

August 2 Lesson 9 (NIV)

FAITH AND WISDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Isaiah 40:1–8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 1:1–11

JAMES 1:1–11

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

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

KEY VERSE

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

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

AlbinusAl-*bay*-nuhs.

DiasporaDee-*as*-puh-ruh.

Festus*Fes*-tus.

JosephusJo-*see*-fus.

Mediterranean*Med*-uh-tuh-**ray**-nee-un.

MessiahMeh-*sigh*-uh.

Pentecost*Pent*-ih-kost.

Sanhedrin*San*-huh-drun or San-*heed*-run.

Introduction

A. More Informed, Less Wise

In case you hadn’t heard, this is the Information Age. Everything, or so it seems, can be accessed online. From medical records to legal opinions, from academic scholarship to celebrity gossip—all is available with a simple search on your computer or phone. Countless libraries’ worth of information is now publicly accessible through the internet.

But while we are glutted with information, it is right to ask exactly what we are doing with all of it. In spite of all the generalized and specialized information at our fingertips, are we any wiser

as a society? This month's study—five lessons drawn from the letter of James—helps us evaluate that question.

B. Lesson Context: James the Man

There may be as many as five men by the name of James in the New Testament, so we take care not to mix them up (see Mark 1:19; 3:18; 6:3; 15:40; Luke 6:16). Tradition has taken the author of the book of James to refer to James who was the half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19).

Jesus and James grew up in a large family (see Mark 6:3, lesson 7). Along with the other brothers of Jesus, James did not believe in Jesus during Jesus' lifetime (John 7:3–5). But when the Day of Pentecost arrived after Jesus' resurrection, they had come around (Acts 1:14). Paul indicates that James himself had been a witness of the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3–7).

The chronology is not entirely clear, but perhaps by the mid-40s in the first century, James had become a leader in the Jerusalem church. His exact role is not specified, but Paul associates him with the apostles on at least one occasion (Galatians 1:19). Paul also lists James among the “pillars” of the church (2:9); James was a leader in a group that included apostles and elders (Acts 15).

The significance of this is heightened when we consider the centrality of Jerusalem in the thinking of the earliest Christians, who were of Jewish background. The Jerusalem church was more than just one congregation among many; it was the mother church. What happened there mattered to the entire church (example: Acts 15:4, 22–29). We see James's impact on the first-century church in the account of what is called the Jerusalem Council as he gave the final, decisive word on the matter at hand (15:13–21). That was about AD 51.

We have corroborating evidence outside the New Testament as well. According to the Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100),

Caesar, upon hearing the death of Festus, sent Albinus into Judea, as procurator.... Albinus was but upon the road; so [the high priest Ananus] assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned (*Antiquities of the Jews*, book 20, chapter 9).

That martyrdom occurred in AD 62.

C. Lesson Context: James the Epistle

The letter of James therefore had to have been written prior to James's death in AD 62. Given the other details of his life, a reasonable supposition is that the letter was written in the 50s, making it one of the earliest of the New Testament documents. Very likely it was written from Jerusalem, given the status of the writer there (see above).

Structurally, the epistle lacks many of the features of an ancient letter, features that we see throughout Paul's letters. It opens with the standard opening features of sender, recipients, and greeting. Beyond that, however, it lacks a thanksgiving (characteristic of Paul's letters; example: Romans 1:8–10), a standard letter body, and a closing (example: Romans 16).

The letter proceeds loosely from subject to subject, repeatedly returning to a handful of prominent topics. Those include trials (example: James 1:2–4, below), wisdom (example: 1:5–8, below), and wealth (example: 1:9–11, below).

The letter approaches Christian living from the obvious backdrop of Judaism. This is evident in the author's use of the Old Testament: he quotes from it five times (in James 2:8, 11 [twice], 23; 4:6) and alludes to it at least that many more times (see 1:10; 2:1, 21, 25; 5:11, 17, 18).

I. Enduring Trials

(JAMES 1:1–4)

A. Greeting (v. 1)

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

The opening verses are seen by many as establishing the thematic foundation of the letter. At the outset, we might wonder why *James* does not refer to himself as the Lord's brother (see Lesson Context). Among other considerations, his addressees already know who he is. More importantly, by omitting his familial relationship with the Lord, James may be deliberately refraining from leveraging that status for power.

That he calls himself *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* places him in a long and venerable tradition, which includes Moses (1 Kings 8:53), David (2 Samuel 3:18), and various prophets (Jeremiah 7:25; Daniel 9:10; Amos 3:7). James is not shying away from the authority that comes with his role as a leader in the Jerusalem church. Instead, he is laying claim to an ancient means of expressing his authority to speak on behalf of God.

