JAMES

BIBLE STUDY

A Verse-by-Verse Study



"Be doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22)
a living faith that works, from trials to prayer

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A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Study

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this study direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Introduction

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to work through this verse-by-verse study of the book of James. My purpose in writing this study guide is the same as it was for my study of Revelation: to bring you closer to our Creator and to give you a way to grow in your Christian walk.

When I was a boy in Victorville, Pastor Jimmy Carter lived down our street. I mowed his lawn, and he took me to church and led me to Christ. His faith was practical. He spent time with me and invited me along. James says faith without works is dead, and I saw living faith in him.

James is one of the most practical books in the New Testament. In just five chapters James tells us what real faith looks like on an ordinary day: how it holds up in trials, how it treats the poor, how it talks, how it plans, and how it prays. I do not claim to be an authority on the Bible or on James. I am simply someone like you who wants to grow closer to God and understand what He has given us in His Son. Before you read any part of this book, or any part of Scripture, I ask that you pray, asking God:

- For the Holy Spirit to be present, to help open your eyes and your heart (Psalm 119:18, 119:105)
- For discernment and knowledge (Psalm 119:66, James 1:5)

2 Timothy 2:15 (SLB)

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker not needing to be ashamed, cutting straight the word of truth."

The Bible is God's Word to us (2 Timothy 3:16), given for training in righteousness. If we cannot understand what it says, we cannot apply it to our lives or help build God's kingdom.

So how do we go about understanding God's Word?

The first rule is context. You may have heard the saying "Context is King," but what does that mean? Every word, sentence, and passage helps explain the ones around it. Before we read any passage, we should ask a few simple questions: Who wrote it? Who was it written to? What came right before it? Knowing the answers gives us a clearer picture of what God is saying, both in general and to each of us personally.

Context matters a great deal in James. It is a letter written by a real man, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, to Jewish believers who had been scattered from their homes. Many of them were poor, and some were being pushed around by the rich. James writes like a pastor who knows his people. He moves quickly from one subject to the next, the way the wisdom books of the Old Testament do, but the same few themes keep coming back: trials, wisdom, the tongue, the rich and the poor, and a faith that shows itself in what we do. When James says that faith without works is dead, we need to remember who he is talking to and what question he is answering. He is

not giving us a different gospel from Paul. He is warning people who say they believe but whose lives show no change.

Exegesis, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

People typically interpret the Bible using one of two methods, Exegesis or Eisegesis. Both are explained below, along with a third word, Hermeneutics. Sometimes people use both methods to "make their case" for the interpretation they want. These definitions are based on www.merriam-webster.com, with my own notes added.

Exegesis means explaining a text, especially a passage of Scripture. Exegesis is reading and interpreting the full text of a passage, and drawing out what it is actually saying.

Eisegesis means reading your own ideas into a text. This happens when we try to find something in the text that really isn't there. It can lead to many errors, especially when we bring assumptions to a passage that aren't actually in it. This method can be used to justify a behavior, position, or belief that goes against what the text originally meant.

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles used to interpret a text, such as the Bible. "Hermeneutics" and "Exegesis" are sometimes used to mean the same thing. The difference is that Exegesis is the work of explaining a passage, while Hermeneutics is the set of principles that guides that work. In Biblical Hermeneutics, the Bible should be read literally unless the text itself gives us a different meaning.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (SLB)

"16 Every Scripture ***is*** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which ***is*** in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work."

This passage tells us plainly that the writers of Scripture were inspired by God. Every passage in the Bible came from God and was written down by man. These are not fairy tales or made-up stories. They are God's own breath, given to us so we can be equipped and ready to do good work.

Because every word was inspired and breathed by God, I believe we must let God's Word interpret itself. We must study the Bible using Exegesis, drawing out what the text says, guided by sound Biblical Hermeneutics.

We should study God's Word using the Golden Rule of Interpretation, as Dr. David L. Cooper stated it:

"When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

(http://www.biblicalresearch.info/page55.html)

I read the Bible as it is written. James is a letter that teaches plainly, and this study takes James at his word: God really does give wisdom to those who ask, He really does test our faith to make it strong, and He really does expect the faith that saves us to show up in how we live.

This study uses the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB) unless I note otherwise. To better understand the original Greek, I also used The Interlinear Bible (Jay P. Green Sr., ISBN 1-56563-977-4).

How This Study Is Laid Out

Each chapter of this study follows the same pattern as my study of Revelation:

- Scripture: the full text of the chapter, broken into sections, so you can read it straight through first.
- Preview: a short look at what the chapter covers.
- Study: the chapter again, verse by verse, with my notes on what each verse says and what it means for us.
- Summary: the main points of the chapter in a few lines.
- Study Questions: questions for personal study or a small group, from simple fact questions to questions about how we live. Some of them are personal. In a group, no one should ever have to answer one aloud, and what is shared in the group stays there.
- Old and New Testament links: after many verses you will find a short line in small type that lists the places where the other Testament quotes, fulfills, pictures, or echoes that passage. "Quoted" means the New Testament quotes the Old Testament words. "Fulfilled" means the New Testament tells us a prophecy or promise came true. "Pictured" means the New Testament itself points to an Old Testament person, event, or object as a picture of Christ. "Alluded to" means a clear echo in shared words or pictures. Every link is listed again in a table at the back of the book.

Using This Study With a Group

This study works for one person or for a group. Here are two ways a group can pace it:

- One chapter a week: five weeks. If you like, add a first meeting to read the Introduction and the Background together.
- Half a chapter a week: ten weeks. The Scripture for each chapter is already printed in two parts, and the start of the second part is a natural place to stop.

For each meeting, I suggest reading the Scripture out loud together first, straight through, before anyone comments. Then walk through the Study section, stopping where the group has questions, and finish with the Study Questions and prayer. The first questions in each list can be answered from the text. The later ones are more personal, and no one should feel pressed to answer them aloud.

Some parts of James touch painful subjects: trials and suffering (1:2-12), temptation and sin (1:13-15), how churches treat the poor (2:1-13), words that wound (3:1-12), money and the unfair treatment of workers (5:1-6), and sickness and confession of sin (5:13-16). If you lead a group,

read those sections ahead of time and be ready to listen. If someone shares something that puts them or another person in danger, help them get help right away.

I look forward to walking with you through the book of James. If you'd like to share feedback, please email me at andrew@trinfinityenterprises.com.

May God bless you and your time studying and getting to know Him better.

Overview of James

James is the twentieth book of the New Testament. It sits between Hebrews and 1 Peter. It is the first of the seven General Letters (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude). They are called general because most of them are not written to one city or one person, but to believers spread over a wide area.

James is a short letter, but it is full of commands. In only 108 verses James gives more than fifty of them. He is not trying to load his readers down with rules. He is a pastor who wants their faith to be real. Again and again he asks the same question in different ways: does what you say you believe show up in how you live? He looks at that question in trials, in temptation, in the way we treat the poor, in the way we talk, in the way we plan, and in the way we pray.

James gives us the theme of the letter in chapter 1. It is not enough to hear God's Word. We must do it:

James 1:22 (SLB)

"But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

James has 5 chapters and 108 verses. Here is its structure:

Part One: Faith That Is Real (chapters 1 and 2)

- Chapter 1: Trials, Wisdom, and Doers of the Word
- Chapter 2: No Favoritism and Faith That Works

Part Two: Faith That Speaks and Thinks Rightly (chapter 3)

- Chapter 3: Taming the Tongue and Wisdom from Above

Part Three: Faith That Waits on God (chapters 4 and 5)

- Chapter 4: Draw Near to God
- Chapter 5: Patience Until the Lord Comes

Background of the Book

Author: The letter opens with "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are several men named James in the New Testament. James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, was one of the twelve apostles, but Herod put him to death early, about A.D. 44 (Acts 12:1-2). James the son of Alphaeus was also one of the Twelve (Matthew 10:3), but we know almost nothing else about him. A third James is named only as the father of the apostle Judas, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16). The early church held that this letter came from a fourth James, the brother of the Lord, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. That is the view of this study. He is the only James who fits a letter that speaks with this much authority to Jewish believers everywhere, and yet he does not need to explain who he is. Everyone knew him.

James, the brother of the Lord: The Gospels name James first among the brothers of Jesus (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). During Jesus' ministry His brothers did not believe in Him (John 7:5). That changed after the resurrection. Paul tells us the risen Lord appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7), and soon after, Jesus' brothers were praying with the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). James became a leader of the Jerusalem church. Peter sent word to him after his escape from prison (Acts 12:17). He spoke the deciding words at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13-21). Paul calls him "James, the brother of the Lord" (Galatians 1:19) and names him as one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9), and Paul reported to him when he came to Jerusalem for the last time (Acts 21:18). Early church writers remember him as James the Just because of his holy life and his long hours in prayer. Notice how humbly he opens his letter. He could have called himself the brother of Jesus. Instead, he calls himself a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does "brother of the Lord" mean? This study takes the phrase in its plain family sense. Jesus' brothers were the sons of Joseph and Mary, born after Jesus (Matthew 1:25; 13:55-56). So James was a younger son of Joseph and Mary, and he shared a mother with Jesus but not a father. Some churches hold that the Lord's brothers were Joseph's sons by an earlier marriage or cousins. What matters most for reading the letter is this: James grew up close to Jesus, did not believe in Him at first, met Him risen from the dead, and spent the rest of his life serving Him.

Who it was written to: James writes "to the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion" (1:1). The dispersion was the common name for Jewish people living outside the land of Israel. The plain reading, and the one this study follows, is that James wrote to Jewish believers in Jesus who were scattered from their homes. Many had been driven out of Jerusalem by the persecution that began after Stephen was killed (Acts 8:1; 11:19). James calls them "my brothers" again and again, and he says they meet in a "synagogue" (2:2), the Jewish word for a meeting place. Many of them were poor. Some were being cheated by rich landowners and dragged into court (2:6; 5:4). Some read "the twelve tribes" as a picture of the whole church, but nothing in the letter requires that, and the Jewish flavor of the letter fits the plain sense.

When and where it was written: James most likely wrote from Jerusalem, where he lived and led the church. The letter does not tell us its date, but many Bible teachers believe it was written early, about A.D. 45 to 49. If so, it may be the very first book of the New Testament to be written.

The reasons are simple. The church in the letter is still mostly Jewish and meets in a synagogue. James never mentions the big debate over whether Gentile believers had to be circumcised, which was settled at the Jerusalem council about A.D. 49 (Acts 15). And the letter reads like the early days of the church, before Paul's letters were spread around. Others date the letter later, closer to A.D. 60 to 62, near the end of James's life. They think James may be answering people who had twisted Paul's teaching on faith. Early writers, including the Jewish historian Josephus, tell us James was put to death in Jerusalem about A.D. 62, so the letter was written before then. Some modern scholars doubt that the Lord's brother wrote it at all. They point to its good Greek and believe a later writer used his name. But a Jewish man raised in Galilee, where Greek was widely spoken, who led a church for many years, could well write good Greek, and the letter's simple, early, Jewish setting fits James himself. I take the letter at its word.

How James writes: James writes like the wisdom books of the Old Testament, such as Proverbs. He uses short, strong sayings and word pictures from everyday life: waves, flowers, mirrors, horses, ships, fire, springs, fig trees, farmers, and rust. He moves quickly from one subject to the next, sometimes linking them by a single word. And he sounds a great deal like Jesus. James hardly ever quotes Jesus word for word, but the Sermon on the Mount echoes all through the letter. Jesus said to ask and it will be given (Matthew 7:7), and James says to ask God for wisdom (1:5). Jesus said those who hear and do His words are like a wise man who built on the rock (Matthew 7:24-27), and James says to be doers of the word (1:22). Jesus blessed the merciful (Matthew 5:7), and James says mercy triumphs over judgment (2:13). Jesus warned against storing up treasure where moth and rust destroy (Matthew 6:19), and against swearing oaths (Matthew 5:33-37), and James warns about both (5:2-3, 12). The man who grew up in the same house as Jesus had clearly listened to Him.

Purpose: James does not write to explain the gospel step by step, as Paul does in Romans. His readers already believed. He writes to help them live like it. He wants them to stay faithful in trials, to ask God for wisdom, to stop playing favorites, to prove their faith by their works, to watch their tongues, to humble themselves before God, to wait patiently for the Lord's coming, and to pray for one another.

