here on earth but for a short time (vs 11). He too will “fade away” like the grass and flowers of the field, and with him the attractiveness of His 'business' dealings (NIV) and 'pursuits' (NASB) will also fade. Of what benefit, in the final analysis, did his riches profit him?

James' advice is profitable for the brethren of both humble circumstances and wealth. This world and all its attractions are temporary. The poor should not set their hopes on becoming wealthy and the rich should not place their hopes on the wealth they have. On what should we place our hope? What course of life should we pursue? James answers these questions in verse 12. Our hope is to be in God. And rather than envy the rich of this world and their supposed 'happy circumstances,' we should 'envy' the person who perseveres under trial, for that person will be “approved” of God and receive the “crown of life.”

Week 3, Day 4: True wisdom, true love. (James 1:12)

Verse 12 completes the exhortations of verses 2-4 and verses 9-11. Not only will the trials that come our way test our faith and produce in us endurance so that we will become mature (vs 3-4) – conformed to the image of Christ and fit for His service, and not only will we avoid the deceitfulness of the world's temporary wealth (vs-9-11), but we will be “approved” by God and receive the “crown of life” (vs 12). Though the trials and training of our faith are painful, even sorrowful (Heb 12:11), and though the wealth of this world seems so desirable and comforting to our flesh, we still admire, even envy, those who have gone before us with such exemplary character. Who does not admire Joseph, Jacob's first son by Rachel? He was hated by his brothers and they sold him into slavery when he was 17 or 18 years old. He was taken to Egypt and served faithfully and prosperously in the house of the chief of the body guards. There he was falsely accused of immorality, when in fact he was faithful to God, and thrown into prison. In prison he served the chief jailer faithfully and was given charge of all the responsibilities of the chief jailer. In prison he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer, but was forgotten by the cupbearer. For two full years he remained in prison. Then, he was summoned from prison by Pharaoh, interpreted his prophetic dream, and put in charge of all of Egypt. Again he served faithfully and was there ready to help his father and the brothers that had betrayed him (Gen 39 – 46). But by this time, Joseph had learned that his trials and testing – even the betrayal of his brothers – were used by God for his good and the good of many people (Gen 50:20-21). The trials matured and prepared Joseph to be of incredible help to his family and the future nation of Israel.

We also admire the life of Job (James 5:11). Job's trials appear mainly to test his faithfulness to God in the midst of disaster after disaster. In addition, the lives of the men and women described in Hebrews 11 reveal enduring faith. Their lives gained God's approval (Heb 11:2). There is no greater goal to seek than God's approval. And those who have been approved of God will receive the crown of life (vs 12); that is, eternal life. Endurance, or perseverance “under trial,” is James advice. It results in great rewards.

The one who perseveres is called “blessed” (vs 12). But we must persevere. It

does not come without cost. To the church at Smyrna, Jesus said:

“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Rev 2:9-10)

Notice that Jesus knows of their tribulation and their poverty. He knows they have been horribly treated by so-called Jews and He warns them that Satan is going to attack them. Modern Christianity says, 'Wait! Doesn't my compassionate and merciful God spare me from these injustices?' In some cases, yes; in some cases, no. He spared the three companions of Daniel from the fires of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:19-28). He spared Daniel himself from the hunger of lions (Dan 6:16-23). And yet He did not spare His apostles. Church tradition reports that all but John suffered death by crucifixion.

True wisdom sees this life as temporary. The rewards of this life do not compare to the rewards of eternal life with God. And the lesson is 'perseverance under trial.' Those who run in a race must compete by the rules of the race (2 Tim 2:5). And the rules of 'our race' stipulate finishing the course (2 Tim 4:7).

“Therefore . . . let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God.” (Heb 12:1-2)

Let us decide in the midst of each trial to endure by the power of His Holy Spirit so that we too can sit down with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6).

One more point needs mentioning. Notice how this verse ends: “he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” God has promised eternal life to those who love Him. Who are those who love Him? James has given us a bit of a definition. Those who love Him are those who “persevere under trial.” They are those who accept the testing from God.

“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word.” (John 14:23)

“You are My friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:14)

The members of God's family are those who do His will (Mark 3:33-35). That is the message of James: a living faith is one that works, i.e. one that obeys. His message is not salvation by works, his message is true faith equals obedience. Those that love Him are doers of the word.

Week 3, Day 5: Tested and tempted. (James 1:12)

Verse 12 marks a transition in thought for James. The word translated 'trial' in

verses 2 and 12 in the NASB and NIV is the same word that is translated as 'tempted' in verses 13 and 14. Much like the English language, Greek words can have more than one meaning. In English we might say 'that man is finished' – which could mean that he is highly accomplished or skilled at something, or that he has completed a race, or that he is in big trouble. The Greek word for 'trial' or 'tempted' is *peirasmós* and its meaning depends on how it is used. If the source of the *peirasmós* comes from God, then it means to test, try, or prove. If the source of *peirasmós* comes from Satan, then it means to solicit to evil (Ryrie, 1995; Zodhiates, 1991). If it is from God, then we are to accept the 'testing' as something for our good and to see the end result as something joyful. If it is from Satan, the world, or our flesh, then we are to reject the 'temptation' as something that would be to our detriment. The first is to be received, the second is to be rejected, avoided, even mourned.

James knew that his advice would be twisted by the devil and he wanted to prevent anyone from excusing their indulging in thoughts – as though they were from God – that would lead them down a path of sin and destruction. In the next few verses, and in chapter 4, James details how to avoid the temptations of the devil, this world, and our own thoughts.

Trials and temptations go hand-in-hand. James has told us how to think in the midst of trials when he spoke of the wealth of the believer and the poverty of the riches of this world (vs 9-11). He knew that in the midst of financial struggles, it is quite tempting for us to seek the world's riches. Whether the testing is from God – to build our character and maturity, or the temptations are from the devil – to vex our souls, we often seek immediate relief. But immediate relief is not always available to us. Often we are required to stand against the devil (Eph 6:13; James 4:7). Sometimes we are able to escape the situation (Gen 39:12; 2 Tim 2:22). But whenever possible, we should first and foremost avoid the situation altogether (Prov 4:14-15; 5:1-11) and seek God's leading in our life (Matt 6:13).

