

# JAMES 1:1-18

## 2: FACING TRIALS



### Historical Context & Background

The book of James was written around 44-48 A.D., so a little more than a decade after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. The early church had a boom after this, which upset the unconverted Jews of Jerusalem. After the martyrdom of St. Stephen (Acts 7) the church scattered because of persecution (Acts 11:19). James, “the Lord’s Brother”\* (Galatians 1:19) was the head of the church in Jerusalem at that time, and wrote a letter to his former church members who were scattered abroad (Jew and Gentile: the early church adopted the “twelve tribes” language, seeing itself as the renewed Israel). So we have a group cast out of the home where their faith bloomed, trying to live it out in a hostile culture. We can relate. Despite going abroad, the church remained persecuted, but also began to slip in their commitment to the Lord and to each other. James writes his general letter to the church to encourage them in their trials and to admonish them for their spiritual problems so they might commit themselves wholly to God.

\*There is debate about whether James was the half-brother of Jesus, or whether the word “brother” used in Galatians was colloquial. It’s an irrelevant debate for your group!



### Related Passages

Romans 5:3-4 - Paul also discusses the role of suffering and trials in the Christian life. Our response to them can be transformative.

Matthew 21:21-22 - Jesus on faith being the key which unlocks the power of prayer.

Ephesians 4:17-24 - Paul’s flow charts showing the two paths we’re offered (a picture is at the end of this document).



### Key Terms

**Servant:** *doulos* in the Greek, which is better translated as slave. When James calls himself a *doulos* of God, he means he wholly belongs to God, a major theme of the letter. A slave of the Lord was also a term of dignity, applied to Moses and David. This concept alone has radical implications about power, hierarchy, service, etc.

**Crippled:** This word doesn’t merely mean an intellectual doubt, since Scripture actually vali-

dates our doubting (though it asks us to trust God through it). It can mean “to waver,” which has a great connection to James’ image in the next verse. It means something like asking with conflicting *loyalties*, for example to God and the world, or to God and mammon. It’s the prayer of one who lacks an anchor his soul (Heb. 6:19).

**Heavenly Lights:** The planets, stars, sun, and moon. For ancient people these were part of the heavens, which demonstrated a permanence and perfection, and which were the source of light. For the Jew and Christian, they’re the visible reminders of God’s good creation.



## Key Themes

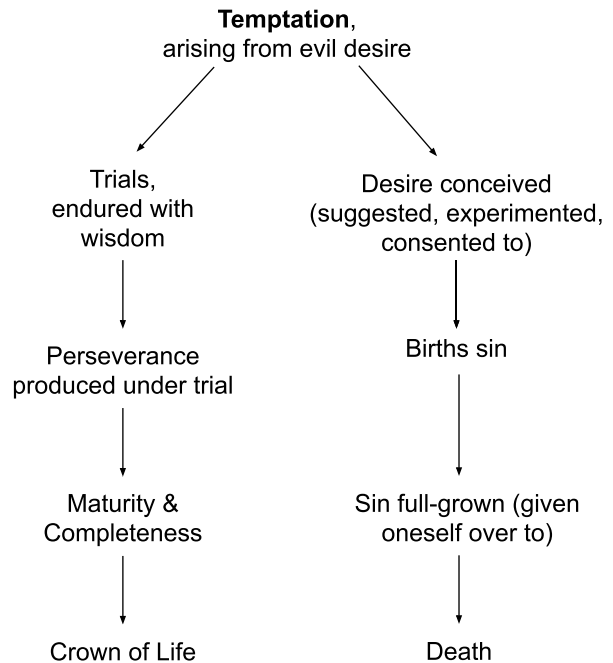
**Trials & Wisdom:** The first command of James is to have pure joy. This is what he demands of the church. But it’s difficult and strange when paired with what follows: facing trials of many kinds. That word “trial” could have two meanings, being tempted to sin (internal trial) or being persecuted in some way (external trial). So it covers all people. When James says have joy, he doesn’t mean we look at our spiritual and external afflictions with a kind of cheap optimism (everything is great!) or indifference to suffering. We’re not meant to think pain and suffering are good in themselves. Scripture categorically proclaims the enmity of death, pain, and suffering (Revelation 21:4).

But James doesn’t want us to despair. He doesn’t want us to surrender to grief, become Eeyore’s. This will lead us to just resign ourselves to our sin and give into temptation; or lead us to resign ourselves to the pressures of the world, a kind of practical giving up of the faith. We don’t laugh at pain, suffering, death. But we also don’t resign ourselves to trials. James’ vision is to reshape how we experience grief and trial, and how we use it. James wants us to be “mature and complete,” which only occurs when we’re refined. Like metal, we have to be heated, hammered, shaped. Only then do we shine with strength. Resisting sin, facing persecution, even staring down the barrel of our own grief and refusing to despair all fashion us into mature believers who put their hope in God. How do we do this? James tells us: Pray for wisdom. Let God help reframe our lives. The Bible sings the value of wisdom (Proverbs 8:35). On a campus where everything is about knowledge, we’re called to have wisdom. This is the path to endurance through trials, and the path to refinement and maturity.

It could be really helpful for you to parse out what James means by having joy. There probably are people in your group with deep wounds who need to hear Scripture doesn’t just paint over them. There probably are people in your group who feel afflicted by temptation (to sleep around, to watch porn, to get drunk, to cheat on tests to get the A’s their parents expect). There probably are people who feel pressured to conform to the practices of campus, or feel ostracized for not joining in. Why shouldn’t they give in? It’s not just moralistic rules; James asks us to imagine ourselves, fully refined with a crown of glory. But there also may be people who don’t feel like they are being tried, not tempted or persecuted. This probably means they’ve conformed too much to culture, or they’re deadened to their own sins. James has warnings for this group.

