

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

SWINDOLL'S
LIVING
INSIGHTS

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY

JAMES • 1&2 PETER

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*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois*

Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, Volume 13

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Swindoll, Charles R.

Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter / Charles R. Swindoll.

pages cm. — (Swindoll's living insights New Testament commentary ; Volume 13)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-9378-0 (hc)

1. Bible. James—Commentaries. 2. Bible. Peter—Commentaries. I. Title. II. Title: Insights on James, 1 and 2 Peter. III. Title: Insights on James, First & Second Peter.

BS2785.53.S95 2014

227'.907—dc23

2014033709

Previously published by Zondervan under ISBN 978-0-310-28432-1

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For more than sixty years I have loved the Bible. It was that love for the Scriptures, mixed with a clear call into the gospel ministry during my tour of duty in the Marine Corps, that resulted in my going to Dallas Theological Seminary to prepare for a lifetime of ministry. During those four great years I had the privilege of studying under outstanding men of God, who also loved God's Word. They not only held the inerrant Word of God in high esteem, they taught it carefully, preached it passionately, and modeled it consistently. A week never passes without my giving thanks to God for the grand heritage that has been mine to claim! I am forever indebted to those fine theologians and mentors, who cultivated in me a strong commitment to the understanding, exposition, and application of God's truth.

For more than fifty years I have been engaged in doing just that—and *how I love it!* I confess without hesitation that I am addicted to the examination and the proclamation of the Scriptures. Because of this, books have played a major role in my life for as long as I have been in ministry—especially those volumes that explain the truths and enhance my understanding of what God has written. Through these many years I have collected a large personal library, which has proven invaluable as I have sought to remain a faithful student of the Bible. To the end of my days, my major goal in life is to communicate the Word with accuracy, insight, clarity, and practicality. Without informative and reliable books to turn to, I would have “run dry” decades ago.

Among my favorite and most well-worn volumes are those that have enabled me to get a better grasp of the biblical text. Like most expositors, I am forever searching for literary tools that I can use to hone my gifts and sharpen my skills. For me, that means finding resources that make the complicated simple and easy to understand, that offer insightful comments and word pictures that enable me to see the relevance of sacred truth in light of my twenty-first-century world, and that drive those truths home to my heart in ways I do not easily forget. When I come across such books, they wind up in my hands as I devour them and then place them in my library for further reference . . . and, believe me, I often return to them. What a relief it is to have these resources to turn to when I lack fresh insight, or when I need just the right story or illustration, or when I get stuck in the tangled text and cannot find my way out. For the serious expositor, a library is essential. As a mentor of mine once said, “Where else can you have ten thousand professors at your fingertips?”

In recent years I have discovered there are not nearly enough resources like those I just described. It was such a discovery that prompted me to consider becoming a part of the answer instead of lamenting the problem. But the

solution would result in a huge undertaking. A writing project that covers all of the books and letters of the New Testament seemed overwhelming and intimidating. A rush of relief came when I realized that during the past fifty-plus years I've taught and preached through most of the New Testament. In my files were folders filled with notes from those messages that were just lying there, waiting to be brought out of hiding, given a fresh and relevant touch in light of today's needs, and applied to fit into the lives of men and women who long for a fresh word from the Lord. *That did it!* I began to work on plans to turn all of those notes into this commentary on the New Testament.

I must express my gratitude to both Mark Gaither and Mike Svigel for their tireless and devoted efforts, serving as my hands-on, day-to-day editors. They have done superb work as we have walked our way through the verses and chapters of all twenty-seven New Testament books. It has been a pleasure to see how they have taken my original material and helped me shape it into a style that remains true to the text of the Scriptures, at the same time interestingly and creatively developed, and all the while allowing my voice to come through in a natural and easy-to-read manner.

I need to add sincere words of appreciation to the congregations I have served in various parts of these United States for more than five decades. It has been my good fortune to be the recipient of their love, support, encouragement, patience, and frequent words of affirmation as I have fulfilled my calling to stand and deliver God's message year after year. The sheep from all those flocks have endeared themselves to this shepherd in more ways than I can put into words . . . and none more than those I currently serve with delight at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Cynthia, for her understanding of my addiction to studying, to preaching, and to writing. Never has she discouraged me from staying at it. Never has she failed to urge me in the pursuit of doing my very best. On the contrary, her affectionate support personally, and her own commitment to excellence in leading Insight for Living for more than three and a half decades, have combined to keep me faithful to my calling "in season and out of season." Without her devotion to me and apart from our mutual partnership throughout our lifetime of ministry together, Swindoll's Living Insights would never have been undertaken.

I am grateful that it has now found its way into your hands and, ultimately, onto the shelves of your library. My continued hope and prayer is that you will find these volumes helpful in your own study and personal application of the Bible. May they help you come to realize, as I have over these many years, that God's Word is as timeless as it is true.

The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:8)

