

# J ames

*The Book of*

Session Two:  
September 21, 2004

*James 1:1-4—Trials, Faithfulness, and Completion*

## ❖The Text (NRSV)

*<sup>1</sup>James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

*<sup>2</sup>My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, <sup>3</sup>because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; <sup>4</sup>and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*

## ❖What's going on here?

-v.1—James begins with the traditional form of greeting of a 1st-c. letter; it is similar to the way Paul's letters begin, but is more generic (there is no specific identification of the audience). See *Session One* for discussion of which James is referred to in this opening verse. The rest of the book lacks the traditional marks of a letter, so it is possible that we have earlier material compiled into the loose form of an epistle.

Clearly, as the material stands now, the book of James is written to a Christian audience; the address to the "twelve tribes," however has a strongly Jewish flavor, anticipating James' many references to Old Testament stories, thought, and values. Most likely, this title suggests that the audience is Jewish-Christian; however, books like 1 Peter (1:1) use "dispersion" language to refer to Gentile Christians as well.

-v.2—James jumps right into a discussion about facing "trials," and he probably has in mind a specific set of concerns for his audience. (Whether this is James of Jerusalem talking to fellow believers in the original Jerusalem community or a later disciple of that James, perhaps addressing a church in Antioch, is not as certain.) This is *not*, however, pure speculation

about possible future hardship—James is speaking to people in the thick of some sort of trials. These "trials" are part of the general conditions of human life, but specifically are part of the tension in which these believers must live as they try to discern the will of God amidst dominating evil powers (Rome and wealthy elites, especially). Largely, these "trials" deal with making faithful decisions (how to act, interact with others, etc.) rather than with physical maladies like illness.

-vv.3-4—James takes the trials his audience is facing as a given—the issue is not how to get *out* of them, but how to live *through* them in faith. But James *also* takes as a given that God's hand is at work and will shape them through these trials. The theme of suffering working out for Christian endurance and hope is common in the NT—see especially Rom. 5:3-5 and 1 Pet. 4:12-13. The ultimate outcome of this "testing" is a maturity of faith and completion. Implicit here is the idea that God is at work in the face of these trials, not that all hardships in and of themselves are actually good; at the same time, the maturity of faith and endurance cannot come without the testing.

## Connections: How does this fit with our life?

-James has in mind specific kinds of "trials" as he writes—do you think his conclusions apply to *all* kinds of hardships? Do his words resonate—or not—with your experience? How?

-What does "joy" look like? Putting on a smile for the outside world? Bright-eyed optimism? Something else? Something more?

-For that matter, what does "maturity" look like? In your life, what have been moments in your own life where you have seen *maturity* present? Is maturity worth the trouble of going through "trials"? Why or why not?

❖ **Themes**—Here in the opening verses of the book, James hints at several inter-related themes that will guide the flow of the whole book; here are a few to be aware of:

*-trials and testing*—James walks a tightrope when talking about trials that believers face: on the one hand, God is not to be blamed as the direct *cause* of our suffering or temptation, but on the other hand, God’s hand is at work bringing good (in the form of “endurance” and “maturity”) as we go through suffering.

It is important to understand the word “testing” without the connotation of the strict schoolteacher who seems (to the students) bent on getting the children to fail. James does not talk about testing as a way of sifting out who are the *real* believers and who are the pretenders. Rather, the image behind the language of “testing” is that of the refiner’s fire, which purifies, or “tests,” the quality of the metal—the goal of which, is to make the metal pure and strong. So while the “testing” itself is not pleasant, James holds out the real hope that God will use these experiences to bring about maturity; indeed, the resultant endurance cannot come without the testing.

But at the same time, Christians are not to go looking for trouble—James is all-too-aware that testings come and find us as part of the challenge of living in faith. Moreover, James seems to be specifically concerned here about “testings” as challenges for living faithfully and ethically—James is *not* telling us that God made me sick to make me stronger, but rather that God will use the challenges I face about how I will use my money, how I will live in a non-Christian culture, etc. to develop my faith and my character.

*-completion and maturity*—This theme is hinted at in 1:4 but becomes a key to understanding the whole book and James’ whole outlook. We don’t have a good English word to get at all that James means by “complete”—the Greek word James consistently uses has a sense of “mature,” “reaching the goal for which

one is intended to aim,” and “fulfilling one’s purpose.” It is the same root in the Greek when Jesus cries out from the cross, “It is *finished*.” There are moral dimensions to this concept, but it is more than doing right or wrong acts. For James, “completion” is similar to the Hebrew “shalom,” which is more than peace understood as lack-of-conflict, but is the wholeness of having all the *pieces* of one’s life fit together, of the whole community fitting together. Completion is about having a wholeness of character and about shaping the kind of people we are—for James this is about *being*, not just *doing*.

### A Disclaimer to Lutherans Reading James

Talk about *completion* can sound suspicious to Lutherans—we classically maintain that we are both justified and sinners at the same time, and we want to insist that we are accepted by God by grace alone, apart from anything we do or earn. So James’ talk of growing to maturity in faith can sound like generic moralizing, or worse still, like works’ righteousness.

It is helpful, though, to take James on his own terms and to understand Luther in his own context. Luther, building on Paul before him, was concerned to show that justification required no prerequisite goodness on our part. He attacked any attempt to demand *anything*—a certain level of holiness or show of piety—as a requirement in order to merit salvation. Understandably, then, Luther—and Lutherans—tend to focus on Christian *beginnings*, baptism especially, and we emphasize God’s acceptance of us as we are.

