

## Week 2: The Testing of Faith

### The Place of the Passage

James opens with an exhortation to his readers to persevere under trial. As those who are dispersed throughout the world, sometimes even by persecution, they are hard-pressed on every side. James encourages his readers to realize that one important mark of the Christian life is to trust God rather than self—even when life seems unbearably hard. If you do that, he says, God will use your trials to make you a more faithful follower of Jesus.

### The Big Picture

James tells his readers not to despair because of their trials, but rather to bear up under them, relying on God, recognizing that he is using their trials for their good.

### Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 1:1–11](#). Then review the listed shorter passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, page 2391, available online at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org).)

#### Joy in Trials ([James 1:1–4](#))

James identifies himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Knowing that James would have grown up with Jesus—known him as a child, a teenager, a young adult—does it seem remarkable to you that James would now call his brother “Lord”<sup>1</sup> and “Christ”<sup>2</sup>? What do you think happened that convinced James that Jesus, his crucified brother, is here and now the Lord and Messiah?<sup>3</sup>

James addresses his letter “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” but he is not writing to only Jewish believers. He is alluding to the fact that just as the children of Israel were dispersed throughout the world in their exile, so also believers in Christ are now aliens and strangers who are waiting for God to gather them home to himself (see also [1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11](#)). What, then, is the connection between [James 1:1](#) and 2? How does a reminder to Christians of their status as aliens and strangers in this world set up James’s exhortation to them to “count it all joy” when they meet trials?

[James 1:2–4](#) are a chain argument in which one thing leads to another. Trace the chain that James describes. What is the end result of our trials?

The word translated “steadfastness” in [James 1:3](#) literally means “to remain under,” like a person holding up a heavy weight for a long period of time. Think of someone who lifts weights for exercise. What is the “full effect” of that person’s “steadfastness?” What are some of the effects of our remaining steadfast under the weight of trials?

#### Wisdom from God in Trials ([James 1:5–8](#))

The exhortation in [James 1:5](#) to ask God for wisdom is not disconnected from the theme of persevering under trials. Read [Proverbs 2:1–15](#). What is wisdom? Where does it come from? What are the benefits of having wisdom?

As in the Old Testament, wisdom is a God-given and God-centered discernment regarding God's world and how best to live in it. In other words, it is seeing the world and your circumstances as God sees them and then acting in accord with that knowledge. How, then, does God see our trials in this life? How is that different from the way we are tempted to see them? If we could understand our trials as God understands them, how would we act differently?

The word translated "doubt" in [James 1:6](#) is literally "dispute." It is used in many different contexts to refer to a dispute with another person. Here, though, James uses the word to refer to a person disputing within one's own self! In other words, to doubt is to be a person of a fundamentally divided mind and a fundamentally inconsistent attitude toward God. It's a reckless and wavering distrust—a refusal finally to trust God. The point is not that a Christian never has doubts; it's that a Christian never allows his mind to become so divided and self-disputing that it welcomes those doubts. A Christian will always strive to take the side of God and truth against doubts when they arise. What are some strategies Christians can use to fight doubt? How can you resist becoming "a double-minded person, unstable in all your ways?"

### **Don't Trust in Yourself, No Matter Your Station in Life ([James 1:9–11](#))**

James has much to say in his book about poverty and wealth, and how God expects us to use the resources he gives us. Most of the time in this book, the wealthy are evil people who are oppressing James's readers (e.g., [James 2:6](#) and [James 5:1–5](#)). But is that always true? Read [James 4:13–15](#). James is speaking here to a group of relatively wealthy businesspeople who are traveling to another city in order to make a profit. But it also seems that these businesspeople might be believers! Here's why: When James addresses wicked, rich oppressors, he doesn't exhort them to do anything; he simply condemns them. Here, though, he treats these businesspeople as Christians, teaching them to adjust their thinking and their speech to fit true theology. So does James set up a simplistic "poor equals righteous, rich equals wicked" equation? Does the rest of the Bible? What is the Bible's general opinion of wealth—that it is evil, or that it is dangerous? What other passages of Scripture support your answer?

In [James 1:9–11](#), the author points out our universal tendency to boast in ourselves and to rely on our own accomplishments. Both rich people and poor people have this tendency, so James addresses them both. He exhorts the poor person to boast in his "exaltation"—that is, in what God has done in Christ—rather than to despair because of poverty. And he exhorts the rich person to boast in his or her "humiliation"—that is, in his or her identification with the suffering Christ—and not in riches, because the riches will soon pass away. How does material wealth tend to lead to self-reliance? Does material poverty always lead to reliance on God? If not, what kinds of things can it lead a person wrongly to rely on?

What kinds of things besides wealth do we tend to rely on and boast in for a sense of well-being and security, rather than on God?

