# James, Lesson #1 The Pressure of Trials

## Good Questions Have Small Groups Talking www.MyBibleStudyLessons.com

Email your people and invite them to read the Introduction to James in their Study Bible. An informed group makes for interesting discussion.

## James 1.1 - 4

### OPEN

Let’s each share your name and one time of intense physical pain.

### DIG

1. What do we know about James?

Finally, there is James, who is called the brother of Jesus. Although the first definite connection of him with this letter does not emerge until Origen in the first half of the third century, it is to him that it has always been traditionally ascribed. The Roman Catholic Church agrees with this ascription, for in 1546 the Council of Trent laid it down that James is canonical and is written by an apostle.

Let us then collect the evidence about this James. From the New Testament we learn that he was one of the brothers of Jesus (Mk 6:3; Matt 13:55). We shall later discuss in what sense the word brother is to be taken. During Jesus' ministry it is clear that his family did not understand or sympathize with him and would have wished to restrain him (Matt 12:46-50; Mk 3:21; Mk 3:31-35; Jn 7:3-9). John says bluntly, "For even his brothers did not believe in him" (Jn 7:5). So, then, during Jesus' earthly ministry James was numbered amongst his opponents. — Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT).

1. James grew up with Jesus. When did he become a Christian?

With Acts there comes a sudden and unexplained change. When Acts opens, Jesus' mother and his brothers are there with the little group of Christians (Ac 1:14). From there onwards it becomes clear that James has become the leader of the Jerusalem Church although how that came about is never explained. It is to James that Peter sends the news of his escape from prison (Ac 12:17). James presides over the Council of Jerusalem which agreed to the entry of the Gentiles into the Christian Church (Ac 15). It is James and Peter whom Paul meets when he first goes to Jerusalem; and it is with Peter, James and John, the pillars of the Church, that he discusses and settles his sphere of work (Gal 1:19; Gal 2:9). It is to James that Paul comes with his collection from the Gentile Churches on the visit to Jerusalem which is destined to be his last and which leads to his imprisonment (Ac 21:18-25). This last episode is important, for it shows James very sympathetic to the Jews who still observe the Jewish law, and so eager that their scruples should not be offended, that he actually persuades Paul to demonstrate his loyalty to the law by assuming responsibility for the expenses of certain Jews who are fulfilling a Nazirite vow. — Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT).

1. What was James’ role in the early church?

Plainly, then, James was the leader of the Jerusalem Church. As might be expected, this was something which tradition greatly developed. Hegesippus, the early historian, says that James was the first bishop of the Church at Jerusalem. Clement of Alexandria goes further and says that he was chosen for that office by Peter and John. Jerome in his book, On Famous Men, says, "After the Passion of the Lord, James was immediately ordained bishop of Jerusalem by the apostles.... He ruled the Church of Jerusalem for thirty years, that is, until the seventh year of the reign of Nero." The Clementine Recognitions take the final step in the development of the legend, for they say that James was ordained Bishop of Jerusalem by none other than Jesus himself. Clement of Alexandria relates a strange tradition: "To James the Just, and John and Peter, after the Resurrection, the Lord committed knowledge; they committed it to the other apostles; and the other apostles to the seventy." The later developments are not to be accepted but the basic fact remains that James was the undisputed head of the Church at Jerusalem. — Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT).

1. How did James describe himself in verse 1?

The other New Testament writers echoed Paul’s heartfelt devotion to the Lord. James did not boast about being Jesus’ half-brother but instead called himself “James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1 HCSB). Later in his letter, James instructed his readers with these familiar words: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ . . . Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that’ ” (4:13, 15). Such language draws heavily on the slave/master relationship. Slaves could not go and do whatever they wished. They were bound to follow the will of the master. — MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2010). Slave: the hidden truth about your identity in Christ. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1. Is it a servant or slave of Christ? What difference does it make?