Like it or not, we are engaged in both a training program and a battle. God allows us to encounter trials in order to mature us, to make us ready for His coming kingdom. On the other hand, the devil seeks to 'accuse' us (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5), 'sift' us (Luke 22:31-32), to 'devour' us (1 Pet 5:8). We are engaged in a battle against the "world forces of darkness" (Eph 6:12). Fortunately, God has placed limitations on how much we can be tempted (1 Cor 10:13). But the temptations will come.

In light of these things, our goal should be to fight the good fight, finish the course set before us, and to keep the faith (2 Tim 4:7). James is going to give us some great advice on how to achieve that end.

Week 4, Day 1: The buck stops here. (James 1:13-15)

U.S. President Truman used to have a small sign on his desk that described his attitude: "The buck stops here." According to the Truman Library and Museum website, the expression "is said to have originated with the game of poker, in which a marker or counter, frequently in frontier days a knife with a buckhorn handle, was used to indicate the person whose turn it was to deal. If the player did not wish to deal he could pass the responsibility by passing the 'buck', as the counter came to be called, to the next

player.” Today, the expression is often used when referring to someone who has passed the blame of their decision onto someone else. After the fall in the Garden of Eden, Adam blamed both Eve and God for his mistake: “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate” (Gen 3:12). Eve blamed the serpent (Gen 3:13). And the devil has been lying and accusing others since the beginning (John 8:44; Rev 12:10).

President Truman viewed the saying in light of the importance of personally making the actual decision. In his farewell address, in January of 1953, he said: “The President – whoever he is – has to decide. He can’t pass the buck to anybody. No one else can do the deciding for him. That’s his job.” It is in these two ideas, making the decision and owning up to the consequences, that apply to our next passage. Human nature doesn’t want to make the tough decisions, nor be responsible for the unwelcome consequences. But when it comes to deciding on what to do with the temptation and the consequences of our decision, we will stand alone before the Judge.

In verse 13, James says: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’” God will test our faith to train us in righteousness (Heb 12:11), but He will never tempt us to do evil. It isn’t possible. God has no capability to sin. He cannot even be tempted by evil (vs 13). Therefore, it doesn’t even enter His mind to tempt us with evil. We cannot blame God.

Then, can we blame Satan or the world around us for the temptation? It is true that Satan is called the ‘tempter’ (Matt 4:3) and that we struggle against the devil and his angels (Eph 6:12). It is also true that the world throws before our paths many temptations (1 John 2:16). But neither Satan, his angels, or others are ultimately responsible for how we respond to those temptations. The responsibility is ours and ours alone. How can this be? Consider those things that are a temptation to others but not to yourself. For example, it might be that some have a real difficulty with gambling. They can’t go near a casino without gambling away all that they own. For others, this is not something they really have to struggle with. Gambling has no appeal to them. So though the world offers this ‘enticement’ to everyone, its allure lies within the individual, not in the actual activity. It is in our own desires that temptation has its appeal. This is what James says in verse 14: “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lusts.” Instead of the phrase ‘carried away’ (NASB) or ‘drawn away’ (KJV), the NIV uses the phrase ‘dragged away.’ The root word can be translated this way, but most translations and Bible authorities seem to prefer the phrase ‘drawn away.’ Dragged does emphasize the force of the temptation, but it can give the wrong impression: that the temptation is more than we can resist. This is not scriptural (1 Cor 10:13). What James is saying is that the temptation plays upon our evil desires and draws us away from the shelter of the Lord and lures us like a fish after bait (Vine, 1940). The sin is not in the temptation; Jesus was tempted in all things, but never sinned (Heb 4:15). It is in our yielding to the temptation that sin is born.

In verse 15, James explains how sin occurs and what it leads to: “Then, when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin . . . [which] brings forth death.” Most Bible versions translate the Greek word *sullambanō* as ‘to conceive,’ and figuratively (NASBEC, 1981; Zodhiates, 1992) it has this meaning. Zodhiates (1991) also translates the word as “to clasp, to seize.” Rather than letting the lure or bait pass us by, we grasp hold of it. Rather than ignoring or resisting or diverting our thoughts elsewhere, we ‘cooperate’

with the thought presented to us. We yield to the temptation and we are hooked. It is an active decision on our part. We can blame no one else. We are guilty.

The result from this, James says, is that when sin is 'full-grown' (NIV), it brings forth death.

Week 4, Day 2: Avoiding death. (James 1:15)

In verse 15, James tells us that sin – brought to maturity – leads to death. Let us trace the steps:

1. Sin is conceived when we cooperate with, take part with, or grasp hold of the bait.
2. When sin is “fully-grown” (NIV), “when it has become a fixed habit” (Adamson, 1976), when we have become enslaved to the sin (Rom 6:16), “when it reaches maturity” (MLB), when it has become “mature and complete” (in parallelistic contrast to James 1:4), then it “gives birth to death” (NIV).
3. Here is the path restated:
 1. desire unchecked, conceives sin;
 2. sin unconfessed and unrepented, enslaves us;
 3. sin, fully-formed, gives birth to death.
4. The contrast between enduring the trials and yielding to temptations is total. Accepting and enduring the tests and trials sent from God creates maturity in Christ and this gives birth to eternal life. Accepting and giving in to the temptations of evil causes complete enslavement to sin and this gives birth to death.

Commentators are divided as to what James means when he says that sin for the believer leads to 'death.' Some believe he is referring to physical death and the loss of rewards (1 Cor 3:13; 11:30). Others believe that 'death' refers to eternal separation from God and the loss of one's soul (Gal 6:8; Heb 10:26-27, 29). Bible scholars and theologians have sided with each viewpoint and this will never be resolved on earth. But, regardless of one's viewpoint, unconfessed sin in the believer's life is acutely serious. How then can we guard ourselves from giving into sin so readily? And if we do yield, what can we do to aid us in confessing that sin before God?

