

# J The Book of James

Session Three:  
October 5, 2004

James 1:9-11—The Promise of Reversal

## ❖The Text (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup>Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, <sup>10</sup>and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. <sup>11</sup>For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

## ❖What's going on here?

-v.9-10—The change of subject from doubt/faith to rich/lowly is abrupt, but in this first chapter, James is laying out lines of thought that will be picked up and developed over the course of the whole book like themes of a symphony. But why bring it up now? There is some connection to the previous material in that James will broadly characterize the wealthy as double-minded and split between love for and trust in *wealth* on the one hand, and love for and trust in *God* along with compassion for *neighbor* on the other. Also, the believers addressed are primarily the poor and lowly James is commending in these verses, and they may well see their low economic and social status as part of the trials described in 1:2-4.

Clearly, the lowly one in v.9 is a member of the believing community (and is actually called a *brother* here); what is less clear is whether “the rich” of v.10 are also to be understood as Christ-believers. The rich are not referred to as brothers or believers here, nor does James ever have a single positive thing to say about the rich in the entire book. On the other hand, that, however, is an argument from silence, and the disputes addressed in chapter 4 seem to include rich people who are a part of the believing community. So, does James think that wealthy people cannot be followers of Jesus? James seems to walk right up to that line, and it's hard to tell if his

toe crosses it. He certainly seems skeptical that one can amass great wealth without becoming double-minded and divided in love for God and neighbor, which for him is at the heart of the life of faith.

-v.11—Using an image common to Jewish literature, James describes the reversal of fortunes for the rich in terms of the sudden scorching of the flowers and grass of the field which cuts them off in bloom. The image emphasizes the fleeting, ephemeral nature of wealth (a theme picked up in ch.5) and the suddenness of the reversal, which cuts off the wealth “in the midst of a busy life”—that is, in the thick of all their undertakings and in their “prime.” It will come as a *shock* to the rich and as an *expected surprise* to the lowly.

Also implied by the image is that *God* is the one to bring about the reversal—this is *both* a subtle reminder to the “lowly” ones in James’ audience that they do not have license to violently seize their restitution from the rich, however oppressive; this prerogative remains in God’s hand *and* a stern warning to the rich themselves that God, though wholeheartedly generous, is not a pushover and promises to right all wrongs.

## **Connections: Wealth, Faith, and Life Together**

-As you read James 1:9-11, with whom do you identify most strongly—the “rich”? The “lowly”? Both? How do you think James would identify us?

-James seems to leave little, if any, hope for rich believers who want to remain rich. How does this perspective relate to Jesus’ statements about possessions and wealth in the gospels?

-Our stress, especially as Lutheran Christians, is on the generosity, forgiveness, and grace of God—as opposed to the judgment and wrath of God. What might James say to us? How do you think he holds the image of God as generous and good (1:5) with that of God as Judge? Is this an either-or situation?

## ❖ Themes

*-lowliness*—James pulls no punches in critiquing the wealthy, but here the counterpart of the “rich” is not so much people in economic poverty as it is people in low social status more broadly. The word rendered “lowly” here is regularly used in the New Testament to mean “humble” and suggests a place of disadvantage within society. Surely, this has some connection with one’s economic status (and surely, the rich have more obstacles in their way toward attaining this “lowliness” of James) but this is not strictly about money. At the same time, we also need to remember the collective mindset of 1st-century Mediterranean culture, that tended to see wealth and poverty as a zero-sum game—that is, that there was a limited amount of wealth around to be had, and that if I am rich, it *necessarily* means that I am taking away from someone else. With different presuppositions in 21st century America, we have to ask the challenging questions of how this sharp critique of the rich affects the way we do business and manage our homes today.

James’ stress on the reversal of the lowly and exalted echoes the promise of the Old Testament that those who are at the margins and are humbly dependent on God will be raised up, whereas those who trust in their own power will be exposed as impotent. The sentiment is much the same as Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2, Mary’s song in Luke 1, and the Psalms’ repeated call to trust in God rather than in power, wealth, or oneself.

James is not, then, maintaining that there is a maximum annual income allowed in order to be eligible to “get in” to heaven—remember, James is not asking “getting in” questions. Rather, as someone concerned that people have integrity of faith, James questions how one can truly live as a part of God’s community while also trusting in wealth and ignoring the needs of others.

James 1:12-18—Making Sense of Evil with a Wholly Good God

## ❖ The Text (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup>Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. <sup>13</sup>No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. <sup>14</sup>But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; <sup>15</sup>then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. <sup>16</sup>Do not be deceived, my beloved.

<sup>17</sup>Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup>In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

## ❖ What’s going on here?

-v.12—Almost as if he has returned to his place at 1:2-4, James picks up the theme of endurance in testing. But now James is asking the fifty-thousand-dollar question: “If God is all good and Lord of the universe, then why do I go through trials in the first place?” This whole section revolves around James’ attempts to make sense of that questions.

James begins in v.12 reiterating the idea that enduring trials brings a genuineness, a tried-and-true quality of faith, which in turn will mean that God will bring those tested through to receive life at the last. The “crown of life” is not to be understood as a divine merit badge or a medal *earned* by extraordinary goodness, but as a symbolic crown which *is* life—and at that, life in the future consummated Reign of God. In other words, as much as James is concerned about the here-and-now, he has no illusions that life-as-we-know-it is the be-all and end-all; no, the suffering we face now will indeed end when God grants us life-in-its-fullness as a crown at the last. On the other side of suffering is not just the prospect that we’ll be made stronger and tougher to face more hardship, but rather

there will be the promised and coming Day of the Lord when hurts are mended and the lowly are raised up.

