
§1 *Wisdom for Life's Tests (James 1:1-27)*

1:1 / The letter from James opens with a simple and direct greeting. The writer identifies himself simply as **James, a servant of God**. There was only one James so well known in the early church that he would need no other form of identification, and that was James the Just, brother of Jesus, leader of the church in Jerusalem. The readers are expected to recognize the name.

Yet for all his prominence and important position in the church (so important that the letter from Jude begins, "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James"), the title used is very modest. He is simply a **servant**. It is possible that he is thinking of himself as someone like Moses, chosen of God and taken into his service (Deut. 34:5; Josh. 1:2, Num. 12:7), but more likely it simply reflects the humility of the author. The most exalted statement he can make about himself is not his leadership of the church or his relationship to Jesus, but the fact that he, like every other Christian, is a slave of God and of Jesus. He calls Jesus **The Lord Jesus Christ**, for he is thinking of him as his heavenly, exalted Lord, who is about to return in glory to set things right in the world. It is this picture of Jesus that dominates the letter throughout.

James sends his greetings to **the twelve tribes scattered among the nations**. On the one hand, he sees the church as a united body or a distinct nation in the world. Believers are God's people as the Romans are Caesar's people and Egyptians are Pharaoh's. They are his chosen ones here on earth. Yet they are not a powerful group, for they are **scattered**. They are not a physically united group; they do not have a land they may call their own. Instead they are spread throughout the nations, belonging, yet never being one of the people among whom they live, living out their lives as foreigners in the land in which they were born.

Their dignity is not in strength or numbers but in the fact that they belong to God.

James begins the letter itself by introducing his three main topics—trials, wisdom, and wealth: (1) A proper perspective gives one joy despite a difficult situation, although in order to stand in such a situation one will need divine wisdom. (2) The person who prays for this wisdom needs to pray from a committed position. Without commitment one will receive nothing. (3) One of the chief trials of life and tests of commitment is wealth and how one uses it. There is no need to fear the rich—their end is at hand.

1:2 / James addresses his readers as **brothers**, which means that he considers them members of the church in good standing. There is a warmth in his address that continues throughout the letter despite his criticism of them. He is one with his readers and shares their weaknesses, as he will show more graphically in 3:1-2.

The readers are to **consider it pure joy** when they suffer **trials of many kinds**. The trials to which James refers are the testing and refining situations in life, hard situations in which faith is sorely tried, such as persecution, a difficult moral choice, or a tragic experience. James does not gloss over the reality of the suffering involved—the tears, the pain, the sweat. Instead he points to a transformed perspective of those trials. If one looks at the difficult situation not merely from the perspective of the immediate problem but also from the perspective of the end result God is producing, one can have a deep joy. This is not a surface happiness, but an anticipation of future reward in the end-times (eschatological joy). It is not only possible, but necessary (thus James commands it), for without it one may become so bogged down in present problems as to abandon the faith and give up the struggle altogether. Only with God's perspective, thus considering oneself already fortunate in anticipation of God's future reward, can the faith be maintained against the pressures of life.

1:3 / One reason it is possible to believe oneself to be fortunate in adversity is that the suffering produces a good result even now. With Joseph one might say, "You meant evil against

me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). The process of testing faith is like the tempering of steel: the heat, rather than destroying the steel, makes it stronger. The apocryphal book Sirach (2:5) uses another image: "For gold is proved in the fire, and men acceptable to God in the furnace of affliction." The process is difficult, but the result is good.

James assumes the good result when he writes, **the testing of your faith develops perseverance**. The test has to do with the fact that they have faith, that there is "pure gold" in them. They should not look fearfully at testing, but look through it, for the result will be **perseverance**. This ability is hardly a virtue to be winked at. First, it is a virtue that only suffering and trials will produce. Second, it yields to a stable character, a firm, settled disposition of faith: It is a heroic virtue. A person possessing such a virtue could be trusted to hold out, whatever the circumstances. Such people were surely in demand as leaders in the church. Third, it relates the believer to other believers who were noted in Jewish tradition for this virtue: Abraham, who was put through the fire ten times (Jubilees 17:18; 19:8), Joseph, who went from trial to trial before becoming ruler over Egypt (Testament of Joseph 2:7; 10:1), or Job, who endured patiently a series of almost unbelievable sufferings, only to be rewarded in the end (James 5:11; Testament of Job).

There is no question that this virtue is important, just as there is no question that the means of getting it are unpopular. But the Christian is called to face into the fact: However difficult and unpleasant the test may seem, God is perfecting the Christian's character through it.