Scottish pastor Alexander Maclaren, a contemporary of Spurgeon, echoed these same truths:

The true position, then, for a man is to be God’s slave. . . . Absolute submission, unconditional obedience, on the slave’s part; and on the part of the Master complete ownership, the right of life and death, the right of disposing of all goods and chattels, . . . the right of issuing commandments without a reason, the right to expect that those commandments shall be swiftly, unhesitatingly, punctiliously, and completely performed—these things inhere in our relation to God. Blessed [is] the man who has learned that they do, and has accepted them as his highest glory and the security of his most blessed life! For, brethren, such submission, absolute and unconditional, the blending and the absorption of my own will in His will, is the secret of all that makes manhood glorious and great and happy. . . . [I]n the New Testament these names of slave and owner are transferred to Christians and Jesus Christ.

As these voices from church history make so abundantly clear, our slavery to Christ has radical implications for how we think and live. We have been bought with a price. We belong to Christ. We are part of a people for His own possession. And understanding all of that changes everything about us, starting with our perspective and our priorities.

True Christianity is not about adding Jesus to my life. Instead, it is about devoting myself completely to Him—submitting wholly to His will and seeking to please Him above all else. It demands dying to self and following the Master, no matter the cost. In other words, to be a Christian is to be Christ’s slave. — MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2010). Slave: the hidden truth about your identity in christ. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1. Who was this letter written to?

Humble James writes pastorally to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” The Jews’ scattering, known as the Diaspora, began in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes. Later the southern tribes suffered the same fate when the Babylonians took them captive in 586. Because of this, Jews were spread all over Mesopotamia, around the Mediterranean, and into Asia Minor and Europe (cf. Acts 2:5, 9–11). Some of the major cities of the world—Alexandria, for example—had large populations of expatriate Jews. Also, when Jewish Christians were first persecuted in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, they fled first to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1) and then to Jewish communities around the Mediterranean (Acts 11:19, 20). Tragically these Jewish Christians were not taken in by their expatriate Jewish kinsmen, but rather were rejected and persecuted.

Further, refused protection by the Jewish community, these Jewish Christians were exploited by the Gentiles. Homeless and disenfranchised, they were robbed of what possessions they had, hauled into court, and subjected to the Gentile elite. They had less standing than slaves. They became religious, social and economic pariahs. A good way to get a feel for their position is to read modern post-Holocaust Jewish writers such as Elie Wiesel. It is to these Jewish Christian brothers, mistreated ex-parishioners of James’ church, that Pastor James sends his letter. — Hughes, R. K. (1991). James: faith that works. Preaching the Word (p. 17). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

1. James 1.1 – 4. What did James teach us we can expect in following Christ?

Trials and tests come that impact our patience and give it a chance to grow (do they ever!). As patience begins to develop, strong character is cultivated, moving us ever onward toward maturity. There is no shortcut! But by refusing to squirm out of your problems, you find yourself becoming the man or woman you have always wanted to be.

When the way is rough, your patience has a chance to grow. JAMES 1:2 - 4 , TLB — Swindoll, C. R. (2002). Bedside blessings. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1. James says, “many kinds of trials.” What are some examples of trials we experience?

One of the wildest stories we’ve ever seen on this subject came from the insurance claim form of a bricklayer who got hurt at a building site. He was trying to get a load of bricks down from the top floor of a building without asking for help from anyone else. He wrote:

It would have taken too long to carry all the bricks down by hand, so I decided to put them in a barrel and lower them by a pulley which I had fastened to the top of the building. After tying the rope securely at ground level, I then went up to the top of the building, I fastened the rope around the barrel, loaded it with bricks, and swung it over the sidewalk for the descent. Then I went down to the sidewalk and untied the rope, holding it securely to guide the barrel down slowly. But since I weigh only 140 pounds, the 500 pound load jerked me from the ground so fast that I didn’t have time to think of letting go of the rope. As I passed between the second and third floors I met the barrel coming down. This accounts for the bruises and the lacerations on my upper body.

