

SERIES ON JAMES

Trials & Wisdom, Riches & Poverty (James 1:1-11)

By Jerry Truex; September 5, 2010

A. Introduction

Today we begin a series on the Letter of James. The series will have eleven parts and take us up through the middle of November.

1. Genre: Epistle & Wisdom

What kind of genre is James? First, it is a letter or **epistle**. It has a sender (James), addressees (the twelve tribes of the dispersion), a main body (2:1—5:18), and a closing (5:19-20). So it looks like a letter, but it deviates from the patterns of ancient letter writing.

James offers very practical instruction, similar to Proverbs and Sirach. For that reason James is called Christian **wisdom** literature. For example:

James 1:5. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God who gives to all generously..." (NRSV)

Prov. 2:6. For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (NRSV)

2. Three Themes

There are three main themes in James. These themes intertwine, repeat, and expand over the course of five chapters.

1. Trials in the Christian life
2. Wisdom
3. Riches and poverty

3. Outline

The overall outline looks like this:¹

¹ Adaptation from Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 26-7, who follow Peter David, *The Epistle of James* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 22-28..

- † Greetings (1:1)
- † Three Key Themes (1:2-11)
 1. Trials in the Christian Life (1:2-4)
 2. Wisdom (1:5-8)
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- † Restatement of the Three Themes (1:12-27)
 1. Trials/Temptations in Relation to God (1:12-18)
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- † Expansion of the Three Themes (2:1–5:18)
 1. Riches and Poverty (2:1-26)
 - a. Favoritism Condemned (2:1-13)
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 2. Wisdom and Speech (3:1-4:12)
 - a. Power of the Tongue (3:1-12)
 - b. Wisdom from Above and Wisdom from Below (3:13-18)
 - c. Misuse of Speech (4:1-12)
 3. Trials and Temptations (4:13-5:18)
 - a. Planning apart from God's Will (3:13-17)
 - b. Responding to Oppression (5:1-12)
 - c. Anointing Prayer for Serious Illness (5:13-18)
- † Closing (5:19-20)

B. Greeting (1:1)

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

¹ Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ χαίρειν.

1. Who was "James"?

The letter claims to be written by someone named "James" (1:1).

a. Brother of Jesus

Is this "James" the brother of Jesus?

Mark 6:3. Is not this [Jesus] the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. (NRSV; cf. Matt 13:36)

James, the brother of Jesus, is mentioned by Paul in Gal. 1:18-19.

Gal. 1:18-19. ¹⁸ Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; ¹⁹ but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. (NRSV; cf. Acts 21:18)

b. Leader of Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13)

James, the brother of Jesus, "saw" the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:7) and became the leader of the church in Jerusalem shortly thereafter. He is mentioned in Act 15:13 as one of the leaders at the first Jerusalem council (cf. Acts 12:17; 21:18).

c. Knows the Jesus tradition

James is very familiar with Jesus' teaching. There are over thirty-five allusions to Jesus' teaching in this letter. For example:

Matthew 5:34-37. ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (NRSV)

James 5:12. ¹² Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (NRSV)

d. Died in 62 C.E. (Josephus)

Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, describes the death of James taking place in 62 C.E.:

Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he [Ananus, the high priest] assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20:200).

e. The Ossuary of James

An ossuary is a bone box (explain). In November 2002, a certain ossuary became public knowledge that had an Aramaic inscription in Aramaic, which reads, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."



Aramaic: Ya'akov bar Yosef akhui di Yeshua

English: James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus

The owner, **Oded Golan**, an engineer from Tel Aviv, bought the ossuary from an antiquities dealer in the 1970s for a few hundred dollars.

In 2001, Golan invited **André Lemaire**, one of the world's leading experts on ancient inscriptions to examine the ossuary. Lemaire was convinced it was authentic.

In 2002, the ossuary was on display at the **Royal Ontario Museum** from Nov 2002 to Jan 2003. The Royal Ontario Museum studied the ossuary and concluded it was authentic.