1:4 / Perseverance, however, is not a passive, teeth-gritting virtue, but a development in which the character is firmed up and shaped around the central commitment to Christ. It does not happen overnight, for it is a process. The process needs to **finish its work**, or "have its complete effect," for it is the shaping of the whole person that is at issue. One must be careful not to short-circuit it: to pull the metal out of the fire too soon, to abort the developing child, to resist the schooling—to use three metaphors often used to describe the process. James does not see a

single end to the process, such as the development of love as a super-virtue (Rom. 13:8; 2 Pet. 1:6) or the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:6; Rom. 6:22)—although he would have certainly approved of such—for the goal is far more global. The person is formed, not just partly or simply morally, but totally, as a whole being, and is thus to be **mature and complete, not lacking anything**.

In speaking of the person as perfect James is not thinking of sinless perfection but is probably referring to a concept like that found in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The concept is that of a commitment to the command of God in all its depth and radicality, a commitment that calls anything less than total obedience sin and repents and seeks forgiveness, a commitment that, rather than reducing the word to the cultural “pagan” standard of the world, seeks to be shaped and formed by it. In other words, James is referring to mature Christian character: It is **mature** in that it is well developed; it is **complete** in that every virtue and insight is in place; it is **not lacking anything**, but mirrors Christ. This is what adversity should produce in the Christian if he or she will allow it. But it is not a passive process; the believer has to permit this to happen. There is an imperative involved (a better translation might be “allow perseverance to finish its work”). It is possible to short-circuit the process and thus not to develop properly and to live through the suffering in vain.

1:5 / James now turns to his second theme and what appears to be a totally new topic, that of wisdom and prayer. It is indeed a major theme of the letter, but it is not unrelated to what goes before. If person hears a call to be perfect, he or she would certainly cry, “Help! Who can do it?” (like Paul’s “Who is sufficient for these things?” 2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5-6). Divine help is necessary, and divine help in James comes in the form of wisdom (cf. 3:13 ff.). Christians should indeed lack nothing, but in order to do this they need divine wisdom.

James shares this recognition. **If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God**. He can do this with full confidence that God **gives generously to all**. Here James draws on the Jesus tradition (the yet unwritten sayings of Jesus that later formed the Gospels), for Jesus promised God would give his children what they ask

(Matt. 7:7-11; Mark 11:24; Luke 11:9-13; John 15:7). What better gift could they request than the wisdom needed to withstand the trials they face. God **gives** it, for God is a good giver; God gives **generously**, which means that he gives without mental reservations, that he gives simply, with a single heart. He is not looking for some hidden return from believers; he does not have mixed motives or grudging feelings. In fact, he gives not just generously but **without finding fault**. That is, he does not complain about the gift or its cost. He is not a "fool," who "has many eyes instead of one. He gives little and upbraids much, he opens his mouth like a herald; today he lends and tomorrow he asks back" (Sirach 20:14-15). No, God gives true gifts: no complaining, no criticizing (What? You need help *again?*), no mixed motives, no reluctance. Free, generous, even spendthrift giving characterizes the Christian's God.

And what a gift he gives! He gives wisdom, which in this letter is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit, a gift that James' readers, as former Jews, would recognize (as the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls did) as one of the gifts of the age to come. Wisdom comes to the Christian through Christ (1 Cor. 1:24; 2:4-6). This surely is what is needed to withstand trials and come to perfection.

1:6 / Not everyone, however, receives that wisdom requested. "Where is that spiritual power?" one might ask. "If God is so generous, where is the wisdom I need to discern the situation, to withstand the test, and to come to perfection?" Such questions were certainly asked, for James provides an answer: **But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt.**

First, **he must believe**, that is, one must ask in the context of faith. Faith here is not simply intellectual knowledge (as it will be in 2:19). James has no thought that one simply has to give intellectual assent to a doctrine to receive the blessing (e.g., God will give what Christians ask; therefore he will give them wisdom if they ask for it). James does not appear to be calling for research into the truth of a matter (e.g., that the promise really is one given by Jesus or that out of a hundred people who prayed all received their request, while only fifty of a similar group who did not pray had a satisfactory outcome), but for commitment. Therefore he is also not speaking of faith as an emotional feeling

(i.e., if only people could keep feeling that God is really giving wisdom to them will they receive it). Certainly, this is how James has been interpreted by later commentators both in modern popular religion and in ancient times. But James is not trying to encourage believers to stuff their doubts deep within and to drum up an emotional *feeling* of certainty, but to commit themselves. Faith for James is a single-minded commitment to God that trusts in God because God is God. Thus faith remains resting in God despite doubt and holds on through testing. Faith is the "but if not" of Daniel's friends (Dan. 3:18); the "though he slay me yet will I trust him" of Job (Job 13:15). It is a confident trust in God or a resting in God despite the outward circumstances.

