

James Chapter 1 – John Karmelich

1. If I had to describe the book of James in one thought it would be, "If we have faith that Jesus is God then what should we do about it?" How we should live as Christians is the book's theme. With that convicting thought stated, let me spend a little time giving the "who, what, when and why's of this book and then I'll talk about why we should study it, starting with this chapter.
2. Let us start with the question of who is James. For those who don't know, the best way to learn the bible is to compare scripture with scripture. That is how we will discover who is the author.
 - a) The book of Acts which was written by Luke, lists three disciples of Jesus all named James in Acts 1:13. The most famous of those three James is the brother of John. That John was one of the main disciples, who is famous for writing the Gospel of John. That James was recorded in the book of Acts as being killed for being a Christian by none other than King Herod in Acts 12:2. Most scholars argue and I believe that even though that James was one of the original twelve disciples, he was not the author of this book.
 - b) The other two people named James again listed in Acts 1:13, are both fairly obscure bible characters with little else said about them in the bible, so scholars rule them out.
 - c) The fourth James named in the New Testament is the half brother of Jesus. After Jesus was born, the Gospels record that Joseph and Mary went on to have children, including four boys. They are named in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 13, Verse 55. One of those boys was named James. The book of Acts and church history records that this James, the half brother of Jesus became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem. In Acts 15, there was a big "pow wow" of the church leaders at that time. This James is listed as being one of the main people who spoke at that meeting. That is why most scholars agree that that James, the half-brother of Jesus wrote this book.
 - d) One more thing about "who" and I'll move on. The Gospels in effect record that Jesus' half brothers didn't believe in Him until after the resurrection. See John 7:3 as support for this theory. Think about it logically: Suppose you grew up in the same house as Jesus. You may have heard about him doing miracles. He might have made claims of being divine, but it's very difficult to accept him as a "deity".
 - i) Personally, if I was the resurrected Jesus, I might have returned to go visit my siblings and say, "Believe me now? Why weren't you there when I was hanging on the cross?" Jesus after the resurrection didn't go chew out his brothers for not believing him. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he states that that Jesus did visit his half brother James, after the resurrection. That is the same James who was well known as their church leader then.
 - e) The final clue that this is the same James as the brother of Jesus, who again, was one of the first church leaders, is that the words and phrases used in this letter are similar to some of the phraseology that James spoke in Acts Chapter 15. Does that mean I am 100% positive it is the same James? No, but evidence is fairly strong to support that argument.
3. Now let me move on to the topic of when this book was written. Most scholars believe that this is the first book written in the New Testament. For those who don't know, the books of the New Testament are not listed in chronological order. While none of the books are dated, there is some good arguments to believe that James was one of the first one's penned.
 - a) Most scholars argue it was written before the "big pow wow" in Acts 15, because if it was written after that date, it would have mentioned that key meeting. In Acts 12, the church was scattered due to a persecution of Christians under King Herod, the one who had the other James (John's brother, the disciple) killed. That means that most scholars date this book as probably being written between the times of those two chapters in Acts. That is why scholars date this book about 10 years after the resurrection.

4. Now comes the important question of "why": One of the issues that most Christian scholars have struggled with through the last two millennia of the issue of understanding about God's grace versus working in order to please Him". There are scholars who incorrectly think that the book of James is a contradiction to one of Paul's key teaching points that we are saved by God's grace alone and we can't earn it.
 - a) That is because the book of James is full of ideas we should do as Christians. In fact, even though this book is five short chapters, it is in effect full of commands of things we should do to live as Christians. This book is sometimes referred to as the New Testament book of proverbs, as it is full of short statements of how we are to live.
 - b) With that said, here is how I reconcile that argument. To me it comes down to the false idea of trying to earn God's love as opposed to trying to be a good witness for Him out of gratitude. Think of it this way: Religions that believe in a single God usually explain that one has to do "a, b, and c" in order for God to be happy with us. It is about working hard in order to prove to God that we are worthy to be with Him forever. While that concept seems like the ideal way to live out our lives, the problem with that idea is that we never can know for sure if we are ever good enough for God.
