

JAMES 1 – Wisdom for Everyday Life
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I'm excited to begin our Bible study on the book of James. The theme of this study is Wisdom for Everyday Life.

Wisdom is one of the main things we need in life. We all have times in life when we need wisdom to make a decision, to answer a problem, to help a relationship. And the key to wisdom is not just knowing something about some things – it's about knowing the One who knows everything about everything! Proverbs 4:7 says:

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.

In other words, make sure that the main thing you get is wisdom from God.

The book of James is like a New Testament version of Proverbs. The focus of James is on practical ways to live out a life of faith in Christ. James encourages God's people to live like God's people! James teaches us that a faith that does not produce life change is no faith at all. A key verse to understanding James is James 2:17

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James is the ultimate description of the relationship between faith and works.

I want to give you a little of the background of this book. Many scholars believe that James is one of the first New Testament books written – if not the first. It was probably written around 45 AD. That date is given because it seems to have been written before the meeting of the Jerusalem Council, which happened in 49 AD. Also James was writing to Jews who became believers in Christ. The decision to take the gospel to the Gentiles did not happen until the Jerusalem Council in 49 AD. James would have surely addressed Gentiles in his letter if that event had already taken place. Instead, James opens with this statement:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

So – who is this James who wrote this letter? There are five men named James in the New Testament.

- 1- James, son of Zebedee, brother of John, was one of the 12 disciples
- 2- James, the son of Alphaeus, was also one of the 12.
- 3- Mark 15:40 mentions James the Younger whose mother Mary was there when Jesus was crucified.

- 4- An apostle named Judas (not Iscariot) had a father named James.
- 5- Jesus had a brother named James.

Matthew 13:55 lists the names of Jesus' brothers:

...His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas.

This Judas is the one we call Jude who also wrote a book of the Bible. Here's the thing: none of Jesus's siblings believed He was the Messiah. John 7:5 says:

Even His own brothers did not believe in Him.

Mark 3:20-21 says:

One time Jesus entered a house, and the crowds began to gather again. Soon He and His disciples couldn't even find time to eat. When His family heard what was happening, they tried to take Him away. "He's out of his mind," they said.

Not only did Jesus' family not believe in Him; they thought He was crazy. So, contrary to many false gospels, Jesus did nothing as a child to make people think He was the son of God. He did no miracles. So, His own family did not believe in Him. Yet, after the resurrection, everything changed!

Acts 1 tells about Jesus appearing to His disciples after the resurrection and then it tells about Him ascending to Heaven. Acts 1:12-14 says:

They returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives... Those present were Peter, John, James, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew; James son of Alphaeus Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and His brothers.

This is one of the most powerful proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ: His brothers went from skeptics to believers. Including James! James saw Jesus, became a believer, then became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James. What changed this skeptic into a believer? The resurrection! 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 lists everyone Jesus appeared to after resurrecting:

He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time... Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Notice that Jesus made a point of appearing to His brother James. We know the Bible is talking about His brother James here because the others named James were included in the 12. Why did Jesus appear to James? Think about this - "What would your brother have to do to convince you he was the Son of God?" Wouldn't the answer be something like rising from the dead?

James was changed from a skeptic to a believer by the resurrection! And that resurrection power is still changing lives today.

The changed life of James is amazing. As we've seen, he went from being a skeptic to a believer to being one of the 120 praying when the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. Then he became an apostle. The Apostle Paul said in Galatians 1:15-19 that when he was saved, He did not go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles at first.

Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. The only other apostle I met at that time was James, the Lord's brother.

Not only was James an apostle – but we learn from the book of Acts that he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul said in Galatians 2:9

James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers.

Luke also said in Acts 21:17-18

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.

One of the most pivotal chapters in the New Testament is Acts 15. It gives the account of the first Jerusalem council where a decision was made about what to do about Gentile believers. Acts 15:1-11 tells the story of how Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem and debated those who were saying that Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to be saved. Verses 6 and 7 say:

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them...

I'm not going to read everything he said, but verses 12-22 say:

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed His concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this... "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

What I want you to see is that many of the heavyweights were there: Paul, Barnabas, Peter and the other apostles – but James was the one who made the ultimate decision! James had become the leader or bishop of the church in Jerusalem! This is such an amazing transformation. But – even as the leader of the church in Jerusalem – he had a heart for believers everywhere. That’s why he said in James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

James wrote to Jewish believers who were scattered around the world. Remember, Jesus said to take the gospel to the nations, but that really didn’t happen until the believers were scattered because of persecution.

Notice how James introduces himself: not as the brother of Jesus or an apostle, but as a servant of God. A servant of the Lord Jesus Christ!

James – the former skeptic – called Jesus His Lord and he called himself a servant of Jesus. The Greek word translated servant is *doulos* – one who voluntarily, willingly and wholeheartedly submits to the will of another. Lord means the master of the servant.

So, James had gone from a skeptic of Christ to a slave of Christ. And he eventually became a martyr for Christ. That’s right – James gave the ultimate sacrifice for Christ. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, James was stoned in AD 62 because of his devotion to Christ. That’s how far he had come in his faith – from skeptic of Christ to martyr for Christ.