I held tightly to the rope until I reached the top where my hand became jammed in the pulley. This accounts for my broken thumb.

At the same time, however, the barrel hit the sidewalk with a bang and the bottom fell out. With the weight of the bricks gone, the barrel weighed only about 40 pounds. Thus my 140 pound body began a swift descent, and I met the empty barrel coming up. This accounts for my broken ankle.

Slowed only slightly, I continued the descent and landed on the pile of bricks. This accounts for my sprained back and broken collar bone.

At this point I lost my presence of mind completely, and I let go of the rope and the empty barrel came crashing down on me. This accounts for my head injuries.

And as for the last question on your insurance form, “What would I do if the same situation rose again?” Please be advised I am finished trying to do the job all by myself.

Everybody needs somebody to come alongside and help. If you understand that, are willing to give to others and help them, and maintain the right motives, their lives and yours can change. — Maxwell, J. C., & Dornan, J. (1997). Becoming a Person of Influence (pp. 108–109). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

1. What are some trials you personally have experienced?

A Canadian bird decided that it was too much trouble to fly south for the winter. He said to himself, “I can brave a winter. A lot of other animals do it. It just can’t be that hard.” So as all the other birds flocked away toward sunny South America, he stayed behind and waited for winter.

By the end of November, he was having serious second thoughts. He had never been so cold, and he couldn’t find any food. Finally, he broke down and realized that if he didn’t get out of there soon, he wasn’t going to make it. So he started flying south all by himself. After a while, it began to rain. And before he knew it, the water was turning to ice on his wings. Struggling, he recognized that he couldn’t fly any longer. He knew he was about to die, so he glided down and made his last landing, crashing to the ground in a barnyard.

As he lay there stunned, a cow came by, stepped over him, and dropped a plop right on him. He was totally disgusted. Here I am, he thought, freezing to death. I’m about to die. I’m on my last breath, and then this! What an awful way to go.

So then the bird held his breath and prepared himself to die. But after about two minutes, he discovered that a miracle was happening: He was warming up. The ice on his wings was melting. His muscles were thawing out. His blood was flowing again. He realized that he was going to make it after all. He got so excited and happy that he began to sing a glorious song.

At that moment, the farm’s old tomcat was lying in the hayloft in the barn, and he heard the bird singing. He couldn’t believe it; he hadn’t heard anything like it for months, and he said to himself, “Is that a bird? I thought they’d all gone south for the winter.”

He came out of the barn, and lo and behold, there was the bird. The cat crossed over to where he was, pulled him gently out of the cow plop, cleaned him off—and ate him.

Any dream worth living is worth sharing with others.

There are three morals to this story: (1) Not everyone who drops a plop on you is your enemy; (2) not everyone who takes a plop off you is your friend; and (3) if somebody does drop a plop on you, keep your mouth shut. The same can be true for you as you realize your dream. Some people you consider friends will fight your success. Others will support you in ways you didn’t expect. But no matter which people criticize you or how they do it, don’t let them take your focus off your dream. — Maxwell, J. C. (2006). Your road map for success: you can get there from here. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1. What are we to do when trials come?

We’re very fickle in our faith, aren’t we? We are inconsistent, ambivalent. We sing “My faith looks up to Thee” . . . until the medicine stops working, until the lights go out, until the bill comes due and we don’t have what it takes to pay it. Until our grades slip or our career takes a turn or we loose a mate. . . .