 - c) Christianity in effect says it is impossible to be good enough for God. Although it is not ever stated in the bible, Christianity teaches that God does not grade on a curve. The idea is that one has to be 100% forgiven of all sins, past, present and future in order for us to be perfect so that we can be with Him forever. If God by definition is perfect, then we would have to be perfectly forgiven to be with Him in heaven. That is why Christianity has the concept of God Himself dying for our sins so that we can be perfectly forgiven and live with Him forever.
 - d) Given all of that, how does one explain the book of James, which is full of commands as to how the Christian should live? Again, the key word to me is the word "gratitude". The idea is we don't try to please God in order to earn His love. We should please Him out of gratitude for our salvation. We can't be more saved by doing what James teaches or what any of the laws teach in the bible. However, this book and the bible as a whole gives us examples of the best way to live out of gratitude for what Jesus did for us.
5. Let me give my final bit of background and then I can focus on Chapter 1. The "where" question: As I stated earlier, James was an early leader in the church in Jerusalem. When the persecution of Christians began under King Herod, the Christians who stayed in Jerusalem lived "underground" to lead the church. Therefore, most likely this letter was written from Jerusalem.
 - a) Another reason to believe that this letter was written before the big "pow wow" of Acts Chapter 15, is that is when the Jewish Christians first learned and accepted the idea that non-Jewish people could be saved by faith. In the introduction to this letter, James said that this is written to the "12 tribes scattered among the nations". That means that James addresses this letter to Jewish Christians (descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel) that are now scattered around the greater area due to the persecution of the church that was happening at that time.
 - b) Given the fact that James only addresses this letter to Jewish Christians, that is a clue that this letter was probably written before the Acts Chapter 15 meeting.
6. With that introduction to the book completed, let me now give my title, "Understanding trials".
 - a) This is not about courtroom trials, although that could count as a trial. The idea is that everyone in life has times when things are difficult and we don't know what to do next. Remember that James wrote this letter at a time when it was a death sentence to even be a Christian from a Jewish background. Therefore "trials" was the key word of that day.
 - b) When trials occur, I like to remind people of two verses in the bible. The first one is used 453 times in the King James Version of the bible that says, "It came to pass". My point is whatever trial we are going through, eventually will come to an end. Just like all of those events described in the bible did come to an end.

- i) The second verse to remember is Romans 8:28, which says in effect that all things work for good for those who love God. The key point is that God allows trials to happen in the lives of believers ultimately for His glory. We usually don't know why we go through such trials and sometimes we may never know the reason, but I trust in that Scripture that God has a purpose for allowing such things to occur.
 - a) One of the best prayers I have ever heard on the issue of trials is the simple prayer of "Dear God, let not this lesson or this trial be wasted".
 - b) If I can keep that in mind, along with the concept of "it came to pass" I find that I can trust in God to see me through any trial in life.
 - c) My final point about trials is to think about this from James' perspective. No matter how bad the trial that most of us are going through, most of us are not trying to be killed just because we believe Jesus is God. That is what the Christian church faced at the time when James wrote this letter. Therefore, if James is teaching how they could not only survive in such times, but also make a difference for God, maybe we too, can learn a few things not only about living through trials, but how to make a difference for God during such times.
 - i) With that statement out of my system, it is time for Verse 1.
7. Chapter 1, Verse 1: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.
- a) Verse 1 does give us the "who" the letter is from and who it is written to.
 - b) Since I've already beaten to death that I am convinced this James is Jesus' half brother, I won't talk about that any more. With one exception: Notice that James doesn't brag about his personal relationship with Jesus. This letter has no, "Oh, and by the way, I'm the one who grew up in the same house as Jesus and He visited me after the resurrection". James just calls himself a servant of God and a servant of Jesus who James believes is his Lord.
 - i) If you have a brother, what would it take to consider him to be god? Even if you saw him do a miracle, you might say he has a gift, but that would not make him out to be God. Even if you saw that brother die a violent way and saw them alive again, you might say, "OK, nice trick. How did you do that?" The only thing that might convince you that brother was God is how that brother acted once you did see him resurrected and what he said based on that fact. Whatever was said, it did convince James that Jesus was Lord (in charge) of James life.
 - ii) One gets the impression James believed in God before he was a Christian. I'm sure Joseph and Mary must have told James and the other siblings stories about Jesus' birth. It appears the siblings didn't believe it all until after the resurrection. That is when it sunk in, seeing Jesus then. That is why the letter is titled this way.
