

# JAMES

# 1

## James 1:1–8

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**1:1** *From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To God's faithful people who have been scattered. Greetings.*

James begins his epistle with a cordial greeting in which he introduces himself and identifies his audience. He salutes his readers with a word of greeting, states his name, and presents himself as the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. His epistle was addressed to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, that is, to those Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire due to the persecution waged by the Romans against Jewish believers.

James did not introduce himself as the brother of Jesus or as a key leader of the church in Jerusalem, which might have gained him fleeting earthly glory at best or curious passing attention at least. Instead, he took on a spiritual identity and presented himself simply as one in service to God because his identity as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ was absolutely essential to his credibility and authority to speak on the subject matter of his epistle. His statement serves as solid evidence of his recognition of his spiritual identity as

well as how he, like Paul, desired to be viewed by others (*Romans 1:1*).

James' spiritual identity not only secures divine credence for his message but also enlightens his readers regarding their cultural and conceptual understanding of God. It bridges the perceived gap between the Old Testament Jewish revelation of God and the New Testament picture of God as revealed in Christ Jesus. In a sense, James' description of his position in God's service provided a link in the minds of his listeners between the God they knew through tradition and the Lord Jesus Christ in Whom their faith was founded.

With his opening statement, James not only commands their attention by declaring his position in God's service, but he also offers a personal testimony of his obedience to God by public affirmation. Accordingly, he begins his letter by accepting the ministerial position to which God called him and by assuming the exhorter's office with his audience. He faithfully delivers to a people in grave spiritual need what he has received from God. He introduces his letter by dealing directly with a serious issue relating to matters of faith amid the hardships surrounding suffering believers.

***1:2 My brothers and sisters, be very happy when you are tested in different ways.***

Although, as noted in verse one, James rightly assumed the exhorter's office, he now bonds with his audience through a superior relationship—that of a member in the same spiritual family of faith—by calling them “brothers and sisters.” Since such an attitude obviously does not reflect a biological relationship, his statement discloses an unusual quality of spiritual maturity. His identification with the spiritual state of his audience depicts his subjection to the very same admonition that he imparts to his readers. In essence, James does not speak as an elite exhorter to a suffering church of a lower estate. Rather, he proclaims the Word of his master to every struggling believer, including himself.

James' first words of exhortation bid all believers to view trials as common to Christians living under God's dominion. He admonishes his readers to count difficult circumstances as occasions for joy. On face value, such counsel appears to contradict the human experience. While James' words might seem to encourage denial and a false sense of resolve in the face of adversity, such implications were never intended.

James' exhortation is based on two spiritual factors integral to Christian living. First, trials are essential elements of Christian pilgrimage. They are providential and not fated, a natural outcome of the adversarial behavior of the hostile world toward God's people. Trials are not fortuitous but designed tools in the hands of a sovereign God Who employs them to refine faith, enhance godly fellowship, and augment the Christian journey. They are unavoidable, necessary, and purposeful (*John 15:18–20; 1 Peter 1:6–9*). Second, it is possible to experience real victory over such circumstances. Having already affirmed that trials are spiritual phenomena in our Christian journey, James admonishes all believers to respond to difficult circumstances with the fruit of the Spirit, starting with joy. Accordingly, this verse counsels suffering Christians to allow the Holy Spirit to generate joy from within as the dominant attitude of their spirit when they face life's trials.

### **1:3 *You know that such testing of your faith produces endurance.***

In admonishing believers to be joyous in times of affliction, James does not contemplate counterfeit believers who have opted to resign to some fated destiny. Rather, he envisions mature, committed believers who appreciate and understand their journey of faith and who, in all circumstances, aspire to live under the sovereign lordship of God Almighty. He does not issue arbitrary orders to accept affliction as a joyous experience in denial of real predicaments. Rather, James comforts all believers by encouraging them to recognize that through their affliction, God, in His sovereignty, will produce patience no matter how painful the experiences might be

from an earthly perspective. “We ask him to strengthen you by his glorious might with all the power you need to patiently endure everything with joy” (Colossians 1:11). He exhorts them to be joyful in their trials since they know that the Spirit who causes joy to flourish in their hearts will also cultivate this patience in them. Therefore, he tells his readers to be confident during affliction, not only in accepting God’s will but also in anticipation of virtue and victory.

**1:4** *Endure until your testing is over. Then you will be mature and complete, and you won’t need anything.*

The text in this verse forewarns Christians that believers should not look to patience as the ultimate virtue that either offsets or ends trials and testings. Rather, it is a necessary spiritual element generated by the Holy Spirit through affliction to affect endurance no matter the trial. As such, James says that patience must be allowed to operate in a child of God so that the Christian pilgrimage will rise to a more refined level of spiritual maturity. “Surrender yourself to the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7).

True patience is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Pain and anguish cannot induce it from man’s resolve or emotional strength simply by their occurrence. It is a dynamic virtue that fortifies the spirit of a suffering believer during affliction and promotes the person to a more excellent state of wholeness and contentment in the Lord. Thus, patience is not an end in itself, but it must be appropriated during trying times in order to endure and reach beyond.