Ada Yardeni, a leading Israeli authority on Hebrew and Aramaic script, maintains that the inscription is authentic.

However, the **Israel Antiquities Authority** (IAA)—which has a history of hostility toward collectors such as Golan—studied the ossuary and, in June 2003, announced it was a forgery. The patina looked suspicious.²

Archaeologists and scholars are divided about the authenticity of the ossuary.³ However, I believe it is possible, if not likely, that this ossuary is the bone box of the man who wrote this letter.

2. Who was it written to?

James is addressed to certain a community of believers, the “twelve tribes of the Diaspora.”

- The twelve tribes is a symbolic reference to Israel, the descendants of Jacob/Israel, who had twelve sons/tribes.
- The term Diaspora—which means dispersion—refers to Jews and Jewish Christians, who live outside of the land of Israel, perhaps Syria (1:1)⁴

What else do we know about these people?

- They are poor and disadvantaged; James is antagonistic toward the rich (1:10-11; 2:6-7; 4:13-17; 5:1-6)
- They are Jewish believers, who meet in a synagogue/assembly (2:2)⁵
- They have teachers (3:1) and elders (5:14)
- They misunderstand Paul’s teaching (2:14-26)
- They have a problem with slander and other forms of verbal abuse

C. Three Key Themes (1:2-11)

1. Trials in the Christian Life (1:2-4)

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

² Πᾶσαν χαρὰν ἠγάσασθε, ἀδελφοί μου, ὅταν πειρασμοῖς περιπέσητε ποικίλοις, ³ γινώσκοντες ὅτι τὸ δοκίμιον ὑμῶν τῆς πίστεως κατεργάζεται ὑπομονήν. ⁴ ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ ἔργον τέλειον ἐχέτω, ἵνα ᾦτε τέλειοι καὶ ὀλόκληροι ἐν μηδενὶ λειπόμενοι.

² Patina = a film formed from chemicals that seep out of or drip onto the stone over hundreds of years; the coating that builds up on an ancient artifact. There were two issues: first, IAA said they found what they call “fake patina” on the inscription and second they claimed that the inscription cuts through the patina on the ossuary.

³ Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story & Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus & His Family* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003).

⁴ “Certain people came from James” to Syrian Antioch (Gal 2:12) supports this argument. Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 29.

⁵ Was James addressing Jewish Christians? On the one hand, James affirms the status of the Torah and One God (2:19), the foundation of Jewish faith. On the other, he does not mention circumcision, Sabbath, or food laws. So it is possible that his audience was made up of “God-fearers,” non-Jews who were attracted to the synagogue and the Jewish faith, but now taking up faith in the Messiah Jesus.

a. Trial/temptation (*peirosmos*)

The word for “**trial/temptation**” (*peirosmos*) refers to anything that proves or reveals the character of a person.⁶ The word is related to the word for attacker or pirate or (*peirates*).

Imagine a situation where you feel attacked by another person or by certain circumstances or your own thoughts or emotions. It’s a trial. Christians are not sheltered from adversity; Christians face trials.

It is also an opportunity. It’s an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of your character. When trials come (just about all the time), we can do one of three things: we can grow, remain the same, or regress.

b. Consider it (*hēgēsasthē*)

The verb, **consider it** (*hēgēsasthē*) is an imperative; James is saying, “make a mental judgment or choice” about what is happening—consider, reckon, regard, interpret—what is happening as **all joy** (*pasan charan*). The NRSV says, “Consider it nothing but joy.”

c. All joy (*pasan charan*)

James wants us to consider/interpret our trials as **all joy** (*pasan charan*) or total joy. Although it seems strange, trials are occasions for joy. Why? Because they are opportunities:

- To purify us of our attachments (purgation),
- To know the Christlike character (illumination), and
- To realize the divine image within us (unification).