Chapter 1: Trials, Wisdom, and Doers of the Word

Scripture

1:1-18 James, a slave of God and of ***the*** Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which ***are*** in the dispersion: greetings. Consider ***it*** all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let the endurance have a perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. And if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from God, who gives to all generously and does not reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, doubting nothing; for the one who doubts is like a wave of ***the*** sea, being blown by the wind and being tossed. For let that man not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ***he is*** a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. But let the humble brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich ***one*** in his humiliation, because like a flower of grass he will pass away. For the sun rose with the scorching heat and withered the grass, and its flower fell, and the beauty of its appearance perished; so also the rich ***man*** will fade away in his pursuits. Blessed ***is the*** man who endures trial, because having become approved he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is being tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God is unable to be tempted by evils, and He Himself tempts no one. But each one is tempted by his own desire, being drawn away and being enticed. Then the desire, having conceived, gives birth to sin; and the sin, having been brought to completion, brings forth death. Do not be led astray, my beloved brothers. Every good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Having willed ***it***, He brought us forth by ***the*** word of truth, for us to be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

1:19-27 So then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, having put aside all filthiness and excess of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of ***the*** word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Because if anyone is a hearer of ***the*** word and not a doer, this one is like a man observing the face of his birth in a mirror; for he observed himself and has gone away, and immediately he forgot what he was like. But the one who looked intently into ***the*** perfect law, the ***law*** of freedom, and continued ***in it***, this ***one***, having become not a forgetful hearer but a doer of work, this one will be blessed in his doing. If anyone seems to be religious among you, not bridling his tongue but deceiving his heart, the religion of this one ***is*** worthless. Religion pure and undefiled before the God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation, ***and*** to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Chapter 1 Preview

James wastes no time. After a one-line greeting, he tells his readers to count it all joy when they fall into trials. God uses the testing of our faith to build endurance, and endurance makes us mature. If we lack wisdom to get through it, we can ask God, who gives generously, but we must ask in faith and not with a divided heart. Poor believers can rejoice in how God has lifted them up, and rich believers in how God has humbled them, because riches fade like a flower in the sun.

Then James draws a line between trials and temptation. God tests us so we will stand, but He never tempts anyone to sin. Temptation comes from our own desire, and if we feed it, it gives birth to sin and death. God is the giver of every good gift, and He gave us new birth by His word. In the second half of the chapter James tells us what to do with that word: listen well, put away sin, receive it with meekness, and above all do it. Hearing without doing is like looking in a mirror and forgetting your own face. Real religion shows up in a controlled tongue, care for orphans and widows, and a life kept clean from the world.

Chapter 1 Study

1:1 *James, a slave of God and of **the** Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which **are** in the dispersion: greetings.*

"James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." This is James the brother of the Lord, the leader of the church in Jerusalem (see the Background). He could have opened with his family tie to Jesus. Instead, he calls himself a slave. The word means one who belongs to a master and lives to do his will. James had once doubted his brother (John 7:5). Now he calls Him Lord, and he puts God and "the Lord Jesus Christ" side by side as the One he serves.

He writes "to the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion." These were Jewish believers scattered outside the land of Israel. Many had lost homes and jobs for following Jesus. His greeting is one word, "greetings," which in Greek is close to the word for joy. And joy is where he starts.

1:2 *Consider **it** all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials,*

"Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various trials." That is not how most of us think about trials. James does not say the trial itself is a joy, or that we should pretend it doesn't hurt. He says to "consider" it joy, to think it through and decide how we will see it.

Notice the word "whenever." Trials are not an if. They will come. To "fall into" them is like falling into a pit you didn't see. And they are "various," which means many colors and kinds: sickness, money trouble, loss, persecution, problems with people. James is not talking about trouble we bring on ourselves by sin. He means the hard things that come to us as we follow Christ (Matthew 5:10-12).

1:3 *knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.*

Why can we count trials as joy? "Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance." The word for testing was used for putting metal into the fire to prove it was real and to burn away what was not (1 Peter 1:6-7). God does not test our faith to find out whether it is real. He already knows. He tests it to make it stronger and to show it to be real.

"Endurance" is the power to stay under a heavy load without giving up. It is not just waiting things out. It is holding steady and still trusting God. You can't build that kind of strength in easy times, any more than you can build muscle without lifting anything.

1:4 *And let the endurance have a perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

"And let the endurance have a perfect work." Notice the word let. We can cut the process short. We can grumble, quit, or look for any way out. James says, let endurance finish its work.

The goal is "so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Perfect here does not mean sinless. It means mature, full-grown, finished. "Complete" means having every part in place. God is not just trying to get us through the trial. He is using the trial to make us more like His Son (Romans 8:28-29). The question to ask in a hard time is not only, 'How do I get out of this?' but also, 'What is God building in me through this?'

1:5 *And if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from God, who gives to all generously and does not reproach, and it will be given to him.*

"And if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask from God." In the middle of a trial, we often don't know what to do. James has an answer: ask. Wisdom is not just knowing facts. It is seeing life the way God sees it and knowing how to live it out.

Look at how God gives. He "gives to all generously and does not reproach." To reproach means to scold or throw something in your face. God never says, 'You again? Why didn't you figure this out yourself?' He is glad when His children come to Him. "And it will be given to him." That is a promise. Jesus said the same: ask, and it will be given to you (Matthew 7:7).

1:6 *But let him ask in faith, doubting nothing; for the one who doubts is like a wave of **the** sea, being blown by the wind and being tossed.*

"But let him ask in faith, doubting nothing." Asking in faith means trusting that God is good, that He hears, and that He will give what is best. The doubting James means here is not a passing question in the mind. It is a heart that can't decide whether to trust God or not.

"For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, being blown by the wind and being tossed." James's readers knew the sea. A wave has no direction of its own. It goes wherever the wind pushes it. A person who prays one day and leans on his own plans the next is like that. He is moved by every new fear.

1:7-8 *For let that man not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; **he is** a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*

"For let that man not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord." This is a strong warning. God is generous, but He is not obligated to answer a person who won't really trust Him. Prayer is not a way of keeping our options open.

James calls such a person "a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Double-minded means, in Greek, having two souls. One part of him wants God, and another part wants to go his own way. He is "unstable," shaky and unsettled, and not just in prayer but "in all his ways." Being

divided on the inside shows up everywhere on the outside. James will come back to this word in 4:8 and call the double-minded to purify their hearts.

1:9 *But let the humble brother boast in his exaltation,*

Now James turns to the poor and the rich, one of the main themes of his letter. "But let the humble brother boast in his exaltation." The "humble brother" here is the poor believer, low in the eyes of the world. Many of James's readers were in that place.

What can a poor believer boast in? "His exaltation," the high place God has given him. He may have little money, but in Christ he is a child of God, an heir of the kingdom (2:5), and rich in faith. The world may look down on him. God has lifted him up. That is a reason to rejoice even in a trial of poverty.

1:10-11 *and the rich **one** in his humiliation, because like a flower of grass he will pass away. For the sun rose with the scorching heat and withered the grass, and its flower fell, and the beauty of its appearance perished; so also the rich **man** will fade away in his pursuits.*

"And the rich one in his humiliation." The rich believer is to boast in being brought low. Why? Because at the cross he learned that his money could not save him. He stands before God as a beggar like everyone else. That is something to be glad about, because it keeps him from trusting what won't last.

"Because like a flower of grass he will pass away." James borrows a picture from Isaiah 40:6-8. In Israel, wildflowers bloom bright in spring. Then the hot sun and the dry east wind come, and in days they are gone. "So also the rich man will fade away in his pursuits." He may die in the middle of his busy plans. Riches are not evil, but they are short-lived. Only what we have in God lasts.

Old Testament links: Isaiah 40:6-7 (alluded to)

1:12 *Blessed **is the** man who endures trial, because having become approved he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to those who love Him.*

James comes back to trials and gives a blessing. "Blessed is the man who endures trial." Blessed means truly happy, favored by God. It is the same word Jesus used in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12).

"Because having become approved he will receive the crown of life." "Approved" is a word for metal that has passed the test. The crown here was the wreath given to the winner of a race. The crown is life itself, eternal life in its fullness. We are not saved by enduring. We are saved by grace through faith. But those who truly belong to God keep going, and God rewards them.

Notice who receives it: "those who love Him." Endurance in trials is not just grit. It comes from love for God.

1:13 *Let no one say when he is being tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God is unable to be tempted by evils, and He Himself tempts no one.*

Now James makes a turn. The same Greek word can mean a trial or a temptation. A hard time can become a test that makes us strong, or a temptation to sin. So James warns, "Let no one say when he is being tempted," that he is "being tempted by God."

People have blamed God for their sin since the garden, when Adam said, "The woman whom You put with me" (Genesis 3:12). James shuts that door. "For God is unable to be tempted by evils, and He Himself tempts no one." God is holy. Evil has no pull on Him at all, and He never tries to lead anyone into sin. God tests us to make us stand. Satan and our own flesh tempt us to make us fall.

1:14 *But each one is tempted by his own desire, being drawn away and being enticed.*

Where does temptation come from, then? "But each one is tempted by his own desire." The problem is not first outside us. It is inside us. The devil is real, and the world puts bait in front of us, but the bait only works because something in us wants it.

"Being drawn away and being enticed." These are hunting and fishing words. "Drawn away" is like a fish being pulled out of its safe hiding place. Enticed is like bait on a hook. The worm looks good. The hook is hidden. That is how temptation works. It shows us the pleasure and hides the cost.

1:15 *Then the desire, having conceived, gives birth to sin; and the sin, having been brought to completion, brings forth death.*

James now changes the picture to a birth. "Then the desire, having conceived, gives birth to sin." Desire is the start. When we welcome it and agree with it instead of turning away, it conceives, and sin is born.

"And the sin, having been brought to completion, brings forth death." Sin does not stay small. It grows up, and when it is full-grown it brings death: broken lives, broken relationships, and in the end separation from God (Romans 6:23). This is the opposite of verses 2 to 4. Trials handled with faith lead to maturity and the crown of life. Desire handled with indulgence leads to sin and death. The best time to stop the chain is at the very beginning.

1:16 *Do not be led astray, my beloved brothers.*

"Do not be led astray, my beloved brothers." The words "led astray" mean to wander off the path or be fooled. James is about to say something we must not get wrong.

Notice the tenderness. Right after a hard warning about sin and death, he calls them "my beloved brothers." James is not scolding people he does not care about. He is a pastor warning people he loves. The lie he wants to guard them from is the one in verse 13, that God might be the source of evil. The truth he is about to give is that God is the source of every good thing.

1:17 *Every good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

"Every good giving and every perfect gift is from above." Here is the answer to verse 13. Evil does not come from God. Every good thing does. Every meal, every friend, every breath, and every spiritual blessing is a gift "from above, coming down from the Father of the lights."

"The Father of the lights" points back to creation, when God made the sun, moon and stars (Genesis 1:14-18). But those lights change. The sun rises and sets. The moon grows and shrinks. Shadows move across the ground all day. God is not like that. He is the One "with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." He does not change (Malachi 3:6). He is always good, always giving, and always the same.

1:18 *Having willed **it**, He brought us forth by **the** word of truth, for us to be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.*

Here is God's greatest gift. "Having willed it, He brought us forth by the word of truth." James uses a birth word again, but this time it is the opposite of verse 15. Desire gives birth to sin and death. God gives birth to new life. It was His will, His choice and His doing, not ours (John 1:12-13). He did it "by the word of truth," the gospel (1 Peter 1:23).

"For us to be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." Under the Law, the first part of the harvest was given to God, and it promised that the rest of the harvest was coming (Leviticus 23:10). These early believers were the first of a great harvest. One day God will make all creation new (Romans 8:19-23).

1:19 *So then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;*

"So then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." Since God gave us new life by His word, we should be ready to hear it. This verse is about how we receive God's Word, but it fits how we treat people too.

Most of us have it backward. We are quick to speak and slow to listen. James says to flip that. Be "swift to hear." Listen first, and listen well. Be "slow to speak," taking time before you answer. And be "slow to anger." Anger often comes when we talk before we have listened. Proverbs says the same (Proverbs 10:19; 17:27).

1:20 *for the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

Why be slow to anger? "For the anger of a man does not produce the righteousness of God." Human anger, even when we think it is on God's side, does not bring about the kind of right living God wants.