 - c) That leads us to the second part of this letter: It is written to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations". Let me explain what I believe that means. On one hand, it is written to those Jews who already believed in Jesus. On the other hand, it is also written to Jewish people in general to teach them about Jesus. Even though it is only addressed to Jewish believers, I promise that this letter is designed for all us Christians to read. That is why I believe it was written before the big "pow wow". That meeting is when it was understood that non-Jews could be saved through Jesus without being Jewish first.
 - d) The final word is "greeting". The "hello" is not "I'm better than you because I'm the half-brother of Jesus." It is not "Do what I say, because I am known as the or "a" leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem". The point of this letter is that James understood what it was like to be persecuted. There was a death sentence on his head as well as the head of any Jewish Christian at that time.
 - i) To say it another way, "I'm no better than you. I understand what you are going through at this time. Let me greet you as an equal brother or sister in Jesus and nothing more than that. Then let me give you a little advice about how to deal with the trials we all are facing just because we believe that Jesus is God."

8. Verse 2: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.
- a) In verse 2, James says that we should consider it a joyful experience when we face trials. I don't know about you, but trials are not my idea of a good time. Why would he say this?
 - i) Think of it this way: When have we learned the greatest learning lessons in our lifetime? Times when things are going well or during difficult times? When did we learn to trust God the most? It is usually when we are struggling. That is what James is trying to get across to hang in there during that difficult time.
 - ii) The point is not that James wants us to suffer. The point is that when things are getting difficult, that is when the Christians prays to God, "Help". To put that in James' vocabulary here, we develop "perseverance" because we are learning to trust God through those difficult times.
 - iii) To come back to one of the most commonly used lines in the bible, "this too shall pass". One thing we have to remember during our own trials is that somehow and someway it will come to an end. That probably won't give us the solution to our issues, but it will comfort us that whatever we are dealing with is not permanent.
 - b) Remember that James is writing to Christians who are on the run for their lives due to the fact at that moment it is a death sentence in that part of the world to be a Christian. James does not say, "too bad for you all", or "here is where you can hide". Instead he is saying to be joyful, not because the situation is good, but because God is using that situation in order to teach you to trust Him more and help you through your and our trials.
 - c) To summarize, the idea so far is when troubles come should seek God in order to help us deal with whatever we have to deal with. That leads perfectly to the word perseverance. The idea is in effect to hang in there as God promises to see us through such times.
 - d) Verse 4 says that perseverance makes us mature. That does not mean that if we have just the right number of difficulties in life, we will then have a better relationship with God. The idea is that we learn to trust God to guide us through our day. I am at a point in my life where I say, "Dear God, I don't know what is going to happen today or how I will get through this situation, but You know all things and You will somehow work it out."
 - i) This doesn't mean that I never have bad times. It just means that I have learned that no matter what, God will see me through this and when life gets difficult, I need to remind myself of this principal. That principal is that God has allowed me to go through what I am going through for some reason, and I stated earlier, the best prayer in difficult times is "Dear God, let not this lesson be wasted."
 - ii) To give an example, I discovered last night that the daughter of someone I know had committed suicide. This was a strong Christian man and I know his daughter went to Christian schools all of her life. There is no easy way to deal with that sort of pain and any of us who are parents can relate to that sort of tragedy. My prayer for the family is that God give them the perseverance to deal with that tragedy and give them the strength to move on through it all.
 - iii) My point is not that we should be happy during really difficult times. My point is just that God allows us to go through tragedies ultimately for His glory. There is no way I can explain tragedies like that last example. God never says the pain will just go away when we trust in Him. His promise to us is to guide us through such times so that we can preserve and continue to make a difference for Him.
 - iv) In effect, Verse 4 is a promise. The promise is that our trust in God will give us the strength in order to preserve through whatever it is we have to deal with. Again, that does not mean life will be easy. It just means even this too "shall pass".
 - e) OK, John, my life is not that tragic at the moment. When difficult times do come, what should I do about it? How do I get the wisdom to handle it? The answer is in Verse 5.

9. Verse 5: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.
- a) To explain, first I would like to explain the difference between wisdom, intelligence and knowledge. I like to use the example of being hungry and having food in front of us.
 - i) Knowledge is about realizing that eating that food will satisfy our hunger.
 - ii) Intelligence is about how fast we figure out that eating the food ends the hunger.