Chuck Swindoll
Frisco, Texas

THE STRONG'S NUMBERING SYSTEM

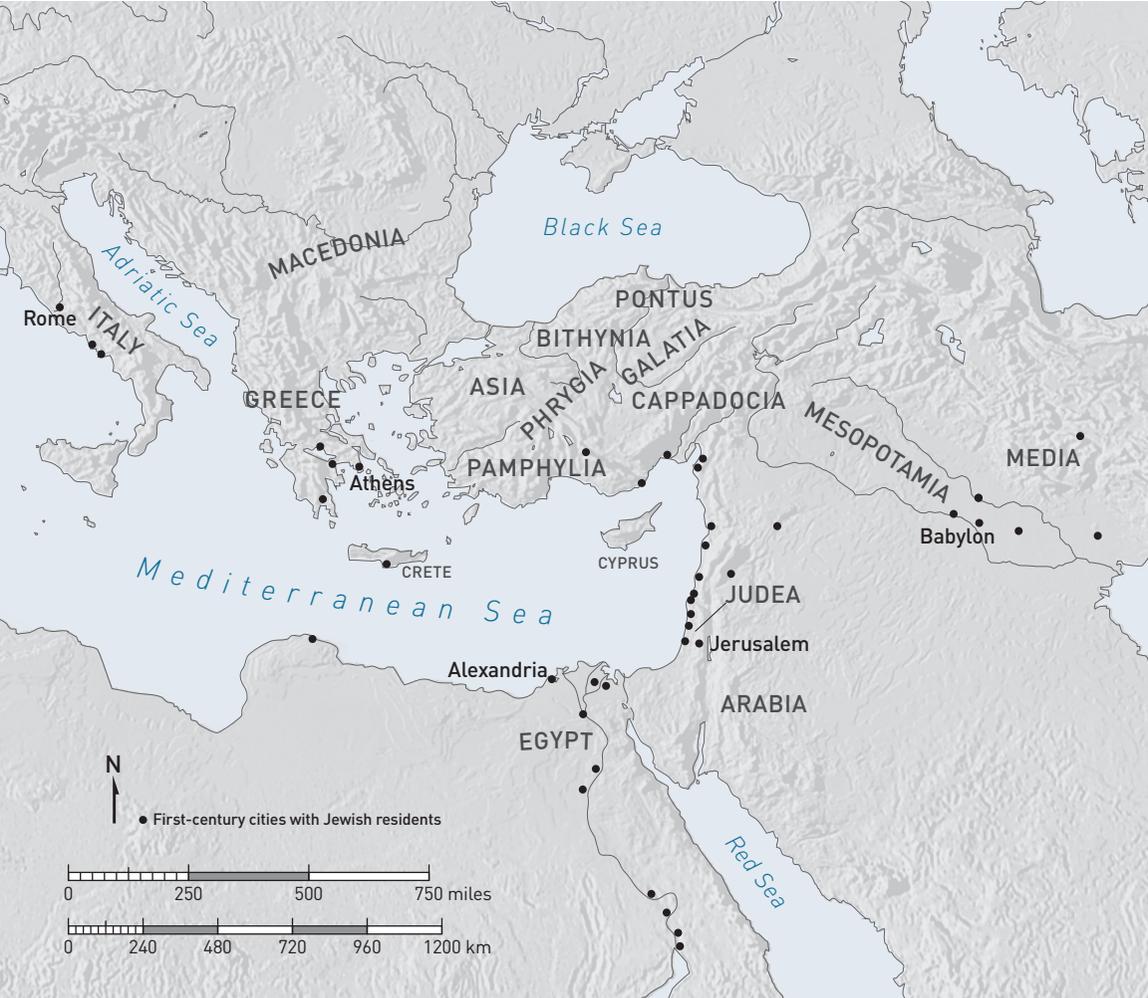
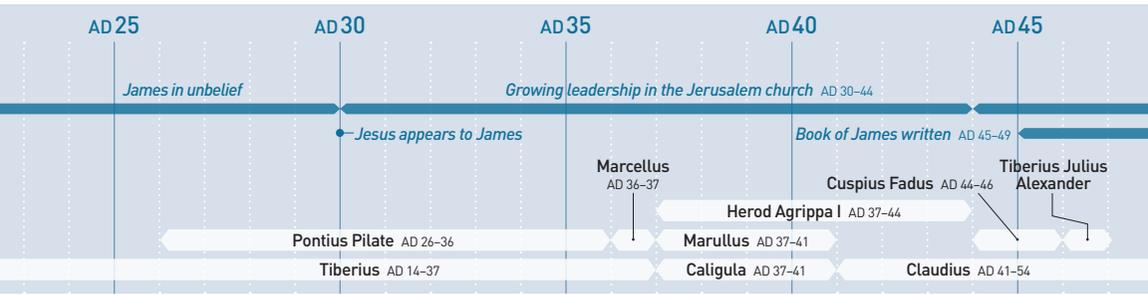
Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary uses the Strong's word-study numbering system to give both newer and more advanced Bible students alike quicker, more convenient access to helpful original-language tools (e.g., concordances, lexicons, and theological dictionaries). The Strong's numbering system, made popular by the *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is used with the majority of biblical Greek and Hebrew reference works. Those who are unfamiliar with the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek alphabets can quickly find information on a given word by looking up the appropriate index number. Advanced students will find the system helpful because it allows them to quickly find the lexical form of obscure conjugations and inflections.

When a Greek word is mentioned in the text, the Strong's number is included in square brackets after the Greek word. So in the example of the Greek word *agapē* [26], "love," the number is used with Greek tools keyed to the Strong's system.

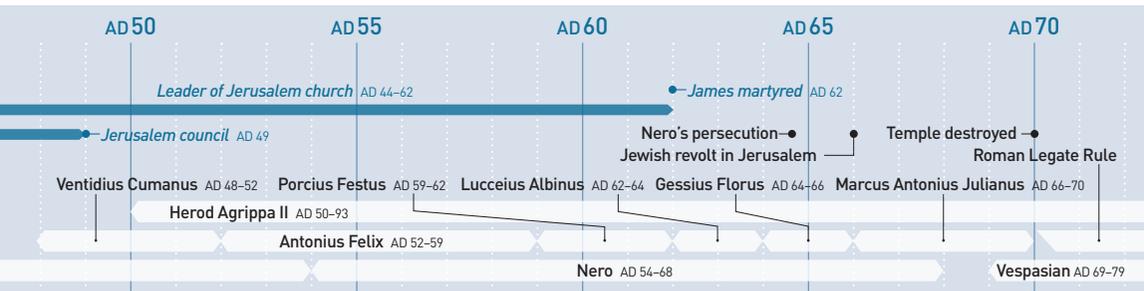
On occasion, a Hebrew word is mentioned in the text. The Strong's Hebrew numbers are completely separate from the Greek numbers, so Hebrew numbers are prefixed with a letter "H." So, for example, the Hebrew word *kapporet* [H3727], "mercy seat," comes from *kopher* [H3722], "to ransom," "to secure favor through a gift."

INSIGHTS ON JAMES

First-century Jewish Christians struggled with persevering through hardship, maintaining good works, promoting peace in their churches, and living patiently in anticipation of the Lord's return. They knew Jesus as the Way of life but needed a travel guide for walking in that Way through life. So do we! In the midst of the struggles of everyday life, we can all use a dose of James's hands-on Christianity.



The Jewish Diaspora in the first century



JAMES

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where politics rules the day. In this world, a person’s public reputation too often drowns out the private reality. *Who* you know usually trumps *what* you know. Name-dropping often gets you farther than talent or skill. These cynical sayings not only apply to the political realm, where quid pro quo is the status quo. Unfortunately, the “good ol’ boy” system also tends to corrupt most areas of business, academia, entertainment—and, yes, even the church.