James is not saying all anger is sin. Jesus was angry at sin (Mark 3:5), and Paul says, be angry and do not sin (Ephesians 4:26). But most of our anger is about us: our pride, our rights, our plans. That kind of anger does not make anyone more like Christ, including us. When we feel it rising, we should stop and ask whose cause we are really defending.

1:21 *Therefore, having put aside all filthiness and excess of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

"Therefore, having put aside all filthiness and excess of wickedness." "Put aside" is the word for taking off dirty clothes. "Filthiness" was a word for moral dirt. "Excess of wickedness" is the evil that is still left over in us. Before God's Word can take root, some things have to go.

"Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." "Meekness" is a teachable spirit, not arguing with God's Word but welcoming it. The word is already "implanted" in believers, planted like a seed at our new birth (verse 18). Now we must keep receiving it. It "is able to save your souls." God's Word saved us at the start, and it keeps working in us until the day we see Christ.

1:22 *But be doers of **the** word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

Here is the theme verse of the letter. "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." In James's day most people did not own a copy of the Scriptures. They heard them read aloud in the synagogue and in church. It was easy to think that listening was enough.

James says no. Hearing is good. We need it. But if we only hear, we are "deceiving" ourselves. The word means to reason falsely, to talk ourselves into a lie. We can sit under good teaching for years and fool ourselves into thinking we are growing, while nothing changes. The test of a good sermon, or a good Bible study, is not how much we enjoyed it. It is what we do with it.

1:23-24 *Because if anyone is a hearer of **the** word and not a doer, this one is like a man observing the face of his birth in a mirror; for he observed himself and has gone away, and immediately he forgot what he was like.*

James gives a picture. "Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, this one is like a man observing the face of his birth in a mirror." The "face of his birth" means his natural face, the one he was born with. Mirrors in those days were polished metal, so a person had to look closely.

"For he observed himself and has gone away, and immediately he forgot what he was like." He sees the dirt on his face or the messy hair, and he walks away and does nothing about it. What good was the mirror? God's Word is like a mirror. It shows us what we really are. If we see our sin and walk away unchanged, we have missed the whole point of looking.

1:25 *But the one who looked intently into **the** perfect law, the **law** of freedom, and continued **in it**, this **one**, having become not a forgetful hearer but a doer of work, this one will be blessed in his doing.*

"But the one who looked intently into the perfect law, the law of freedom." "Looked intently" means to bend down and look closely. It is the word used of John looking into the empty tomb (John 20:5). This is not a quick glance. It is careful, steady study.

James calls God's Word "the perfect law, the law of freedom." The Law given at Sinai could show sin but could not change the heart. In Christ, God writes His word on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33),

and obeying it is not slavery but freedom. This person "continued in it" and became "not a forgetful hearer but a doer of work." And here is the promise: "this one will be blessed in his doing." The blessing comes in the doing.

1:26 *If anyone seems to be religious among you, not bridling his tongue but deceiving his heart, the religion of this one **is** worthless.*

James now gives three tests of real religion. The first is the tongue. "If anyone seems to be religious among you, not bridling his tongue but deceiving his heart, the religion of this one is worthless."

"Religious" here means outward worship: going to services, praying, fasting, keeping the forms. A person can do all of that and still have an unbridled tongue. A bridle is what a rider uses to guide a horse. An unbridled tongue runs wherever it wants: gossip, harsh words, lies, complaining. James will say much more about this in chapter 3. Here he says that such a person is fooling himself, and his religion is "worthless," empty and useless.

1:27 *Religion pure and undefiled before the God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation, **and** to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

"Religion pure and undefiled before the God and Father is this." What does God call real religion? Not more ritual. James gives two things.

First, "to visit orphans and widows in their tribulation." In that day, orphans and widows had no one to provide for them and were easily cheated. God calls Himself the Father of the fatherless and the defender of widows (Psalm 68:5). To visit means more than stopping by. It means to look after and care for them. Second, "to keep oneself unstained from the world." The world here means the way of life that leaves God out. Real faith does both. It reaches out in love to people in need, and it stays clean from the world's ways. Many of us are good at one and weak at the other. James calls us to both.

Chapter 1 Summary

James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, writes to Jewish believers scattered from their homes. He tells them to count it all joy when they fall into trials, because the testing of their faith produces endurance, and endurance makes them mature and complete. Those who lack wisdom should ask God, who gives generously, but they must ask in faith and not be double-minded. The poor believer should rejoice in his high place in Christ, and the rich believer in being humbled, because riches fade like a flower. God blesses the one who endures trial with the crown of life. God tests His people, but He never tempts anyone to sin. Temptation comes from our own desire, which gives birth to sin, and sin brings death. Every good gift comes from the Father of the lights, who never changes and who gave us new birth by the word of truth. So believers must be swift to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, put away sin, and receive the word with meekness. They must be doers of the word and not hearers only. Real religion bridles the tongue, cares for orphans and widows, and stays unstained by the world.

Chapter 1 Study Questions

1. How does James describe himself in 1:1, and what does that tell you about him?

2. According to 1:2-4, what does God produce in us through the testing of our faith?

3. What does James say about how God gives wisdom, and how should we ask for it? (1:5-8)

4. Why can both the poor believer and the rich believer rejoice? (1:9-11)

5. What is the difference between a trial and a temptation, according to 1:12-15?

6. Trace the steps from desire to death in 1:14-15. Where is the best place to stop the chain?

7. What does 1:17 teach about God's character, and why does that matter when life is hard?

8. Which part of "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" is hardest for you? (1:19)

9. Think of something you have heard from God's Word lately. What would it look like to be a doer of it this week? (1:22-25)

10. Is there an orphan, a widow, or someone else in need that God may be calling you to look after? (1:27)

Chapter 2: No Favoritism and Faith That Works

Scripture

2:1-13 My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, ***the Lord*** of glory, with partiality. For if a man with a gold ring, in splendid clothing, comes into your synagogue, and a poor ***man*** in filthy clothing also comes in, and you look upon the one wearing the splendid clothing and say to him, "You sit here in a good ***place***," and to the poor ***man*** you say, "You stand there," or "Sit here under my footstool," were you not divided among yourselves, and did you ***not*** become judges with evil reasonings? Listen, my beloved brothers: did not God choose the poor of this world ***to be*** rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you dishonored the poor ***man***. Are not the rich oppressing you, and ***are*** they themselves dragging you into courts? Are they not themselves blaspheming the good name which was called upon you? If indeed you fulfill ***the*** royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one ***point***, he has become guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but murder, you have become a transgressor of ***the*** law. So speak and so act, as being about to be judged through ***the*** law of freedom. For the judgment ***will be*** merciless to the one who has not shown mercy; and mercy triumphs over judgment.

2:14-26 What ***is*** the profit, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Surely the faith is not able to save him? And if a brother or a sister is naked and lacking daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," but you do not give them the things needed for the body, what ***is*** the profit? So also the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder. But do you want to know, O empty man, that the faith apart from the works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, having offered Isaac his son on the altar? You see that the faith was working together with his works, and by the works the faith was perfected. And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness," and he was called a friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only. And likewise also Rahab the prostitute, was she not justified by works, having received the messengers and having sent ***them*** out by another way? For just as the body apart from ***the*** spirit is dead, so also the faith apart from the works is dead.

Chapter 2 Preview

In chapter 1 James said that real religion cares for those in need. Now he shows what happens when a church does the opposite. A rich man in fine clothes walks into the meeting, and he is given the best seat. A poor man in dirty clothes walks in, and he is told to stand in the back or sit on the floor. James says this is sin. God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and it is often the rich who are mistreating believers. The royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as

yourself," leaves no room for favoritism. Breaking one part of God's law makes a person guilty of the whole, so we should speak and act as people who will be judged, and show mercy, because mercy triumphs over judgment.

In the second half of the chapter, James asks one of the most important questions in the Bible: what kind of faith saves? A faith that only talks, and never helps a hungry brother or sister, is dead. Even the demons believe that God is one, and they shudder. James points to Abraham, who offered Isaac on the altar, and to Rahab, who hid the spies, to show that real faith always acts. James is not teaching that we earn salvation by our works. He is teaching that the faith that saves is a living faith, and a living faith shows itself in what we do.

Chapter 2 Study

2:1 *My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, **the Lord** of glory, with partiality.*

"My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality." Partiality means judging people by the outside: their money, their clothes, their looks, or their place in society. The word pictures receiving someone based on their face.

Look at how James describes Jesus: "the Lord of glory." Next to His glory, every human difference is small. The richest man in the room and the poorest man in the room are both sinners who need the same Savior. To play favorites in the presence of the Lord of glory is to forget who He is and who we are. James does not say it is a minor flaw. He says it does not fit with faith in Jesus at all.

2:2 *For if a man with a gold ring, in splendid clothing, comes into your synagogue, and a poor **man** in filthy clothing also comes in,*

James gives an example. "For if a man with a gold ring, in splendid clothing, comes into your synagogue." Wealthy Romans sometimes wore several gold rings to show off their status. "Splendid clothing" means bright, shining clothes, the kind only the rich could afford.

"And a poor man in filthy clothing also comes in." This man may have only one set of clothes, and they are dirty from work. Notice that James calls the meeting place a "synagogue." The word means a gathering, and it was the word Jewish people used for their place of worship. These Jewish believers still used it for their church meeting. That is one sign this letter was written early.

2:3 *and you look upon the one wearing the splendid clothing and say to him, "You sit here in a good **place**," and to the poor **man** you say, "You stand there," or "Sit here under my footstool,"*

"And you look upon the one wearing the splendid clothing." The words "look upon" mean to look with special interest and respect. The rich man gets noticed. "You sit here in a good place," they say to him. They hurry to give him the best seat.

Then they turn to the poor man. "You stand there," or "Sit here under my footstool." He is told to stand off to the side or sit on the floor at someone's feet. Have you ever walked into a church and

felt that no one wanted you there? Many people have, and some never came back. James wants every church to look at how it greets the person who has nothing to give.

2:4 *were you not divided among yourselves, and did you **not** become judges with evil reasonings?*

James asks two hard questions. "Were you not divided among yourselves?" The word divided is the same root as the word for doubting in 1:6. When we play favorites, we show a divided heart. We say we follow Jesus, but we value people the way the world does.

"And did you not become judges with evil reasonings?" They had made themselves judges of who was worth honoring, and their standard was evil. They were thinking, 'This man can help us. That man can't.' That is how the world thinks. It is not how God thinks, and it is not how His people are to think.

2:5 *Listen, my beloved brothers: did not God choose the poor of this world **to be** rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?*

"Listen, my beloved brothers." James wants their full attention. "Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?"

James is not saying every poor person is saved, or that being poor makes you holy. He is saying that God has often chosen the poor to be His own (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Jesus was laid in a manger when He was born (Luke 2:7) and grew up in a working family. Most of His first followers were fishermen and common people. The poor may have little in this world, but those who believe are "rich in faith" and "heirs of the kingdom." In God's eyes, the poor believer in the back row is royalty.

2:6 *But you dishonored the poor **man**. Are not the rich oppressing you, and **are** they themselves dragging you into courts?*

"But you dishonored the poor man." The word "dishonored" means to treat someone with shame, as if they had no worth. God honored the poor man, and they shamed him.

Then James asks them to think about who was really treating them badly. "Are not the rich oppressing you, and are they themselves dragging you into courts?" In that day, wealthy landowners and lenders often took advantage of the poor. They could drag them into court over debts, and the courts usually sided with the rich. James is not saying every rich person is wicked. He is saying it made no sense to flatter the very class of people who were pushing them around while shaming the people God had chosen.

2:7 *Are they not themselves blaspheming the good name which was called upon you?*

"Are they not themselves blaspheming the good name which was called upon you?" The "good name" is the name of Jesus. When believers came to faith and were baptized, His name was "called upon" them. It was like a bride taking her husband's name. They belonged to Him.

To "blaspheme" means to speak evil of something holy. Some of these rich men were mocking and cursing the name of Jesus. And yet the church was giving them the best seats. When we treat people as more important because of their money, we can end up honoring those who dishonor our Lord. That is upside down.

2:8 *If indeed you fulfill **the** royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.*

"If indeed you fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture." James quotes Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus called this the second great commandment, right after loving God with all your heart (Matthew 22:37-40).

Why is it called the "royal law"? It is the law of the King. It comes from God, the great King, and Jesus the King made it central. It is also royal because it rules over all the others. Paul says all the law is summed up in it (Galatians 5:14). If you truly love your neighbor as yourself, "you are doing well." And your neighbor includes the poor man at the door.