James’ counsel is not an exhortation consoling suffering Christians to wait with resigned acceptance until their afflictions cease. Rather, he enlightens them concerning the value of trials in developing an attitude of patience, which is God’s gift in helping them to grow in spiritual maturity. Patience itself is not the fruit of pain, nor is it the nursery for spiritual maturation. It is the fruit that the Holy Spirit Himself bears in the life of a Christian so that the suffering believer views his trials as necessary and useful experiences intended to

transform the natural man through God's grace and power. Spiritual maturity is a progression, and patience is a necessary virtue along the journey to true godliness and holiness (*2 Peter 1:5-7*).

Ultimately, James counseled his listeners to allow Christ's perfect and complete work to transform their lives as they continued on their pilgrimage in dependence upon God's faithfulness and His providence for all circumstances. All believers are called to be perfect as God is perfect because the Holy Spirit indwells and empowers them to do so (*Matthew 5:48*). Such completeness in the Lord brings about true contentment and true maturity in which nothing is lacking. "I'm not saying this because I'm in any need. I've learned to be content in whatever situation I'm in" (*Philippians 4:11*). As a result, mature believers are fully equipped in holiness and not wanting for anything.

**1:5** *If any of you needs wisdom to know what you should do, you should ask God, and he will give it to you. God is generous to everyone and doesn't find fault with them.*

James exhorts his audience to ask God for His wisdom in order to understand His will in affliction and its purpose in their lives so that they might know why and how to respond with joy and patience in spite of their human perspective. He directs their attention to Almighty God so that they might reach beyond their finiteness and better understand the purpose of affliction and how to respond to trials and testings through God's wisdom. He assures believers that God gives His wisdom abundantly because He is generous and impartial in enabling all believers to live according to His will.

Two factors must prevail in the minds and hearts of Christians if they are to ask and receive God's wisdom. First, they must believe that God is the source of all wisdom and imparts it to all who ask by faith. "The Lord gives wisdom. From his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He has reserved priceless wisdom for decent people. He is a shield for those who walk in integrity" (*Proverbs 2:6-7*). Second, they must recognize the ineptitude of the natural mind in comprehending spiritual matters. The realization of these fundamental truths does

not empower Christians to compel God to give wisdom. Instead, it places them in the right spiritual mind-set to ask and receive what is already given. James recognizes that his exhortation is too profound for earthly minds to grasp. Therefore, he admonishes believers to perceive their spiritual state and ask for the appropriate spiritual resources from God, Who imparts heavenly wisdom beyond human understanding to the point of overflowing. God, Who in His sovereignty determines and controls all circumstances, exclusively possesses the wisdom needed to travel the path that He sets forth before His people. Therefore, James instructs believers to seek wisdom and understanding from the sovereign Lord Who, for His own purpose, considered it right and beneficial to acquaint them with difficult circumstances.

**1:6** *When you ask for something, don't have any doubts. A person who has doubts is like a wave that is blown by the wind and tossed by the sea.*

Wisdom should be sought by faith in knowing and believing that God alone possesses the true wisdom in all things, that He gives it generously to those who ask by faith, and that there is the recognition of the need for wisdom in one's life. This means that asking for God's wisdom is an expression of faith in Who God is and what He does for His children. Indeed, seeking wisdom is in itself an act of faith. It is not a mere possibility or an option to be tested that might, as a matter of circumstances, soothe the onslaught of an unsettling feeling of despair.

As with all prayers to God, any request for wisdom not based on a profound faith in His sovereignty and graciousness is displeasing to Him. James likens this to the waves of the sea tossed about by the wind. Since none can please God without faith, such requests deliver no spiritual benefit to doubting believers because they are unstable. An unstable soul lacks the solidity of a Spirit-filled life and fails to nurture the fertile ground for the effective cultivation of joy and patience. *"Then we will no longer be little children, tossed and carried*

*about by all kinds of teachings that change like the wind. We will no longer be influenced by people who use cunning and clever strategies to lead us astray” (Ephesians 4:14).* Thus, James admonishes believers to guard their attitude when they seek to receive anything from God, especially His wisdom. God’s wisdom must be sought with trust in His limitless supply and boundless generosity, and with presenting the need to Him in faith. These convictions certainly constitute an attitude of faith. Doubt must not be allowed to exploit the natural circumstances of human frailty and sow instability into one’s life. Instead, as believers, we should look to God, Who has absolute control of our lives and circumstances for all things material and spiritual.

***1:7 A person who has doubts shouldn’t expect to receive anything from the Lord.***

This statement does not suggest that the Lord’s wisdom is ever without power or rendered ineffective. Rather, James now makes an unequivocal declaration that God’s wisdom is of no profit to a doubting and erratic person. His statement implies that an unstable believer is so afflicted with doubt that he cannot surrender himself to God’s wisdom and benefit from its blessings. Such a person is spiritually out of alignment with God. He has no understanding of the spiritual significance of suffering and God’s purpose in it. His prayers are simply an undirected venting of mortal steam with no lasting spiritual benefit to his human perspective.

