



# Study Series

James: Week One

## Bible

James 1:1-11 (NIV)

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

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

### Trials and Temptations

**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.

# Sermon Summary

The letter of James is a no-holds-barred encouragement to live our faith out loud. In fact, for James, faith that isn't reflected in your lifestyle is hardly faith at all. He has no time for a faith that is private, personal and internalised and challenges us to give careful thought to our own discipleship. This challenge is evident not only in the content of this letter but even in James' style of writing. He tends to make stark contrasts between two options and this invites discussion and thought. In many ways his style is typical of wisdom literature, especially proverbs, which invite us to consider when the truth they contain is to be applied. Or, again, James' style is reminiscent of Jesus' parables in which simple illustrations were used to teach about the kingdom of God and to invite further engagement with Jesus about how, exactly, the kingdom was like a farmer who went out to sow his seed. This similarity may stem from the relationship between Jesus and James. Not only is this letter an example of some of the earliest Christian teaching, but many scholars believe that this is James, the half-brother of Jesus. Either way, we find many points of contact between James' teaching and that of Jesus and I'll draw attention to that as we go.

In this first section we also encounter one other feature of James' style, and that is his rapid shift of perspective that can almost feel like he's introducing a new topic.

Determining the connections between the sections will take a bit of work, but will be well worth it.

James isn't one for small talk and after a brief greeting he launches right into what must surely be one of his main topics: endurance in trial. James' readers are to endure trials to their faith knowing that endurance will bring maturity and completeness. The trials of their faith must be read with James' understanding of faith in mind. He is not speaking on ideas about God, but about our faith lived out loud. The trials are those that tempt us to a less active faith and must be opposition, oppression, and persecution. This has similarities with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:10-12 and other places where the outcome of suffering because of our actions is seen as a good thing.

Enduring this sort of trial requires wisdom and if we lack it we should ask God and he will give it to us. This is not a new topic, but a continuation of what James has said in vv. 2-4. The argument goes something like this: wisdom is about discerning the divinely created patterns of this world and applying them to our lives to be successful; we know that the only way to grow and develop is to challenge ourselves. There is a big difference, however, between challenging ourselves in a particular area (e.g., learning a more complex

piece of music) and enduring oppression. We may need God to show us that what is true in every other area of life is also true in discipleship.

And when you ask, ask without doubting. Is this a new topic? I don't think so. Instead, James is speaking about the prayer for wisdom (though we also should pray without doubting). The image he uses is that of a wave on the sea which is constantly up and down and, as he points out, unstable. If we are going to pray a "stable" prayer we are talking about a prayer that is consistent. It is the prayer of the persistent widow or of Jesus in Gethsemane; prayers that consistently ask the Lord for the sort of wisdom required to endure opposition and live our faith out loud.

Part of the reason may be found in the last verses of our section on wealth and poverty. James goes on to have a lot to say about those who are oppressing his readers (see. 2:5-7; 5:1-6). And yet, especially in 2:5-7, his readers are being tempted to show favouritism to the rich. If the oppression comes from the rich you can imagine that a prayer that could have been prayed was that God would bring along some wealthy people who could help them; people who could use their wealth and privilege to make life easier for them. The warning is twofold: First, wealth only brings a false security (as illustrated in the example of the wild flower) and, second, that wealth does not bring maturity and completion. That comes through enduring and persevering trials and, as this is the only way that James has presented for maturity, we should rejoice when we are placed in a position to grow and mature.

That's quite a start isn't it? James doesn't beat around the bush but gets right to it in his challenge. Our challenge is to engage with what he has said and to think deeply about it and then put it into practice.

## Questions

These questions are a guide for conversation. Please take your time over them, and don't feel in a rush to finish them. The objective of a group discussion is to engage in meaningful conversation around a Biblical idea, invite the Holy Spirit to lead your time of reflection.

Have a go at question 1 before reading the passage.

1. Opening Discussion: What are the sorts of things that make us want to keep our faith quiet? Have you ever experienced this sort of trial? If you feel comfortable, share your answers with the group.

2. Read James chapter 1:1-11. As you read, or hear it read, notice if there are words or phrases that 'jump out at you'. What are they? (Try to resist the urge to explain why it jumped out – this is about observing, not judging, allowing God to show you something). Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you to that word or phrase. Take some time to share what you've been lead to.
3. Can you think of a time that you have felt particularly challenged but, by persevering, have experienced significant growth in your life? After taking a moment to think, share your answers with the group.
4. James says that those who doubt shouldn't expect to receive anything from God. Discuss this idea, especially in relation to James' affirmation that God gives generously without finding fault.
5. In Scripture it is clear that wealth and privilege are not neutral, but that they make for a competing narrative. This narrative suggests that for us to lack nothing, we need to have enough money to lack nothing. Discuss how this competing narrative is played out in our society and culture and how we can be tempted to buy into it (no pun intended).
6. This opening section of James begs the question: What is the desired outcome of your life? James makes a strong case that your actions determine the sorts of outcomes you should expect. What do you desire to make of your life and, if it is to be a mature disciple of Jesus, what actions may you have to change to achieve that, especially that keep us from living our faith out loud.

## Prayer

Take some time to reflect on your answers to question 6, pray for each other that you might be reminded of God's power to bring meaningful change to our lives, and that by His Holy Spirit, He would provide you the strength to make the necessary changes to greater live your faith out loud.