Old Testament links: Leviticus 19:18 (quoted)

2:9 *But if you show partiality, you are committing sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors.*

"But if you show partiality, you are committing sin." James does not soften it. Favoritism is not just bad manners. It is sin. We may not think of it in the same way as stealing or lying, but God does.

"Being convicted by the law as transgressors." "Convicted" means proven guilty. A "transgressor" is one who steps over a line God has drawn. The same law that says to love your neighbor also says not to show partiality in judgment (Leviticus 19:15). You cannot say you keep the royal law while treating some people as less than others.

Old Testament links: Leviticus 19:15 (alluded to)

2:10 *For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one **point**, he has become guilty of all.*

"For whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." This is a sobering verse. God's law is not a list of separate rules where we can keep the ones we like and skip the others. It is one whole, like a pane of glass. Crack it in one place, and the whole pane is broken.

Some of James's readers may have thought, 'I don't murder or commit adultery, so a little favoritism is not a big deal.' James says that one sin is enough to make us a lawbreaker. That is also why none of us can be saved by keeping the law (Galatians 3:10-11). We have all stumbled. We all need a Savior.

2:11 *For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but murder, you have become a transgressor of **the** law.*

James explains why. The same God who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." He gave every command. When we break any one of them, we are going against Him.

"Now if you do not commit adultery but murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." It doesn't matter which command we break. We have broken God's law. The point for James's readers is plain: they may have been proud of keeping some of the big commands, but showing partiality was still sin against the same God who gave the big ones. There is no such thing as a sin that does not matter to God.

Old Testament links: Exodus 20:13-14 (quoted); Deuteronomy 5:17-18 (quoted)

2:12 *So speak and so act, as being about to be judged through **the** law of freedom.*

"So speak and so act, as being about to be judged through the law of freedom." James calls on us to watch both our words and our actions. One day, believers will stand before the Lord and give an account (Romans 14:10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). For the believer, that is not a judgment to decide heaven or hell. That was settled at the cross. It is an evaluation of how we lived.

The standard is "the law of freedom," the same phrase James used in 1:25. This is God's Word written on the heart of a believer who has been set free by Christ. We are not slaves trying to earn freedom. We are free people learning to live like it, and that includes how we treat others.

2:13 *For the judgment **will be** merciless to the one who has not shown mercy; and mercy triumphs over judgment.*

"For the judgment will be merciless to the one who has not shown mercy." This is a serious warning. A person who never shows mercy shows that he has never really received God's mercy himself. Jesus told a parable about a servant who was forgiven a huge debt but would not forgive a small one, and he was judged without mercy (Matthew 18:23-35).

"And mercy triumphs over judgment." What a wonderful end to this section. Mercy wins. In the cross, God's mercy triumphed over the judgment we deserved. And when we show mercy to others, it shows that His mercy has changed us. Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

2:14 *What **is** the profit, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Surely the faith is not able to save him?*

Now James asks his big question. "What is the profit, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" Notice the words "says he has faith." James does not say this person has faith. He says the person claims to have it. The question is whether that claim is real.

"Surely the faith is not able to save him?" In Greek, the question expects the answer no. And the word the matters. James is asking whether that kind of faith, a faith that only talks and never acts,

can save. The answer is no. A faith with no change in the life is not the faith the Bible calls saving faith.

2:15-16 *And if a brother or a sister is naked and lacking daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," but you do not give them the things needed for the body, what* ***is*** *the profit?*

James gives a picture. "And if a brother or a sister is naked and lacking daily food." Naked here means without enough clothing to stay warm. This is a fellow believer who is cold and hungry.

"And one of you says to them," "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled." It sounds kind. It may even sound spiritual. But then James adds, "but you do not give them the things needed for the body, what is the profit?" Words alone did not warm anyone up or put food on the table. The brother walks away still cold and hungry. John says the same thing: love is not just in word, but in deed and truth (1 John 3:17-18). Kind words without help are empty.

2:17 *So also the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself.*

"So also the faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself." Here is James's point. A faith that has no works is like those empty words. It looks like something, but there is no life in it.

James does not say that faith plus works earns salvation. He says that faith with no works is dead. A dead body may look like a person, but it can't breathe, walk, or help anyone. Real faith is alive, and living things move and grow. If there is no movement at all, no change, no love, and no obedience, James says that faith is not alive.

2:18 *But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.*

James imagines someone pushing back. "But someone will say," "You have faith, and I have works." The objector seems to say that faith and works are two separate gifts. Some people have one, and some have the other, and either one is fine.

James answers, "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." Faith is inside us, and no one can see it directly. The only way to show it is by how we live. James is saying, 'You cannot show me faith with nothing to see. But I can show you mine by what I do.' The two are not separate. Works are how faith becomes visible.

2:19 *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder.*

"You believe that God is one; you do well." Every Jewish believer knew the words of Deuteronomy 6:4, that the LORD our God, the LORD is one. They said it every day. James says that is good. It is true, and it matters.

"Even the demons believe, and shudder." Demons know who God is better than most people do. They knew Jesus was the Son of God when the crowds did not (Mark 1:24; 5:7). Their belief is correct, but it does not save them. It only makes them tremble, because they know the judgment that is coming. Knowing the right facts about God is not the same as trusting Him, loving Him, and following Him. Saving faith is more than agreeing with the truth. It is resting our whole weight on Christ.

Old Testament links: Deuteronomy 6:4 (alluded to)

2:20 *But do you want to know, O empty man, that the faith apart from the works is dead?*

"But do you want to know, O empty man, that the faith apart from the works is dead?" James calls the objector empty. It means hollow, like a pot with nothing inside. His faith has the right words but nothing in it.

James is about to give proof from the Old Testament. He is not just giving his opinion. He wants to show that this is how faith has always worked, from the very beginning. Some old Greek copies have the word dead here, and others have a word meaning useless or idle. Either way, the point is the same. A faith that does nothing is worth nothing.

2:21 *Was not Abraham our father justified by works, having offered Isaac his son on the altar?*

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works, having offered Isaac his son on the altar?" James points to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. In Genesis 22, God told Abraham to offer up Isaac, the son of the promise. Abraham obeyed, and God stopped him and provided a ram instead.

What does James mean by "justified" here? To be justified means to be declared righteous. In Romans, Paul uses the word for how a sinner is declared righteous before God. James uses it here in the sense of being shown or proven righteous. God had already declared Abraham righteous by faith in Genesis 15:6, many years before Genesis 22. When Abraham offered Isaac, his faith was put on display. That act did not make him right with God. It proved that he already was.

Old Testament links: Genesis 22:9-10 (alluded to)

2:22 *You see that the faith was working together with his works, and by the works the faith was perfected.*

"You see that the faith was working together with his works." Faith and works were not rivals in Abraham's life. They were partners. His faith moved him to act, and his acts came out of his faith. Abraham could climb that mountain only because he trusted God to keep His promise, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

"And by the works the faith was perfected." "Perfected" means brought to its full goal or shown in its full form. A seed is real before it sprouts. But you see what it really is when it becomes a tree. Abraham's faith was real in Genesis 15. On Mount Moriah it came to full flower.

2:23 *And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness," and he was called a friend of God.*

"And the Scripture was fulfilled which says," "And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." James quotes Genesis 15:6, the same verse Paul uses in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6. This is where Abraham was declared righteous, by faith, before he had done anything.

How was that verse "fulfilled" in Genesis 22? The offering of Isaac showed that what God said about Abraham was true. His faith was real. "And he was called a friend of God." God Himself called Abraham His friend (Isaiah 41:8), and so did Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:7). That is the kind of relationship real faith brings. It is not cold agreement. It is trust that walks with God.

Old Testament links: Genesis 15:6 (quoted); 2 Chronicles 20:7 (alluded to); Isaiah 41:8 (alluded to)

2:24 *You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only.*

"You see then that a man is justified by works and not by faith only." This is the verse many people think goes against Paul. Paul wrote, "Therefore we reckon a man to be justified by faith apart from works of law" (Romans 3:28). Do they disagree?

No. They are answering two different questions. Paul is answering, 'How can a guilty sinner be made right with God?' His answer is by faith alone, apart from anything we do (Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-9). James is answering, 'How can you tell whether someone's faith is real?' His answer is by the works that faith produces. When James says "not by faith only," he means the kind of faith he has been describing since verse 14: a faith that only says it believes, a dead faith, the kind of faith demons have.

So a sinner is justified before God by faith alone, and that faith is shown to be real by works. Paul says the same thing in his own words. Right after saying we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, he adds, "For we are His workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Paul fought against people who added works to faith as the way to be saved. James fought against people who thought they could have faith with no works at all. Both men are guarding the same gospel from two different sides.

2:25 *And likewise also Rahab the prostitute, was she not justified by works, having received the messengers and having sent **them** out by another way?*

James gives a second example. "And likewise also Rahab the prostitute, was she not justified by works, having received the messengers and having sent them out by another way?" Rahab lived in Jericho. She hid two Israelite spies and helped them escape, because she believed that the LORD had given Israel the land (Joshua 2:9-11).

Why does James pick Rahab? Because she was the very opposite of Abraham. He was the father of the nation. She was a Gentile and a prostitute. And yet both showed real faith by what they did. Hebrews 11:31 says it was "by faith" that she did this. Her faith was proven when she risked her life. And God saved her, put her in Israel, and even placed her in the family line of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

Old Testament links: Joshua 2:1 (alluded to); Joshua 2:4 (alluded to); Joshua 2:15-16 (alluded to); Joshua 2:21 (alluded to)

2:26 *For just as the body apart from **the** spirit is dead, so also the faith apart from the works is dead.*

"For just as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also the faith apart from the works is dead." James ends with a picture everyone understands. When the spirit leaves a body, the body is dead. It may look the same for a little while, but there is no life left in it.

That is what faith without works is like. It has the outward shape of faith, but there is no life in it. Notice what James does not say. He does not say works are the life of faith, or that works save us. Christ saves us, through faith. But real faith is alive, and life always shows. So the question for each of us is not, 'Did I ever say I believe?' It is, 'Is my faith alive?'

Chapter 2 Summary

James warns believers not to hold their faith in the Lord of glory with partiality. When a church gives the best seat to a rich man and shames a poor man, it judges with evil thinking. God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of His kingdom, while many of the rich were oppressing believers and blaspheming the name of Jesus. The royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," rules out favoritism, and showing partiality is sin. Whoever stumbles in one point of the law is guilty of all. Believers should speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom, and they should show mercy, because mercy triumphs over judgment. In the second half of the chapter, James asks whether a faith that says it believes but has no works can save. Like kind words to a hungry brother with no help given, that faith is dead. Even demons believe that God is one, and they shudder. Abraham's faith was shown when he offered Isaac, and Rahab's when she hid the spies. A sinner is justified before God by faith alone, as Paul teaches, and the faith that justifies is a living faith that shows itself in works, as James teaches. Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead.

I have judged people by their clothes, money or looks. James 2 calls that what it is: favoritism. God does not look at people that way, and I should not either.

Chapter 2 Study Questions

1. What two men walk into the meeting in 2:2-3, and how is each one treated?

2. What does James say God has done for the poor of this world? (2:5)

3. What is the royal law, and why does favoritism break it? (2:8-9)

4. Why does breaking one command make a person guilty of all? (2:10-11)

5. What does James mean when he says "mercy triumphs over judgment"? (2:13)

6. In 2:14, does James say the man has faith, or that he says he has faith? Why does that matter?

7. The demons believe that God is one. What is missing from their belief? (2:19)

8. How do Paul (Romans 3:28) and James (2:24) answer different questions about faith and justification?

9. Have you ever judged someone by their clothes, money, or looks? How can you and your church welcome people the way God does? (2:1-4)

10. Is there someone in need right now whom you could help with more than words? What would that look like this week? (2:15-16)

Chapter 3: Taming the Tongue and Wisdom from Above

Scripture

3:1-12 Let not many ***of you*** become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive greater judgment. For we all stumble in many ***ways***. If anyone does not stumble in word, this ***one is*** a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also. Look, we put the bits of the horses into the mouths for them to obey us, and we also turn about their whole body. Look, also the ships, being so great and being driven by strong winds, are turned about by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the one steering wills. So also the tongue is a small member and boasts great things. Look, how great a forest a small fire kindles! And the tongue ***is*** a fire, the world of unrighteousness. So the tongue is set among our members, defiling the whole body and setting on fire the wheel of birth, and being set on fire by Gehenna. For every kind of beasts and of birds, of creeping things and of sea creatures, is tamed and has been tamed by the human kind. But no one of men is able to tame the tongue; ***it is*** an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the God and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made according to ***the*** likeness of God. Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing. These things ought not, my brothers, to be so. Surely the spring does not pour forth from the same opening the sweet and the bitter? Surely a fig tree is not able, my brothers, to produce olives, or a vine figs? So no spring ***is able*** to produce both salty and sweet water.