This is why the opening words of the book of James are so refreshing. Like a cool spring breeze blowing through a musty room, the unassuming nature of these first few words drives out arrogance, ego, and presumption. Written by a man who could have dropped the Name above all names, this simple, straightforward greeting sets the tone for a letter that assaults our natural human tendencies toward sin and selfishness with a radical message of authenticity and humility.

IDENTIFICATION OF JAMES

From the very first word, the name “James,” this short letter presents us with a problem: Which “James” wrote this letter? His humble self-identification as “a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1) doesn’t get us far. And unless we were among those first recipients of the letter, we are left to some old fashioned sleuthing to find out which James penned these words.

If you run through the New Testament, you’ll come across four or—depending on how you count them—five different men with this name (see chart, “Five Named James”). It’s fairly easy to rule out a couple of these. James, the father of Judas, never appears in the New Testament

THE BOOK OF JAMES AT A GLANCE

SECTION	REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE STABILITY	REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE LOVE
PASSAGE	1:1-27	2:1-3:12
THEMES	<p>Joy in Trials</p> <p>Facing Temptations</p> <p>Responding to the Word</p>	<p>Partiality and Prejudice</p> <p>Faith at Work</p> <p>Bridling the Tongue</p>
KEY TERMS	Wisdom (1:5; 3:13, 15, 17), Double-Minded (1:8; 4:8),	
	<p>Trials</p> <p>Perseverance</p> <p>Religion</p>	<p>Works</p> <p>Justify</p> <p>Tongue</p>

REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE HUMILITY	REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE PATIENCE
3:13-5:6	5:7-20

<p>Expressions of the Heart</p> <p>Settling Disputes</p> <p>Expressions of Desires</p> <p>Warnings to the Wealthy</p>	<p>Patience in Suffering</p> <p>Sickness and Sin</p> <p>Carnality and Correction</p>
---	--

Faith (1:3, 6; 2:1, 5, 14-26; 5:15)	
-------------------------------------	--

<p>Jealousy</p> <p>Humble</p> <p>Judge</p>	<p>Persevere</p> <p>Turn</p>
--	------------------------------

KEY TERMS IN JAMES

***dipsychos* (δίψυχος) [1374]** “double-minded,” “wavering,” “doubting”

A compound of “two” and “soul,” this word first appears in the Greek language in the book of James (1:8; 4:8). It doesn’t appear again until the end of the first century in nonbiblical Christian books. Some scholars believe James himself actually coined the term.¹ In any case, James uses the word to describe the wavering faith of Christians who claimed to believe one thing but lived in a way that betrayed that confession. This term sums up in one word the attitudes and actions James wanted his readers to avoid.

***pistis* (πίστις) [4102]** “faith,” “confidence,” “reliance,” “trust”

For Christians, *pistis* is the means by which they relate to God. Depending on its context, the term can range in meaning from simple intellectual “assent” to demonstrable “faithfulness.” For Christians, the entire range applies. Acceptance of core beliefs is essential for faith, but knowledge alone does not save. James develops the uniquely Christian concept of authentic saving faith, which involves unwavering trust in and reliance upon God. This authentic faith manifests itself through acts of faithfulness (1:3, 6; 5:15).

***sophia* (σοφία) [4678]** “wisdom,” “skill,” or “ability to act on what you know”

“Wisdom” has a rich meaning in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in early Jewish Christianity. Wisdom involves far more than mere knowledge of facts and advances even beyond skillful living or the emphasis on practical virtue seen in Greek philosophy. Rather, “wisdom” in the Christian sense is a gift from God closely associated with the presence and working of the Holy Spirit, producing supernatural discernment and prudence. This explains why God, not man, is the ultimate source of true wisdom, which is the repeated emphasis in James.

except in Luke 6:16. And James, the son of Alphaeus, probably the same as “James the Less,” though one of the Twelve, disappears from the biblical account after the upper room experience on Pentecost (Acts 1:13). These two can be safely dismissed as unlikely candidates for authorship.

This leaves James, the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John (#2), or James, the half brother of Jesus (#4). Though the first James, a “Son of Thunder,” played a major leadership role in the infant church as one of Christ’s inner three (Peter, James, and John), he was the first of the Twelve to suffer martyrdom under Herod Agrippa I. That occurred

FIVE NAMED JAMES

Four (or, perhaps, five) people with the name of James appear in the pages of the New Testament.

IDENTIFICATION	SCRIPTURE	DESCRIPTION
1. James, father of Judas (not Iscariot)	Luke 6:16	Nothing is known about this James. He is mentioned in the list of the original twelve disciples as the father of Judas (not Iscariot) to distinguish him from Judas the betrayer. This Judas is also distinguished by the name "Thaddaeus."
2. James, Son of Zebedee, brother of John	Matthew 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mark 1:19, 29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35, 41; 13:3; 14:33; Luke 5:10; 6:14; 8:51; 9:28, 54; Acts 1:13; 12:2	Brother of the apostle John and one of the "Sons of Thunder." He witnessed some of Jesus' private miracles, was present at Christ's transfiguration, and was invited to pray with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. This James was the first of the twelve disciples to be martyred. He was put to death with a sword around AD 44.
3a. James, son of Alphaeus	Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13	One of the twelve disciples, distinguished as the "son of Alphaeus" to keep him distinct from James #2. Many scholars believe #3a and #3b, "James the Less," are the same person.
3b. James the Less, son of Mary	Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1; Luke 24:10	The son of one of the women named Mary who witnessed Jesus' burial and resurrection. Many believe "James the Less" is the same as James, the son of Alphaeus (#3a), though he could be a different person altogether.
4. James, son of Joseph and Mary, half brother of Jesus	Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; 2:9, 12; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Jude 1:1	The natural son of Mary and Joseph after the birth of Jesus. Though he did not believe in his brother Jesus during His earthly ministry (John 7:5), after the risen Lord made a special appearance to him, James became a believer and eventually the leader of the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem until he was martyred around AD 62.

around AD 44 in a persecution that resulted in further scattering the Jewish Christians throughout the Roman world (Acts 12:2). Shortly after this persecution, Jesus' half brother James (#4) stepped in to lead the persecuted church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). This James, reared with Jesus in the home of Joseph and Mary, likely penned the letter that bears this name.

This identification of the author as the half brother of Jesus goes back to the earliest centuries of Christian history. Most conservative New Testament scholars agree. Both the tone and the content of the letter match the style one would expect from a well-known leader of the original Jewish Christian church.