 - iii) Wisdom is when we actually eat the food.
 - iv) To put it another way, I know lots of people that have lots of knowledge and may even have a high degree of intelligence. However, they still may not have a lot of wisdom in terms of doing the right things in life.
 - b) That leads me back to this verse. It does not say that seeking God gives us knowledge. It says that seeking God gives us wisdom. Grant it, studying our bible does give us a lot of knowledge about it's subject. However, it is the application of that knowledge that God is concerned about as we live our lives. The point here is that if we lack wisdom as to what to do next, God promises to give us that wisdom to make the right decision.
 - i) Let's say we are at some sort of point where we need to make a tough decision. God promises to generously give us the wisdom to make that decision.
 - ii) Does that mean we will never make mistakes or bad decisions? Of course not. It just means that God allows us to go through things for a reason. Remember that the ones James is writing to are on the run for their lives. There are wanted dead or alive posters around town with their pictures. ☺ No matter how hard or often they prayed, those posters were still there. I'm sure there was no guarantee that they would even live through another day. The comfort James is trying to give at this point is that God, not James or you or me, will give us the wisdom to make the tough decisions we have to make at times.
 - iii) I should also add that there are no magic words. We can't recite a specific prayer and then God will give us the wisdom to make the right decision. It is a matter of just seeking Him and asking Him for the wisdom of what to do in that situation.
 - a) I have lost count of the number of times in my life where I needed help to find something or just to make a tough decision and after a quick prayer, it is amazing how the right answer just happened. If one wants proof for the existence of God, pray one's way through a tough decision. It is amazing to see how He works to help us through that situation.
 - b) This also does not mean God is a genie in a bottle. Coming back to the man who just lost his daughter, no prayer is ever going to take away that pain. It does mean that God promises to give each of us the wisdom to make the decisions in life that He wants us to have in order to continue to make a difference for Him with our lives.
 - c) On that happy note, ☺ we can move on.
 - c) Coming back to the verse, notice the phrase "without finding fault". That means we can't have enough sin in our lives to lose that promise. God won't ever say to us, "I can't help you with this situation as you have sinned too much today." Remember that God has forgiven us of all our sins, past present and future as long as we trust that Jesus is God and (the big "and") we believe He is Lord (in charge of our lives).
 - i) Yesterday evening I also heard about another person who believed that Jesus did die for his sins but he didn't believe the entire bible is the word of God. That is an example of a person who does not believe Jesus is Lord. I'm not talking about how we interpret the bible. I'm talking about believing it in the first place. I'll just say that this person was living with a well-known sin and didn't want to change their lifestyle of the sin they were living with. My point is that God does not condemn us or fail to give us wisdom if we do believe He is both our savior and our lord.

10. Verse 6: But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.
- a) To explain these verses, it is probably best if I explain what it does not say:
 - i) It does not say that if I have any moments of doubt about God's existence, then He won't help us to deal with our problems.
 - ii) It does not say that we must pray hard enough in order to get God to answer.
 - b) Instead, one has to read this as an "either-or" statement. Either we believe God can and will help us, or we don't believe it. I recall a time in my life when I was really struggling with a financial problem. I couldn't stop worrying about it. That is when my wife helped me by teaching me "baby steps". That is when one prays, "Dear God, for the next thirty seconds I'm not going to worry about this situation." Then one prays about it again when that time frame is over. In other words, if we can't pray about it once and then not worry about it, we pray in small steps to get us through one moment at a time.
 - c) The point about doubts is not that we won't have moments in life where we doubt God's existence. When we doubt God will see us through difficult times, we will be like a wave in the sea tossed around like the wind. The point is God is effectively saying to us in such times, "Yes I am here. Yes I know this situation is difficult, if not impossible to be able to deal with. Yes I know it is horrible. However, I promise to give you the wisdom to get through this situation. You need to keep on trusting that I (God) will guide you through whatever it is you have to deal with at this moment in time."
 - d) Now think about James' audience and the "wanted dead or alive" posters around town. Now think about the person who just lost his grown daughter to suicide. My point is if you think you have it tough, welcome to the real world. Sometimes I have learned that the best way to deal with pain is to go be of service to someone else. The best way to get through a particular tragedy is to find a way to be of service to someone else.