3:13-18 Who ***is*** wise and understanding among you? Let him show out of his good conduct his works in ***the*** meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom is not coming down from above, but ***is*** earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition ***are***, there ***is*** disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and of good fruits, impartial, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Chapter 3 Preview

In chapter 1 James said that a person who does not bridle his tongue has worthless religion (1:26). Now he comes back to the tongue and gives it a whole chapter. He starts with a warning to those who want to be teachers, because those who teach God's Word will be judged more strictly. Then he shows how much power a small thing can have. A small bit turns a horse, a small rudder steers a ship, and a small spark sets a forest on fire. The tongue is like that. It can set the whole course of life on fire, and its fire comes from hell itself. People have tamed every kind of animal, but no one can tame the tongue. With the same mouth we bless God and curse people made in His image, and James says that should not be.

In the second half, James turns from the tongue to wisdom, because what comes out of the mouth shows what is in the heart. There are two kinds of wisdom. One is earthly, natural, and demonic, full of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and it brings disorder and every evil thing. The other comes from above. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and without hypocrisy. Those who make peace sow a harvest of righteousness.

Chapter 3 Study

3:1 *Let not many **of you** become teachers, my brothers, knowing that we will receive greater judgment.*

"Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers." In the early church, as in the synagogue, men could stand and teach. Being a teacher, or rabbi, was a place of honor. Some people wanted the title for the wrong reasons.

James gives a reason to slow down. "Knowing that we will receive greater judgment." Notice he says we. James was a teacher, and he puts himself under this warning. Those who teach God's Word are responsible for what they say and for how they live. Their words shape the lives of others. James is not telling gifted people to stay silent. God gives teachers to His church (Ephesians 4:11). He is telling us to take the job seriously and teach with fear and care.

3:2 *For we all stumble in many **ways**. If anyone does not stumble in word, this **one is** a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also.*

"For we all stumble in many ways." James does not pretend that teachers are perfect. We all means every one of us. To stumble is to trip and fall into sin. And of all the ways we stumble, the most common is with our words.

"If anyone does not stumble in word, this one is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also." Perfect again means mature, as in 1:4. A person who can control his tongue can control the rest of himself too, because the tongue is the hardest part to master. Only one Man ever did this fully, and that was Jesus (1 Peter 2:22). The rest of us are still learning. But the more God has our tongue, the more He has the rest of us.

3:3 *Look, we put the bits of the horses into the mouths for them to obey us, and we also turn about their whole body.*

James gives three pictures of a small thing that controls a big thing. The first is a horse. "Look, we put the bits of the horses into the mouths for them to obey us, and we also turn about their whole body."

A bit is a small piece of metal in a horse's mouth. A horse may weigh a thousand pounds or more, but a rider can turn it with a small pull on the reins. Notice that James uses the same word, bridle, that he used in 1:26 and 3:2. When the mouth is under control, the whole body follows. When we let God guide our words, He guides the rest of our life as well.

3:4 *Look, also the ships, being so great and being driven by strong winds, are turned about by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the one steering wills.*

The second picture is a ship. "Look, also the ships, being so great and being driven by strong winds, are turned about by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the one steering wills."

In James's day, some ships carried hundreds of people (Acts 27:37). They were pushed by strong winds. And yet a small rudder at the back could steer the whole thing. The one at the helm sets the course. In the same way, our words often set the direction of our lives. A single sentence can start a friendship or end one. It can lead a person toward Christ or push them away. Who is steering your tongue?

3:5 *So also the tongue is a small member and boasts great things. Look, how great a forest a small fire kindles!*

"So also the tongue is a small member and boasts great things." The tongue is small, but it makes big claims, and it can do big things, for good or for harm.

Then James gives the third picture, and it is a frightening one. "Look, how great a forest a small fire kindles!" James's readers had seen dry hillsides catch fire. One spark could burn for miles. Many of us have seen the same thing in the news. A careless word works the same way. One piece of gossip can spread through a church or a family and do damage that takes years to repair. Proverbs says death and life are in the hand of the tongue (Proverbs 18:21).

3:6 *And the tongue **is** a fire, the world of unrighteousness. So the tongue is set among our members, defiling the whole body and setting on fire the wheel of birth, and being set on fire by Gehenna.*

"And the tongue is a fire, the world of unrighteousness." James means that the tongue can hold a whole world of evil: lies, gossip, slander, cursing, boasting, flattery. "So the tongue is set among our members, defiling the whole body." Like smoke staining a house, a sinful tongue stains the whole person.

It is "setting on fire the wheel of birth." That phrase means the whole course of life, from birth on, turning like a wheel. The tongue can set a whole life on fire. And it is "being set on fire by Gehenna." Gehenna was the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where children had once been burned to idols (Jeremiah 7:31). Jesus used the name for hell. When the tongue is used for evil, its fire comes from below.

3:7 *For every kind of beasts and of birds, of creeping things and of sea creatures, is tamed and has been tamed by the human kind.*

"For every kind of beasts and of birds, of creeping things and of sea creatures, is tamed and has been tamed by the human kind." From the beginning, God gave mankind rule over the animals (Genesis 1:26-28). People have trained horses, elephants, falcons, dogs, and even lions and snakes.

James covers the whole animal world in four groups: four-legged animals, birds, reptiles, and sea creatures. We have tamed them all, and we keep doing it. Man has great power over creation. That makes the next verse all the more striking.

3:8 *But no one of men is able to tame the tongue; **it is** an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*

"But no one of men is able to tame the tongue." For all our skill, we cannot tame the little muscle in our own mouth. Not one of us can do it on our own.

"It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." Unruly means restless, never at peace, always ready to strike. James compares the tongue to a snake with poison (Psalm 140:3). Is there any hope, then? Yes. James says no man can tame it, but God can. The Holy Spirit produces self-control in us (Galatians 5:22-23). We will never get our tongues under control by willpower alone. We need to ask God every day to guard our mouths (Psalm 141:3).

Old Testament links: Psalm 140:3 (alluded to)

3:9 *With it we bless the God and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made according to* ***the*** *likeness of God.*

"With it we bless the God and Father." Every Jewish believer blessed God many times a day in prayer. The same is true for us when we sing, pray, and praise God in church.

"And with it we curse men who have been made according to the likeness of God." Then we walk out and use the same tongue to tear people down. To curse here means to speak evil of someone or wish harm on them. James reminds us that every person is made in God's likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). When we speak hatefully about a person, we are attacking someone who bears God's image. We cannot truly honor God while we treat the people He made with contempt.

Old Testament links: Genesis 1:26 (alluded to); Genesis 5:1 (alluded to)

3:10 *Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing. These things ought not, my brothers, to be so.*

"Out of the same mouth come forth blessing and cursing." That is a sad picture, but it is honest. Most of us have done it. We praise God on Sunday and lose our temper at home or in traffic on Monday.

"These things ought not, my brothers, to be so." James does not say, 'Oh well, everybody does it.' He says it ought not to be. It is not normal for a believer. It is a sign that something in the heart still needs to change. Jesus said that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). If cursing comes out, something in the heart needs God's cleansing.

3:11 *Surely the spring does not pour forth from the same opening the sweet and the bitter?*

James uses a picture from nature. "Surely the spring does not pour forth from the same opening the sweet and the bitter?" In a dry land like Israel, people knew their springs. Some gave fresh, sweet water. Others near the Dead Sea gave bitter, salty water that no one could drink.

But one spring does not give both at once. The water that comes out shows what is underneath. The question expects the answer no. A spring can't do it, and neither should a believer's mouth. If our words are bitter one minute and sweet the next, that shows a heart that is still mixed.

3:12 *Surely a fig tree is not able, my brothers, to produce olives, or a vine figs? So no spring* ***is able*** *to produce both salty and sweet water.*

"Surely a fig tree is not able, my brothers, to produce olives, or a vine figs?" A tree produces fruit according to what it is. Jesus said the same thing: you will know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:16-20).

"So no spring is able to produce both salty and sweet water." James's point is that our words show what we are. A new heart should produce new words. That does not mean a believer will never say a wrong thing. James already said we all stumble (3:2). But the pattern of our words over time shows what kind of tree we are. If you want to change your words, start by asking God to change your heart.

3:13 *Who* ***is*** *wise and understanding among you? Let him show out of his good conduct his works in* ***the*** *meekness of wisdom.*

Now James moves from the tongue to wisdom. "Who is wise and understanding among you?" This ties back to verse 1. Those who wanted to be teachers thought of themselves as wise. James says, if you are wise, prove it.

How? "Let him show out of his good conduct his works in the meekness of wisdom." Wisdom is not measured by how much you know or how well you argue. It is shown by how you live. And real wisdom comes with "meekness," a humble, gentle spirit that does not need to win or show off. Once again, James is talking about faith that shows itself in works. True wisdom has a gentle face.

3:14 *But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast and lie against the truth.*

"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart." "Bitter jealousy" is the sour feeling that comes when someone else gets what we want, whether it is attention, praise, or a position. "Selfish ambition" is the drive to get ahead for ourselves, even at others' expense. The word was used for a person who campaigned for office by stirring up groups against each other.

"Do not boast and lie against the truth." If that is what is in your heart, don't brag about being wise. You are fooling yourself and others. A person full of jealousy and selfish ambition is not wise, no matter how many verses he can quote.

3:15 *This wisdom is not coming down from above, but* ***is*** *earthly, natural, demonic.*

"This wisdom is not coming down from above." Real wisdom comes from God (1:5, 17). This other kind does not. James gives three words to describe where it comes from.

It is "earthly." It belongs to this world and looks only at this life. It is "natural," which means it comes from the human soul without God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). And it is "demonic." It is the kind of thinking the devil himself loves. Pride and selfish ambition were Satan's own sins. The world calls this kind of thinking smart, driven, or successful. James calls it what it is.

3:16 *For where jealousy and selfish ambition **are**, there **is** disorder and every evil thing.*

"For where jealousy and selfish ambition are, there is disorder and every evil thing." James shows us the fruit of that earthly wisdom. "Disorder" means confusion, unrest, and things falling apart. God is not a God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Think about what jealousy and selfish ambition do to a church, a family, or a workplace. People take sides. They talk behind each other's backs. Every decision becomes a fight. And from there comes "every evil thing." Many church splits and family breakups can be traced back to those two sins. They often hide under the surface, so we should ask God to search our hearts (Psalm 139:23-24).

3:17 *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and of good fruits, impartial, and without hypocrisy.*

Now James describes the wisdom God gives. "But the wisdom from above is first pure." It comes first because it is the most important. Pure means clean and holy, with no hidden motives.

Next it is peaceable. It seeks peace, not fights. It is gentle, kind and patient, not insisting on its rights. It is reasonable, willing to listen and be persuaded. It is "full of mercy and of good fruits," so it helps people in need. It is impartial and does not play favorites (2:1). And it is "without hypocrisy," the same on the inside as it is on the outside. This list sounds a lot like Jesus Himself. True wisdom looks like Christ. It also sounds like the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

3:18 *And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

"And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." James ends the chapter with a farming picture. A farmer sows seed and later reaps a harvest. Peacemakers sow peace, and the harvest is righteousness, right living and right relationships.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Peacemaking is not the same as avoiding every conflict. It means working to bring people together in truth and love. Jealousy and selfish ambition sow disorder. Wisdom from above sows peace. Every day, with our tongues and our actions, we are sowing one or the other. What harvest are you sowing?

Chapter 3 Summary

James warns that not many should become teachers, because those who teach will receive a stricter judgment. We all stumble in many ways, and the hardest place to stay in control is the tongue. Like a small bit that turns a horse, a small rudder that steers a ship, and a small fire that burns a whole forest, the tongue is small but powerful. It is a fire, a world of unrighteousness, set on fire by hell. People can tame every kind of animal, but no one can tame the tongue on his own. With the same mouth we bless God and curse people made in His likeness, and that should not be. A spring cannot give both sweet and bitter water, and a fig tree cannot produce olives. James then contrasts two kinds of wisdom. Earthly, natural, and demonic wisdom is full of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, and it brings disorder and every evil thing. The wisdom from above is pure,

peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and without hypocrisy. Those who make peace sow a harvest of righteousness.