Since doubting persons do not exercise the faith to ask God and receive what is given, such believers lack the spiritual discernment to recognize the bestowal of the divine gift. Therefore, their alleged prayers for wisdom or answers have no spiritual significance. At best, it would be a logical search for anything that might work while in fact it is an expression of frustration at the insufficiency of the inherent resources of the flesh to deal with matters of a spiritual nature. James cautions believers against presumptive arrogance and tells them not to expect their prayers to be answered if offered in doubt.

**1:8** *A person who has doubts is thinking about two different things at the same time and can't make up his mind about anything.*

The text explains the reason why a doubting person may ask but fail to receive God's wisdom: he is double-minded and unstable. Once again, the issue is with the person in doubt and not with God's wisdom. A double-minded believer suffers from a lack of focus. Such a Christian does not have the faith to ask and receive because he does not depend upon God's trustworthiness. A double-minded believer can't make up his mind about anything because he is unsettled. He is torn between the yearning of his spirit and the bitter complaints of his flesh. He is plagued by shifting convictions resulting from the raging conflict between the new nature and the old self, much like Paul's description in his letter to the Romans.

<sup>15</sup>I don't realize what I'm doing. I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do what I hate. <sup>16</sup>I don't do what I want to do, but I agree that God's standards are good. <sup>17</sup>So I am no longer the one who is doing the things I hate, but sin that lives in me is doing them.

<sup>18</sup>I know that nothing good lives in me; that is, nothing good lives in my corrupt nature. Although I have the desire to do what is right, I don't do it. <sup>19</sup>I don't do the good I want to do. Instead, I do the evil that I don't want to do. <sup>20</sup>Now, when I do what I don't want to do, I am no longer the one who is doing it. Sin that lives in me is doing it. (Romans 7:15–20)

This kind of believer often seeks to merge the will of the flesh with the will of God, desiring to serve two masters. Therefore, he wastes his life attempting to use the resources of the flesh to gain spiritual advances. James clearly states that such people cannot receive God's wisdom because their unsteadiness inhibits the Holy Spirit from nurturing the new nature.

### Notes/Applications

James, the brother of Jude and the half brother of our Lord, wrote this epistle to the Jews of the dispersion but, more importantly,



to Christians of all ages. This short epistle has inspired some but discouraged many. Its emphasis on the practical, observable applications of a living faith at times appears so rigid and legalistic that the Christian often becomes discouraged. However, close scrutiny will result in a cheerful affirmation of its lessons, often affirming earlier statements made by Jesus Himself.

In his opening paragraph, James addressed one of the most fundamental issues that face all Christians—the manner in which we face those difficult times that threaten to destroy our faith. In some sense, there are the trials and adversities posed in the lives of all members of the human race. Each person will experience the frailties of the flesh, falling prey to those diseases that threaten one's very life. Death seems to be a specter waiting eagerly at each doorstep, suddenly taking a wife, a mother, a father, a child, or friend with no prior warning. However, James was speaking more specifically about circumstances that were common to those early followers of the Way. They suffered the unjust onslaught of persecution for their commitment to Jesus Christ. They were ridiculed and humiliated. They were pursued and slaughtered. As a result, the harsh realities of their human existence often intercepted the eternal realities of their redemption in Christ.

James counteracts the material circumstances with an exhortation to rejoice in the providential care of the sovereign Lord. Contrary to all external evidence, Christians are urged to look beyond the temporal and perceive the hand of the Lord that designs and governs every step of their earthly sojourn, guiding them firmly along that path to their eternal home. *“Always be joyful in the Lord! I’ll say it again: Be joyful! Let everyone know how considerate you are. The Lord is near. Never worry about anything. But in every situation let God know what you need in prayers and requests while giving thanks. Then God’s peace, which goes beyond anything we can imagine, will guard your thoughts and emotions through Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:4–7). While this is humanly impossible, James assures us of the all-sufficient resources of the Lord, Who provides His wisdom to those who ask,

helping them to understand their material circumstances within the context of God's providence.

James guarantees joy, patience, and wisdom as long as we focus on the trustworthiness of our Savior instead of dwelling on the hardships that threaten us. Therefore, we should look to God's help so that we might depend more fully on His providence instead of listening to the bitter complaints of our failing flesh, and so that we might pray with single-minded faith in God's providential love and care.

*<sup>6</sup>You are extremely happy about these things, even though you have to suffer different kinds of trouble for a little while now. <sup>7</sup>The purpose of these troubles is to test your faith as fire tests how genuine gold is. Your faith is more precious than gold, and by passing the test, it gives praise, glory, and honor to God. This will happen when Jesus Christ appears again.*

*<sup>8</sup>Although you have never seen Christ, you love him. You don't see him now, but you believe in him. You are extremely happy with joy and praise that can hardly be expressed in words <sup>9</sup>as you obtain the salvation that is the goal of your faith. (1 Peter 1:6–9)*