

# Letter of St. James . . . Catholic Scripture Study

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***Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness*** (James 1:2-3).

## Week 1 – Introduction

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### I. THE AUTHOR

At the beginning of the letter the writer introduces himself simply as ***“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”*** (1:1).

In the Old Testament the expression “servant of God” is applied to people like Abraham, Moses, David, or the prophets who had a prominent mission.

From the contents of the letter we can conclude that the author is well known to the early Christians and is held in high regard.

- He teaches with authority (1:13ff; 3:13ff),
- reproaches his readers (1:21ff; 4:13ff),
- takes them to task (4:1ff) and
- even threatens them (5:1ff).

The name James was very common, so it is not surprising that up to five men called James appear in the New Testament. These are:

- **James, the son of Zebedee**, called the Greater, an apostle (Mt 10:2; Luke 8: 51; Acts 1:13; 12:2);
- **James, the son of Alphaeus**, called the Less, also an apostle (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13);

- **James, “the Lord’s brother”** (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3);
- **James, bishop of Jerusalem** (Acts 12:17; Gal 1:19);
- **James, an eyewitness of the Resurrection** (1 Cor 15:7).

Scholars are generally agreed that the “brother of the lord,” (that is, his cousin or relative) is the bishop of Jerusalem, to whom the risen Lord appeared.

In summary, it is fairly clear that the letter was written by James, “the Lord’s brother” and the leader (bishop) of the Jerusalem church. This James may have been the same person as James, son of Alphaeus, listed in the Gospel as an apostle, although scholars disagree.

- He was one of the three key leaders of the Church in that first generation (the other two were Peter and Paul), and presided over the Council of Jerusalem (AD 49/50).

James led the Jerusalem church for more than a decade prior to his martyrdom in AD 62, when he was stoned to death by the Jews (See Josephus, *Antiquities* 20, 9, 20-203).

James was not only a leader; he was a man of wisdom who taught the wisdom of the kingdom of God in a style reminiscent of Jesus himself.

## II. DATE OF COMPOSITION

The letter was likely composed in Jerusalem.

As usual, scholars debate the date of its composition. A few have argued that it was composed in the 40s, but the majority place it toward the end of James’ life based on James’ apparent clarification of Paul’s teaching concerning faith and works (2:14-26).

James is careful to refute such misunderstandings and set the record straight.

- In this case the date of composition would be around AD 60, shortly before the author died a martyr's death.

### III. IMMEDIATE READERSHIP

#### A. The Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion

The letter is addressed to ***“the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.”***

In Old Testament terminology the term ***“twelve tribes”*** designates the people of Israel; the ***“Dispersion”*** or ***“Diaspora”*** refers to the non-Palestinian Jews who had settled throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Since in Christian thought the Church is the new Israel, some scholars think this designates the Jewish Christian churches located in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere.

Others think the letter is meant more generally for all Christian communities, and the “dispersion” has the symbolic meaning of exile from our true home.

There is yet another way of understanding “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.”

James, as we just discussed, had a prominent role in the Jerusalem church. As such, it is not unreasonable to think he felt a peculiar responsibility for outreach to Israel. But the question is: what was on James' mind when he thought of “Israel.”

As modern readers, we think that Jews and Israelites are interchangeable terms. In reality, however, every Jew is an Israelite, but not every Israelite a Jew.

## B. Israel – Once a United Kingdom

The reason for this is that Israel was a united nation for only a very brief period of its history (about 73 years under David and Solomon).

After that, the nation was split by civil war into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah and the breach was never healed.

## C. Israel Divided - Northern Kingdom Dispersed

Following the split, “Israel” as a united nation was an ideal, not a reality and, after the northern kingdom (i.e., the “ten lost tribes of Israel”) was deported and dispersed among the Gentiles by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., it became an unattainable ideal.

## D. Southern Kingdom Survives

Only the kingdom of Judah survived (despite the trauma of the Babylonian Exile about a century and half later). Judah (and most specifically, the House of David) was chosen by God as the line through whom the Messiah would come.

Hence, the term “Jew” comes from “Judah” and has historically been applied to members of the surviving tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, not to Israel as a whole, which in its entirety included both the northern and southern kingdoms.

## E. The Promised Restoration of all Israel

And yet, through prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah God foretold that, in Jeremiah's words, **“The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”**

In short, somehow or other God was going to include the “lost” and dispersed tribes of the northern kingdom in his New Covenant. The

question of how God would do that occupies several New Testament figures, including Jesus himself.

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee (Mt 4:12-13), the “land of Zebulun and Naphtali” - (two of the lost tribes) - and appoints twelve apostles to judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28).

Similarly, when Jesus calls Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), he says that Paul is his chosen instrument to carry his name, not only before Gentiles and kings, but before the “sons of Israel.”