A REVIEW OF THE LIFE OF JAMES

Having identified the author as James, the brother of Jesus, what do we know about him that will help us as we read his letter? Let's reconstruct a meaningful picture of James's life.

No second-born son or daughter can possibly fathom what it must have been like to suffer second child syndrome with an older brother who never sinned. But James did. Can you even imagine? Jesus always came when His mother called Him the first time. He always washed His hands properly before supper. He always did His chores quickly and with delight. He always obeyed. Then there was James, born with a sinful nature like the rest of us, living in the shadow of a big brother who was God in the flesh. Being far from perfect, younger brother James had a built-in problem right from the start.

I suppose James would have been happy to see Jesus leave home when He did. But then his already "strange" older brother came back to their home town claiming to be the long-awaited fulfillment of messianic promises (Luke 4:16-21). How do you think James felt toward his older brother then? We don't have to wonder. John 7:5 says, "Not even His brothers were believing in Him." And Mark 3:21 tells us that His family "went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, 'He has lost His senses.'"

So, throughout the Gospels we see James in a state of unbelief and skepticism over his older brother. But things didn't stay that way. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, the apostle Paul gives us a brief glimpse at an otherwise unknown event—the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to James. We probably should avoid speculating about the nature of that visit, but I suspect it was different from Paul's much-needed Damascus encounter—the one that blinded him with brilliant glory (Acts 9:1-9).

Rather, I picture Jesus putting His arms around His younger brother, whispering words of encouragement and love in his ear—words he had longed to hear all his life.

In any case, when Jesus' disciples gathered in the upper room after their Lord's ascension into heaven, James sat among them (Acts 1:14). He experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2) and the subsequent growth of the Jerusalem church in the midst of persecution (Acts 3–9). James was no doubt active in the Jerusalem church when Stephen was arrested and later martyred for his faith (Acts 6:8–8:2). So James would have been aware that a young, zealous rabbinical student known as Saul of Tarsus supported the brutal death of Stephen and had begun “ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women” to put in prison (Acts 8:3).

Shortly after his conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18, AD 32), Saul of Tarsus, now Paul the apostle, returned to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the church he had once so viciously persecuted (AD 35). Acts 9:26-28 records the account of this visit:

When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord.

The Jerusalem church accepted Barnabas's testimony and received Saul as a member of the Christian community, even welcoming him into the apostolic fellowship. It is noteworthy that Saul sought out James in that gathering (Gal. 1:19). Perhaps James recalled his own stubborn refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah, even though he had lived with Jesus all his life. Like Saul of Tarsus, James had finally come around. God's work of grace had grabbed his heart and made him look at his brother Jesus in a whole new light. And so, about ten to fifteen years later, James wrote the very first book of the New Testament, the short, practical manual of Christian living we call “James.”

Around AD 49, a dispute erupted in the church that threatened to break the unity between Jews and Gentiles. Acts 15:1 tells us, “Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be

saved.” Naturally, this addition of circumcision to the gospel troubled Paul and Barnabas, who had been preaching a simple message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone apart from works (Gal. 2:15-21). Wanting to set the record straight, Paul and Barnabas immediately went to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders, including Peter and James.

When Paul made his case to the leaders in Jerusalem, Peter concurred, reminding the council that God had saved the Gentiles strictly by faith when he preached the gospel to Cornelius and his household (Acts 15:7-11; see 10:1–11:18). So, after Paul and Barnabas reported on their miraculous ministry among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12), James himself stood up and supported Peter and Paul.

“Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,
 AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS
 FALLEN,
 AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,
 AND I WILL RESTORE IT,
 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,
 AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’
 SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM
 LONG AGO.

Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” (Acts 15:13-21)

James’s wise and convincing words became the basis for the Jerusalem council’s decision to affirm Paul’s gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone. In agreement with Paul and Barnabas, the Jerusalem apostles and elders firmly rejected the addition of works to the gospel—and aren’t we grateful! However, in order to maintain unity between the Jewish and Gentile believers, the Jerusalem council asked Gentile converts to avoid practices that Jews would find offensive (Acts

15:28-29; 21:25). Stated succinctly, James wanted to ensure that genuine faith was authenticated by God-honoring works.

James appears again in the book of Acts about ten years later (ca. AD 58). Shortly before being arrested and sent to Rome, Paul arrived in Jerusalem from his third missionary journey and met with James, who was by then clearly the leader of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 21:15-19). In an attempt to exonerate Paul from charges that he had been encouraging Jews to abandon their customs after coming in faith to Christ, James and the other elders in Jerusalem encouraged Paul to participate in a purity ritual at the temple (Acts 21:23-24). From this we learn that James, a Jew living in Jerusalem and leading the Jewish believers, continued to keep the Law as a testimony to his fellow Jews. The last thing he wanted was for his genuine faith in Jesus as the Messiah to be maligned because he and his people abruptly turned their backs on the Law of Moses. Though the Law was never a means of salvation, for James and many Jewish believers, it was a means of testimony to unbelieving Jews that their faith empowered them to do good works.

Ancient historians tell us that James continued to live and teach in Jerusalem, convincing many Jews and visitors to Jerusalem that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Greatly esteemed for his piety, he spent so much time in the temple kneeling in prayer that he was given the nickname “Camel Knees.” Even his opponents, the scribes and Pharisees, could find no fault in him—except, of course, his “misguided” belief that Jesus is the Messiah.

Nevertheless, James’s authentic faith eventually became the death of him. His true faith in Christ—demonstrated through good works, strengthened through suffering, and seasoned with God-given wisdom—drew the ire of the increasingly zealous and jealous religious elite. His words and works attracted thousands of Jews to Christ, and the anti-Christian powers in Jerusalem eventually had enough of him. The ancient church historian, Eusebius, describes the events leading up to James’s final confrontation with his opponents:

But after Paul, in consequence of his appeal to Caesar, had been sent to Rome by Festus, the Jews, being frustrated in their hope of entrapping him by the snares which they had laid for him, turned against James, the brother of the Lord. . . . Leading him into their midst they demanded of him that he should renounce faith in Christ in the presence of all the people. But, contrary to

the opinion of all, with a clear voice, and with greater boldness than they had anticipated, he spoke out before the whole multitude and confessed that our Savior and Lord Jesus is the Son of God. But they were unable to bear longer the testimony of the man who, on account of the excellence of ascetic virtue and of piety which he exhibited in his life, was esteemed by all as the most just of men, and consequently they slew him.²

Josephus reports that James was simply stoned, but Eusebius recounts that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and then beaten to death with a club.³ Whatever the details of his brutal and unjust execution, James, the brother of Jesus, was martyred for his faith in AD 62.