 - i) With that all too tough thought in mind, notice the phrase "double minded" as an example of doubting God. If we doubt that He will help us through our situation, we will always be living in a state of worry and fear. James' audience is still on the run for their lives even after James' letter got to them. Their situation didn't get any better just because this letter arrived. There are and were times in the history of the Christian church where many people were painfully killed just for believing Jesus died for their sins. However, continuing to live for Jesus can be harder than dying a martyr's death. James is saying keep on trusting God during that time.
 - ii) The point is trusting God gives us the right perspective of how to deal with what ever it is we have to deal with. We are still saved. We can still trust God to give us the wisdom to deal with whatever we have to deal with. That never means that the pain will go away instantly. These verses just remind us that if we trust Him to guide us, He does promise to give us the wisdom to deal with our situations.
 - iii) Again it is an "either or" situation, not a matter of trying harder to please Him.
11. Verse 9: The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. ¹⁰ But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.
- a) Johns' very loose transition: It not a matter of who we are when it comes to dealing with difficult situations. If we have any sort of physical riches, then we have to remember that they won't last forever. If we have nothing, we have to remember that God loves us and cares for us as much as He loves those who have some sort of physical riches in this life.
 - b) James' point here is that he is still writing to those on the run. However, one cannot buy their way out of that situation. It is not a matter of money, but a matter of trust in Him.

- c) I notice many commentators read these verses as the start of a whole new section and fail to see the connection between the previous set of verses and these verses here. They look at these three verses and just think they are saying that whether or not one is rich or poor, it just means that we are equal in God's eyes. While that fact may be true, it does miss the point. Remember that one has to read bible verses in context of the surrounding text in order to get the author's intent.
- i) The context is that when one needs God's help, one seeks God and He promises to give us the wisdom of how to deal with that situation of the moment. The point as it relates to these verses is it does not matter if a believer in Him is rich or poor the answer is the same. God will help those who seek Him.
 - ii) So why bring up money here? I suppose some people think they can "bribe" their way of a situation. It is a way of thinking, "Why do I need God at this moment in my life when I have all of these riches?" James is saying, that having lots of riches does not give one wisdom. If one has a talent to make or keep lots of money, that does not make one wise before God.
 - iii) I recall many years ago when my brother was going through a very difficult time, my father thought he could fix the situation with enough money. That is a false way of thinking and no that did not solve the problem. To quote a man who has gone through periods of his life with and without a significant amount of riches, it is better to have it than not to have it, but at the same time, it does not make one a wise person. That is James' point in these verses.
- d) In summary, these verses are not a condemnation of having "stuff". It is a condemnation of trusting in that stuff and not God Himself. They are condemning the idea that we don't need to seek Him if we have the resources to buy our way out of a situation.
- e) Most of us are aware of the fact that the vast majority of Christians around the world are poor. That is true through the history of the church. That does not mean one can only be saved if one is poor. Jesus said not many of the wealthy are saved. There was a queen of England (I believe Queen Victoria) who was famous for saying she was saved by the letter "m", when Paul said not many (as opposed to not any) of those who are rich are saved. (That reference is to the King James Version of 1st Corinthians 1:26.)
- f) OK, enough money guilt. Let's move on.
12. Verse 12: Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.
- a) Remember how I said it is important to read bible verses in context? That is why I argued the verses about being rich or poor are not so much a comment about one's financial well being as they are a comment about how God views money in context of trusting Him to get through our trials in life. My proof is here in Verse 12. My point is James was talking about trials before and after the discussion of rich and poor people. Now that I've stated that, let me talk about what Verse 12 is saying to us.
 - b) Take a moment to notice how much James loves to use words and phrases that get us to continue to trust in God. We get "perseveres" in this verse and we get a promise that we will receive a "crown" if we continue to trust in Him. My point is that James is reminding us not to give up. It is not that we can be more saved. It is the idea that our lives benefit if we keep on trusting God to get us through our lives. James desire is that we all continue to trust Him no matter what the situation. The book of James does not teach us how to be saved, but how to live once we are saved. If we get that, the whole book makes sense.
 - c) A false idea can come out of these verses that one has to try hard in order to be in heaven. One has to remember that we are saved by God's grace alone, and not how hard we work. James is not a contraction to Paul's writing. It is just seeing it from a different perspective. From God's perspective, we are saved from our trust in Him alone. From our perspective, God wants us to live a life that makes a difference for Him in all that we do.

