

FAITH AND WISDOM



BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

James 1:1–11

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. (James 1:5)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

The final five sessions of our study of Wisdom concern the Epistle of James. This letter is categorized as a general epistle because it does not appear to have been written to a particular church among the faith communities established by Jewish Christians in dispersion. Unlike Paul's letters, then, it does not address controversies unique to a specific group of people but rather dispenses general wisdom for the faithful. It is a bit of a hybrid, a wisdom text that begins like a letter, with a salutation, but does not have the closing we find in other epistles.

Scholars consider the likely identification for the letter-writer to be James, the brother of Jesus, or someone writing in his name. Many scholars date the book within his lifetime (James was martyred in 69 CE), but its dating is speculative and ranges from the 40s CE to the second century. We know from the book of Acts that James became the leader of the Christians in Jerusalem and a major player in the dispute over whether circumcision and other Jewish religious practices should be required for Gentile converts (Acts 15). The epistle does not take on such controversial topics but sticks to more basic expectations for Christians, particularly the care we show for others.

Martin Luther did not like the letter from James, with its emphasis on actions as a measure of righteousness. In the coming weeks we will examine the claims made by James and attempt to acknowledge both the wisdom and the theological challenges found in this ancient text. Which matters most for Christians, our faith or our works?

Saving God, give us the lively minds of enthusiastic students and grace with each other as our conversations unfold. We ask in the name of the Great Teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

James 1:1–11

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

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

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

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

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT DOUBT


The opening verses of James include a harsh description of people who doubt (vv. 7–8). Because last week’s lesson emphasized the importance of asking questions, we will want to consider how intellectual and spiritual curiosity both resemble and differ from doubt in the life of faith. We will also want to consider potential harm these verses might do in our faith communities.

James writes that God will give us wisdom if we ask for it, but we know from reading the Gospels that even with Jesus in the room, the disciples did not always understand what he tried to tell them. Their questions might have been frustrating, as a child’s can be to a parent, but asking for explanations and wrestling with the Scripture to better comprehend its meaning are time-honored and faithful spiritual pursuits. Asking a question for deeper understanding does not necessarily equate to having doubts.

Doubt in Scripture is inextricably tied to the story of Thomas in John 20, who missed the first appearance the risen Christ made to the disciples in the upper room. We might wonder whether Thomas doubted the resurrection or perhaps whether he doubted his own place among the disciples, having been left out of an important event. When Thomas saw him there a week later, Christ taught that deep faith can require believing even what we cannot see, a challenge we face as Christians today.

He did not teach that Thomas or others who had doubts were “double-minded and unstable,” as James does. It would be helpful to know where the writer was coming from. The word “double-minded” does not appear elsewhere in Scripture, and some scholars view it as having been invented by the writer of the letter. Did James speak from experience with a double-crosser who harmed the early Christian community?

Without context, we can only evaluate the words themselves. They seem to leave no room for doubt at all and describe God as favoring the confident claimants while cutting off the doubtful. Those words may sound especially concerning if we know and care for neighbors, friends, or family members who struggle with mental illness and if we suffer from them ourselves. Doubt about faith matters or one’s place in the faith community can be among the cognitive distortions that plague people who live with depression or anxiety. We will want to take care in discussing this assertion by James and show empathy for those who may be harmed by hearing the words as exclusionary. James’s assertion must not be the last word on doubt or God’s response to it.

 How would you describe the difference between having questions and having doubts?

NOTHING BUT JOY

Although the letter from James became part of the Christian canon, its teaching does not recount any of the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It does, however, include themes familiar from the Pauline epistles and 1 Peter. James echoes their encouragement to the faithful in adversity. They all agree that we can grow in our faith by developing endurance in suffering. What sounds acceptable in the second person—finding joy in a test of your faith—can read as much harder in the first person—

finding joy in a test of mine. To embrace this, we might want to consider the experiences of leaders among the early Christians, some of whom went to prison, while others died for their beliefs. They held onto their faith in Jesus Christ while under threat, and at the same time they both spread the good news and began to organize the communities of faith they led. Working for something we believe deeply can inspire us to stay in the struggle and help us to feel close to the God we follow.