First, if we should sin, we must humble ourselves before God, knowing that He is faithful and just to forgive us from our sins and cleanse us from our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Second, we need to help each other. We are to strengthen those with tendencies to weakness (Heb 12:12). We are to come to the aid of those who have sinned (Gal 6:1; James 5:19-20). And we ourselves must try not to be the cause of someone else's stumbling (1 Cor 8:9-13).

In regard to resisting temptations, Christ's advice was to eliminate those things or circumstances in our lives that cause us to sin. In Mark 9:43-50, He gives this advice:

1. If our hand causes us to sin, “cut it off” (Mark 9:43). An application of this can

be found in our workplaces. In New Testament times, most work was done with their hands. If we work in a place where temptations are difficult for us, we should quit our job. If someone has trouble with gambling, it would be foolish for that person to work in a casino. In fact, it is probably foolish for most Christians to work in a casino.

2. If our foot causes us to sin, “cut it off” (Mark 9:45). An application of this might be in our plans to travel. In New Testament times, much travel was accomplished on foot. If we take a trip to the beach or lake shore, are we going there primarily for the view of the beach or the sunbathers? If the latter, the plans for the trip are ill advised. The remedy: don't go there.
3. If our eye causes us to sin, “cut it off” (Mark 9:47). An application of this is, to be careful of what we watch on television, or where we surf on the Internet, or what we see at the movie theater. Whether it is gambling, lust, whatever, the eye is a primary receptor of temptation. We must be careful of the things we see. Avoid television or surfing the Internet alone, if these are problem areas for you. And research the content of movies before you see them.
4. It is good to be 'rid' of certain things in this life in order that we may enter into eternal life.

At the end of these verses, Jesus makes an interesting comment:

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (Mark 9:49-50)

There seems to be a play on the word salt. Jesus is probably using it with two different meanings. Let us think about what our Lord is saying.

Week 4, Day 3: Revealing life. (An aside: Mark 9:49-50; James 1:16)

Though we are looking at a short passage in Mark today, it ties in with what James has been saying (vs 2-4, 12) and will very shortly say (vs 18-22).

In Mark 9:49-50, the Lord's use of the word 'salt' is intriguing. Jesus says that everyone will be salted with fire. This probably means that we will all be tested with trials. Notice that it is not an overflowing of trials, but a salting. It is almost as though the proper proportion of trials makes us a more appealing offering unto God, and to others. In Old Testament times, the offerings placed upon the altar to burn gave up a soothing aroma to the Lord (e.g. Ex 29:18). Often, the term “an offering by fire unto the Lord” is used in conjunction with the words “soothing aroma to the Lord” (NASB). In Ephesians 5:2, Paul writes: “walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” In Romans 12:1, Paul exhorts us to present ourselves as a “living sacrifice, acceptable to God.” God is very pleased when we are willing to be totally surrendered to His will and His service. But how do we become a usable sacrifice unto God? Are we not called to yield to His will daily? (Luke 9:23). As James said in verses 2-4, it is in the trials – the testing by fire (1 Pet

1:7) – that we are purified (Mal 3:3) and made mature (James 1:4).

Our lives are constantly being observed. Even in the times of trials our character is seen by non-believers. How we react has an impact on their perception of what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ. If we allow the trials to refine us and make us more attractive in character to God and to others, then the “salt” within us is very good. It makes the Lordship of Christ more attractive to them. This is the “salt” that Christ spoke of in Matthew 5:13. It is also the kind of “salt” that should be revealed in our speech: “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt” (Col 4:6; NASB). The Good News Bible paraphrases grace and salt as “pleasant and interesting” (TEV, 1992). Our lives and speech should cause non-believers to be interested in what we believe.

In Mark 9:50, Jesus then asks: “but if the salt becomes unsalty, with what will you make it salty again?” If the trials in our lives do not have God's intended effect of maturing us, or if the 'appealing aroma' of our Christian witness is destroyed by yielding to grievous sin, how will we regain that witness to the non-believers that have been observing us? Have we not destroyed for at least some length of time their willingness to hear the gospel message? Think of the news reports of prominent Christian leaders who have been exposed of adultery or homosexuality. Who will believe their message? Because of this Jesus then says: “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” It is Christ's will for us to be mature in the faith so that we will have an effective witness to non-believers. Along with that maturity will come the cooperative and loving relationships with our brothers and sisters in the faith. As He says in John 13:34-35, this too will be observed by non-believers. Who wants to attend a church where the members of the congregation are fighting among themselves? Hypocrisy destroys any appeal the gospel might have for non-believers. It also speaks volumes about our so-called 'relationship' with God.

James has been explaining to his readers the operations of temptation and our yielding to it (James 1:13-15) in order for us to avoid the death that follows. He instead wants us to be a 'revealer of life' to the non-believers who are observing us. James wrote to the first-generation believers to remind them that they are a kind of 'first fruits' of a greater harvest (James 1:18). Our ability to advance the gospel will not be successful if we complain and get angry (vs 19-20). Nor will our presentation of the gospel be received if we indulge in sin.

James is calling his readers to receive the testing and training from God and to reject all temptations to evil that are presented to them. They must not be deceived (James 1:16). Sowing to the flesh will reap extremely grave consequences (Gal 6:7-8). They must acknowledge that their sinful desires reside within themselves (James 1:14), otherwise they cannot address the problem. The first step in a cure is a proper diagnosis.