How do we learn consistent faith? We learn it one day at a time. We learn it through endurance. James writes: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (James 1:2–3). He’s not talking about a will-o-the-wisp faith that starts out on the 100-meter sprint and, quicker than you can think, is over. Anybody can handle that kind of faith. Anybody can take ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes of a test. But ten days or fifteen days, or a year, or two or three? Well, that’s another matter. That’s the enduring faith James is talking about. — Perfect Trust / Swindoll, C. R. (2007). Wisdom for the way: wise words for busy people. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

1. How can we rejoice when trials come?

How can a person consider trouble as an opportunity for joy? This is a remarkable command—we are to choose to be joyful in situations where joy would naturally be our last response. When certain circumstances make us angry and we want to blame the Lord, James directs us to the healthier alternative—joy. Those who trust in God ought to exhibit a dramatically different, positive response to the difficult events of life.

Our attitude is to be one of genuine rejoicing. This is not joyful anticipation for trials. Instead, it is joy during trials. The joy is based on confidence in the outcome of the trial. It is the startling realization that trials represent the possibility of growth. In contrast, most people are happy when they escape trials. But James encourages us to have pure joy in the very face of trials. James is not encouraging believers to pretend to be happy. Rejoicing goes beyond happiness. Happiness centers on earthly circumstances and how well things are going here. Joy centers on God and his presence in our experience.

The word whenever doesn’t allow much room for doubt. We are urged to be joyful not if we face trouble, but whenever. Trials, problems, situations can be joy robbers if we lack the proper attitude. Where does this trouble come from? The troubles and trials we face can be hardships from without or temptations from within. A trouble may be a hard situation that tests a person’s faith such as persecution, a difficult moral choice, or a tragedy. Life’s trail is marked with such trials. Enduring one trial is not enough. God’s purpose in allowing this process is to develop complete maturity in us.

Considering your troubles to be joy comes from seeing life with God’s perspective in mind. We may not be able to understand the specific reasons for God’s allowing certain experiences to crush us or wear us down, but we can be confident that his plan is for our good. What may look hopeless or impossible to us never looks that way to God! — Life Application New Testament Commentary.

1. What do we learn about the goal of Christian living from this passage? What does this verse teach us about what a mature Christian looks like?

What does a really, really spiritually mature person look like? What is it that we are heading for in spiritual growth? What is the high-water mark of spiritual maturity? It is the ability to worship God when times are difficult, really difficult.

This is spoken of by Jesus’ half-brother, James:

Consider 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 1:2-4

When you are able to do this consistently, you are near the top of the mountain of spiritual progress. — Josh Hunt. Enjoying God.

1. Imagine you were doing a talk based on this passage. What are some practical steps you would suggest to becoming one who rejoiced when it was challenge to rejoice?

Everybody has two lists. One is the stuff we gotta have to be happy. The other is a list of deal-killers to happiness. The trick to learning to rejoice in the Lord always is keeping both lists short. I want a pretty short list of stuff I have to have in order to be happy and a pretty short list of things capable of killing joy in God. Some people have the opposite, and they are not happy very much. There is a long list of things that must be just so in order to make them happy. The kids must behave just so; finances must be just so; the weather must be just so. If everything is not just so, they are not happy. Period. And, there is a long list of things that can upset their happiness. If the dog barks next door; if traffic is bad; if they have to wait in line–ooh, there is one. Lots of people cannot be happy if they have to wait in line too long. It is a deal killer to happiness. — Josh Hunt. Enjoying God.

1. What benefits come to the person who learns to live out James 1.1 – 4?

My dad used to say, “You can’t beat a man like that.” He was referring to Philippians 1:22-24 (NIV), but the principle applies here. “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

1. What price does the person pay who cannot rejoice on bad days?

A baby step in this direction is achievable fairly quickly. The high point of spiritual maturity is when the train wreck comes and we rejoice in the Lord. It may take us a lifetime to reach that pinnacle, but we can achieve success in some foothills in a jiffy. Next time you have a flat tire–an inconvenience to be sure, but in the broad scheme of things. . .hey, it’s a flat tire for crying out loud. Next time you have a flat tire, make a decision to rejoice. See the flat tire for what it is–an inconvenience for today but in the broad scheme of things not that big of a deal. It is a skinned knee. You are having to wait in line. A bother to be sure, but only a bother. Throw a party. This is a test. It is only a test of the emergency perseverance development system. It is only a test. Had it been an actual train wreck, things would have been a whole lot worse than this. It is just a test. Just a flat tire. Run around your car three times and say, “It is just a test! It is just a test! It is just a test!”