And in Acts 26:6-7, Paul explains to Agrippa, **“I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain.”**

And so, Paul shows himself to be preoccupied (as so many first century Jews were) with the question of how in the world God is going to fulfill all the promises that he made through the Old Testament prophets concerning the restoration of “all Israel.”

These promises imply that it is through the New Covenant of Christ the “son of David” that the seemingly impossible ideal of reuniting Israel will be attained through the Davidic kingdom.

For the distinguishing feature or essential character of the Davidic kingdom is that it did something the Mosaic covenant never did. The Mosaic covenant included the twelve tribes of Israel and no one else.

- The Davidic covenant, in contrast, **unites the twelve tribes with the Gentiles** throughout the world and, if it fails to do that, it fails to fulfill the Davidic covenant.

So the defining feature of the Davidic covenant is that the son of David comes to establish a spiritual kingdom that somehow, mysteriously, links Israel with the Gentiles under the son of David.

- That is what Christ is doing in and through the Church.

Given all this, James' address to "the twelve tribes in the dispersion" makes a great deal of sense in light of overall biblical revelation. It appears that James sees his own role, his own unique duty, is to explain this mystery to those who are coming into the New Covenant from the remnant of Israel.

## IV. PURPOSE AND THEMES

James presents practical wisdom for living a life of wholehearted devotion to God in the midst of trials and tribulations.

His letter describes a community living the counter-cultural life demanded by the Gospel – the kind of counter-cultural life we should be living today.

### A. Main Themes

Throughout the letter there is an emphasis on the need for consistency between a Christian's faith and his actions – ***"faith without works is dead."***

- Everything a Christian does should reflect the faith he or she professes.

A choice must be made! As James asks, "Will you be friends with the world and therefore "double-minded," and "unstable", or friends with God and therefore "perfect and lacking in nothing?"

- It is impossible to be both.

There are exhortations and warnings about:

- how to cope with difficulties and temptations, about
- the need to be objective in one's judgment of others and to avoid backbiting;

- About detachment from material things, and the need to be concerned about the poor and the needy;
- The practice of prayer; and
- The correction of those who go astray.

These are the main themes of the letter.

## V. STRUCTURE

We can divide the letter into three sections and a conclusion. The second section deals specifically with the basic teaching about consistency between the faith one professes and the works one does.

Chapter 1 contains a dozen short sayings that introduce many, if not most, of the topics that will be addressed in greater depth in the following chapters. It also introduces the main themes of perfection as a goal of the Christian life and importance of God's wisdom in working towards that perfection.

### A. First Section (1:1-2:13)

The first section, which begins after a short heading and greeting, teaches the value of suffering.

- It emphasizes that only good can come from God and therefore God never tempts man or seeks to harm him (1:13-18).
- Accepting what comes from God means doing what he says (1:19-27) and not what other people, or the world, thinks or expects.

All these teachings point to the need that there be no discrepancy between what one receives from God and the way one puts it into practice.

## **B. Second Section (2:14-26)**

The second section develops the central idea:

- A faith which does not translate into good works is a dead faith (2:14-19).

This point is made again and again, like a refrain running right through the passage.

The argument is based mainly on the example of well-known Biblical personalities such as Abraham and Isaac (2:20-26).

## **C. Third Section (3:1-5:6)**

The third section contains many practical applications of this teaching. Christians are exhorted to

- control the tongue (3:1-12),
- to seek true wisdom and reject false wisdom (3:13-18),
- to recognize the source of disagreement (4:1-12), and
- to put all their trust in divine providence and not be preoccupied by their private affairs or riches (4:13-17) for that only leads to flagrant injustice (5:1-6).

## **D. Conclusion**

The letter concludes with a series of brief but forceful instructions.

- It insists on the need to keep true to the faith with patience and constancy;
- It teaches the value of prayer, encouraging prayer at all times;
- It speaks about the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick; and

- Finally it encourages Christians to have concern for one another.

### **E. Memory Verses**

Two ways to become “a doer that acts” and not a “hearer that forgets” (James 1:25) are to memorize scripture and put it into practice.

Each section will close with a suggestion for applying what you have learned based on a verse drawn from the passage that was studied.

### **F. Tips for Memorizing Scripture**

- Review, review, review!
- Read the verse silently and aloud, write it down, listen to it being spoken, and above all DO what it says.
- Recite the reference along with the verse so that you can find it in your Bible later.

# Wisdom for Tough Times (James 1:1-18)

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## I. OVERVIEW

After the initial greeting, James opens his letter with a godly perspective on facing trials and temptations and closes it with wise directives regarding suffering, illness, and sin.

His original audience, the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” is living out their newfound Christian faith far from Jerusalem and the Temple.