A PREVIEW OF THE LETTER OF JAMES

In light of James's pedigree, position, kinship, and legacy, imagine how he could have started his letter:

“James, of the tribe of Judah, of the house of David, of the royal line of the kings of Judah . . .”

or

“James, the eldest of the brothers of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God . . .”

or

“James, pastor of the First Christian Church of the world . . .”

or

“James, long-time associate of Peter, James, John, Paul, and the rest of the apostles . . .”

Yes, James could have dropped all kinds of names, pulled rank, and impressed his readers with ego-inflating titles. But, as we will see when we unpack his letter, that kind of pride is one of the things he rails against. That may be the style of this me-first world, but that wasn't the style of James. Instead, he simply began his epistle, “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). James was a bond-servant (*doulos* [1401]), an indentured servant or slave—not a prized position in the class culture of the Roman world. But James did not regard his slavery to God and submission to Jesus Christ as a burden or curse, but a glorious honor.

After introducing himself, James then addressed the letter to his audience, which was typical letter form at the time. To whom, then, was this letter written? “To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” (1:1).

Although most of the historical twelve tribes of Israel had lost their distinct identities centuries earlier in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, the term “twelve tribes of Israel” continued to be used as a figure of speech referring to all children of Israel throughout the world. The phrase “who are dispersed abroad” reinforces the fact that James was primarily addressing Jewish Christians, many of whom he had probably known in Jerusalem before they were scattered as a result of persecution of the church by the unbelieving Jewish authorities. Several times throughout the letter, James calls his readers “brethren,” indicating that he is addressing fellow believers in Jesus, not merely all Jews spread throughout the Roman world.

So, James was a Jewish believer writing to other Jewish believers in the first century who were “dispersed abroad” (*diaspora* [1290]), “scattered throughout” like seed sown throughout a field. When James wrote this letter, Jewish communities had already been established throughout the Roman world as a result of numerous exiles from the Holy Land. In addition, about this time, the Roman Emperor Claudius persecuted the Jews of Rome and drove them from the city. Jewish businesses were boycotted. Jewish children were mocked and thrown out of schools. Times were harsh and life was grim. So Jewish Christians, like the people to whom James wrote his letter, seem to have been living under a double *diaspora*. Not only were they subject to Roman ire because of their Jewishness; many had been driven out of the Jewish communities themselves because of their faith in the Messiah! More than any others, Jewish believers lived without roots and traveled outside Judea looking for a place to call home. Many of these men and women found themselves in a social and religious limbo.

I do believe suffering purifies and matures, but I also believe that relentless, extreme suffering can confuse and crush. Many of these Jewish believers had begun to grow weary, tempted either to turn their backs on their Jewish roots or to defect from their faith in Christ. Many claimed that they believed the truth of God concerning the Lord Jesus, but because of the pressures of the day, they began to live a lie.

In this context of suffering, confusion, and defection, it is not surprising that James writes a letter of strong exhortation. Remember, this letter was not a doctrinal treatise, not a defense of the gospel regarding

the person and work of Christ, not a retelling of the Christian story. This letter assumed his readers already knew all those things. Instead, James penned a letter about authentic faith lived out in a hostile world.

The main theme of the book of James is that *real faith produces genuine works*. In other words, the person who has really found the way genuinely walks in it. If you claim, “I have come to Jesus Christ; He is my Lord and Savior,” James answers, “Then let your life give evidence of that truth. Let your outward acts reflect the inward reality. Justify your faith before others by your good works.” When we realize this overarching theme, many of the individual sections and troublesome verses will become clear.

In the first major section, including all of chapter 1, James tells his readers that *real faith produces genuine stability*. When real faith is stretched, it doesn’t break but perseveres. James supports this claim with three examples. First, he shows that trials and tribulations in life do not destroy faith but actually deepen it and cause it to grow (1:1-12). Second, he reminds us that we can face temptations through genuine faith (1:13-18). Third, he explains that true believers respond to God’s Word positively, changing their lives to conform to its truth (1:19-27).

The second major section begins at 2:1 and runs through 3:12. In this section James argues that *real faith produces genuine love*. When true faith is pressed by various circumstances, social challenges, and personal struggles, it does not fail. Instead, it produces responses that put others first. Real faith takes a stand against prejudice (2:1-13), justifies itself through obedience and action (2:14-26), and bridles the beastly tongue (3:1-12). Genuine faith does not produce a passive, wimpy push-over, but a daring and durable force of love in action.

In the third section, James asserts that *real faith produces genuine humility* (3:13-5:6). He contrasts worldly ambition with heavenly wisdom; one results in envy and strife, the other in righteousness and peace (3:13-18). James also lends practical advice on overcoming worldly behavior in the church, including behavior that brings division (4:1-10). He then exhorts his readers to overcome boasting with true humility before God (4:11-17). He also warns the wealthy to live responsibly with their riches (5:1-6).

In the last section, James reaffirms the truth that *real faith produces genuine patience* (5:7-20). Those Jewish Christians distressed by faith-challenging circumstances needed to hear that assurance over and over again. James exhorts his readers to be patient in suffering in light of the Lord’s coming (5:7-12). He encourages them to seek physical and

spiritual wholeness (5:13-18). And he ends his profoundly practical letter with an admonition to steer erring believers back onto the right path (5:19-20).

First-century Jewish Christians struggled with persevering through hardship, maintaining good works, promoting peace in their churches, and living patiently in anticipation of the Lord's return. They knew Jesus as the Way of life but needed a travel guide for walking in that Way through life. So do we! In the midst of the struggles of everyday life, we can all use a dose of James's hands-on Christianity.

REAL FAITH PRODUCES GENUINE STABILITY (JAMES 1:1-27)

The two figures stood waist deep in the blue-green water flowing easily around them. Light danced across the surface of the river as the sun peeked through the feathery clouds, illuminating the two men who appeared to be arguing with each other. The one, dressed in a simple garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, held up his hands and shook his head in mild protest. His eyes closed, he patted his chest and pointed to himself.

The other man, also in his thirties and dressed in the robe and sash of the commoners, had stripped himself in preparation for baptism and had been ushered by the prophet's younger disciples to the prophet John himself. After a brief exchange, John hesitated, then, placing his hands on the young man named Jesus, he immersed him.