- d) This leads me perfectly to a quick discussion about the "crown of life". I am convinced that there are rewards in heaven based on our faithfulness to Him. Think of it as being in a race and only the winner gets a prize. I don't believe it means we have to work harder than the Christians standing next to us. I once heard someone say that when we get to heaven, some of us are going to appreciate it more than others. I believe that a false idea is that when we are saved, we just kick back on a couch all day in our homes in heaven. The correct idea is that the purpose of heaven is to have an intimate relationship with God the Father forever. I believe some of us will appreciate that more than others one day.
- i) When we live a life here based on trusting that God will give us the wisdom and the strength to get through the day, we carry that trust in Him into the next life. Think of this life as a preparation for eternity. Receiving that "crown of life" is not based on say, how many good deeds we do. It is based on how much we have trusted Him to get through our lives.
 - a) That reminds me of the false idea that someone leading millions of people to Jesus will get a greater reward in heaven than a person who just works with a few others. The issue is not so much what we have accomplished for Him. It is how much have we trusted in God's power in strength to work through us to accomplish what He desires to accomplish in our lives.
 - ii) In summary the "crown of life" is not based on what we have accomplished based on our own power or our own circumstances. It is based on how much we have trusted Him to get through our lives. We are somehow rewarded in heaven based on how obedient we were to what God calls us to do in life. If you have no idea what it is He has called you to do, ask for that wisdom, and as James has taught, God promises to give us the wisdom of how we can be a better servant to Him.
- e) With that said, I believe we are ready to move on to Verse 13.
13. Verse 13: When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.
- a) To explain, let me start by coming back to my lesson title of "understanding trials". Does God allow people to go through trials? Of course. The purpose of those trials is usually to build up our faith in Him. Let's be honest, we do our best praying under trials.
 - i) That leads to a logical question: Does God tempt us to sin? If He allows believers to go through trials, does that mean He is tempting us to sin? That is the issue that is being brought up in these verses.
 - ii) To answer that issue, we have to understand a little about God. By definition, God is perfect. If He is perfect, He cannot be tempted to sin Himself. If God is perfect, that also means He can't tempt us to sin. In short we can't blame Him for our sins.
 - b) Ok, if it is not God's fault, why do we sin? Why do we have a sin nature inside of us?
 - i) The first person to blame is in effect ourselves. All of us are born with a desire to sin. Think of it as a disease we are each born with. Does that mean we can't help not sinning? Of course not. It just means that desire is there. That is one reason why we need His power to overcome the temptation to sin in the first place.
 - ii) To expand on that thought, I believe that each of us have our own weaknesses. In other words, some of us have more willpower in different aspects of our lives than other people. You may or may not have a strong desire to drink alcohol until one gets very drunk. All of us have different levels of willpower. One can apply that principal to any potentially sinful issue. Just because we may or may not have a desire to commit some sort of sin, does not mean we have to act upon that desire. That is why we are called to rely upon His power to help us in our own weakness.

- iii) Well, I'm not done blaming people yet. ☺ There is also the influence of the world and the influence of Satan himself. Let's start with the world. Temptations to sin are always all around us. There are multitudes who don't care about pleasing God and say in effect, "come join us". The temptation is always there.
- iv) In effect, the same can be said about Satan and his dominions. Remember what is Satan's purpose: To make you and me an ineffective witness for Jesus. I will argue that he can't take away our salvation, but he is always plotting or trying to lure us from being a good witness for God by getting us to focus on other things.
- c) In summary, if our own desires were not bad enough, the influence of the world, and the influence of demonic forces are there to lure us away from God. That is why He designed us with a need to stick close to Him. It is not that He has a physical need to be loved by us. It is about us coming to the realization that we need Him in order to have the power to resist our own desires and the desires placed upon us from the outside. That is why we need to depend upon God as our power source to overcome such temptations.
 - i) That is in effect, why God can't tempt us with evil, but we still can be tempted.
- d) OK, I've discussed who can tempt us and how, (ourselves, the world, demonic forces). The only thing left to discuss from these verses is Verse 15. Once we understand how we can be tempted, next we need to understand the danger of temptation. James is saying that when that desire comes to sin, that desire leads to sin and when that sin has fully grown, it leads to death. I would say that requires an explanation:
 - i) Does this mean every temptation will cause us to sin? No.