Trials are like opportunities to go to the gym and exercise—not always pleasant or pleasurable—but completely joyous and satisfying.

d. Faith (*pistis*)

The issue is **faith** (*pistis*). Although “faith” is a noun, it is a verbal-noun. Faith refers to faithfulness, loyalty, or reliability.

So James is saying, “Your faithfulness, your loyalty, your reliability produces endurance.” Faith in action, coupled with endurance, leads to maturity (*telios*) without lacking anything (*mēdeni leipomenoi*)—“so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4).

⁶ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 47.

When we face trials/temptations, the question is: “Will I follow what God wants me to do or not?”

- If I chose not to do what God wants, then I’m not loyal or faithful to God and it is likely that I’m doing an “end-run” around God; I’m reaching for what I WANT outside of God’s will.
- If I chose to do what God wants, then I’m loyal or faithful to God and I’m trusting that God will provide what I need, when I need it. [Katie: “God doesn’t always come when you call, but He always shows up on time.”]

2. Divine Wisdom (1:5-8)

<p>⁵ If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶ But 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.</p>	<p>⁵ Εἰ δέ τις ὑμῶν λείπεται σοφίας, αἰτείτω παρὰ τοῦ διδόντος θεοῦ πᾶσιν ἀπλῶς καὶ μὴ ὀνειδίζοντος καὶ δοθήσεται αὐτῷ. ⁶ αἰτείτω δὲ ἔν πίστει μηδὲν διακρινόμενος· ὁ γὰρ διακρινόμενος ἕξοπι κλύδωνι θαλάσσης ἀνεμιζόμενῳ καὶ ῥιπιζόμενῳ. ⁷ μὴ γὰρ οἰέσθω ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἐκεῖνος ὅτι λήμψεται τι παρὰ τοῦ κυρίου, ⁸ ἀνὴρ δίψυχος, ἀκατάστατος ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦ.</p>
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a. Wisdom (*sophia*)

James next introduces what is critical for spiritual maturity and wholeness—wisdom. He says, “If you lack wisdom.” This is a first-class conditional, which assumes that that you lack wisdom. We don’t naturally have this type of wisdom.

At the end of verse 4, James said God will provide what we need; we will lack nothing!

Now he says we must not lack **wisdom (*sophia*)**. In general, wisdom does not refer to knowledge or intelligence, “but adds a practice element of living”; wisdom shows and enables us to walk with God.⁷

What does this wisdom look like?

James 3:17. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (NRSV)

This is very similar to the “fruit of the Spirit” mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23.

⁷ David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 50.

Galatians 5:22. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (NRSV)

It looks like Christ.

1 Cor. 1:30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God (NRSV).

So, there is a close connection between Wisdom, the Spirit of God, and Christ.

b. Ask (*aiteitō*) for wisdom

How do we get wisdom? It says, **ask (*aiteitō*)** God; the “asking” is a present tense imperative. That means you must continue to ask for wisdom. If it was just a one-time “asking,” it would be in the aorist tense. We must ask repeatedly. Never give up. Never stop.

c. The giving-God (*tou didontos theou*)

Who do we ask? The Greek literally says, “ask from **the giving-God.**” God gives continuously (present tense participle). We are to ask for wisdom repeatedly and God gives wisdom continuously. We are dependent on God. We are created in such a way that we cannot be autonomous from God. We are dependent creatures. You may not like it. You might want to “break-away” and be independent from God, but that is courting disaster. God is a giving-God because we are continually dependent on God.

d. To all (*pasin*)

To whom does God give? James says **to all (*pasin*)**—all, everyone, each person. If you ask for wisdom, God gives wisdom to you. There are no exceptions.

Whoever asks for Wisdom/Spirit, God gives generously and without hesitation. Does that mean that God gives wisdom to people who have not lived a godly life? Yes. God gives wisdom to anyone who asks. The wisdom God gives comes with the Holy Spirit.

e. In faith without doubt

How are we to ask? In what manner should we ask? James says “in faith without doubting.”