For each of the things you mentioned in the previous question, explain why it is foolish to rely on them. Why is it better and wiser to rely on God?

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

## Gospel Glimpses

**A SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST.** Some readers think that the letter of James barely qualifies as a Christian book because it doesn't give a systematic presentation of the gospel. That, however, is to misunderstand what James is doing. He is writing his book to people who already understand the gospel, and he is helping them to see how to live in a way that reflects their faith in Jesus. James understands very well the truth of the gospel and of Jesus' identity. Even in his very first line, he identifies himself as a servant of Jesus the Christ. That is not Jesus' last name! It is a theologically rich title that identifies Jesus as the promised Messiah—the king who would save his people from their sins.

**AN UNWAVERING FAITH.** The fundamental call of the gospel is for us to “repent<sup>4</sup> and believe” ([Mark 1:15](#)). In other words, we are to put our faith<sup>5</sup> in Jesus—to rely on him and trust him. James calls for exactly that kind of faith in this section of his book. True faith in Christ is not a faith that hedges its bets—“I’ll rely 90 percent on Jesus, but 10 percent on my own righteousness.” Authentic faith is not divided, double-minded, and unstable. It’s a faith that gives itself wholly to Jesus, relying on him and him alone for salvation.

**BOASTING IN CHRIST.** James says that whether we are rich or poor, our only boast should be in what God has done for us. He makes the point with rich irony. Whereas the world sees the poor as contemptible, they should boast that God has exalted them in Christ. And whereas the world sees the rich as honorable, they should boast that God has humbled them and shown them their need for salvation. Paul says something very similar in [Galatians 6:14](#) when he writes, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

## Whole-Bible Connections

**THE TWELVE TRIBES IN THE DISPERSION.** Centuries before the birth of Jesus, the twelve tribes of Israel were exiled from their land and scattered among the nations of the world. The northern kingdom was carried into exile by the Assyrian empire, and the southern kingdom was exiled by the Babylonian empire. The Old Testament prophets held out the hope that one day God would return his people to their land and restore them ([Jer. 31:7–14](#); [Ezek. 37:15–28](#)). During their exile, however, they had to endure as aliens and strangers. The New Testament applies those same categories to believers in Christ. Peter, for example, addresses his first letter to the “elect exiles of the Dispersion” ([1 Pet. 1:1](#)). Like God’s people centuries ago, we Christians are a people waiting for our final redemption when Jesus returns.

**THE BENEFIT OF TRIALS.** The New Testament is very clear that believers will face trials of many kinds. Just as our Lord was tested in the wilderness ([Matt. 4:1–11](#)), and just as he endured temptation ([Heb. 4:15](#)), so we too are called to endure trial and temptation in this life. However, the Bible also promises us that God will use our trials for our good, strengthening us and leading us to rely more fully on him. Paul makes a similar point in [Romans 5:3–5](#), and Peter too compares the effect of trials on our faith to the way fire purifies gold ([1 Pet. 1:7](#)).

**WISDOM FROM GOD.** The book of Proverbs tells us that wisdom comes only from God himself ([Prov. 2:6](#)). It also tells us that wisdom existed before the world was created ([Prov. 8:22–23](#)), and that it is the order according to which he created the world ([Prov. 8:27–31](#)).

Wisdom, therefore, is much more than we usually think. It is not just pithy sayings or clever solutions to problems. It is actually the very mind of God, the pattern according to which he created and ordered the world. To have wisdom, therefore, is to see the world as God sees it, and then to act in accordance with that understanding. And of course, how has God most fully and completely revealed his mind and character to us? Through his Son, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God.

### **Theological Soundings**

**JESUS AS CHRIST.** James bases his entire book on his confession of Jesus as the Christ ([James 1:1](#)). He understands his brother to be the long-awaited Messiah, with all that entails. Jesus is the King who had come to inaugurate God's kingdom,<sup>7</sup> but he is also the King who would suffer in the place of his people in order to qualify them to share in that kingdom.

**THE GOODNESS OF GOD.** James says that God "gives generously" to those who ask him. The Bible's consistent witness is that God is unspeakably generous and merciful. From his mercy to Adam, to his rescue of Noah from the flood, to his choosing of Israel to be his special people, God proves himself to be a good God, not a stingy and grasping one.

**HUMANS ARE MORTAL.** Our physical lives do not last forever. Just as the grass withers and the flower fades, so we are here one moment and gone the next. That reality powerfully underlines James's main point—that our faith should be not in our own wavering, unstable selves, but in the unchanging and immortal God.

### **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 1:1–11](#) for your own life today. Note the personal implications for your walk with the Lord in light of (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 1:1–11](#)