 - ii) Does this mean every time we sin, it can cause us to physically die? No.
 - iii) It does mean that temptation "left alone" will grow and cause us to sin.
 - iv) It does mean that sin left alone, causes us turn away from God. For the unsaved, it is talking about living a life denying Jesus payment for one's sins and therefore we turn to other things in order to give us pleasure in life. For the saved, it is about losing one's rewards in heaven. Remember the "crown of life" from Verse 12?
 - a) That crown is about rewards in heaven based on doing what God called us to do. When we as believers sin, it turns us away from Him and in effect does cause us to "die" in the sense of not doing His will for that moment.
 - v) What do we do when temptation is upon us? God does promise us to give us a way to escape. (See 1st Corinthians 10:13 on that point.) If one is a believer, I am convinced that in every tempting situation, He says in effect, "here is the way out". It is amazing to notice the interruptions that come into our lives when such temptations come. It is as if some force is saying, "come this way not that way" and helps us to deal with that desire.
 - a) In other words, just as there are demonic forces we can't see that are trying to make us a bad witness for God, there are good forces we can't see that are trying to help us to stick to the type of life that God desires of us.
 - vi) So what do we do practically? Pray. That is why part of the Lord's prayer is "lead us not into temptation". (Matthew 6:13.) God is aware of our inability to deal with it based on our own willpower. That is why we pray for His help in order to overcome such temptation. What if I am "knee deep" in it already? Again, pray for help. Run away as much as possible. Often such desires have to be crucified to a slow and painful death. My point is that God loves us too much to ever leave us alone, no matter how much we have sinned. Yes there are still penalties to be paid to society and we may have to deal with the damage done, but God is always willing to give us a fresh start and help us walk away from it.
 - vii) OK John, if all of that is true, why should I repent now? Why can't I just wait until my deathbed? First, one never knows when one is going to die. More importantly living for God is the best way to live our lives now, not to continue in sin.

14. Verse 16: Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.
- a) OK, after a page and one half of condemnation, it is time to get back to the text. I've now beaten to death the idea that God can't tempt us with sin and He desires that we draw on His power in order for us to overcome whatever it is we have to deal with at any moment.
 - b) In effect, James eases up on us too. He understands the guilt caused by sin as well as the rest of us. That is why James changes the topic a little and makes the statement in effect that "God is good". We can't blame Him for our problems.
 - c) The point here is because God is not only good, He is perfect and all the good things that we do receive in life come from Him. Remember that James is writing this letter to those who are on the run for their lives due to persecution. James is reassuring those believers and in effect us, that if we live or die today, God is still good and wants the best for us.
 - i) This means that the good things that God gives us in life includes the truth of His existence, the ability to give us the power to overcome temptation. Further, it is His desire to guide our lives if we let Him. That is why we pray and that is why we study His word.
 - ii) The point in Verse 17 is "God does not change". Our circumstances may change and our lives change, but God doesn't. He by definition is perfect and is aware of all that we go through in life.
 - d) This leads to Verse 18. In this verse God refers to believers in Jesus as the "first fruits" of all that He created. Does that mean no one from the Old Testament is saved? Of course not. What about judgment of nonbelievers? That is His job to judge, not yours or mine. Think of "first fruits" as a special group of everything that God has created. When I think of the image of a "first fruit", I think of it as being something special. The first thing that is picked off of a tree.
 - i) Remember that James is writing to Jewish believers. God first picked the nation of Israel to be His representatives to the world. One can argue that the Jewish people are God's "first" as they were first called to draw close to Him. On a specific date in history 2,000 years ago, God sent Jesus to die for us so that anyone we can have an intimate relationship with Him and have the price of all of our sins covered by His blood. That is why even 2,000 years after that event, we as Christians are part of that first group to live our out lives in order to make a difference for Him.
 - ii) OK, if we as believers are a "first fruit" whatever that means, what does it mean that we do with that bit of information? Again, it just means that God desires that we use the most valuable asset we have, our time, in order to make a difference for Him with our lives. It is about realizing that by regularly focusing upon Him, we have the power not only to overcome sin from whatever the source, but the power to make a difference for Him. That thought would be a wonderful way to end the lesson, but I still have eight more verses to go.