You can tell a lot about a person by what makes them upset. We took our kids to Six Flags last summer and had a great time. The last night we were there was a big Christian concert and the place was packed. We parked on the second to the last row of this huge parking lot. Happily, they had a “people mover” to haul us in from the parking lot and back out to our car at the end of the day, which was nice, because we were all tired. But, there was a problem, a flat tire. Not a literal flat tire, but a problem. Because of the crowds, cars were backed up getting out of the parking lot. Consequently, the people mover could not get us all the way to where our car was, but had to drop us off about two thirds away instead. We had to walk what was still a considerable distance to our cars. This was especially bothersome because we were tired at the end of the day.

It was a bother, but the guy in front of us confused this with a train wreck. He began grumbling at first, then cursing, then yelling, then threatening the driver with his job, if not a lawsuit. Give me a break. It is a flat tire, not a train wreck. I turned to my boys and said, “You can tell a lot about a man by what makes him upset. And the thing is, that guy is going to spend his whole life upset because this kind of thing is a part of life. It happens all the time.” — Josh Hunt. Enjoying God.

1. Does it matter how we feel—or just what we do?

It is true that our hearts are often sluggish. We do not feel the depth or intensity of affections that are appropriate for God or His cause. It is true that at those times we must exert our wills and make decisions that we hope will rekindle our joy. Even though joyless love is not our aim ("God loves a cheerful giver!" 2 Corinthians 9:7; "[Show] mercy with cheerfulness," Romans 12:8), nevertheless it is better to do a joyless duty than not to do it, provided that there is a spirit of repentance that we have not done all of our duty because of the sluggishness of our hearts.

I am often asked what a Christian should do if the cheerfulness of obedience is not there. It's a good question. My answer is not to simply get on with your duty because feelings don't matter. They do! My answer has three steps. First, confess the sin of joylessness. ("My heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I," Psalm 61:2.) Acknowledge the coldness of your heart. Don't say that it doesn't matter how you feel. Second, pray earnestly that God would restore the joy of obedience. ("I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart," Psalm 40:8.) Third, go ahead and do the outward dimension of your duty in the hope that the doing will rekindle the delight.

This is very different from saying: "Do your duty because feelings don't count." These steps assume that there is such a thing as hypocrisy. They are based on the belief that our goal is the reunion of pleasure and duty and that a justification of their separation is a justification of sin. — The Dangerous Duty of Delight.

1. Romans 5.3 – 4. What other benefits come to the person who experiences trials?

Paul wrote that our sufferings produce perseverance, which in turn produces character (Romans 5:3–4), and James said that the testing of our faith develops perseverance, which leads to maturity (James 1:2–5). Our ultimate hope, though, is not in maturity of character in this life, as valuable as that is, but in the perfection of character in eternity. John wrote, “When he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2, NIV). The often painful process of being transformed into His likeness will be over. We shall be completely conformed to the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18, NIV). I visualize in my mind a pair of old-fashioned balance scales. Paul first puts all our sufferings, heartaches, disappointments—all our adversities of whatever kind from whatever source—onto one side of the balance scales. Then he puts on the other side the glory that will be revealed in us. As we watch, the scales do not balance, but completely bottom out on the side of the glory that will be revealed in us.

This is not to say that our present hardships are not painful. We see from Hebrews 12:11 that they are indeed painful, and we all know this to some degree from experience. But we need to learn to look by faith beyond the present pain to the eternal glory that will be revealed in us.