-v.13—This begs the question—if God promises to bring me through suffering ultimately to life, and if God even uses suffering to shape my faith and character, then *has God caused my suffering?*

James understands the question, but gives an emphatic “no” in response. God isn’t *tempting* you, James says—and the change in English terms (from trials/testing to temptation) is crucial. Although both go back to the same Greek word, this concept has two distinct senses—(1) generic hardships that are part of human life, and (2) attempts to lead someone astray, i.e., temptations. While James is bold enough to claim that God uses the former in order, like the refiner’s fire, to bring about a quality and durability of our character, he insists that God doesn’t intentionally want us to fail or fall into sin. The key is motivation—with the first, God desires to bring us through, to succeed, as it were; with the second, the tempter wants us to fail miserably. James’ rationale for asserting that God is not in the tempting business is that God is *wholly good*—not susceptible to temptation, and thus also not willing to resort to temptation tactics for any reason.

-v.14—All right then, if God is not behind the temptations that I face, *who is?* James answers in 1:14 that in this respect, *I am my own worst enemy.* My own “desire” leads me into temptation and sin. And this is the practical point for James—I cannot point the finger or pass the responsibility for my actions onto God. The buck stops with me, as it were, so I cannot blame God for the way I act. The devil didn’t *make* me do it—whatever *it is*—and neither did God, James says. As we face difficulties and trials, James tells us, God is still in the midst of the situation—it’s just that God is there bringing us through them with the promise of life on the other side, not pulling the strings on us from above.

-v.15-16—James rather graphically depicts the chain reaction that comes from giving in to our temptations—in a grotesque parody of the life-cycle, desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and sin in turn matures and gives birth, ironically, to death. The connection between sin and death is also thoroughly Pauline, too, as Romans 5:12ff and 6:23 suggest. For Paul, however, Sin and Death are understood more as cosmic powers than as individual acts that lead to an individual’s death. James brings this to a personal level.

The point is to make startlingly clear that the impulses that lead us against the way of God have powerful and dangerous consequences, and in fact, have a grotesque “perfection” or “completion” of their own, which is parallel but diametrically opposed to God’s way of life and wholeness.

-v.17—In contrast to the chain of death and sin and to the suggestion that temptation comes from God, James offers an alternative scheme: God is not the cause of our evil desires, sin, or temptation, but rather is the source of everything good and gracious. And in fact, God is wholly and constantly good—there is no change or wavering to this faithful love of God.

Some commentators identify the references to “shadow,” “variation,” and “change” as technical astronomical terms within the ancient world for things like eclipses and the motion of celestial bodies. If this is the case, James may be still aiming his response at people asking the “why suffering” questions, especially those who think that their fates are being determined by the planets or astrological signs. While we don’t know what would have led early Christians specifically to this kind of belief, there was clearly a sense in the ancient world that human events were subject to the direction of the stars. This may have been an appealing explanation for Christians going through trials as James wrote: that their recent “testings” were out of God’s control and were actually brought about by the stars. James, however, is countering this belief

and affirming that the future and the present both remain within the hands of God, even though God is not to be blamed for temptations. Even if James is not specifically addressing believers wrestling with astrology, he is hinting, through his word choice, at the constancy of God, who is far more faithful and steadfast than even the heavens, for even the stars and planets move and are overshadowed at times. God, James insists, is supremely faithful.

-v.18—James has a strong sense of God’s design for history, even if he doesn’t explain how that reconciles with present hardships, suffering, or evil. He attributes his audience’s identity as part of the community of believers to God’s design and will—that is, their very existence as “church” (even though James doesn’t use this word) is part of the fulfillment of God’s purposes. (Whether James of Jerusalem’s first audiences would have called themselves “Christians” yet as *opposed* to “Jews” may not be so clear, but they clearly understood themselves as part of a distinct and new community—and their inclusion in that community was a radical new beginning that was like a new “birth.”)

This hints at teachings on election and grace that writers like Paul develop further and more explicitly, but James seems to imply that his audience has come to their life of faith at *God’s* initiation and by *God’s* design. Their coming to belong in this new community of faith is passive, like being born, rather than choosing or earning it oneself. Note that James doesn’t make these connections for us, but it does seem to be the gist of the imagery he uses.

The birth imagery in v.18 parallels the birth language in 1:12-16, which painted an ugly picture of sin giving birth to death. On the contrary, James offers us an image of God giving birth to us to bring us forth to completion. Although James does not use the word for “baptism,” he may have it in mind when referring to being given birth by God’s word of truth. (John 3 also uses “birth” imagery in ways that hint at baptism.)

### Connections: Lead Us Not Into Temptation

—What are temptations and testings that you have faced or face right now? Where do they come from?—

—James stresses God’s faithful character. Have you seen it in your life? How? What does it mean that God is faithful?

### ❖ Themes

-*first fruits*—In 1:18, James calls his audience a “kind of first fruits of his [God’s] creatures.” In the Old Testament the idea of first-fruits referred to the first part of the harvest, which both guaranteed that there would be more soon to come and which was given (sacrificed) to God’s use. James here suggests that the Christ-believing community is also both a sign of more to come—they live as a witness to God’s coming final, *eschatological* (end-time) Reign, and in the mean time are to be a community given to God’s purposes. The church is to be a witness already to the Kingdom of God which is at hand but not here in fullness.

### James 1:12-18—A Picture of Two Births

<p><b>Desire</b> Gives birth to</p>	<p><b>God’s good purpose—</b> gives us <u>birth</u> by the “word of truth”</p>
<p><b>Sin</b> gives birth to</p>	<p><b>Life of wisdom—</b>we live as first-fruits now</p>
<p><b>Death</b></p>	<p><b>Completion—</b>the “crown of life”—comes in its full ness not in our lifetimes but in the consummated Reign of God</p>

God brings us through suffering; brings us to maturity