They are separated from their Jewish brothers and sisters, sometimes even persecuted by them, and at times in danger of conflict with the Roman authorities as well.

- They had to learn what it meant to live as a Christian in a world that ridiculed or even hated the Gospel and that held out its own set of temptations, similar to our own situation today.

Keep this in mind as you read the wise directives he holds out to help them meet their trials with joy and develop a godly perspective to help them persevere.

## II. GREETING (JAMES 1:1)

***[1] James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greeting.***

### A. Who is this James?

It is fairly clear that the letter was written by James, “***the Lord’s brother***” (i.e., cousin or relative) who was the leader (bishop) of the Jerusalem church. He was one of the three key leaders (besides Peter and Paul) of the early Church.

This James was probably the same person as James, son of Alphaeus, listed in the Gospel as an apostle (see *Introduction*), but some scholars disagree.

### B. The Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1)

The term “Lord” - *Kyrios* in Greek - which is applied to Jesus Christ, is used in the second century BC Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament to translate the name of *Yahweh*.

- It is an explicit profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ, part of the Christian creed from the very beginning.

### C. The Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion (James 1:1)

In Old Testament terminology the term “**twelve tribes**” designates the people of Israel. The “**Dispersion**” or “**Diaspora**” refers to the non-Palestinian Jews (Israelites), who had settled throughout the Greco-Roman world after the Assyrian invasion and their dispersion in 722 BC.

Since in Christian thought the Church is the new Israel, some scholars think this designates the Jewish Christian churches located in Palestine, Syria, and elsewhere (See *Introduction* for more details).

## III. THE VALUE OF TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS (JAMES 1:1-18)

### A. Overview

In these opening verses, St. James points out how Christians should behave in the face of trials:

- they should accept them with joy;

- if they find it difficult to see why they're experiencing difficulties, they should ask God to give them the necessary wisdom;
- The poor and humble of the Lord look forward to **exaltation**, while the rich and prosperous of the world face future **humiliation**, unless they embrace God as their true wealth
- finally he reminds them that the reward God promises to those who endure trials is blessedness.

#### IV. THE VALUE OF SUFFERING (JAMES 1:2-4)

***[2]Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, [3] for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.***

***[4] And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.***

Every hardship and suffering in life can be a cause to rejoice. These trials are part of God's plan to

- strengthen our faith,
- prove our fidelity, and
- bring us closer to perfection.

These trials can be counted as "all joy" because they test faith and produce steadfastness, which means our faith becomes firm and it cannot be shaken.

This in turn leads to maturity, the state of perfect completion in which one is lacking in nothing.

## V. THE SOURCE OF WISDOM (JAMES 1:5-8)

***[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him.***

***[6] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.***

***[7,8] For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.***

We have already seen that trials, met with joy, strengthen faith. But there is an additional source of help: God's Wisdom.

This wisdom is not human insight or ingenuity, but a heavenly gift that gives us a right understanding of life in relation to God.

- It is given generously to those who ask for it with expectant faith – not doubting.

It is the only type of insight that enables one to be joyful in the midst of adversity and suffering, because it allows one to see these things as an opportunity to share in our Lord's suffering.

- When we find it difficult to view things in this light we need to ask God to give us wisdom.

## VI. APPLICATION

*One practical way to seek wisdom is to read the Bible daily. A good starting point is the Book of Proverbs, divided into 31 chapters that can be read, one a day, over a month. This book was written to teach us wisdom.*

## VII. POVERTY AND RICHES

***[9] Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,  
[10] and the rich in his humiliation, because like the flower of the grass he will pass away.***

***[11] For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.***

Comparing oneself to the rich can lead to discouragement. However, from God's perspective, it becomes clear that those who are materially poor are often rich in faith since their circumstances put them in the situation of relying fully on God.

These have chosen to be heirs of the kingdom. In contrast, earthly possessions have no lasting value. They are here today and gone tomorrow, like the flower of the grass.

## VIII. TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS (JAMES 1:12-15)

***[12] Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.***

***[13] Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one;***

***[14] but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.***

***[15] Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death.***

### A. Trials

We all have two things in common. We all face trials of various kinds and we have all been tempted to do something we shouldn't.

James returns to the benefits of standing strong in the face of trials and then looks at temptation.

For the Christian, trials can actually be a source of joy because we know that we can mature as a result of them. Our joy stems from the fact that we have God's grace available to us in the midst of the trial.

Some people think that, because they are unable to avoid trying circumstances, they should resign themselves to them. They adopt the idea of "whatever will be will be." But resignation is passive.

- Christians are called to actively persevere so as **"to receive the crown of life"** – that is, the eternal life that awaits the saints who have patiently and faithfully endured the trial's of life.
- Resignation results in defeat; perseverance in triumph.