Chapter 3 Study Questions

1. Why does James warn that not many should become teachers? (3:1)

2. What three pictures does James use to show the power of a small thing? (3:3-5)

3. What does James say about where the tongue's fire comes from? (3:6)

4. Why is it wrong to curse people, according to 3:9?

5. What do the spring and the fig tree teach about our words? (3:11-12)

6. How does a truly wise person show his wisdom? (3:13)

7. What are the marks of earthly wisdom, and what does it produce? (3:14-16)

8. Look at the list in 3:17. Which mark of the wisdom from above do you most need God to grow in you?

9. Think about the last week. Where did your words build someone up, and where did they tear someone down? (3:9-10)

10. Is there a relationship where God may be calling you to be a peacemaker? What first step could you take? (3:18)

Chapter 4: Draw Near to God

Scripture

4:1-10 From where ***come*** wars and fightings among you? ***Is it*** not from here, out of your pleasures that are waging war in your members? You desire and do not have; you murder and are jealous and are not able to obtain; you fight and wage war. But you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, so that you may spend ***it*** on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that the friendship of the world is hostility ***with*** God? Whoever therefore chooses to be a friend of the world is made an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain? Does the spirit which dwelt in us yearn with envy? But He gives greater grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes ***the*** proud, but gives grace to ***the*** humble." Be subject therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse ***your*** hands, ***you*** sinners, and purify ***your*** hearts, ***you*** double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned to mourning and the joy to gloom. Be humbled before the Lord, and He will exalt you.

4:11-17 Do not speak against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother and judges his brother speaks against ***the*** law and judges ***the*** law; but if you judge ***the*** law, you are not a doer of ***the*** law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. But you, who are you who judge the other? Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city and will spend one year there and will trade and will make a profit"; you who do not know the ***things*** of tomorrow. For what ***is*** your life? For it is a vapor that appears for a little ***while*** and then vanishes. Instead of your saying, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogant claims; all such boasting is evil. Therefore to one who knows to do good and does not do ***it***, to him it is sin.

Chapter 4 Preview

Chapter 3 ended with peace. Chapter 4 opens with war. James asks where the fighting among believers comes from, and he answers plainly: from the selfish desires at war inside us. We want and don't have, so we fight. We don't have because we don't ask, or we ask with the wrong motives. Then James uses strong words. Those who make friends with the world are like an unfaithful wife, and friendship with the world makes a person an enemy of God. But God gives greater grace. He opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. So James calls his readers to submit to God, resist the devil, draw near to God, cleanse their hands and hearts, mourn over their sin, and humble themselves before the Lord, who will lift them up.

In the second half, James warns against two more kinds of pride. The first is speaking against and judging a brother, which puts us in God's place as Lawgiver and Judge. The second is making plans as if we control tomorrow. Our life is a vapor that is here for a little while and then gone. Instead, we should say, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that." James ends with a short, searching sentence: if we know the good we ought to do and don't do it, it is sin.

Chapter 4 Study

4:1 *From where **come** wars and fightings among you? **Is it** not from here, out of your pleasures that are waging war in your members?*

"From where come wars and fightings among you?" James is not talking about wars between nations. He is talking about quarrels inside the church. These believers were fighting with each other. James asks where it came from.

He answers with another question. "Is it not from here, out of your pleasures that are waging war in your members?" The word for "pleasures" is the one we get the word hedonism from. It means selfish desires for what pleases us. Those desires are like an army camped inside us, always at war. The fight on the outside starts with a fight on the inside. Before we blame the other person, we should look at our own hearts.

4:2 *You desire and do not have; you murder and are jealous and are not able to obtain; you fight and wage war. But you do not have because you do not ask.*

"You desire and do not have; you murder and are jealous and are not able to obtain; you fight and wage war." This is how the inner war spills out. We want something. We can't get it. So we get angry and fight. James uses the word murder. Some of his readers may have been in such bitter fights that it led to violence. Jesus also taught that hate in the heart is the root of murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

Then James gives a simple answer that is easy to miss. "But you do not have because you do not ask." Instead of fighting to get what we want, we could bring our needs to God. How many fights could be avoided if we prayed first?

4:3 *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, so that you may spend **it** on your pleasures.*

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly." Some of them did pray. But their prayers were not answered. Why? Because they asked "wrongly." The word means badly or with evil motives.

"So that you may spend it on your pleasures." They treated God like a vending machine for their own wants. Prayer is not a way to bend God's will to ours. It is a way to bring our will in line with His. Jesus taught us to pray, "Let Your will come about" (Matthew 6:10). God loves to give good gifts to His children (1:17), but He is not going to give us what would feed our selfishness and hurt us. When our prayers seem unanswered, it is good to ask what we are really asking for and why.

4:4 *Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that the friendship of the world is hostility **with** God? Whoever therefore chooses to be a friend of the world is made an enemy of God.*

"Adulterers and adulteresses!" James uses strong language. In the Old Testament, God often called Israel His wife, and when Israel worshiped idols the prophets called it adultery (Jeremiah 3:20;

Hosea 1:2). James is talking about spiritual unfaithfulness. God's people belong to Him, and running after the world is like a wife running after other men.

"Do you not know that the friendship of the world is hostility with God?" The world here does not mean the people God loves (John 3:16) or the earth He made. It means the system of thinking and living that leaves God out: its pride, greed, and lusts (1 John 2:15-17). "Whoever therefore chooses to be a friend of the world is made an enemy of God." Notice the word "chooses." We cannot be best friends with both.

4:5 *Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain? Does the spirit which dwelt in us yearn with envy?*

"Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain?" James is about to sum up what Scripture teaches. He is not quoting one exact Old Testament verse, but giving the sense of many of them.

"Does the spirit which dwelt in us yearn with envy?" This is one of the hardest verses in James to translate, and Bible teachers read it in two main ways. Some read it as being about the human spirit God gave us. Our spirit, fallen as it is, leans toward envy, and that explains the fighting of verses 1 and 2. Others read it as being about God Himself. God yearns jealously over the spirit He caused to dwell in us. He is a jealous God (Exodus 20:5), and He will not share His people with the world, just as a faithful husband will not share his wife. Both readings fit the context, and the next verse answers either way: God gives greater grace.

4:6 *But He gives greater grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes **the** proud, but gives grace to **the** humble."*

"But He gives greater grace." What a turn. James has just shown how sinful and divided our hearts can be. But God's grace is greater than our sin, greater than our pride, and greater than the pull of the world.

"Therefore it says," "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James quotes Proverbs 3:34, in the form found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Peter quotes the same words (1 Peter 5:5). Opposes is a military word. It means to line up against someone in battle. God sets Himself against the proud. But to the humble, those who know their need, He gives grace. Grace always flows downhill, to the low places. The way to receive more grace is to humble ourselves.

Old Testament links: Proverbs 3:34 (quoted)

4:7 *Be subject therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

James now gives ten commands in a row, all calling us back to God. The first is "Be subject therefore to God." To be subject means to place yourself under someone's authority, like a soldier under his captain. This is the opposite of pride.

"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The devil is real, and he wants to pull us back into the world. But notice the order. First we submit to God. Then we resist the devil. We cannot fight him

in our own strength. We stand against him by standing under God. Peter says the same: our adversary prowls like a roaring lion, and we are to resist him, firm in the faith (1 Peter 5:8-9). And here is the promise: he will run. He has no power over a believer who stands under God.

4:8 *Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. Cleanse **your** hands, **you** sinners, and purify **your** hearts, **you** double-minded.*

"Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you." This is one of the most precious promises in the Bible. God does not hide from those who seek Him. When we turn back to Him, He does not stand with His arms crossed. Like the father of the prodigal son, He runs to meet us (Luke 15:20).

But drawing near requires a change. "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." The priests washed their hands before coming near to God's altar (Exodus 30:19-21). Hands stand for what we do. Hearts stand for what we want and think. The "double-minded," a word James used in 1:8, are those trying to love God and the world at the same time. James calls them to come back with a whole heart.

Old Testament links: Psalm 24:4 (alluded to)

4:9 *Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned to mourning and the joy to gloom.*

"Be miserable and mourn and weep." That may sound strange in a book that started with "Consider it all joy" (1:2). But James is talking about how we should feel about our sin. Some of his readers were laughing and having a good time while living in friendship with the world. They didn't take their sin seriously.

"Let your laughter be turned to mourning and the joy to gloom." James is not against laughter or joy. He wants them to stop laughing off their sin and to grieve over it. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Godly sorrow leads to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10). When we really see our sin, we weep. Then God turns our mourning into real joy.

4:10 *Be humbled before the Lord, and He will exalt you.*

"Be humbled before the Lord, and He will exalt you." This sums up the section. Everything James said in verses 7 to 9 is a way of humbling ourselves before God.

And here is God's promise: "He will exalt you." To exalt means to lift up. The proud try to lift themselves up, and God brings them down. The humble bow low before God, and He lifts them up. Jesus said, "whoever will humble himself will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Peter says it too (1 Peter 5:6). God's way up is always down. We don't have to fight for our place. If we humble ourselves, God will give us the place He wants us to have, in His time.

4:11 *Do not speak against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother and judges his brother speaks against* ***the*** *law and judges* ***the*** *law; but if you judge* ***the*** *law, you are not a doer of* ***the*** *law but a judge.*

"Do not speak against one another, brothers." Speaking against means talking someone down, often behind their back. It is one of the ways the fighting of verse 1 shows up. It is also another kind of pride. When I tear down my brother, I am lifting myself up.

"The one who speaks against a brother and judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law." How is that? The law tells us to love our neighbor (2:8). When we slander a brother, we are acting as if that law doesn't apply to us. "But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge." James is not saying we can never call sin what it is. He is warning against setting ourselves up as the final judge over others.

4:12 *There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. But you, who are you who judge the other?*

"There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy." Only God gives the law, and only God has the power to save or condemn. He alone knows every heart, and He alone will judge with perfect fairness.

"But you, who are you who judge the other?" That is a humbling question. We do not know all the facts. We cannot see the heart. We are sinners ourselves. Jesus said, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (Matthew 7:1). That does not mean believers never correct one another (Galatians 6:1), or that a church never deals with sin (1 Corinthians 5). It means we never take God's seat as the final Judge, condemning our brother as if we were above him.

Old Testament links: Isaiah 33:22 (alluded to)

4:13 *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city and will spend one year there and will trade and will make a profit";*

James turns to a new kind of pride. "Come now, you who say," "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city and will spend one year there and will trade and will make a profit." Many Jewish people in the dispersion were traders who traveled from city to city to do business. James pictures one of them looking at a map and making plans.

What is wrong with that? Nothing is wrong with planning, or with business, or with making a profit. The problem is what is missing. Look at how many times the merchant says "we will": go, spend a year, trade, make money. God is not in the plan at all. He is planning as if he owns tomorrow.

4:14 *you who do not know the **things** of tomorrow. For what **is** your life? For it is a vapor that appears for a little **while** and then vanishes.*

"You who do not know the things of tomorrow." That is the problem. We plan for tomorrow, but we don't know what tomorrow holds. Proverbs says, "Do not boast yourself about the day of tomorrow, for you do not know what a day will bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1).

"For what is your life? For it is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes." A vapor is like a puff of steam over a cup of coffee or your breath on a cold morning. You see it, and then it is gone. That is how short our life is compared to eternity. This is not meant to scare us. It is meant to humble us and make us live wisely, depending on God for each day.

Old Testament links: Proverbs 27:1 (alluded to)

4:15 *Instead of your saying, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that."*

"Instead of your saying," "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that." Here is the right way to plan. James does not say, don't plan. He says, plan with God in it. Our very life depends on His will, and so do our plans.

Paul lived this way. He told the believers in Ephesus that he would return "God willing" (Acts 18:21), and he wrote to Corinth that he would come "if the Lord wills" (1 Corinthians 4:19). This is not just a phrase to tack onto our sentences. It is a heart that says, 'Lord, my time is in Your hands.' We can make plans, set goals, and work hard, while holding all of it with an open hand.