1b. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

There has been considerable debate regarding the identity of the recipients of James's letter. We wonder if the addressees are to be understood literally (in terms of ethnic Jews; compare Acts 26:7) or figuratively (in terms of Christians of any descent; compare Romans 9:6–8). Given the presence of significant Old Testament imagery (see Lesson Context: James the Epistle), it seems best to understand the addressees in the straightforward fashion.

James is therefore writing to ethnic Jews who have accepted Jesus as Messiah. They are *scattered* in communities around the Mediterranean, outside Judea. This state of affairs is commonly known as the Diaspora, the Greek word that is behind the translation "scattered" here and in John 7:35 and 1 Peter 1:1.

B. Trying Faith (vv. 2–4)

2. Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

The imperative verb *consider* implies a thoughtfulness that not only looks *at* a situation but *through* it to its potential result. That is how it is used in 2 Thessalonians 3:15 (translated "bear in mind" in 2 Peter 3:15). *Whenever you face* is the condition for James's exhortation to *consider it pure joy*. Note the phrasing: *whenever*, not *if ever*. James assumes that his readers will all be tested in some way. The only question is how to respond when the time comes. *Face* implies a sudden, unexpected encounter, as the word being translated is "attacked" in Luke 10:30 and "struck" in Acts 27:41.

The *trials* Christians face are not all one kind—Satan likes to change it up, offering a variety of unholy shortcuts (compare Matthew 4:1–10). For James, the different kinds of trials include, at a minimum, those related to personal financial status (James 1:9, 27; 2:15, 16), favoritism (2:1–4, 9), economic injustice (2:5–7), and exploitation (5:1–6). Obviously, these categories overlap to varying degrees.

The concept of facing trials or trying times is related to the idea of undergoing temptations (compare 2 Corinthians 8:2). The advice James gives might initially seem counter intuitive; for most of us, our first reaction when undergoing trials is to do the opposite of rejoicing! James knows this, of course, and he addresses this next.

3. because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

James wants his readers to realize that there is a bigger picture than the troubles they face in the moment. That bigger picture is a goal toward which all their suffering should point: the increase of *perseverance*.

It is important to understand that the perseverance James encourages is not mere passive endurance or just hunkering down until the storm passes. Rather, the perseverance James advocates is active and confident. This includes continuing to do the right thing at the right time. This kind of perseverance continues to act in love in the face of opposition.

Trials in and of themselves do not result in spiritual maturity (see Matthew 13:5, 6, 20, 21). Rather, insofar as trials call forth perseverance on our part, it is that very perseverance that will result in what James discusses next.

4. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Here is the desired result of exercising the *perseverance* just discussed. The fact that James wants his readers to *be mature and complete* is troubling to some since there was only one perfect person: Jesus (Matthew 19:21; Romans 12:2; James 1:17).

This problem has drawn at least two suggestions. One is that the maturity James has in mind is something that he sees as attainable. He clearly doesn't think of maturity as sinlessness (see James 3:2). This leaves maturity to be understood as consistent, habitual behavior rather than as a status to be obtained. In other words, the one who is mature is the one who consistently strives to overcome sinful behaviors and attitudes. Such a person, to use the language of the apostle John, "walk[s] in the light" (1 John 1:7).

A second proposal takes into account that Jesus said something similar in Matthew 5:48 (where the same Greek word is translated "perfect"). But he went further by stating that the perfection of the Father is the goal. Thus the proposal is that although we know that it's not possible for us to be perfect in this earthly life, that doesn't mean the standard should be lowered. The Father's perfection is our continuing standard.

Either way, this is how we pass life's tests.

II. Seeking Wisdom

(JAMES 1:5–8)

A. God's Gift (v. 5)

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

The focus of James's exhortation shifts from trials to *wisdom*. On a surface level, there is a verbal connection between James 1:4, 5 in the word *lacks*. But the connection is deeper than that. Wisdom is needed in order to come through the trials of life in a way that leads to spiritual maturity. This wisdom is, above all, divine wisdom—wisdom that comes from God (see Proverbs 2:3–6).

James recognizes that fact as he instructs his readers to *ask God* for wisdom (compare 1 Kings 3:9, 10). This exhortation reminds James's readers of the centrality of prayer, during times of both

trial and relative ease. Request is a fundamental part of prayer; it acknowledges our lack and our dependence on God to supply the need. In so doing, it also acknowledges God's nature: he is generous *to all*. More than that, he wants to grace us all with his gifts (see Psalm 145:15–19; Matthew 7:7–11).