As Jesus rose from the water of the Jordan River, the Baptizer looked into the sky as the sunlight, briefly veiled by a passing cloud, broke through with brilliant light. But now his eyes fixed on something—something only he could see. He staggered backward in the water, losing his footing, but his disciples caught him.

“What, master? What did you see?”

“The Spirit of God descending like a . . . dove,” John answered. “And a voice—a voice from heaven saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’”

John and his disciples watched the man Jesus climbing out of the water on the opposite bank of the river—the one facing the wilderness. Instead of turning to follow the meandering Jordan, Jesus, still dripping with water, followed a fluttering dove eastward, toward the desert.

For forty days and forty nights Jesus was tempted, tested, and tried. Hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, he stumbled over the rocks, slept on gritty sand, and wandered under a hot and brutal sun. But those physical troubles were nothing compared to the spiritual temptations He faced. Like a relentless warlord constructing a siege ramp to His soul, Satan tempted the Son of God to satisfy His human cravings (Matt.

KEY TERMS IN JAMES 1:1-27

***hypomonē* (ὑπομονή) [5281] “patient endurance,” “perseverance,” “steadfastness”**

This term comes from two Greek words, *hypo* (under) and *menō* (abide), with the basic meaning, “to abide under.” In its common usage in the first century, it emphasized the ability to face difficult circumstances with patience and steadfast fortitude.

***peirasmos* (πειρασμός) [3986] “trial,” “test,” “temptation”**

Though the book of Revelation uses the term to refer to the coming period of global testing prior to the return of Christ (Rev. 3:10), the term generally refers either to tests that challenge the strength of one’s faith (1 Pet. 1:6) or to temptations that challenge one’s moral strength (Luke 4:13). James deals with both meanings in his letter: tests of faith in 1:2-12 and temptations to sin in 1:13-18.

***thrēskeia* (θρησκεία) [2356] “religion,” “worship,” “piety,” “devout practices”**

The Greek word for “religion” refers not to one’s private convictions but to a well-defined religious community or system. Judaism was in this sense a “religion” (Acts 26:5), as was the angel-worshipping cult described in Colossians 2:18. In James, it refers to the orthodox Christian religion, emphasizing its fundamental beliefs and practices that distinguish it from other religions (Jas. 1:26-27).

4:1-4), to circumvent God’s plan for salvation through suffering (Matt. 4:5-7), and even to fall down and worship him (Matt. 4:8-11). Though Jesus endured an excruciating period of physical trials and temptations, He emerged victorious, His true qualities shining through—perfect Man and perfect God. Yet Jesus’ trials were not over. During the next three years of public ministry, He would continue to endure rejection, persecution, false accusation, abandonment, insults, mockery, beatings, and finally crucifixion before His work was through.

Believers in Jesus Christ have followed Him in baptism, received the blessing of the Holy Spirit, and been called God’s children by adoption. But we often forget that the faith-gift that saved us will continually be put to the test by trials and temptations throughout our lives. Like wanderers in a wilderness of hardships and allurements, we Christians face the trials of life and temptations to sin. But like our Lord before us, we can face these harsh realities with confidence, responding to Scripture in faith and obedience rather than collapsing under temptations.

The book of James develops the overarching theme that *real faith produces genuine works*. In chapter 1, James argues that when faith is put to the test, it perseveres. It results in stability. To demonstrate this point, he gives three examples. First, he argues that the normal trials that accompany life don't crush genuine faith—they produce endurance (1:1-12). Then, he notes the key to overcoming temptations: God-given strength (1:13-18). Finally, he explains that, like the Lord Jesus' trials in the wilderness, genuine faith results in submission to God's Word, the conforming of the believer's life to the image of Christ (1:19-27).

Trials of Life

JAMES 1:1-12

NASB

^{1a}James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes who are ^bdispersed abroad: Greetings.

²Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various ^atrials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces ^aendurance. ⁴And let ^aendurance have *its* perfect ^bresult, so that you may be ^cperfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and ^awithout reproach, and it will be given to him. ⁶But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸*being a* ^adouble-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹But the ^abrother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; ¹⁰and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like ^aflowering grass he will pass away.

LIT

¹This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am writing to the “twelve tribes”—Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!

²Dear brothers and sisters, ^{*} when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

⁵If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

⁹Believers who are ^{*} poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. ¹⁰And those who are rich should boast that God has

¹¹For the sun rises with ^aa scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

¹²Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has ^abeen approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him.

1:1 ^aOr *Jacob* ^bLit in the *Dispersion* 1:2 ^aOr *temptations* 1:3 ^aOr *steadfastness* 1:4 ^aV 3, note 1 ^bLit *work* ^cOr *mature* 1:5 ^aLit *does not reproach* 1:8 ^aOr *doubting, hesitating* 1:9 ^aI.e. church member 1:10 ^aLit *the flower of the grass* 1:11 ^aLit *the* 1:12 ^aOr *passed the test*

humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. ¹¹The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

¹²God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

1:2 Greek *brothers*; also in 1:16, 19. 1:9 Greek *The brother who is*.

People don't need to march to the drumbeat of daily life or analyze its melody for very long before they realize that much of life's music is played in a minor key. Hurts, heartaches, pain, problems, disappointments, discouragements, sicknesses, suffering, disease, and death form a constant bass line for what everybody wishes was an upbeat chorus. And however hard we try to conduct the often clamorous orchestra toward a sweeter song, the dissonant chords continually offend our senses.

This reality of suffering creates within us questions regarding God's justice and life's purpose. For millennia the best philosophers and theologians have attempted to resolve the apparent discord between the belief in an all-good and all-powerful God and the pervasiveness of wickedness, evil, and suffering in the world He created. And at the same time, scientists and saints alike have struggled against the natural order of things, desperately trying to bring lasting relief to humanity's misery. In the end, many people in this world end up enduring their short lives by dulling the torment with mind- or body-numbing methods that distract them from the pain but never deliver them from it: drugs, alcohol, entertainment, busyness, education, travel—even world-denying religious pursuits. But while these things can provide temporary means of escape, the floodwaters of adversity eventually rise above the highest hills of retreat. Trials of life—or death—eventually overtake everybody. Without exception.