**Temptation:** James gives two major progressions in this section, which mirror each other. When faced with a trial or temptation, one can proceed down the progression toward the “crown of life” (1:2-4; 12) or down the path which leads to death (1:13-15). Both start with temptation, but when faced with our temptations and desires, we can go one of two ways. For further illustration, you can check out Ephesians 4:17-24. There’s a flowchart from that passage at the bottom of this document.

This is helpful because not only does it explain the origin and progression of temptation and sin, but it shows us the root: desire. St. Augustine said that we are fundamentally lovers. We have to be taught to desire the kingdom, and we need to work on curbing our desires for sin. How can this be done? The classic answer is worship. This is where James moves: God is the perfect Father (see the next theme) and worthy of our worship, not our blame. It’s really helpful to explore what you love with your group: what do they think about; what are their habits; where do they most often go; what constitutes the “rituals” of their week; how often do you pray? The real task of discipleship is training our desires so that we want to proceed down the path toward the crown of life. How do we train our desires? Establishing rhythms and habits of holy practice (go to synergy, pray every day, spend time with Christian community, etc.), cultivate imagination and community.



**The Tempter:** Through all of this James wants us to be clear, God isn’t the one who’s trying to trip us up. God isn’t just up there preparing pop-quizzes so he can give us a (failing) grade on our spirituality. James thinks this is really detrimental to our understanding of who God is. Do we view God as the tempter, waiting for us to mess up so he can accuse us? This is a great question to explore with your group. Because that’s actually the exact representation of Satan in Scripture—the father of lies, the great tempter, the accuser. James here wants us to see God differently: He’s the author of all things good and perfect, the Father of the heavenly lights, and the light which drives away shadows. When we’re making our way through that flow-chart, we shouldn’t think of God slamming us with temptation to send us to death, but as our helper who wants to carry us to life and crown us. There are examples where God tests his people; but it’s clear his goal is never to destroy their faith, but to strengthen it, and if it is shaken to restore it.

## BB Quotes & Stories

*“All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”*

ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

*"The desire of your heart constitutes your prayer."*

ST. AUGUSTINE

Read *Silence* by Shusaku Endo (or the film adaptation by Martin Scorsese) and contrast the witness of the Japanese martyrs with the choices of the main character, Rodrigues.

## ! Three Main Points

1. We need to reframe how we think about trials so that we can see them as opportunities for growth (and so resist giving in), as if it were Spiritual weightlifting.
2. God wants us to be mature and perfect, and he wants to crown us with life. We can't see God as the enemy of life, but as its author and greatest champion.
3. Our hearts are what lead to our temptations, so we have to retrain our desires to desire his kingdom.

## ? Discussion Questions

- In what sense can we see ourselves in the same situation as James' audience? Should we feel like "exiles?" Are we experiencing trials for our faith? Are we doing something wrong if we don't feel like exiles on campus?
- What is the first command given in this section (and therefore the first command given for the whole work)? Do you intuitively consider joy the first commandment of the Lord?
- How does James' desire (and ultimately God's desire) for us to have life help us understand our temptations, the exhortations to live well and avoid sin?
- Why are trials helpful? What does it mean to have "pure joy?" Should we be happy when we're afflicted or grieving?
- What are the "trials" for you? Where do you feel the pressure externally or internally? Where do you think you aren't good at perseverance? How can you grow in perseverance, and what is this group's role in helping?
- What is the role of doubt? Why does doubt make you like a wave? (You need to understand the full range of the term doubt in James 1:6 to properly get this. See the key terms section.)
- How is the poor brother (1:9) meant to take pride in his poverty? Should we consider being poor something to glory in (cf. 2:5) to the exclusion of being rich? How do poverty and riches fit into James' discussion in the preceding verses (what might riches mask or inhibit, or what kind of temptation might having wealth lead to)?
- Why should the rich man boast because his wealth passes away? (Transitory riches fading helps one recognize eternal riches which don't fade; the rich man who recognizes the temporariness of his riches, or that he will die while business goes on, this man will understand his place before God.)
- In 10 years, what kind of person do you want to be? What pressures are you experiencing which would lead you to not be that kind of person?
- In many ways, "life" and "death" are the two major themes of Scripture. Death comes

through Adam, life through Christ. Death is the final enemy; Christ came so that we may have life, and life to the full. How do we see James entering into this discussion, illustrating this theme that runs across all Scripture?

- What do you think James means when he calls God the “Father of the heavenly lights?”
- Where do you think temptation comes from? Do you get angry with God for tempting you (trick question!)?
- If desire is the root of our temptations, how do we fix that? Can we change our desires? If so, how?
- What are the desires of your heart? How do you figure out what it is you love and desire?
- How are we given birth through a word? What does that mean? (For the leader, the word means a ton! The first creation was birthed by God speaking; and the Word—Christ—came to give new birth to new creation, since the old was messed up. The word we hear now—the gospel—is the good news of this rebirth. This could be a great question for basic gospel presentation to new Christians.)

## Application and Practice

**Attend Synergy** for a month. If worship is how we reshape our desires, we need to worship! Commit to worshipping God.

**Listen** only to worship music for a week. At the end of the week, journal how your thinking changed and whether this helped you live better.

**Read** a proverb every day this week. We must ask God for wisdom, but we need also to recognize he’s given us a whole lot of wisdom in Scripture already! Proverbs is a great study in wisdom. Soak in it.

## Going Deeper

**Sermon:** “Appetites” – Andy Stanley

**Video:** “You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit” – James K. A. Smith

**Video:** “Taking a Liturgical Audit of Your Life” – James K. A. Smith