Because of this fact, the opposite of faith (**not doubt**) is doubt. The person who doubts is not doubting that God will do something *specific*, but is doubting in general. "Does God really act *today*?" or more deeply expressed, "Can I trust God to do the best for me or must I look out for myself?" Here James may be applying a tradition from Jesus like that in Matthew 21:21: "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, . . . you can do what was done to this fig tree."

The doubter is **like a wave of the sea**. The picture is graphic. The doubter is "one who lives in inner conflict between trust and distrust of God." (F. Mussner, *Der Jakobusbrief* [Freiburg: Herder, 1967], p. 70.) In a service of worship this person is caught up in the music, the words of praise, or the exhortation of the sermon and trusts God completely. Outside, the same person faces the winds of adversity and, instead of trusting *despite feelings*, gives in and believes that only his or her own resources and cleverness can help. Like wind-tossed water, an unstable Christian sways back and forth.

1:7-8 / That man, says James (to clearly distinguish this individual from other people with a stable faith), **should not think he will receive anything from the Lord**. Obviously James cannot be sure that such a person, or even a wicked blasphemer, for that matter, will receive nothing from God. God is gracious and kind, often giving more than he has promised and always giving far more than people deserve. Sun and rain come to the good and the evil alike. But such a person wavering between God and the

world ought not to *expect* to receive something from God. Such a person has no right to expect **anything**, much less wisdom, for he or she is not following the proper principles. The promises of the gospel all assume a commitment of the individual to, and trust in, God (e.g., the “in my name” formula, John 14:14). Without this trust there is a more basic issue to be settled than that of the item asked for: The more basic issue is that of trust. Until one has dealt with this issue, one is in no position to begin praying.

This person, claims James, **is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does**. The pre-Christian Jew Sirach had already said, “My son, disobey not the fear of the Lord, and approach it not with a double heart” (1:28), and, “Woe unto the fearful hearts and faint hands, and unto the sinner that goes two ways . . . woe unto you who have lost your endurance” (2:12-14). James has the same concern for this person of a double mind. If a person’s mind is split and he or she really does not know whom to trust, one can hardly have confidence in such a person. Such a one is not just undecided but, in fact, **unstable**. Now, indeed, he or she may “trust” in God and be part of the church, but with a heart filled with doubt, this person is emotionally keeping options open and other lines of support clear. There is a basic instability within that will eventually become evident in behavior. You cannot trust such a person, for he or she is like Aesop’s crow, trying to walk down two paths at once. The implied call is for commitment. “Put all your eggs in one basket,” and make that basket God. Without commitment, prayer is in vain. James 4:1-10 will make this crystal clear.

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / **The twelve tribes** of Israel were God's chosen people in the Old Testament. James looks on the church as the continuation of that people of God. The church includes the remnant of the old Israel and takes into itself the converts from the Gentiles. It is therefore "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), the people of God in the new age of the Spirit (cf. Rom 4:13-25; Gal. 5:21-31).

Scattered among the nations is a technical term for the dispersion or Diaspora. After the exile of Jews from Palestine in 586 B.C., most did not return. Instead they spread out through the cities of Asia and Europe, westward to Rome and Spain, south to Egypt, and east to Babylon and Persia. To the Jews living in Palestine, these people were Diaspora, scattered people, exiles from the land to which they belonged. James uses this term for Christians, for they are also "exiles" in the land in which they live. In much the same way, Peter refers to Christians as sojourners or pilgrims (1 Pet. 1:1, 17; 2:11).

1:2 / The phrase **consider it pure joy** has as its central word the Greek word "joy," *charan*, which forms a wordplay with the *chairein*, "greetings" of v. 1. James uses such wordplay links to tie his letter together despite his tendency to juxtapose topics.

The structure of vv. 2-4 is that of a chain saying, which is also found in Rom. 5:3-5 and 1 Pet. 1:6-7. In 1 Peter, in particular, some identical phrases are used. The saying appears to have been widely and loosely used within the early church, which means that each author felt free to adapt it to make his own point. The basis of the structure is probably some statement of Jesus similar to that in Matt. 5:11-12, "Happy are you when men insult you. Rejoice and be glad, because a great reward is kept for you in heaven." For further reading see D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 113, 117-19.