In launching his overarching case that real faith produces genuine works, James begins with an opening argument that many preachers today would prefer to relegate to a closing remark—the problem of suffering and trials in life. But James couldn't have chosen a more relevant

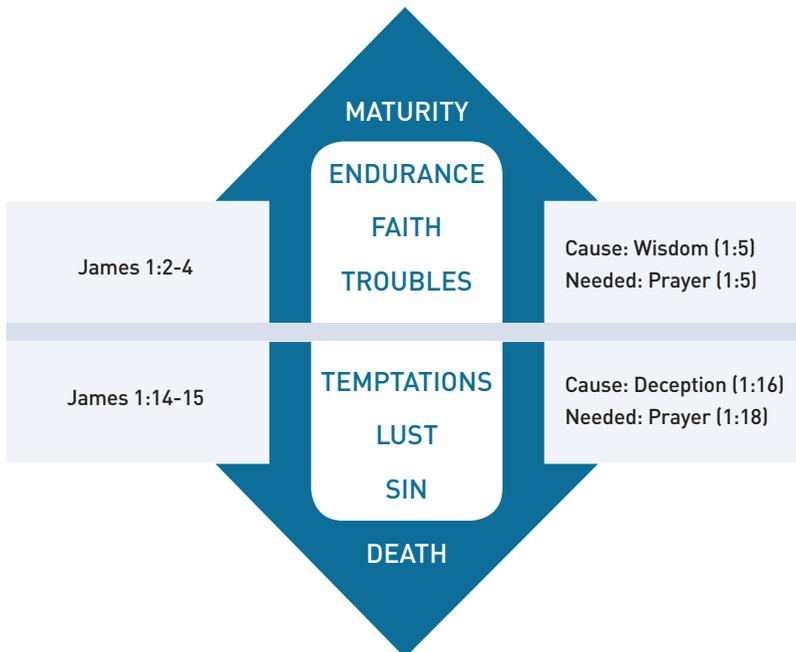
issue to test his thesis of the durability of true faith. As we saw in the introduction and greeting, James’s dispersed readers were experiencing hardship as they tried to come to terms with their new identities as Jewish Christians in a culture that despised both Jews *and* Christians. In a social context like that, it’s understandable that these trials would push many toward a more comfortable alternative—either go back to Judaism or stop living out their faith in Christ. But this situation—or something very similar—is not unique to first-century Christians. In fact, life’s painful trials have touched every generation of Christians throughout history—including you and me today.

— 1:1-4 —

As we discovered in the introduction to James, the recipients of this letter were people enduring adversity. Having been “dispersed abroad,” they were disoriented, disillusioned, and probably downright depressed. They were bearing the brunt of criticism, brutality, and unjust treatment.

James greets these beleaguered believers with a single word: “Greetings” (*chairō* [5436]). Though a common form of official greeting at that time (Acts 15:23), *chairō* literally means “to rejoice,” as in Romans

Two Trajectories in James 1



12:15—“Rejoice (*chairō*) with those who rejoice!” This contrast between his readers’ harried situation and James’s exhortation to “consider it all joy [*chara* (5479)]” in the very next line sets the tone for his letter.

So, without hesitating, James leaps headfirst into his most pressing issue—trials. The Greek word James uses for “trial” is *peirasmos* [3986], which appears a second time in 1:12. The word can refer to tests that challenge the integrity of one’s faith (as in 1 Pet. 1:6). But it can also refer to “temptations,” things that appeal to our sinful tendencies and challenge our moral integrity (Luke 4:13). In 1:2-12 James deals with the first meaning—tests that challenge a believer’s faith. Then, in 1:13-18 he treats the second meaning—temptations to sin. Before we address the testing aspect of these trials, let’s look at two things James tells us about these tests of faith in this verse.

First, he tells us that trials are inevitable. Note that James doesn’t say, “Consider it all joy *if* you fall into various trials.” Instead he uses the word “when” (*hotan* [3752]). Like death itself, trials are inescapable and unavoidable. Few things are certain in this world, but troubles, hardship, challenges to faith—count on it—will come.

Second, James says that the trials are “various” (*poikilos* [4164]). It may seem like a waste of time to dwell on such a seemingly unimportant word, but think about it. While we can expect trials to come, we have no idea what form they’ll take. The Greek word *poikilos* can mean diverse, variegated, or multicolored. In other words, trials occur in all shapes and sizes. Like unwelcome guests, they burst into our lives unannounced and stay too long! Trials may be frequent and frustrating or epic and life changing. We can never predict.

But James also pulls back the veil and lets his readers see the inner workings of trials, revealing that they have a purpose. As he traces the pathway of the Christian journey through life, James reveals that the presence of trials produces both immediate and ultimate results.

First, *the testing of faith produces endurance* (1:3). That’s the immediate result. The term “testing” (*dokimion* [1383]) refers to a means of authenticating something. Like a prospector biting into a gold nugget to test its quality, God applies specific things to each of His children, testing their faith to reveal its true character.

Note that the object of God’s testing is “your faith.” Our heavenly Father is no mad scientist trying to torture his subjects to the breaking point. He’s more like an expert trainer who knows which muscles to develop, what diet to follow, and what schedule to keep in order to bring about the best results. The goal is not to snap our faith muscles,

but to stretch and strengthen them, producing *endurance*—the strength to “hang in there.”

Endurance is just the initial result. Endurance itself has an even greater purpose, a “perfect result,” literally, “perfect work.” God says, in effect, “In My sovereign plan I’ve lined up a chain of events that will take place, and My finger of testing pushes the first one—endurance.” When endurance takes place it bumps into maturity; then that leads ultimately to a fully developed character.

The people I would regard as having great Christian character are invariably people who have learned how to handle life in the crucible. It’s the mother who’s lost a child and is able to say to God, “You gave, and You took away. Blessed be Your name.” It’s the father who, having given his best at the firm for years, loses his job and says to his family, “Let’s get together tonight and thank God for this opportunity to trust Him.” It’s the teenager who says, “I won’t surrender my principles. I’ll maintain my standards even though I am shunned and treated like an outsider by my peers.” That’s the marvelous quality of maturity. A completeness and wholeness emerge when we patiently “hang in there.”

James states that inevitable trials take various forms in our lives to bring about specific purposes—building the quality of endurance and leading His children toward maturity. In these verses, he also answers the “how” question. How can Christians, neck deep in troubles, rise above their situations without dropping out, giving in, or falling short? What can they do to handle the various trials that come their way? In 1:2-4, James gives three specific imperatives (commands) he wanted his readers to follow: “consider” (1:2), “know” (1:3), and “let” (1:4). Each is worth a closer look.