James went through many trials and persecutions for his faith. The whole early church did – that’s why they had left Jerusalem and were dispersed throughout the world. That explains his opening words in verses 2-4

Count it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James does not start by giving a blessing or saying a prayer – but by telling us to rejoice when we go through trials. And the trials he is talking about are not things like having to wait a few months to get your new car! He was talking to people who were persecuted for their faith. Some of them, including James the brother of John had been killed!

Yet, James says to have pure joy – unmixed with anything else! Really? Facing trouble is an opportunity for great joy? YES! This is not about slapping on a fake smile and acting like you’re happy. This is about taking the broader view that God works all things out for our good and having the joy of knowing I’m going to come through this better and stronger than I was before!

I want you to see the key words James uses: we count it all joy because we know something! What do we know? We know the results of having joy in adversity. We know that the testing of our faith produces something in us: perseverance. And perseverance produces something in us: maturity.

I looked up the meaning of the original Greek word translated “count” and it is a leadership word having two meanings: “to consider” and “to have rule over; to command with authority.”

The word “trials” means adversity. So, the Bible says to command with authority – joy – when we face tough times. Now there is a place for resisting the enemy, but the Bible tells us to command ourselves to be joyful even in the midst of trials.

James is not saying to enjoy adversity. But he is saying that we can find joy in every situation because the joy of the Lord is our strength! And we can have joy in every situation because we know God works everything together for our good! Here’s an example from Acts 13:49-52.

Paul and Barnabas were sent out as missionaries to preach the good news. It was not easy and they received much persecution. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Many of us – if we were persecuted – would be filled with anger or hatred or discouragement. But the disciples got persecuted and they were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. This is not natural. We can’t do this in our own strength. That’s why we need to command ourselves with authority, but we also need to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Joy comes from faith in God and being filled with the Spirit. Being filled with joy and being filled with the Holy Spirit go together. Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. When you are filled with the Spirit of God, you will be full of joy.

But, people with no joy will try to find a substitute. They look for it in money and don’t find it. They look for it in power and fame and don’t find it. They look for it in drugs and alcohol and don’t find it.

But where is real joy found? Joy comes from relationship with Jesus Christ. Isaiah 12:2-3 says:

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

In other words, salvation leads to joy. Christians should be the most joyful people on earth.

Unfortunately, many Christians have given others a wrong view of Jesus because of their lack of joy. Now I know Jesus wept and He was a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief – but that’s not the only emotions He expressed. Jesus laughed and had fun! In fact, listen to what Hebrews 1:9 says about Jesus:

God has anointed You, pouring out the oil of joy on You more than on anyone else.

Jesus had more joy and gladness than anyone who ever lived.

Too many people have a wrong view of Jesus and the misconception that being a Christian condemns you to a life full of rules and regulations whose number one priority is to make you miserable. What a lie! Jesus preached the kingdom of God and Romans 14:17 says

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

If you are looking for joy in your life, you will find it in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A personal relationship with God begins in acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord of your life.

We must get back to the place where we celebrate Jesus regardless of our circumstances or problems. That requires perseverance – which requires waiting. We must understand that God’s delays are not necessarily God’s denials. In fact, times of waiting are essential to our restoration and spiritual growth. James 1:4 says:

Let patience have its perfect work, that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Patience is not a passive waiting, but an active endurance. It’s not so much the ability to sit quietly in a doctor’s waiting room as it is the ability to finish a marathon! Perseverance requires faith! To persevere literally means to go through the severe. It means to remain steady in a tough situation rather than trying to escape it.

By the way – adversity doesn’t produce faith! Faith is tested by trials – not produced by trials. Adversity reveals if we really have faith or not! But when adversity is faced with faith, it produces patience – if we respond to it correctly. Adversity can make us bitter or better! Bitterness comes from facing it with unbelief – betterment comes from facing it with faith and counting it all joy!

How do you know if you are mature in your faith? When you can face adversity with faith and patient endurance without giving up and without turning on God!

You'll never grow to maturity without patience. It takes time.
 For David that meant 12 years between anointing and becoming king.
 For Noah that meant waiting 100 years before rained.
 Abraham waited years before he received God's promise of a son.
 Moses waited on the back side of the desert for 40 years.
 Joseph waited in a pit and a prison before he was exalted to a palace.
 God worked in all of them during the time of waiting.

So, please don't fret over the length of time God is working in you. Remember, the intensity of what God wants to do through you will determine the intensity of the preparation. So, trust the timing of God. You could be one year, one month, one week, one day or one hour away from a sudden move of God in your life. Embrace the preparation time. It is truly not wasted time.

You have to find the joy in waiting and the way you do that is to remind yourself that growth will not happen in us without tough times. God has to do His work in us before He can do His work through us. You see many times we think we're ready but God knows we're not. That's why if God says wait then it's not time yet!

Just keep doing what Psalm 37:34 says:

Wait for the Lord and keep His way. He will exalt you to inherit the land.

Keep waiting on God, trusting God, and walk in His ways, and in due time He will open doors for you. And James says, "Stay joyful in the process." And remember - the joy of the Lord is not something we DO, it's something we receive. Jesus said in John 16:24

Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

You will find joy when you ask Jesus for joy.
 And you will find joy when you quit being a victim of circumstances!
 You will find joy when you start commanding joy in your life!
 So, when you are in a tough time – command joy!
 When you are in a good time – command joy!
 When your circumstances do not result in happiness – command joy!

And you can only do that when you are born again, full of the Spirit, and when you know that God is faithful and He's working everything together for your good!