The idea of **trials** is not a new idea to the readers of this letter, for it is deeply rooted in Judaism. The earliest reference is in Gen. 22:1, an incident referred to in James 2:21, where God tests Abraham. God is also said to test the Israelites in the wilderness, but unlike Abraham they fail the test (Num. 14:20-24). As one moves into the intertestamental period, one finds the famous reference in Sirach 2:1-6:

My son, when thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright and endure firmly, and be not fearful in time of calamity. . . . Accept whatsoever is brought upon thee, and be patient in disease and poverty. For gold is proved in the fire, and men acceptable to God in the furnace of affliction.

(Cf. Jubilees 8:25, or the Dead Sea Scrolls 1 QS 10, 17, 1 QH 5:15-17; 1 QM 16:15-17:3). Thus the early church had a long tradition upon which to draw that expected faith to be tested. See H. Seesemann "Peira," *TDNT*, vol. 6, pp. 23-26, for further data.

1:3 / The phrase **the testing of your faith** is a single word in Greek, *dokimion*. It properly refers to the means of testing in this passage, although in 1 Pet. 1:7 it refers to the result of the test, i.e., genuineness. The means, however unpleasant they may be, produce a good result. They are not simply negative, destroying ungentle faith, but positive, if viewed in the right light.

The term **perseverance**, Greek *hypomonē*, is virtually a technical term in the New Testament. Paul uses the term sixteen times (2 Cor. 6:4; 12:12; 1 Thess. 1:3), and Revelation finds it most important (1:9; 2:2; 13:10; 14:12). It is obvious, from this fact and the fact that its use for Abraham, Job, etc., is found in intertestamental works, that the virtue is important in a community suffering persecution. The Jews after the exile, and particularly after the persecution by Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 B.C.) were concerned about holding fast to the faith despite opposition, disadvantage, or even persecution. They looked to the Old Testament to supply examples, which they exegeted accordingly. Likewise the church found itself vulnerable as a despised and persecuted minority within Judaism and, later, the Roman Empire. Fly-by-night or flash-in-the-pan Christianity would not do. It is not those who apostasize and fall away but "he who endures to the end" who will be saved (Mark 13:13; Matt. 10:22; 24:13). Thus endurance is one of the cardinal virtues of the Christian life, not a side issue. To endure means to copy Christ in his endurance and to assure oneself of future blessedness.

1:4 / The term **must finish its work** is literally "have its perfect [or complete] work." It is this phraseology that suggested to many commentators that a specific virtue is in mind. Instead of a single virtue, however, "You are that perfect work" (M. Dibelius, *James*, p. 74).

The idea of perfection is not original in James. Noah is the archetypal perfect person: "Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generation" (Gen. 6:9). He kept God's law, or he was "of stable integrity, not contaminated by divergent motives or conflicts between thoughts and deeds" (P. J. DuPlessis, *Telios: The Idea of Perfection in the New Testament*, pp. 94-99). Thus the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls could both think of themselves as perfect because of their inward and outward dedication to God (1 QS 2:1-2; 14:7; 1 QH 1:36) and still long for a higher perfection (1 QS 4:20-22). For Paul, Christians are also already the perfect or mature (1 Cor. 2:6), but becoming perfect or mature people is still a process going on with its goal in the future (Eph. 4:13; cf. Col. 4:12; Phil. 3:15). For Matthew, as in the Dead Sea Scrolls, perfection consists in copying God (*imitatio dei*, Matt. 5:48), but in both Matthew and Paul this was re-interpreted in terms of a more available example, God-in-Flesh, Jesus. Thus it becomes copying Christ (*imitatio Christi*, Matt. 19:21; cf. Phil.

2:5ff.). Perfection, then, is a tension. It is both possible and impossible, both present and future. See further, W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 212–13; and R. Schippers, “Goal,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 2, pp. 59–66. The important fact to consider is the eschatological nature of perfection, its “now” and “not yet” tension, as well as the fact that in its realizable form it is focused on copying God and Christ and thus needs divine revelation and human obedience.

1:5 / The English wordplay lacking (v. 4)–lacks (v. 5) is also present in Greek. This catchword linking of ideas is a favorite method by which James joins them into a unity.