Without necessarily denying any of that, James is asking *different questions*. He is addressing people who are already aware of their inclusion in the community of faith; his question is not “how do we get in?” but “once we’re in, where do we go from here?” So rather than focusing on Christian beginnings, James focuses on the process of

growth, maturity, and our goal and purpose as human beings. That is not to say that James is only concerned with the end product (any more than to say that Paul or Luther were *only* concerned with “getting people saved.” But James would ask us how we can be satisfied with staying where we are and not being stretched or growing. At this point, good Lutherans might protest that our salvation, our getting into heaven, is not dependent on our reaching a certain level of Christian proficiency. But James would say, “Of course it isn’t! But God does desire us to come to a deeper relationship with each other and with him. It’s not that I have to grow to earn God’s love, but because of the love of God, I am—we are—enabled to grow toward wholeness.

*James 1:5-8—The Request of Faith and the Gift of Wisdom*

❖ **The Text**

*<sup>5</sup>If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. <sup>6</sup>But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; <sup>7,8</sup> for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.*

❖ **What’s going on here?**

-v.5—Although it may seem to come out of nowhere, the discussion of asking for wisdom flows from the common catchword “lacking” in both v.4 and v.5. Verse 4 presented the hope of being *complete*—people with wholeness of character—who lack nothing. But knowing that his audience is not “there” yet, he points them to the source that can give them what is needed to move toward maturity: God.

Why is James so concerned about asking for wisdom? For him, as for much Hebrew thinking, wisdom is shorthand for the kind of insight and character that enables us to live within the design and Reign of God.

James isn’t asking the “how do I secure a future place in heaven” question; he is asking, “how do I live life in its fullness now?” and the answer he gives is wisdom.

James’ confidences about receiving wisdom is grounded in the good and generous character of God. We will be provided what we need because it is God’s nature to give abundantly, even recklessly. The “generosity” of God is straightforward, indiscriminating, even foolishly simple, so of course, James says, we can trust that God will give us the wisdom to grow to maturity.

-v.6—These words sound harsh, as though we need a certain level of faith before God will give to us (and we as Lutherans recoil at the sound of works’ righteousness). But James is calling for the same kind of simplicity of thought and disposition that God has shown to us in v.5. If God is abundantly and even foolishly faithful in giving to us, we can have a foolishly bold faith in God.

-v.7-8—In contrast both to the simple and generous character of God *and* to the wholeness of mature faith, James presents the alternative—fragmentation. To doubt that God will give the sought-for wisdom is tantamount to accusing God of not being trustworthy, and for James, this is at the heart of who God is—faithful, consistent, and recklessly generous. To doubt the character of such a God is already to doubt that God will give what we ask. Jesus talks in the same way about the trustworthiness of God’s giving (see esp. Matt. 7:7--11, Lk 11:5-13).



***...for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind...***

**Connections: Wrestling with Doubt**

Frederick Buechner says, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” Paul Tillich, too, wrote that doubt was not the opposite of faith but an element of it. What do you think James would say to these? (continued next page)

How do you respond to James’ statements about doubt?

Think of a time when you felt your faith being tested? What got you through it? How were you different on the other side? What remained the same?

After wrestling with James and doubt, what will we do with him? Is this a point to simply ignore James on, to dismiss him as too simplistic and in need of a dose of real life? If not, what will we do with him?

**❖ Themes**

-*wisdom*—There are a lot of things wisdom is not—trite, cliché, common sense sayings like “Early to bed, early to rise...” or “Always brush after every meal”; secret, esoteric, or mystical knowledge given only to a chosen few; nor is it the kind of worldly street-smarts that tells you how to “get by” and to look out for #1.

For James, building on Old Testament and Jewish tradition before him, wisdom is about the practical ways to make sense of life as a part of God’s community. Hebrew writers came to understand Wisdom as that divine reality that ordered the universe and gave purpose to all things in creation. Another ways of speaking of the completion and wholeness of character God intends for us is to speak in terms of life informed by God’s Wisdom. For Christians living

in a culture out-of-sync with that design of the universe (a culture in which the poor were oppressed, some wanted to use violence to get their way, and in which people in need were ignored), James pointed to an alternative—the gift from God of that very wisdom which gave purpose and wholeness to all creation. In a fragmented world, James holds up the promise that God will enable us to put the fragile pieces of our lives together, to be whole people.

-*faith*—The whole book of James will wrestle with what we mean by “faith,” and James will feel free to use the term in different senses. In its best light, James sees faith as a *trust in* rather than a *belief that*—in other words, it is about a person’s whole orientation and is rooted in trust of another, namely God. It is not only beliefs **about** God, but the workings out of a whole life trusting **in** that same God. Also, our faith is rooted first in God’s faithfulness to us—a fidelity which is undivided, unrelenting, and unabashedly generous.

-*double-mindedness*—If faith and wisdom are the marks of a life directed by God toward maturity and completeness, “double-mindedness” is the unpleasant alternative. James is not looking for uncritical, unthinking dogmatism, but rather for undivided love—that is, for a complete desire to live in the Reign of God. James will explore a host of ways that we live with fragmented selves—acting in ways that betray our speech, breaking parts of God’s commandments at the expense of the heart of God’s will, believing facts about God without living out our faith, and forgetting the needs of others—all of these are evidence to James that we are broken people who broken in many ways. And while we have been welcomed in as God’s people already, broken though we are, James sees incredible good news in the fact that God loves us enough not to leave us broken. God will not rest until we are, as Herb Brokering puts it, “wholly holy.”