The background of the Greek word translated “consider” is interesting (*hēgeomai* [2233]). The word comes from a term that means to lead or guide, from which we get our word “hegemony,” the leading influence or guide of something. The Greek term could be used for a person at the front of a line, leading a procession. Though the term is probably functioning here as an intensified form of “to think,” how appropriate that “joy” for James also happens to be the attitude behind which all of our other attitudes and actions should fall in line!

James uses a present participle for the word “knowing,” which is his way of telling his readers how they can stay joyful, positive, and even calm in the midst of trials. By knowing that God has a greater purpose in the testing, the believer is able to “consider it all joy.”

Finally, James encourages his readers to “let endurance have its perfect result” (1:4). The language communicates the idea of cooperation with God’s work. We find a similar idea of a passive cooperation with God’s plan in 1 Peter 5:6—“Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” Just as a potter’s fingers mold a work of art, God’s fingers are working through various circumstances to bring about His perfect result of maturity and completeness in the lives of His people.

So, how do believers rise above troubles in everyday life? They face them with a deliberate attitude of joy, calling to mind the process God is working out in their lives, and cooperating with the entire process.

— 1:5-8 —

After giving a behind-the-scenes look at the ultimate purpose of trials and practical advice on how to endure them positively, James continues the theme by answering another lingering question, “Why do trials overwhelm us?” Why do we sometimes cave in? What things block the joy of enduring life in the crucible? The answer? *Our lack of wisdom.*

Therefore, when we feel ill-equipped to handle a trial, we have one option: Ask God for wisdom. In this context, wisdom can be defined as the ability to view life from God’s perspective. James says this kind of wisdom comes by prayer (1:5). It might be something as simple as, “Lord, in the midst of this loss or heartache or failure, I ask You for wisdom. Help me, first, to see what I’m going through from Your viewpoint, and then please give me faith not to give up.”

Of course, when we’re overwhelmed, faith can be hard to come by. Just as a lack of wisdom can cause us to become overwhelmed, a lack of faith can result in our caving in. James isn’t referring to saving faith in 1:6. He has in mind sustaining faith—the kind of faith that allows us to endure trials, to align our will and our attitude with a divine perspective, abandoning ourselves to God and His mighty hand.

The opposite of faith is doubt. And James compares a person who doubts to the “surf of the sea,” driven by the wind. The word “surf” (*klydōn* [2830]) is used in the Gospel of Luke when the disciples thought they would perish in the storm on the Sea of Galilee. They woke Jesus up and He immediately “rebuked the wind and the surging waves (*klydōn*)” (Luke 8:24). Interestingly, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth after calming the storm were “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25).

James describes this kind of deep-seated doubt as being “double-minded” (Jas. 1:8). The word *dipsychos* [1374] literally means

“two-souled.” It appears here in the book of James for the first time in Greek literature, and James may have even invented the word himself.¹ By the way, if you invent a word, you get to define it, so let’s let James define it for us. James uses the term again in 4:8—“Purify your hearts, you double-minded.” It indicates an impurity of our inner person. Where there should be one thought, goal, attitude, or devotion, we find two competing thoughts. So, a double-minded person is one who wants his or her will and at the same time God’s will. That kind of person is unstable in *everything* he or she does. Pause and just imagine what happens when the double-minded person faces a double-barrel trial in life!

I’ve never done this—and I probably should preface this by warning you not to try this without professional supervision—but I’ve heard it said that one of the cheapest and easiest ways to catch a monkey is to cut off the end of a hollow long-necked gourd, fill it with rice, and tie it to a tree. The hungry monkey will push his scrawny little hand into the thin neck of the gourd to grab the rice. He’ll clutch it with his hand and try to pull it out—but the monkey’s fist is bigger than the gourd’s neck. He’s trapped, because that hungry, shortsighted monkey won’t release the rice to remove his fist. He simply lacks the wisdom to decide that freedom without the rice is better than captivity with it.

That’s the double-minded Christian. Inside the gourd is my will. Yes, part of me wants to live in God’s will, but the other part wants it on my terms. And when a trial comes, I refuse to release my grip and trust that the purpose and plan of God will bring true freedom.

— 1:9-12 —

Trials affect everybody—even the wealthy, who sometimes believe they have a shield of protection, or at least a cushion to blunt the fall. But wisdom and faith are required for both poor and rich. For the poor person, who continues to endure the challenges of lacking worldly wealth, God’s wisdom can remind him of his high position. What high position is this? James probably has in mind the position believers have in Christ. Paul describes it this way: “[God] raised us up with Him [Christ], and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6-7).

For the wealthy, the worst trials come when they lose their worldly riches or when troubles that money can’t deflect enter their lives. He, too, is reminded of the fragility of life (Jas. 1:10). If such a person fails to cooperate with the work of God, but instead, like a monkey grasping

the rice, is determined to have his own will, he will fade away, as James says, “in the midst of his pursuits” (1:11).

But the one who stands up under the weight of trials will be blessed. The word “blessed” (*makarios* [3107]) means “genuinely happy.” Jesus repeated the word some nine times in the introduction to His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1-11). Quite likely, the last couple of those beatitudes form the background of James’s own teaching:

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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.” (Matt. 5:10-12)

James describes that reward in heaven as “the crown of life” (Jas. 1:12). Without denying the future reward in store for those who endure trials and tests, I think there’s a temporal crown, too. I believe the person who truly lives in the Christian life is the one who perseveres under the trial. They are rewarded in this life with maturity, wisdom, and insight into God’s purposeful plan. That’s real life at its best!

APPLICATION: JAMES 1:1-12

Rising Above Trials

It seems so easy to whistle songs of praise when the sun shines on us, when a glorious dawn breaks and life’s forecast looks bright and clear. It’s quite another thing to praise our heavenly Father when a dark sky frowns at us, thunder rolls in, and violent storms of trouble break over our lives. How can anyone sing when days are dark and nights are long? But this is exactly what James calls us to do, to respond to life’s inevitable trials with joy, with wisdom, and with firm confidence in Him.

With an eye toward our personal response to God’s truth, let’s revisit two ways we can handle adversity.

First, *when troubles come, it’s essential that we respond with wisdom.* This insight into trials doesn’t come naturally. Wisdom for handling trials can come only from God, and the primary means He uses to give us wisdom is His Word. Calling to mind specific statements from Scripture that address this very issue will help you respond appropriately