4:16 *But now you boast in your arrogant claims; all such boasting is evil.*

"But now you boast in your arrogant claims." The word for "arrogant claims" was used of a person who brags about things he can't really deliver, like a traveling salesman making big promises. These merchants talked as if their future was secure.

"All such boasting is evil." That is a strong word for something many people think is just confidence. But when we boast about tomorrow as if it is ours, we are claiming something only God has. That is pride, and pride is evil. Paul asks, what do you have that you did not receive? (1 Corinthians 4:7). If all we have comes from God, we have nothing to boast about except Him.

4:17 *Therefore to one who knows to do good and does not do **it**, to him it is sin.*

"Therefore to one who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin." James closes the chapter with a short sentence that cuts deep. We often think of sin as doing what is wrong. James reminds us that sin is also failing to do what is right.

This ties back to the theme of the letter, being doers of the word and not hearers only (1:22). These readers now knew what God wanted: humility, prayer, drawing near, not judging, and planning with God in view. Knowing it was not enough. If they knew and did not do it, that was sin. The same is true for us. What good thing has God shown you to do that you have been putting off?

Chapter 4 Summary

James asks where the fighting among believers comes from and answers that it comes from selfish desires at war within us. We don't have because we don't ask, or we ask with wrong motives so we can spend it on our pleasures. Friendship with the world is spiritual adultery and makes a person an enemy of God. But God gives greater grace: He opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. So James calls believers to submit to God, resist the devil, draw near to God, cleanse their hands and purify their hearts, mourn over their sin, and humble themselves before the Lord, who will exalt them. Believers must not speak against or judge one another, because there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, who is able to save and to destroy. They must not plan as if they control tomorrow, because life is a vapor. Instead, they should say, "If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that." To know the good we ought to do and not do it is sin.

Chapter 4 Study Questions

1. According to 4:1-2, where do fights and quarrels come from?
2. What two reasons does James give for unanswered prayer in 4:2-3?
3. Why does James call his readers "adulterers and adulteresses"? (4:4)
4. What does God do for the proud and for the humble? (4:6)
5. List the commands in 4:7-10. What promises go with them?
6. Why is speaking against a brother a way of judging the law? (4:11-12)
7. What is wrong with the merchant's plans in 4:13-16, and how should he plan instead?
8. Where in your life right now are you tempted to make friends with the world? (4:4)
9. What would it look like for you to draw near to God this week? (4:8)
10. Is there a good thing you know you should do but have not done? What is holding you back? (4:17)

Chapter 5: Patience Until the Lord Comes

Scripture

5:1-11 Come now, ***you*** rich, weep, wailing over your miseries that are coming upon ***you***. Your riches have rotted, and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their rust will be for a testimony against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have stored up treasure in ***the*** last days. Look, the wage of the workers who mowed your fields, which has been fraudulently kept back by you, cries out, and the cries of those who reaped have entered into the ears of ***the*** Lord of armies. You lived in luxury on the earth and lived in self-indulgence; you fed your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You condemned, you murdered the righteous ***one***; he does not resist you. Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Look, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives ***the*** early and late rain. You also be patient; strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near. Do not groan against one another, brothers, so that you may not be condemned; look, the Judge stands before the doors. Take ***as*** an example, my brothers, of suffering hardship and of patience, the prophets who spoke ***in*** the name of ***the*** Lord. Look, we count blessed those who endure. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the outcome of ***the*** Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

5:12-20 But above all, my brothers, do not swear, neither ***by*** heaven nor ***by*** the earth nor ***by*** any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and ***your*** no ***be*** no, so that you may not fall under judgment. Is anyone among you suffering hardship? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous ***man***, being at work, prevails much. Elijah was a man of like nature to us, and he prayed with prayer that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth ***for*** three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth sprouted its fruit. Brothers, if anyone among you is led astray from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that the one who turns back a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Chapter 5 Preview

James begins the last chapter with a warning to the rich who have lived for money. Their riches have rotted, their clothes are moth-eaten, and their gold and silver have rusted. They held back the wages of the workers who harvested their fields, and the cries of those workers have reached the ears of the Lord of armies. They lived in luxury while condemning and killing the righteous. Judgment is coming. Then James turns to the believers who were being treated so badly and tells them to be patient until the coming of the Lord. Like a farmer waiting for the rain, they are to strengthen their hearts, because the Lord's coming is near and the Judge is standing at the door. The prophets and Job are examples of patient endurance, and the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

In the second half, James gives his closing words. Do not swear oaths; let your yes be yes and your no be no. Pray when you suffer and sing praise when you are cheerful. If anyone is sick, he should call for the elders of the church, who will pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. Believers should confess their sins to one another and pray for one another, because the prayer of a righteous person is powerful. Elijah was a man just like us, and his prayers shut and opened the sky. James ends by urging believers to turn back anyone who wanders from the truth, because doing so saves a soul from death and covers a multitude of sins.

Chapter 5 Study

5:1 *Come now, **you** rich, weep, wailing over your miseries that are coming upon **you**.*

"Come now, you rich, weep, wailing over your miseries that are coming upon you." James used the same words, "Come now," in 4:13 to call out the proud merchants. Now he speaks to the rich who live for money and mistreat others.

Are these rich people believers? Most likely not. James speaks to them the way the Old Testament prophets spoke to the nations, as if they were standing in the room (Isaiah 13:6; Amos 6:1). He does not call them "brothers," and he does not call them to repent. He warns them of judgment. This also comforted the poor believers who read the letter. God sees how they are being treated, and He will set it right.

5:2 *Your riches have rotted, and your garments have become moth-eaten.*

"Your riches have rotted, and your garments have become moth-eaten." In that day, wealth was often kept in goods such as grain, oil, and fine clothing. Grain can rot. Clothes can be eaten by moths. James speaks as if it has already happened, the way the prophets often did, because it is that certain.

Jesus taught the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where moth and rust destroy" (Matthew 6:19). Everything we hold in this world is already falling apart. The only riches that last are the ones stored up with God (Matthew 6:20).

5:3 *Your gold and silver have corroded, and their rust will be for a testimony against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have stored up treasure in **the** last days.*

"Your gold and silver have corroded." Gold and silver do not really rust, but James's point is that even the most lasting wealth will lose its value in the end. "And their rust will be for a testimony against you." The rust will be like a witness in court. It proves that the money sat unused while others went hungry.

It "will eat your flesh like fire." The judgment on hoarded wealth will be painful. "You have stored up treasure in the last days." The "last days" began with Christ's first coming (Hebrews 1:2). These people were piling up money as if they had all the time in the world, when the end was drawing near. What a foolish thing, to stockpile for a world that is passing away.

5:4 *Look, the wage of the workers who mowed your fields, which has been fraudulently kept back by you, cries out, and the cries of those who reaped have entered into the ears of* ***the*** *Lord of armies.*

"Look, the wage of the workers who mowed your fields, which has been fraudulently kept back by you, cries out." Day laborers in Israel were paid at the end of each day. They needed that money to feed their families that night. God's Law said not to hold back a worker's wages overnight (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15).

These rich landowners were cheating their workers. And the wages "cry out," like Abel's blood cried out from the ground (Genesis 4:10). "And the cries of those who reaped have entered into the ears of the Lord of armies." The Lord of armies, or Lord of hosts, is the God who commands all the armies of heaven. The poor have no one to defend them on earth, but they have the God of heaven's armies on their side. God hears. That is a warning to every employer and business owner today.

Old Testament links: Deuteronomy 24:15 (alluded to); Malachi 3:5 (alluded to)

5:5 *You lived in luxury on the earth and lived in self-indulgence; you fed your hearts as in a day of slaughter.*

"You lived in luxury on the earth and lived in self-indulgence." They spent their lives on comfort and pleasure, while the workers who made them rich went without. Jesus told a story of a rich man who lived in luxury every day while a poor man named Lazarus lay starving at his gate (Luke 16:19-25).

"You fed your hearts as in a day of slaughter." This is a picture of cattle being fattened up before they are killed. The animal keeps eating, not knowing that the day of slaughter has come. The rich were stuffing themselves, not knowing that judgment was at the door. They were fattening themselves for their own destruction.

Old Testament links: Jeremiah 12:3 (alluded to)

5:6 *You condemned, you murdered the righteous* ***one****; he does not resist you.*

"You condemned, you murdered the righteous one." The rich used their power and the courts to crush the poor (2:6). Some of the poor even died because of it, whether by violence or by being starved of the wages they needed to live.

"He does not resist you." The righteous poor could not fight back. They had no money, no lawyers, and no power. Bible teachers read "the righteous one" in a few ways. Most see it as the righteous poor in general. Some also see in it a pointer to Jesus, the Righteous One (Acts 3:14), who was condemned and killed and did not resist. Either way, the point is clear. God sees those who suffer injustice, and He will judge those who cause it.

5:7 *Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Look, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives* ***the*** *early and late rain.*

James now turns back to the believers. "Be patient therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." Because God will judge the wicked, His people do not have to take revenge. They can wait for Him. The word for patient means long-tempered, able to hold on a long time without losing heart.

"The coming of the Lord" is the return of Jesus. "Look, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and late rain." In Israel, the early rain came in the fall and softened the ground for planting. The late rain came in the spring and filled out the grain before the harvest. A farmer could not make it rain. He did his work and waited. That is how we wait for the Lord. We keep working, and we trust Him for the timing.

Old Testament links: Deuteronomy 11:14 (alluded to)

5:8 *You also be patient; strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near.*

"You also be patient; strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near." "Strengthen your hearts" means to make them firm and steady, so we don't give up when life is hard.

Why? Because "the coming of the Lord has drawn near." James wrote nearly two thousand years ago. Was he wrong? No. In the Bible, near means that the Lord's coming could happen at any time. Nothing else on God's calendar must happen first before Jesus comes for His church. That is called imminence. I believe Scripture teaches that Jesus will come for His church before the seven-year Tribulation (John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). After the Tribulation, He will return visibly to the earth to judge and to reign (Matthew 24:29-31; Revelation 19:11-16). Every generation of believers has been called to live ready, and so are we.

5:9 *Do not groan against one another, brothers, so that you may not be condemned; look, the Judge stands before the doors.*

"Do not groan against one another, brothers, so that you may not be condemned." When people are under pressure, they often turn on each other. The word groan means to grumble or complain under your breath. James has already warned against speaking against one another (4:11). Hard times are not an excuse to turn on our brothers and sisters.

"Look, the Judge stands before the doors." Jesus is not far away. He is like a judge standing at the courtroom door, ready to step in. When Christ comes for His church, believers will stand before Him at the judgment seat of Christ. That judgment is not about whether we are saved. It is about how we have lived and the rewards He will give (2 Corinthians 5:10). Knowing He is at the door should make us careful how we treat each other.

5:10 *Take **as** an example, my brothers, of suffering hardship and of patience, the prophets who spoke **in** the name of **the** Lord.*

"Take as an example, my brothers, of suffering hardship and of patience, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." When we suffer, it helps to remember those who suffered before us. The prophets were God's faithful messengers, and they were mocked, beaten, put in prison, and even killed.

Jeremiah was thrown into a muddy pit (Jeremiah 38:6). Elijah had to run for his life (1 Kings 19:1-3). Jesus said the prophets were persecuted, and that His followers would be too (Matthew 5:12). Notice that they suffered while doing what God told them to do. Suffering does not always mean we have done something wrong. Sometimes it means we are doing exactly what is right. The prophets kept going, and so can we.

5:11 *Look, we count blessed those who endure. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the outcome of **the** Lord, that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.*

"Look, we count blessed those who endure." We look back and see the faithful people of the past as blessed. We honor them now because they did not quit. That ties back to 1:12.

"You have heard of the endurance of Job." Job lost his children, his wealth, and his health in a short time. He asked hard questions, and he struggled, but he did not turn away from God. "And you have seen the outcome of the Lord." The outcome was what the Lord brought about in the end. God restored Job and blessed him with twice as much as before (Job 42:10-17). Why? Because "the Lord is very compassionate and merciful." We may not see the end of our story yet, but we know the heart of the One writing it.

Old Testament links: Job 1:21 (alluded to); Job 42:12 (alluded to)

5:12 *But above all, my brothers, do not swear, neither **by** heaven nor **by** the earth nor **by** any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and **your** no **be** no, so that you may not fall under judgment.*

"But above all, my brothers, do not swear." Swear here does not mean using foul language. It means taking an oath, calling on God or something holy to back up what you say. In that day, people swore by heaven, by earth, or by Jerusalem, and some used clever oaths to get out of their promises later (Matthew 23:16-22).