Week 4, Day 4: The Father of light and perfection, the Giver of Life. (James 1:16-18)

Verse 16 is a transitional verse. It describes what preceded it (vs 13-15) and what follows it (vs 17). James exhorts us not to be deceived by the temptations to do

evil and not to be deceived by thinking that God tempts us. It is in fact our own evil desires that cause us so much trouble. In addition, if we are not careful, we will suffer great loss if we yield to these temptations. They are no trifling matter. Rather, we must acknowledge that God is pure Light; there is no darkness of sin in Him. The Light does not cause darkness, it exposes it (John 1:4-9; 3:19-21).

So after acknowledging that we are evil, where do we turn for help? James writes that we must come to and dwell with the Father of lights. James begins his answer in verse 17 by describing God as the giver of “every good thing” and “every perfect gift.” “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God” (Rom 8:28). It may sound redundant, but 'all things' means all things, even the testing and trials that come our way. God's purpose for us is for our good:

“For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’” (Jer 29:11)

The phrase “Father of lights” (NASB) is translated as “Father of the heavenly lights” in the NIV. It refers to God as the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars (Zodhiates, 1992). Sometimes the word (Greek: phōs) can be used specifically to refer to the sun or daylight (Zodhiates, 1991). The sun, or daylight, alternates with night. And, as the earth rotates, the sun casts a shadow which grows with the turning of the earth. But with God, the 'Light' is constant. The word for variation (Greek: parallagē) is used only here in the New Testament. According to Adamson (1976), it is used in Greek texts “for the setting of teeth in a saw, or for stones set alternately . . . or for the sequence of seasons.” The teeth of a saw blade alternate left, right, left, right . . . in order for the blade to cut a swath wider than the width of the blade, to prevent drag. The sequence of seasons also describe change: warmth followed by cold. But with God there is not alternating of day and night, no casting of shadows due to change, no change from warm to cold as with the seasons. There is only the constant warmth and light of His love.

Everything that comes from God is a good and perfect gift (vs 17), as exemplified by His greatest gift to us: our new “birth through the word of truth” (vs 18, NIV). There are at least two important points to be learned from this verse. First, notice the fruit of God's goodness: He gave us new life. This is in sharp contrast to the results of our lusts, where lust gives birth to sin, and sin (if not confessed and repented of) gives birth to death (vs 14-15). God gives birth to life through the work of His Son as we learn from the “word of truth” – the gospel. Second, notice how we were birthed: by “the exercise of His will” (vs 18, NASB), or as the NIV states it, “He chose to give us birth.” In absolute contradiction to those who misinterpret this epistle, James declares that our salvation was by God and God alone. Works do not save anyone. As stated earlier, the message of James is not salvation by works, the message is true faith equals obedience. God desires to complete the work He began in us (Phil 1:6), but it requires our cooperation:

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” (Phil 2:12-13)

God's will is to work in our lives to conform us to His Son's image (Rom 8:28-29). He sends tests and trials that we must receive and let work in us so that we might reach full maturity (James 1:2-4). We are to resist temptations to evil and avoid the path that leads to death. God is the source of Life (James 1:17-18) and He is always there to help us whenever we need Him (Heb 4:14-16) – which is always!

Week 4, Day 5: The first fruits. (James 1:18)

We must always give thanks to God for what He has done for us through Jesus Christ. Paul describes the free gift of our salvation (Rom 5:15) as “indescribable” (2 Cor 9:15). We are so indebted to God. With that free gift of salvation comes the responsibility of being obedient and honoring to Him (Eph 4:14 – 5:21). If this is true of us today, it most certainly was true of the first generation of believers. James refers to them as “a kind of first fruits among His creatures” (vs 18). Upon them was laid some of the responsibility of the beginnings of the church. The term first fruits among His creatures is important to understanding the letter of James.

The Jewish Christians (the first generation of Christians) – the 'first fruits' of the larger, worldwide harvest.

The promise of a Savior for our sins goes back to Genesis 3:15, where the seed of a woman would cause the death blow to Satan and his kingdom. The lineage would be through Abraham (Gen 12:2-3; John 4:22), the father of faith (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:7) and the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who is called Israel (Gen 32:28) – the name of the Jewish nation.

When Jesus came to earth He came to the household of God (Israel) for to them was given the promises of God and through them came the Messiah (Matt 10:5-6; 15:24; Rom 9:4-5). But, of course, the love of God was not confined only to the Israelites (Gen 12:3; Matt 15:26-28). Though the majority of Jews rejected Christ, the first Christians were Jews. In fact, it took a vision from God for Peter to realize that He wanted to save Gentiles as well (Acts 10; specifically 10:34-35). It took the telling of this vision and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles to convince other Jewish Christians that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles as well as the Jews (Acts 11:18). To the Jews, this was startling news; several years passed after Christ's resurrection before this was realized.

The church is built upon the divine revelation of and the profession of faith in Jesus Christ (Matt 16:16-19) and it began with the Jews with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). The Jewish Christians were the first fruits of the larger, worldwide harvest of believers. This being so, they were exhorted by James to exercise self-control (James 1:19), for they were not going to bring about the righteousness of God in anger and wickedness (vs 20-21a). They would only accomplish God's will by truly receiving the good news of God through the Word and by doing what His Word said (vs 21b-22). God had called them, and today calls us, to display the Light correctly (Matt 5:16). James' thought is the same as Paul's: we are to be a “sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in

every place” (2 Cor 14-15).

This high calling from God demands an appropriate response. James continues his letter by instructing us in how we should respond to that call – we are to live faithfully before the Lord and all who observe us.

Week 5, Day 1: Instructions on faithful living: being quick to learn, slow to react. (James 1:19-20)

The first part of verse 19 is translated differently by various translations:

“My dear brothers, take note of this” (NIV) – an imperative, a command for what follows.

“This you know, my beloved brethren” (NASB) – a statement of the fact that the readers are aware of what he said in the preceding verse or of what follows.