B. Doubt's Instability (vv. 6–8)

6. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

As important as it is to *ask*, it is critical to do so while believing and not doubting (compare Matthew 21:21; Mark 11:24). James's readers may well find themselves struggling to trust God because of what they suffer. Doubting God is hardly a beneficial quality for someone undergoing severe trials!

James illustrates the danger of doubt by comparing a doubter to *a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind*. The lack of stability depicted is not the characteristic of a wise person! Nor is it associated with God, who can be trusted in all circumstances. Isaiah 57:20 uses the same imagery to illustrate wicked people; Ephesians 4:14 uses wind and wave imagery to illustrate those who are spiritually immature.

7, 8. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.

The Old Testament contrasts those having an “undivided loyalty” or practicing “deception” (1 Chronicles 12:33; Psalm 12:2) with those who display singleness of heart. To act with the “all” your “heart” (Psalms 9:1; 111:1; Jeremiah 24:7) is to act with unity of purpose, with absolute devotion to God.

This phrasing is another way of expressing the injunction to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Double-mindedness, on the other hand, suggests conflicted loyalties and indecisiveness. It is associated with sin because it implies a lack of total devotion to God.

All of this is in the background of the term *double-minded*. Such a person *is unstable* because of conflicted loyalties. He or she tries to serve both God and the world simultaneously and ends up doing neither very well. James's readers, who are enduring trials and persecution for their faith, face an acute temptation to try simultaneously to serve God and to conform to what the world asks of them. James emphasizes that this is ultimately impossible (see James 4:8).

III. Handling Wealth

(JAMES 1:9–11)

A. High and Low (vv. 9, 10a)

9. Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.

The focus of James's message shifts again. Economic concerns are a central part of James's message in this letter (see Lesson Context: James the Epistle). The verse at hand brings this into view for the first time. So how does this topic connect to what comes before it? Much depends on how we understand who is being spoken about and what will happen to them.

Believers in humble circumstances are not merely sad or down in the dumps. They are poor (contrast “the rich” in the next verse). The poor are to *take pride in their high position*. This is a very close restatement of James’s exhortation that his readers should “consider it pure joy . . . when [they] face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2). There is a goal, or an end, to the experience of poverty: it can be a transformative experience that draws them closer to God.

This passage echoes the same theme of reversal found in the song that Mary sang when Jesus’ birth was announced to her (Luke 1:52, 53). In this way, James celebrates the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated, which accomplishes this role reversal (compare Matthew 23:12).

10a. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—

In direct contrast to the poor man who rejoices in an upturn of his fortunes, *the rich* are to *take pride in their humiliation*. Some commentators point out that James seems to have the language of Jeremiah 9:23, 24 in mind here. But who are the rich? Is James speaking of a believer or a nonbeliever?

James does not refer to a rich “brother” here, but simply to the rich. For him, the rich are those who mistreat the poor and oppress them (see James 2:6, 7; 5:1–6). For such a man to be humiliated entails judgment, of being thrown down from his position of power.

Even so, there is a note of redemption here. The rich man who decides to come to God can very well rejoice in being made low—that is, in taking on the humility of a follower of Christ. But as James’s language suggests, it is much more likely that the arrogant rich with whom James’s readers have to deal will ultimately face the judgment of God for their actions.

B. Fading Away (vv. 10b, 11)

10b, 11. since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

James draws on very familiar Old Testament language of judgment to speak of the fate of the rich (see Psalms 90:3–6; 103:15, 16; Isaiah 40:6–8). The stages in which a *flower* withers, or passes away, illustrates this.

The fact that the *rich will fade away even while they go about their business* indicates that the entirety of a selfishly lavish lifestyle will come under the withering judgment of God. Jesus’s illustration about the days of Noah is an additional warning (see Luke 17:26–31).

Conclusion

A. Faithful and Wise

The opening lines of the book of James set us up for our study of the letter as a whole. In these lines we were introduced to three themes we will see again and again over the next few weeks. These themes are the reality of trials, the need for wisdom, and the reality of economic privation.

The trials we face produce the need to ask God for wisdom and can involve economic considerations. Above all, James impresses on us our need for God’s wisdom and our inability to live faithful lives apart from it.

Only by seeking God wholeheartedly will we continue to be formed into the kind of people he desires us to be.

B. Prayer

Father, in the midst of the trials that this life presents, teach us to seek wisdom and guidance from you, the only true source of all that is good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

In every aspect of life,
God invites us to seek his wisdom.¹