The idea of **wisdom** in James is not simply insight or God’s law (as in Sirach 4:17; Wisdom 7:15; 8:21) but a gift of the coming new age that can now be found in those who belong to that age (as in 2 Baruch 44:14; 2 Esdras 8:52; 1 Enoch 5:8; 98:1–9; 100:6). As these Jewish parallels (and others in the Dead Sea Scrolls: 1 QS 11; CD 2; 6:3; 11 Q Psa 154) show, Jewish readers would recognize a tension. Wisdom will only be fully possessed in the coming age, but the righteous remnant (“the wise” of Dan. 11–12) already have a foretaste of it in this age. It is this that leads people to perfection, a relationship between wisdom and perfection that Paul also recognized (1 Cor. 2:4–6). See J. A. Kirk, “The Meaning of Wisdom in James.”

God is a good giver (Prov. 3:23; cf. Didache 4:7; *Hermas Mandate* 9), but he is also a generous giver (*Hermas Mandate* 2). The term for generosity, *haplos*, appears in the New Testament only here. It is related to the term *haplotēs*, which means sincerity. Epictetus shows the meaning of *haplos* when he writes, “Stop letting yourself be drawn this way and that . . . but be either this or that *simply* and with all your mind” (*Discourses* II, 2, 13). The same sense of simplicity and sincerity is to be in human giving according to Jesus, for in a context on giving he says, “If your eyes are clear [*haplotēs*], your whole body will be full of light” (Matt. 6:22), which is an idiom for sincere giving, as bad eyes were for stinginess. On this term see further B. Gärtner, “Simplicity,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, pp. 571–72.

1:6 / “Faith” has far more than one meaning in James. Here and in 1:3, 2:5, and 5:15, it means commitment, trust; in 2:14–26 it means intellectual assent; and in 2:1 it means the body of truth about Jesus that is believed. This first use is most like Paul; the others differ from Paul’s. See O. Michel, “Faith,” *NIDNTT*, vol. 1, pp. 587–606.

To **doubt** shows that the person is unlike God. God gives sincerely, with an undivided mind. The doubter prays, but without an undivided mind. He is not at all certain God will answer. The figure of the swaying **wave** was popular in Jewish and Greek literature, e.g., Sirach 33:1–3:

No evil befalls the man who fears the Lord, but in trial he will deliver him again and again. A wise man will not hate the law, but he who is hypocritical about it is like a boat in a storm. A man of understanding will trust in the law.

1:7-8 / The chief term in these verses is *dipsychos*, translated as **double-minded**. The term itself is found first in James and may have been coined by the author. The idea, however, has deep Jewish roots. A person is to seek God with his or her whole heart (Deut. 6:5; 10:10), and thus to doubt or have a **double** heart is in itself evil, a mark of hypocrisy (Ps. 12:1-2; 1 Chron. 12:33). Jewish tradition was constantly calling people to a clear choice: It cannot be God *and* Baal or God *and* Egypt; it must be either one or the other. The sharp contrast continues in Sirach (e.g., 33:7-15) and later literature. Testament of Levi 13:1 calls, "Fear the Lord your God with your whole heart, and walk in simplicity according to all his Law." One notices how simplicity (*haplotēs* from James 1:5) is important. Testament of Benjamin 6:5 adds, "The good mind hath not two tongues, of blessing and of cursing . . . of hypocrisy and of truth . . . ; but it hath one disposition, uncorrupt and pure, concerning all men." The people at Qumran were likewise concerned lest someone who had outwardly (and perhaps meaning it at the time) pledged to follow the way of God would turn back and follow his or her evil nature to the detriment of the community:

No man shall walk in the stubbornness of his heart so that he strays after his heart and eyes and evil inclination, but he shall circumcise in the Community the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the community of the everlasting Council (1 QS 5:4-5).

People who did turn back were surely condemned:

As for them, they dissemble,
they plan devilish schemes.
They seek Thee with a double heart
and are not confirmed in Thy truth.
A root bearing poisoned and bitter fruit
is in their designs;
they walk in stubbornness of heart
and seek Thee among idols,
and they set before them
the stumbling-block of their sin.
(1 QH 4:13-14)

Paul has a similar concern, although expressed in less colorful language, in Romans 6-8. People might commit to Christ but then "walk after the flesh." Paul reacts to the idea with horror. By no means should such instability be allowed. Single-hearted devotion to God is the order of the day.

James' concern with a double heart and instability was later picked up by Hermas (*Mandate 9* for *dipsychos* and *Mandate 2.3* and *5.2.7* for *instability*, which Hermas considers demonic in origin). But the idea is weakened there. James uses it with the full force of tradition. Hermas has concern simply about effective prayer.