The God who disciplines us will also glorify us. — Bridges, J. (2008). Holiness Day by Day: Transformational Thoughts for Your Spiritual Journey. (T. Womack, Ed.) (p. 313). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

1. Think of our pain from the Father’s perspective. How do you think God feels when we suffer?

An incident occurred during our son’s early childhood that illustrated for me this profound love of the heavenly Father. Ryan had a terrible ear infection when he was three years old that kept him (and us) awake most of the night. Shirley bundled up the toddler the next morning and took him to see the pediatrician. This doctor was an older man with very little patience for squirming kids. He wasn’t overly fond of parents, either.

After examining Ryan, the doctor told Shirley that the infection had adhered itself to the eardrum and could only be treated by pulling the scab loose with a wicked little instrument. He warned that the procedure would hurt, and instructed Shirley to hold her son tightly on the table. Not only did this news alarm her, but enough of it was understood by Ryan to send him into orbit. It didn’t take much to do that in those days.

Shirley did the best she could. She put Ryan on the examining table and attempted to hold him down. But he would have none of it. When the doctor inserted the pick-like instrument in his ear, the child broke loose and screamed to high heaven. The pediatrician then became angry at Shirley and told her if she couldn’t follow instructions she’d have to go get her husband. I was in the neighborhood and quickly came to the examining room. After hearing what was needed, I swallowed hard and wrapped my 200-pound, 6-foot-2-inch frame around the toddler. It was one of the toughest moments in my career as a parent.

What made it so emotional was the horizontal mirror that Ryan was facing on the back side of the examining table. This made it possible for him to look directly at me as he screamed for mercy. I really believe I was in greater agony in that moment than my terrified little boy. It was too much. I turned him loose—and got a beefed-up version of the same bawling-out that Shirley had received a few minutes earlier. Finally, however, the grouchy pediatrician and I finished the task.

I reflected later on what I was feeling when Ryan was going through so much suffering. What hurt me was the look on his face. Though he was screaming and couldn’t speak, he was “talking” to me with those big blue eyes. He was saying, “Daddy! Why are you doing this to me? I thought you loved me. I never thought you would do anything like this! How could you . . . ? Please, please! Stop hurting me!”

It was impossible to explain to Ryan that his suffering was necessary for his own good, that I was trying to help him, that it was love that required me to hold him on the table. How could I tell him of my compassion in that moment? I would gladly have taken his place on the table, if possible. But in his immature mind, I was a traitor who had callously abandoned him.

Then I realized that there must be times when God also feels our intense pain and suffers along with us. Wouldn’t that be characteristic of a Father whose love is infinite? How He must hurt when we say in confusion, “How could You do this terrible thing, Lord? Why me? I thought I could trust You! I thought You were my friend!” How can He explain within our human limitations that our agony is necessary, that it does have a purpose, that there are answers to the tragedies of life? I wonder if He anticipates the day when He can make us understand what was occurring in our time of trial. I wonder if He broods over our sorrows. — Dobson, J. C., & Kendall, R. T. (2012). When god doesn’t make sense. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale.

1. Summary. What are the practical benefits of pain? What good comes from suffering?

Alan Mairson wrote an article for National Geographic about beekeepers who raise and transport bees for a living. He told the story of Jeff and Christine Anderson and how their daughter overcame an allergy to bee stings.

To build up her immunity, doctors administered a series of injections to Rachel over a four-month period. But, in order to maintain immunity, she needed a shot or a bee sting every six weeks over several years.

So every six weeks Rachel's parents would go outside and catch a bee. Then, as Rachel recalls, "Mom would take hold of my arm and roll my sleeve up. Then my Dad would make the bee mad and stick it on me and count to ten before he took the stinger out. But it worked. Now when I accidentally get stung, it barely swells, it barely hurts."

In a world full of bees, a loving father must not shield his child from every sting. In fact for the child's own good the father must at times induce pain. — 750 Engaging Illustrations.

1. What do you want to recall from today’s conversation?
2. How can we support one another in prayer this week?