“So then, my beloved brethren” (NKJV) – connecting the previous verse with the exhortation to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Some of the differences in these translations are due to different Greek texts that the different translations were based on. The New Testament in Modern English (NTME) by J.B. Phillips seems to capture the flow of this section of verses by using both Greek texts in translating verses 19-20:

“Knowing this, then, dear brothers, let every man be quick to listen but slow to use his tongue, and slow to lose his temper. For man's temper is never the means for achieving God's true goodness.” (MTME)

What James has been teaching his readers is that enduring the trials leads to life, while yielding to temptations leads to death (vs 2-15). In addition, as a kind of first fruits of the worldwide harvest, their witness is of great importance (vs 18). Knowing these things to be true – as the first generation of believers must have known, the believer in the midst of his testing needs to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (study notes, NKJV, 1997). For in hearing, we may learn something. But when speaking, “you are not learning anything new, but simply repeating that which you already know” (Luck, 1954). If we are quick to speak, we may be speaking out of anger. And if we are angry, it is extremely doubtful that we will learn anything of what God is trying to teach us through the trial. But an attitude of holding the tongue and being willing to listen indicates a desire to learn what God wants to teach us. And isn't that what enduring the trials is all about? (vs 2-4). This explains why we very often have to wait for the Lord's answer to our prayers. The 21st century man, and quite often, the 21st century Christian, is in a big hurry. Anything that slows us down, tends to get us angry. But if we can sit, and be still, and wait for the Lord, He will not let us down. We will come to know God (Ps 46:10) and be renewed by His strength (Isa 40:31). We will thus endure the trials.

Being angry does not allow us to learn anything. In addition, it destroys the witness we can have before non-believers. But being quick to listen is of great value. Mary must have learned a great deal listening at the feet of Jesus, while her sister Martha – preoccupied by being so busy, missed much (Luke 10:39-42).

Being quick to hear and slow to anger models God's nature:

“The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.” (Exodus 34:6; Joel 2:13)

Being quick to hear and slow to speak reveals compassion and graciousness to others. It demonstrates a selflessness and concern for others that will win their hearts to Christ.

Being slow to anger demonstrates wisdom, self-control, and lovingkindness. We never know the circumstances of any situation without a thorough investigation of all the facts. Therefore, it is foolishness to react in anger when we know little of the other person's situation. God knows all the facts perfectly and He shows incredible patience with us. Should we do any less?

Self-control, patience, kindness, gentleness . . . these are qualities that are not ours by nature. They are only possible by the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

Week 5, Day 2: Receive the word planted in you. (James 1:21)

Just as James instructs us to have desire to learn from our trials, he now instructs us to learn from God's Word. It isn't enough to have received the good news of salvation without responding in a proper way. John the Baptizer told his listeners to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:8). It was not enough for them to claim that they were children of Abraham; they needed to have their lives drastically changed. Then, they would be true children of Abraham. Children of faith are those whose lives have been changed by their faith in God. One of God's tools to change us is His Word:

- He brought us forth by His Word. (James 1:18)
- His Word is living and active; it can reveal our heart's motives. (Heb 4:12)
- It purifies us. (John 17:17; Eph 5:26).
- It matures us in Christ. (1 John 2:5)

But the Word of God will not change us if it sits on the shelf. Peter instructs us to earnestly desire to the learn from the Word:

“Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.” (1 Pet 2:2)

It is growing in respect to salvation that James is writing about in verse 21. He says to “receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” He is not writing about receiving the Word for the first time; they are already saved. The word “implanted” (“planted” in NIV) is used only once in the Bible. According to Adamson

(1976), the word is an adjective that “denotes a postnatal acquisition.” It might be that James is contrasting what happens when we choose to receive or grasp hold of the temptations before us (vs 14-15). When we 'take hold of' the evil thought in us, we give birth to sin. If sin goes unchecked, it gives 'birth' to death. Here, James is saying to “humbly accept” (NIV) the Word which can save our souls. The idea is welcoming the Word, grasping hold of it, making an environment in our hearts where it can grow in us and bring us to spiritual maturity. The following quote from Douglas Moo (1985) is very instructive:

“What James is suggesting by describing the Word in this way is that the Christian must not think he is done with the Word of God after it has saved him. That Word becomes a permanent, inseparable part of the Christian, a commanding and guiding presence within him.”

The Word can also be thought of as being “sown” or “planted” in us (Adamson, 1976). This is a fulfillment of God's promise in Jeremiah 31:33, where God says He will put His law within us and on our hearts. For they were unable to keep the written law of God written on stone tablets and the covenant made with the house of Israel. But the law of God residing in us allows us to truly know God and obey Him. His purpose is to turn our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh; hearts that are capable of love and obedience (Ezek 36:26-27).

The adjective 'planted' may also be a reference to the Parable of the Soils, taught by Christ. The seed that fell on good soil grew to be a mature plant and produced much fruit. But good soil doesn't happen naturally. The ground must be constantly cared for by the farmer. He must remove the weeds – the cares and riches of this world – so that the Word is not 'choked,' causing the plant to be unproductive (Matt 13:22). Thus, James introduces his exhortation in verse 21 by writing:

“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent” (James 1:21, NIV)

The Word of God 'conceived' in us must find a healthy environment. The Word 'sown' in us must find a soil free from the distractions of this world. We must get rid of the sins that so easily entangle us (Heb 12:1).

The words “get rid” and “moral filth” imply another word picture, according to Moo (1985). The terms “get rid,” or “put aside” (NASB) is the translation for the Greek word that describe the taking off of a set of clothes. This, used in conjunction with the word “filthy,” reminds us of the vision of Zechariah when he saw Joshua, the high priest, standing with filthy garments, being accused by Satan (Zech 3:1-10). But the angel of the Lord commanded and the filthy garments were removed from Joshua and he was given festive garments. All this was to signify that God would remove the iniquity of man in “one day” (vs 9) through the work of the Branch – Jesus Christ. But with that cleansing came the command to “walk in My ways” and “perform My service” (vs 7). The free gift of salvation also brings with it the command to be a holy people (1 Pet 1:14-16), “a people of his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14, NIV).