## B. Temptations

God tests us by putting us in situations that invite us to trust him. However he never tempts us to turn away from Himself as Satan does. Temptation here means incitement to sin.

- James is adamant that God is neither the author nor the promoter of evil, nor can he Himself be tempted or overpowered by it.
- The truth is that while trial's come from without, temptations attack from within and are born of one's own desire - the effect of "concupiscence."
- Elsewhere James says that the world (cf 1:27; 4:4) and the devil (4:7) are also causes of temptation; but to actually commit sin the complicity of one's own evil inclinations is always necessary.

There is no escaping temptation; it is a part of every human's life as a result of the Fall. Read what the CCC #1264 has to say about the inclination toward sin that is called "concupiscence."

What advice does it give for overcoming it?

### C. Progression from Desire To Death

Sin is our own doing, it is **conceived** when we desire evil and is **born** when we act upon those desires. If unrepented, that sin in turn eventually "brings forth death" – the end toward which all sins point because they separate us from God, the source of life.

### D. Temptation Can Be Resisted

While it is true, as James says, that unchecked temptation leads to sin and eventually death, that process is not inevitable.

- Like trials, temptations can be resisted and overcome (CCC # 1264).

Jesus gave us the best example of how to resist temptation when he was tested by the Devil in the desert (Read Matthew 4:1-11).

- With what powerful weapon did he resist Satan?

## IX. GOD'S PROVISION: EVERY PERFECT GIFT (1:16-18)

***[16] Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.***

***[17] Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.***

***[18] Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.***

## A. God Is Good, all the Time

We have seen that God never tempts anyone. He never encourages a person to do evil. Therefore we cannot attribute to God our inclination to sin, nor can it be argued that by endowing us with freedom he is the cause of our sin.

On the contrary, in the midst of our struggles, it is a great comfort to know that **every perfect gift** from God is given to help us endure trials and overcome temptations in order to live lives that are morally and spiritually pleasing to God.

## B. The Father of Lights (James 1:17)

The Father of Lights is the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars. Unlike these heavenly “lights,” which are constantly changing in brightness and position, God never changes and is ever consistent in blessing those who love him (James 1: 12).

## C. “The Word of Truth”

The first generation Christians, who had been recreated by God by “the word of truth” (the Gospel of new life in Christ) constitute the **first fruits** – a holy offering to God and the first of many to come.

## D. First Fruits

James compares believers of the first generation to the first sheaf of spring wheat that was cut from the field and offered to God in the Temple.

This first portion was meant to thank the Lord for his gifts and to seek his blessing for an abundant harvest. Paul uses this image for Jewish believers – first generation Jewish Christians.

## X. APPLICATION

*While going through this study, take note of how you have typically dealt with trials and temptation and note how God has equipped you to meet the challenges of life.*

*Whatever obstacles may come your way, be assured that you have a loving heavenly Father, your older brother, Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit, your mother, Mary, and the Saints to meet you in the midst of your challenges.*

## XI. HOMEWORK - QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Based on your observations, how does society deal with trials and temptations?
2. When faced with difficult situations, who or what do you turn to first?
3. When it comes to trials, what areas do we seem to be most vulnerable in? Why?
4. In dealing with trials, what is the area that you need to improve on most?
5. James tells us that **“the testing of your faith produces steadfastness”** and bid us **“let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**
6. Have you ever persevered steadfastly through a difficulty and “come out the other side” to peace?
7. Looking at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46), what can we learn about our wills in the midst of trials?

## XII. SUMMARY

It's important to distinguish between the trials and temptations in your life.

A trial is the testing of your faith with the hope that you will become perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. Your heavenly Father's desire for you is maturity.

In 1 Peter 4:12-13 it is written, ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”***

When you face a trial, immediately turn to the Lord in prayer and search for the test. What does God want to accomplish in your life?

If you need wisdom to understand the trial, ask for it. Your heavenly Father will generously give wisdom to you.

Keep your eyes and heart open to God's wisdom, in the Scriptures, the Catechism, in a homily or through a family member or friend.

Temptation is something that we all have to deal with in our lives. When you are tempted to do something that is unpleasing to the Lord, don't blame the Lord, run to Him.

If you don't deal with the temptation, but continue to feed it, that desire will conceive and give birth to sin. And sin may lead to death if not repented.

Once again, call on the wisdom of the Lord and heed the words of Paul to the Corinthians:

***“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of***

**escape, that you may be able to endure it”** (1 Corinthians 10:13).

## Preparation for Week #2 – Doers of the Word

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- Read the complete Letter of James once over quickly to get a general impression.
- Review “Questions for Reflection” and Summary of Week #1
- Read carefully and prayerfully James 1:19-27 – IGNATIUS Catholic Study Bible