The problem here is James has just highlighted the universal generosity of God—God gives to everyone who asks. But now, James seems to say that people must ask with *sufficient confidence*.

Some people point to this verse (1:6) as a way to explain why some prayers are not granted: “You were not healed because you had doubt or you didn’t have enough faith.” This is a misconception. Verse 6 has nothing to do with “how much faith or doubt a person has.” It has nothing to do with health or getting this or that.

Rather, it has to do with whether someone asks for wisdom at all. If you ask for wisdom God—from James’ point of view—obviously you have faith and do not doubt. It is “faithful asking” and “asking faith.” They go together. It is action-faith.

When James saying: “Don’t let doubt keep you from asking.” Honest intellectual doubt is not in view here. For James, “doubt” is wavering back and forth—indecision about whether to ask God for wisdom in times of trial.⁸

James is promoting action-faith, faith that asks God continually, faith relies on God continuously. This is single minded, stable faith; not double-minded, hesitancy.

In plain English, James is saying, “Don’t hesitate to ask God for wisdom.”

3. Riches and Poverty (1:9-11)

<p>⁹ Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, ¹⁰ and [let] the rich [boast] in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.</p>	<p>⁹ Καυχάσθω δὲ ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὁ ταπεινὸς ἐν τῷ ὕψει αὐτοῦ, ¹⁰ ὁ δὲ Πλούσιος ἐν τῇ ταπεινώσει αὐτοῦ, ὅτι ὡς ἄνθος χόρτου παρελεύσεται. ¹¹ ἀνέτειλεν γὰρ ὁ ἥλιος σὺν τῷ καύσωνι καὶ ἐξήρανε τὸν χόρτον καὶ τὸ ἄνθος αὐτοῦ ἐξέπεσεν καὶ ἡ εὐπρέπεια τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἀπώλετο· οὕτως καὶ ὁ πλούσιος ἐν ταῖς πορείαις αὐτοῦ μαρανθήσεται.</p>
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James now turns to the issue of poverty and wealth. It is important to remember that Judaism—and early Christianity was a form of Judaism—was grounded in the Mosaic Law, which envisioned a society in which wealth was periodically redistributed to alleviate poverty.

The paragraph begins by encouraging “the lowly/poor believer” to boast/rejoice in being “raised up/exalted.” Conversely, the rich person is to boast/rejoice in being humbled/made poor. Here we have the great reversal theme.

a. What does this paragraph have to do with the previous context?

⁸ “God does not hesitate to give to us, although we sometimes hesitate to ask.” David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 51.

What does this paragraph have to do with trials and asking for wisdom?

1. Poverty or humiliating circumstances constitute a "trial".
2. The contrast between faith and double-mindedness parallels the contrast between the poor and the rich.

b. Are the poor and the rich both Christians?

Some argue that the rich person is a non-Christian, but grammatically, the phrase, "Let him boast" (*kauxasthō*) and the word "believer" (*adelphos*) in verse 9 apply to both the poor and the rich man. Also 4:13-17 indicates that the community has some well-off people within it.

c. Why should each "boast"?

On the one hand, the lowly should boast because his or her poverty constitutes a trial and that, in turn, provides an opportunity to grow in Character and in faith. By this means, the poor will be spiritually "raised up" or "exalted" ("in the high place," dat. noun, *hupsei*).

On the other hand, the rich should boast because like everything else that has splendor now—like a flower, which will like fall—will be humbled. And that humiliation will constitute a trial for the rich person and that, in turn, will provide an opportunity to grow in character and faith.

4. Reflections:

1. The Letter of James may have been written by James, the brother of Jesus.
2. Christians face trials. We should see trials as opportunities to grow in character.
3. God continuously gives wisdom and help to those who repeatedly ask.
4. We should rejoice in our trials, whether poverty or otherwise, because through such trials we are raised up with Christ.