How do we put away (vs 21) the filthiness and pervasive evil around us? How do

we receive (vs 21) the word implanted in us? How do we “achieve the righteousness of God” in our lives (vs 20, NASB), or “bring about the righteous life that God desires” (vs 20, NIV)? By doing what the Bible says through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Week 5, Day 3: Our response to the Word; Part I. (James 1:22-25)

A problem

In verses 22 through 25, James exhorts his readers to be doers of the word. If they do not become doers of the word, but hearers only, James called them deceived. This is definitely not a desirable condition for believers to be in. Therefore, it is important that we learn from James how to avoid this condition. For by implication, the self-deceived will not be blessed by God (vs 25) and will not grow to maturity. But to understand the solution – that is, how to avoid being self-deceived, one needs to know what James is saying in his illustration of the mirror. It is on this point that commentators differ.

Some commentators say that the one who only hears the word, but does not do the word, is like a man who takes a casual glance in the mirror and sees himself inaccurately. He then moves on hastily, forgetting what he saw of himself through the casual glance, and does nothing about the commands of God in His life. In this case, his problem is one of ignorance. The solution for this man is to slow down, study the Word, and thereby be better informed about God's will. This person, then, will be able to do God's Word and grow to maturity.

On the hand, other commentators say that the one who only hears the word, but does not do the word, is like a man who takes a good look at himself in the mirror, sees himself as revealed by God, but does nothing about it. He decides that it is not all that important. In this case, his problem is one of choosing not to do what the Bible says even though he understands it. The problem and outcome for this man are much more serious.

The problems and solutions to these two different scenarios are quite different. The first scenario seems less alarming and easier to deal with. The second scenario, is much more alarming and might be quite difficult to resolve. One can hope James means to address the first situation. Let us take a closer look.

Unfortunately, as we will see, most Bible versions have chosen not to give literal translations to key words in this section of Scripture. Possibly there are differences among Greek scholars to warrant a general translation and let the readers decide for themselves. If this is the case, our work might be more difficult. Whatever the reason, we should not feel that we are freed from our obligation to at least try to understand God's Word. Christ's prayer to the Father is that we would grow to maturity through His word (John 17:17). We also have Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, will help us understand His Word (John 14:16-17, 26). With this encouragement, let us begin to examine the text.

An investigative word study

Let us take a look at what the commentators and Bible resources on the Greek language have to say. There are several good references available for us. Commentators

referenced in our study on James are: Adamson (1976), Blue (The Bible Knowledge Commentary; BKC, 1983), Kistemaker (1996), Luck (1954), and Moo (1985). Greek word helps for the Bible include Vincent (1886), Vine (1940), Wuest (1945), Zodhiates (1991, 1992), English-Greek Interlinear texts (Green, 1986; Marshall, 1986), and exhaustive concordances with Hebrew and Greek dictionaries (e.g. NASBEC, 1981). See the References section at the end of this study guide for more complete citations. The Greek word references are valuable tools to have for home Bible study and are excellent investments.

Deceive / Delude (vs 22)

In verse 22, James writes that those who only hear the word, but do not do what it says, “deceive” (NIV) or “delude” (NASB) themselves.

Zodhiates (1992) says this Greek word is *paralogízomai* – it looks like para-logic, doesn't it? Zodhiates defines this word as: “to reason falsely or incorrectly.”

Vincent (1886) defines the word this way: “beside, contrary to + to reckon, and hence, to conclude by reasoning.” Vincent concludes: “The deception referred to is, therefore, that into which one betrays himself by false reasoning – reasoning beside the truth” (italics added).

Mirror & Looks (vs 23, 24)

We all know what a mirror is. But in New Testament times the mirrors were quite different. One commentator (Kistemaker, 1996) makes this observation: “Mirrors in the first century were not made of glass but of metal that was polished regularly. The mirrors rested horizontally on tables so that the person who wished to see his reflection had to bend and look down.” Another commentator (Adamson, 1976) makes this observation: “We have a man who “notices” or “observes” his face in a mirror; but the degree of attention given to it is clear from the sequel, including the instantaneous perfect: at once he is gone, and immediately he forgets what his face was like.” This would imply, then, that the problem of the man who only hears the word and doesn't do what the word says, is that he is ignorant of what his state is and needs to slow down and study the word; compliance will then follow.

Moo (1985) however, makes this observation: “There is no justification for giving the verb *katanoēō* (observes) [“looks,” “looking”] in verses 23-24 the connotation of a hasty or cursory glance. In fact, the verb regularly connotes thoughtful, attentive consideration (as in Luke 12:27), where Jesus invites us to ‘consider the lilies.’” Zodhiates (1991) agrees with this definition for “looks” and “looking” used in verses 23-24. He defines the word as: “to observe, remark, consider, contemplate.” Vincent (1886) defines *katanoēō* (looks) as: “attentively considering.” The Amplified New Testament (AmpNT, 1958) translates it, “looks carefully.”

There is disagreement between scholars, but the majority of commentators and Greek scholars describe the 'looking into the mirror' as not a casual glance, but a careful contemplation. We should probably put the weight of our consideration with this viewpoint.

Forgets / Forgotten & Face (vs 23, 24)

How can one who has carefully considered what he has seen in the mirror

immediately forget what he saw? And what did he see? Just his face? The word for “forgets” (NIV) and “forgotten” (NASB) is *epilanthomai* and is defined in the NASBEC (1981) concordance with Greek dictionary as: “to forget, neglect.” It also says in this reference that it is translated elsewhere in the Bible as “forgetting.” We then wonder if this is the word Paul used when he says: “I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching for forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13-14). A check of our exhaustive concordance confirms that Paul's choice to forget what lies behind in his life is the same word used in James 1:24, where the man immediately forgets what he saw in the mirror. We know, then, that the word can convey the idea of an active choice to forget what one has seen. But what did the man see in the mirror that he may have chosen to immediately forget? Is there some meaning to be found in the word for face?