We might also think of people we know whose faith carries them through difficulties we have never experienced. Consider the young widow who writes about her sense of loss but never seems defeated by it, although that is not the same thing as never feeling it. Her honesty about the process of adjusting with her children to a new life she never wanted reveals both the challenges she faces and the joy she finds in her family.

It is not unusual to turn to God and ask for help when we are faced with ultimate questions. For most of us, however, the trials of life take more ordinary form. We face disappointments in love, conflict in the workplace, too much or not enough money, or the decline in health or ability that comes as we age. We may understate how hard those things feel, even when they are commonplace; we may think they do not rise to the level of a test. What would it be like to give our less dramatic life conflicts and endeavors the respect we give to larger trials? Seeking wisdom from God helps us mature in faith in all circumstances.

Hard times in life come to all of us, sometimes for no reason we can see, and other times because of the actions of the people in our lives or the circumstances of the world. God does not set these tests for us, but God will help us find and develop the inner qualities we need to mature in spirit.

 **When have you called on God for wisdom in a particular situation?**

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

When we read the final verses of this week's passage, we might remember the early days of the Christian community in Jerusalem as described in Acts 2, where the believers "held all things in common," making sure that they met the needs of the least advantaged. We also hear echoes of Jesus and his formula of the first being last and the last being first in James's imagery for believers who are poor and those who are rich. Those

without will be raised up and those with it all will wilt like flowers.

In the United States, our culture values both individualism and financial success, both of which conflict with the message James conveys and the teachings of Jesus. It would surprise us to hear of a local congregation in which members hold all assets in common. There are very few Protestant movements where people live in intentional community and share resources. One example is Shane Claiborne's The Simple Way, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.¹ In 1995, a group of college students sought to show solidarity with a group of homeless moms and children who took action by refusing to leave the shelter of a Catholic church. A few years later, those students moved into the same neighborhood to form a spiritual community. After twenty years of growth, they continue to hold resources in common and serve the neighborhood, with an emphasis on care for those in need.

Not only do Protestant Christians prefer to manage their own resources, they don't even come close to tithing in their giving. A 2014 study indicates mainline Protestants give on average 2.54 percent of their income to their churches, and evangelical Protestants' giving was not much higher, at 3.2 percent. While giving by individuals is down in both categories over the past thirty years, Evangelical giving is declining at a faster pace. A current concern for churches is the impact on giving caused by a change in US tax laws, as fewer people itemize deductions and have lost the past benefits of charitable giving.

The truth is that both an ancient story, such as Jesus' statement about the first and last, and the changes in the tax code will sound different to us depending on our own economic status. We might be afraid to be called up to the front of the crowd. We might need that deduction to justify giving or giving as much as we have done. That might be smart, but would it be wise?

 **How do you think the members of your congregation would feel about living in community like the early Christians in Acts? What aspect of sharing resources sounds appealing? What could be a deal breaker?**

1. www.thesimpleway.org/our-story.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. Most likely the James who wrote this book is “James, the Lord’s brother” (see Galatians 1:19).
2. Verse 2 represents the first of fourteen times James addresses his readers as “brothers” (or “brothers and sisters”; Greek, *adelphoi*). See 1:16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 10, 12, 19 (except the NRSV does not translate *adelphoi* in 1:16, 19; 5:7, 10, 12).
3. James’s perspective on trials’ producing character echoes that of Paul (Romans 5:3) and of Peter (1 Peter 1:6).
4. The description “double-minded” is unique in the New Testament and ancient Greek literature. Some biblical scholars believe that James coined the term.
5. Verses 9 and 10 reflect Jesus’ warnings about the difficulty (impossibility) of the rich to be saved as well as the concept of the first being last and the last first (cf. Matthew 19:23–30).

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Aug. 3	Impartial Relationships with One Another	Leviticus 19:13–18
T	Aug. 4	Praised for Steadfast Faith in Persecution	2 Thessalonians 1:3–5, 11–12
W	Aug. 5	The Poor Blessed; the Rich Criticized	Luke 6:20–26
Th	Aug. 6	Suffering for Doing the Right Thing	1 Peter 3:13–19
F	Aug. 7	God’s Choice—the Foolish, Weak, Lowly	1 Corinthians 1:26–31
Sa	Aug. 8	Treat the Rich and Poor Impartially	James 2:1–7