"But let your yes be yes, and your no be no, so that you may not fall under judgment." Careless oaths are not a small thing; James says they bring a person under judgment. This is almost the same as Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33-37. A believer's word should be so honest that it needs no oath to back it up. Bible teachers differ on how far this goes. Many believe James forbids casual and careless oaths used to sound more believable or to dodge a promise, not a solemn oath in a court, since God Himself swore by Himself (Hebrews 6:13) and Paul called God as his witness (Romans 1:9). Others, including some church groups, believe a believer should never take an oath of any kind. Either way, the heart of it is simple. Be a person of your word.

5:13 *Is anyone among you suffering hardship? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*

"Is anyone among you suffering hardship? Let him pray." James comes back to suffering, the theme he started with. His answer is prayer. Not grumbling (5:9), not giving up, but bringing it to God.

"Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." When life is good, we should not forget God either. We should praise Him. Prayer for the hard times and praise for the good times. Either way, the believer's life is turned toward God. Many of the Psalms do both. They begin with tears and end in praise. Whatever you are going through today, there is a fitting way to bring it to the Lord.

5:14 *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord.*

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church." The word sick here usually means weak or ill in the body. Elders are the spiritual leaders of a local church, men who oversee and shepherd the flock (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2). Notice that the sick person calls them. He takes the first step and asks for help.

"And let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord." Bible teachers read the oil in different ways. Some see it as medicine. Oil was one of the most common treatments in that day (Luke 10:34), so the verse would mean using the best medical care along with prayer. Others see it as a symbol, setting the person apart to God and picturing the Holy Spirit's work, as when the apostles anointed the sick with oil (Mark 6:13). The Roman Catholic Church reads this verse as the basis for its sacrament of the anointing of the sick, which in the past was given mainly to the dying and was often called last rites. Whatever view we take, notice that the power is not in the oil. It is "in the name of the Lord."

5:15 *And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him.*

"And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." Save here means to make well, to restore. It is the Lord who heals, not the elders or the oil. The "prayer of faith" is prayer that trusts God and leaves the outcome in His hands.

Does this mean every sick believer who is prayed for will be healed? Experience and Scripture both tell us no. Paul left Trophimus sick (2 Timothy 4:20), and Paul himself was not freed from his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Some teachers read this as a general promise that God often heals in answer to prayer, always according to His will (1 John 5:14). Others read sick as including the spiritually weary, whom God lifts up. "And if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him." Notice the if. Not all sickness comes from sin (John 9:1-3), but some does (1 Corinthians 11:30), and God forgives the one who comes to Him.

5:16 *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous **man**, being at work, prevails much.*

"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed." James widens it to the whole church. Believers should be honest with each other about their sins and pray for each other. Confession here is "to one another," between believers. Our sins are forgiven by God when we confess them to Him (1 John 1:9). But there is healing, in body and in heart, when we bring sin into the light with a trusted brother or sister and they pray with us. Roman Catholic teaching connects this verse with confession to a priest, while most Protestants read it as believers confessing to each other. Wisdom matters too. Not every sin needs to be told to everyone. But secrets kept in the dark tend to grow.

"The prayer of a righteous man, being at work, prevails much." A righteous man is not a perfect one. It is someone who is right with God and walking with Him. His prayer is powerful and gets results.

5:17 *Elijah was a man of like nature to us, and he prayed with prayer that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth **for** three years and six months.*

"Elijah was a man of like nature to us." This is a great encouragement. We may think of Elijah as a superhero. He called down fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:36-38). But he was a man just like us. Right after that great victory, he ran for his life in fear and asked God to let him die (1 Kings 19:3-4).

"And he prayed with prayer that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months." Elijah prayed earnestly, and God shut the sky over Israel because of the nation's idol worship (1 Kings 17:1). Jesus also said the heaven was shut "three years and six months" (Luke 4:25). First Kings 18:1 says the word came to Elijah "in the third year," most likely counting from the time he went into hiding, not from when the drought started.

Old Testament links: 1 Kings 17:1 (alluded to)

5:18 *And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth sprouted its fruit.*

"And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth sprouted its fruit." After the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah went to the top of the mountain, bowed down with his face between his knees, and prayed. He sent his servant to look for rain seven times, until a small cloud rose from the sea. Then the heavens grew black, and a heavy rain came (1 Kings 18:41-45).

James's point is simple. If God answered the prayers of a man like us, He will hear ours too. Elijah's prayer was not powerful because he was special. It was powerful because his God is. That is the same God we pray to.

Old Testament links: 1 Kings 18:42 (alluded to); 1 Kings 18:45 (alluded to)

5:19 *Brothers, if anyone among you is led astray from the truth and someone turns him back,*

James ends his letter, not with a farewell, but with a call to care for one another. "Brothers, if anyone among you is led astray from the truth and someone turns him back." "Among you" means someone in the church, a person who says he believes. "Led astray" means to wander off the path, to drift away from the truth in what he believes or how he lives.

"And someone turns him back." James does not say the elders or the pastor. He says "someone." Any believer can be the one God uses to go after a wandering brother or sister. It takes love, courage, and humility (Galatians 6:1). It is much easier to talk about someone who is wandering than to talk to them. James calls us to go.

5:20 *let him know that the one who turns back a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

"Let him know that the one who turns back a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." The soul saved is the wanderer's, and so are the sins that are covered. When a wanderer comes back to God, God forgives his sins. They are covered, put out of sight (Psalm 32:1). Peter says love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8).

What is the death here? Bible teachers differ. Some believe it is physical death, which can come as God's discipline on a believer who keeps on in sin (1 Corinthians 11:30). Others believe it is eternal death. Some of them say that a person who wanders away completely shows he never truly belonged to Christ (1 John 2:19), while others believe a true believer can turn away and be lost. Good Bible teachers have long disagreed about that wider question. Either way, James's last words are a call to action. Love does not let a brother walk away without trying to bring him home.

Chapter 5 Summary

James warns the rich who have lived for money. Their riches will rot, their gold and silver will corrode, and their rust will testify against them. They held back the wages of their workers, lived in luxury, and condemned the righteous, and the cries of the poor have reached the ears of the Lord of armies. James then calls believers to be patient until the coming of the Lord, like a farmer waiting for the early and late rain. They are to strengthen their hearts, because the Lord's coming is near, and not grumble against one another, because the Judge stands at the door. The prophets and Job are examples of patient endurance, and the Lord is very compassionate and merciful. Believers are not to swear oaths but to let their yes be yes and their no be no. The suffering should pray, the cheerful should sing praise, and the sick should call for the elders, who will pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. Believers should confess their sins to one another and pray for one another, because the prayer of a righteous man is powerful, as Elijah's prayers were. Finally, whoever turns a wandering sinner back from his error saves a soul from death and covers a multitude of sins.

I learned the power of honest confession in a 12-step program. Walking into my first meeting on May 29, 2020, I was ashamed and broken. Hearing others tell the truth about their struggles

helped me tell the truth about mine. James 5:16 says to confess to one another and pray for one another. There is healing in that.

Chapter 5 Study Questions

1. What sins does James charge the rich with in 5:1-6?

2. Who hears the cries of the workers who were cheated? (5:4)

3. What does the farmer teach us about waiting for the Lord's coming? (5:7-8)

4. What examples of patient endurance does James give in 5:10-11?

5. What does James say about oaths, and how should a believer's yes and no be? (5:12)

6. According to 5:13-16, what should a believer do when suffering, when cheerful, and when sick?

7. What does Elijah's example teach about prayer? (5:17-18)

8. Knowing that the Lord's coming is near, what would you change about how you are living today? (5:8)

9. Is there a trusted believer you could be honest with about a struggle and ask to pray for you? (5:16)

10. Is there someone who has wandered from the faith whom God may be calling you to reach out to? (5:19-20)

Conclusion

James is a short letter, but it does not let us stay comfortable. In five chapters James has looked at faith from every side of ordinary life. He showed us faith in trials, holding steady because God is building endurance in us. He showed us faith in temptation, refusing to blame God and turning from our own desires. He showed us faith in church, welcoming the poor man as warmly as the rich one. He showed us faith in what we say, faith in how we plan, faith in how we treat the people who work for us, and faith in how we pray when we are suffering or sick.

As I said at the start of this study, the guiding principle throughout has been to read God's Word plainly, as it is written, and let Scripture explain Scripture. When we do that with James, we find that he and Paul are not at odds. Paul tells us how a sinner is made right with God: by grace, through faith, apart from works. James tells us what that faith looks like once it is alive in us. It hears the word and does it. It loves its neighbor. It bridles the tongue. It draws near to God. James put it this way: "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (1:22).

I hope this study has done what I set out to do: bring you closer to God, help you grow in your walk with Him, and encourage you to live out what you believe. James wrote to believers who were poor, scattered, and mistreated, and he did not promise them an easy road. He promised them that God gives wisdom to those who ask, grace to the humble, and a crown of life to those who endure. And he reminded them that the Lord is coming. "You also be patient; strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near" (5:8).

James's message is the same for us today as it was for the twelve tribes in the dispersion. A faith that only talks cannot save, but the faith God gives is a living faith. It is God who gives new life. "Having willed it, He brought us forth by the word of truth" (1:18). Every good and perfect gift comes from Him, and the greatest gift is His Son. The only thing required of us to spend eternity with God is to receive His Son, Jesus, as our Lord and Savior.

If you haven't yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, or if you want to deepen the one you already have with Him, I invite you to pray this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, You are the Savior of the world, and You forgive all who come to You. I come before You to confess that I have sinned against You. I have rebelled against You and put myself first above You and all others. I want to have a deep, meaningful relationship with You where I can show others by my demeanor and character that You are first in my life. I am asking for Your forgiveness for all my sins. You died for me on the cross so that I could be forgiven and made right with God. Please help me not forget that You gave Your very life for me. I am asking that You take control of my life and make a new creature out of me and into the person You want me to be. I thank You, Lord, and I love You. Amen.

If you prayed this prayer, tell another believer, ask a pastor about being baptized, and find a church where you can grow and serve. Then open God's Word every day, and "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21).

Old and New Testament Links in James

This table lists every Old and New Testament link printed in this study, in verse order. I took the links from the Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, with help from the OpenBible.info cross-references, and I checked each one by reading both passages in the Steadfast Literal Bible. Where I was not sure of a link, I left it out.

Verse in this study	Old Testament passage	Kind
1:10-11	Isaiah 40:6-7	alluded to
2:8	Leviticus 19:18	quoted
2:9	Leviticus 19:15	alluded to
2:11	Exodus 20:13-14	quoted
2:11	Deuteronomy 5:17-18	quoted
2:19	Deuteronomy 6:4	alluded to
2:21	Genesis 22:9-10	alluded to
2:23	Genesis 15:6	quoted
2:23	2 Chronicles 20:7	alluded to
2:23	Isaiah 41:8	alluded to
2:25	Joshua 2:1	alluded to
2:25	Joshua 2:4	alluded to
2:25	Joshua 2:15-16	alluded to
2:25	Joshua 2:21	alluded to
3:8	Psalm 140:3	alluded to
3:9	Genesis 1:26	alluded to
3:9	Genesis 5:1	alluded to
4:6	Proverbs 3:34	quoted
4:8	Psalm 24:4	alluded to
4:12	Isaiah 33:22	alluded to
4:14	Proverbs 27:1	alluded to
5:4	Deuteronomy 24:15	alluded to
5:4	Malachi 3:5	alluded to
5:5	Jeremiah 12:3	alluded to
5:7	Deuteronomy 11:14	alluded to
5:11	Job 1:21	alluded to
5:11	Job 42:12	alluded to
5:17	1 Kings 17:1	alluded to
5:18	1 Kings 18:42	alluded to
5:18	1 Kings 18:45	alluded to

Bibliography

The following sources were consulted for this study. The Jewish historian Josephus is named in the text where his work is used. The commentary reflects my own study and convictions, and any direct quotation from an outside source is identified and cited at the point where it appears.

Green, Jay P., Sr. (ed.). The Interlinear Bible: Hebrew-Greek-English. Hendrickson Publishers, 1986 (2nd ed.; printing used 2005). ISBN 1-56563-977-4.

Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, about 1830. Public domain.

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