Verse 23 in the NIV reads in part: “is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror.” Literally, as derived from two words defined by Zodhiates (1991), the verse could read: “is like a man who looks at his genesis face.” We could easily go on a spiritual tangent here and find meaning that James may not have intended. Fortunately, commentators and Greek scholars such as Vincent (1886) define the meaning of the phrase as: “Literally: the countenance of his birth; the face he was born with.” In other words, the man looked into the mirror and saw his human face. It is wise to refer to several sources before concluding something.

It seems, then, that the intent of James in verses 23 and 24 is to describe a man who has clearly seen what he looks like, but departs from the mirror and chooses to forget what he saw. In the context of being a “doer of the word,” and not just a hearer, coupled with the correct response described in verse 25, there might be some strong implications here.

Looks intently & Perfect law (vs 25)

In the context of what James has been saying, the “perfect law, the law of liberty” refers to the word of God that we are to be doers of (vs 22). This is generally agreed upon by most commentators. James had previously referred to the Word as the “word of truth” (vs 18). We remember from our Bible reading that Jesus referred to the Word as “the truth” and that His truth would set us free (John 8:31-32; 17:17), which implies liberty. We also remember Jesus saying in the gospel accounts that the laws of the Old Testament and the good news as revealed in the New Testament have as their goal, for us to love God and others (Matt 22:36-40). The good news is that the salvation brought to us by Jesus' work on the cross has set us free from Satan's power so that we might serve God in holiness all the days of our lives (Luke 1:74-75). So we see in James 1:25, the doer of the Word looking intently at the “law of liberty,” i.e. the Word.

According to Vincent (1886), the verb (*parakuptō*) translated as 'looking intently' means “to stoop sideways to look attentively.” Zodhiates (1992), possibly interpreting *para* (along side) better, describes it as: “To stoop down near or by something, bend forward or near in order to look at something more closely.” The bending down may parallel what a man looking in the mirror (polished metal laying on the table) or it may infer taking the time to take a deliberate look (Adamson, 1976) at the Word. This is supported by James saying that the doer of the Word “looks intently into the perfect

law . . . and continues to do so” (vs 25, NIV). That is, he does not immediately go away as the man described in verse 24 did. He is also described as one who is “not forgetting what he has heard.” This man's intent is to hear the Word and contemplate the truths of God's sayings, not trying to forget what it said. It is the same humble attitude described in verse 19: to be quick to hear.

Putting the pieces together – your turn.

We have examined quite a bit with the resources we have used. Now it's time to determine what it all means. Reread verses 22 through 25, meditate on what is being said and see if the intent of James words come to life for you. We will take a look at presenting a possible summary of the verses tomorrow, but first it is your turn. We may not come to exactly the same conclusion. The right conclusion may not be the one presented in this study guide. The Bible is the only authority that is correct. We must study the Word to see if what a pastor, teacher, or study guide is saying is true (Acts 17:11).

Week 5, Day 4: Our response to the Word; Part II. (James 1:22-25)

James has been exhorting his fellow believers to receive the trials as correction and training from God for our benefit (vs 2-4, 17). We are to be quick to hear what He has to teach us (vs 19). He then exhorted us to 'receive' the Word that has been implanted in our souls, to welcome it, to let it have its full effect in our lives (vs 21). In this next section, he defines more fully what he means to 'receive' the Word. We began this section noting that there were at least two views on what James meant when he said that those that only listened to the Word are like those that see themselves in a mirror, but do nothing about it. They are either hasty listeners and are guilty of ignorance, or they actually comprehend what the Word says but are deliberately choosing not to do anything about it. Neither situation is good, but the second speaks more harshly of their error, as one of choice rather than one of ignorance.

It's now time to take a look at a possible interpretation of this passage. Since Bible scholars disagree on the interpretation, it is wise to say that whatever conclusion we come up with, we should not be arrogant and think we know with absolute certainty the 'right' answer. In certain doctrinal issues it is vital to come down on one side of an issue with certainty – like the coming of Jesus Christ in bodily form, who paid for the penalty of our sins upon the cross, and bodily rose from the grave on the third day. But in many situations, love of our brothers and sisters in Christ must take precedence over minor doctrinal issues. The unity of the saints is high in Christ's priorities. And if we all mature in our faith, the differences will diminish (Eph 4:13).

Lastly, since both interpretations of this passage can apply to different people, and since both errors need to be addressed, it would be wrong to exclude either of them entirely from our consideration or application.

A possible interpretation

The people of the first century were literally hearers of the word of God. What most of them knew of Scripture was what was read to them in their gatherings, for only

the spiritual leaders had handwritten copies of the Scriptures. It would not be until the late 1300's before the first European wood block printing press was made. And it wasn't until about 1440 before Gutenberg's raised metal press was developed (source: World Book Encyclopedia). So for James' readers of his handwritten epistle, they were literally hearers of the Bible. But with each reading of the Word, a sermon undoubtedly followed. The words of God were carefully explained by the pastors and made clear to the congregations of the early church. In addition, the words of Christ were relayed from the apostles and those that traveled with Christ during his earthly ministry. The words of truth, with sermons, were made known to the early church attenders.

It is in this context that James exhorts his readers to not just be hearers of the word, but doers of the word as well. This was necessary for their spiritual maturity and witness before others; and this, of course, applies just as much to us today. Those who are not doers of the word James labels as 'deceived' or 'deluded.' Recall that Zodiates defined deceived as "to reason falsely or incorrectly." Vincent defined deceived as: "The deception . . . is, therefore, that into which one betrays himself by false reasoning – reasoning beside the truth." This almost sounds like a definition for rationalization, doesn't it? The person has thought about, contemplated what he has heard (recall the word study on "looks") and comes to a conclusion that is wrong. This ties in with the illustration of the man who looks in the mirror, leaves, and immediately forgets what he saw. As one sees a picture of their spiritual nature, like a man looking into a mirror, what does the person conclude? Does he or she see a need for change? Or are they satisfied by what they see? And if what he or she saw was not a 'pretty picture,' do they care? James says that those who are hearers only of the Word, contemplate what they have been shown by God's word and then leave, immediately forgetting what they 'saw.' From the word study on 'forgets,' we realized (especially from Paul's usage of the word in Phil 3:13) that the word can convey the idea of actively choosing – which in this case is to choose to forget what one has seen. So it would appear that what James is saying is that there are those who attend church, hear the Word clearly explained to them, and they understand what God's Word is saying. But instead of responding in obedience to the commands of God, they reason, they rationalize, that what has been said is not of great importance to them. Or, they figure that there is no real hope of change. So instead of attempting to obey God's Word, they leave the church and choose to forget what has been said to them. James describes this as being deceived or deluded. Another way to describe this is: horrible! This is not a trifling matter! Our sanctification – the working out of our salvation, as Paul puts it (Phil 2:12) is to be taken very seriously. Paul says we should cooperate in our sanctification with "fear and trembling" for it is God's will that it take place! How can we just walk away from what we have heard from God's Word? Paul exhorted us to "wake up from our sleep" (Rom 13:11). The words of Christ to the Church at Sardis are quite alarming:

“Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” (Rev 3:2-3)

It is out of love that James is writing his exhortation to his beloved brethren (James 1:19). It is a serious matter to neglect what God has been trying to teach us.

In contrast to the hearer only, the 'doer' of the word "will be blessed in what he does" (vs 25). What characterizes this type of person is that they are quite attentive to what they have heard. In fact, they "stoop down near . . . bend forward . . . in order to look at [at the Word and what it says of our errors] more closely" (Zodhiates, on "looks intently," words in brackets added). They ponder what the Word says, choosing not to forget it. And in studying the Word and pondering what it says, James adds: they "continue to do this" (vs 25). People who take seriously the Word of God will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, choose to obey what they have heard or read. They become "effectual doers" (NASB) of the Word of God. When we read that these people are blessed, the source can only be from God (James 1:17). God wants to bless us. God looks for people to bless (2 Chron 16:9a). The only thing preventing God from blessing us is our unbelief that He wants to, our unwillingness to give up the things of this world. The choice lies with each of us.

Let us very briefly look at the other interpretation of the passage. If the person who is a forgetful hearer of the Word, does so out of ignorance, the result is still very sad. What is so important that you would pass up on what God is saying to you? What is so pressing in this temporary life that it demands us to neglect preparing for eternity? To these people the call to wake up still applies. The time of His return is so near. Let us be ready.

Week 5, Day 5: Vain versus true worship. (James 1:26-27)

James has already covered a lot of territory in this first chapter. He has discussed the need for Christians to accept the trials and tribulations as a form of training and discipline from God, to help mature us (vs 2-4). He has instructed us to avoid evil temptations (vs 14-15 – which draw us away from God. In fact, the word translated 'deceived' (Grk: planaō) in James 1:16 is defined by one Greek dictionary (NASBEC, 1981) as "to cause to wander." If we yield to our temptations, we will stray from a close relationship with God. Instead, we are to draw close to God by resisting the devil (James 4:7-8). At all times, even in the midst of our trials, we are to have an attitude of learning, being quick to listen, and slow to answer back or get angry (vs 19-21). We are also to receive, or welcome wholeheartedly, the words of truth that comes from the Bible. With this wholehearted acceptance of the Word, our mindset must be to obey and conform to what the Bible teaches us. We are not to 'deceive ourselves' by rationalizing away the instructions that God has given us (vs 22). We must assume that the words of God that we hear are meant for us (vs 25) and we must follow those instructions by choosing to yield to the Holy Spirit, so that He can change us.

In these last two verses of chapter one, James deals with one more area of deception common to believers of all ages. That deception involves another aspect of church attendance: worship. We can attend church and be moved by the emotion and oneness we feel in corporate worship. The music and singing may touch our senses and we get caught up thinking we are in a spiritual mode. And that may very well be. But, if we leave the church service, forgetting what we heard and the words of praise to the

Lord and remorse for our sins, of what use is it? James says that if we think ourselves 'religious' – “outward acts of worship” (Moo, 1985), but cannot control our speech, then our religion is worthless, or “fruitless” (BKC, 1983). The need to “bridle” (NASB) or “keep a tight rein” (NIV) on our tongue is universal. We all fail in this area to some degree – James even says of the tongue that “no one of men is able to tame” it (James 3:8, literal translation by Marshall, 1986). Only by depending upon the Holy Spirit do we have a chance. But if we leave our Sunday church worship and have no desire to control our speech, we deceive ourselves (vs 26). Recall that James' letter is to his fellow brothers who were birthed through the word of truth (vs 18). Christians can deceive themselves by thinking that little sins don't matter, that it is enough to hear the sermons, and that we are spiritual because we can sing songs of praise to God.

James responds to that line of thinking. This is what defines being spiritual: visiting the widows and orphans and abstaining from the filth of this world (vs 27). All commentators agree that “visiting widows and orphans” represents coming to the aid of anyone who is in need. The widows and orphans had no way of providing for themselves. God identifies Himself with their needs (Ps 68:5). Helping those in need is doing the work of the ministry (Matt 25:34-40). To keep one's religion 'within the four walls of church' is like burying our money in the ground. It profits us nothing. It doesn't even draw interest like it would if we had put it in a bank. The talents and tools that God has given us, must be used for the benefit of others. Jesus took a stern position against those who were gifted in abilities and wealth but did not use them to help others (Matt 25:19-30; Luke 6:24-25, 36, 38).

The second thing that James calls spiritual is the ability to keep from being polluted or stained by this world. Jesus wants us to go into the world, but to not partake of it (John 17:15). James defines friendship with this world as hostility toward God (James 4:4). Therefore, if we desire to be spiritual before God, we will help those in need, but we will not help ourselves to what we don't need – anything that will harm our walk with God.

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