15. Verse 19: My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.
- a) One thing I admire about James is how he gets practical. This is not how to be saved, or the fact we are saved by His grace alone. This book is about now that we are saved, what does God desire we do with that knowledge of our salvation? To state the obvious, we can't get "more saved", however we can use our lives to make a difference for Him.
 - b) All of this talk about "practicality" leads me to these verses. A big part of understanding trials is to think about how to react when different situations come up. Let me explain:

- i) Recently I heard radio commentator Dennis Prager ask the question, "if there was an 11th commandment, what should it be?" The best one that the audience came up with was (in my opinion) that one should "think before one speaks". I believe it is not given as one of the 10 commandments because there are situations that do require us to speak quickly. However, I believe James is saying that one should think before one speaks. That is in effect Verse 19.
 - c) Let me explain this principal another way: I learned a wonder expression called "HALT". That means one is most likely to "lose it" when one is Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired". I find that I make my biggest mistakes when one of those emotions are front and center. James is saying in effect, the way to overcome the temptation to sin, is to spend a lot of time listening, be aware of HALT, be slow (delayed) to give one's opinion, and then we are a lot less likely to sin.
 - i) Lately, I have been focusing a lot on the issue of anger. My daughters complain that I get angry and yell at them too much. I know it is out of frustration that they are not doing my will at the moment. The way to overcome that or any sin is not by trying harder, but by saying to God, "This is Your problem. I can't fix it based on my own willpower." The practical answer is also what James is saying here.
 - ii) It never ceases to amaze me how God always puts the scripture right in front of me that He needs me to work on at this moment. I realize that much of my anger comes at moments when "HALT" is needed. I also know I can't fix it on my own. The solution is first to be aware of the situation, be willing to be led by God and only then can He work through us to change us to be how He wants us to be.
 - d) All of this does lead me back to these verses. The point here is to replace that anger or whatever sin or temptation we are facing at that moment with His word. The idea is that it is His power and not our own willpower that can help us to change over time. Does this mean I will be perfect? Of course not. However, I have watched people change over time, simply by trusting in God to help them change and not try to do it themselves.
 - i) Remember again, that James audience is on the run for their lives. I'm sure it was easy and common to get angry about their situation. That is probably one reason why James is encouraging them to be "slow to speak" and listen to others.
 - ii) This leads to a related principal: We can't fix others, all we can do is work on our own lives. That is why James is encouraging those believers to focus on the Word of God that they study and let God work to change us from the inside out.
 - iii) Believe it or not, that leads perfectly to the next verse.
16. Verse 22: Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
- a) One has to remember that when James was written, most people did not own a physical copy of a bible. They heard the stories, principals and prophecies as told by others.
 - b) James is giving the practical advice that just listening (or reading) is no good unless one puts into practice what it says. Of course one has to read one's bible in context. The point is that James is encouraging us to draw close to God in order to live a life pleasing to Him. To state the obvious by now, it is not to earn our way into heaven, but out of gratitude for what God has already done for us. Living by what the word says is the best way to live.
 - c) To state the obvious some more, if doing what God's word says can be summed up in one quick line, the bible would not be as thick as it is. Commentary would not be needed.
 - d) Therefore, we need daily time with Him to learn of Him and draw close to Him in order to live the type of life that He desires of us.
 - e) If I had to pick the most important thing to remember besides the fact that one has to trust in Jesus as both the one who died for our sins and the Lord (in charge) of our lives, then I would state what Jesus said are the two most important commandments. That is in effect to love God and to love others. (Matthew 22: 37-38.) If we get that, the rest is commentary.

17. Verse 23: Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.
- a) Speaking of commentary, that in effect is what these verses are. They are commentaries on Verse 22. To remind ourselves, Verse 22 says that we are to not only hear (and read) His word, but obey it. Verses 23-24 tell us what can happen to us when we fail to do that. Verse 25 tells the benefit of actually doing what God's word says to do.
 - b) Verses 23 and 24 use the word picture of looking in a mirror. It is like reading the Word of God and seeing oneself and seeing all the physical faults in one's life. It is like when one looks at a ceiling and notices the missing tile. When we examine ourselves, we notice the flaws, but when we walk away from the mirror, we forget about the flaws, like when we stop staring at the ceiling, we forget about the missing tile. The point is we are more likely to sin when we are not spending regular time focusing upon God.
 - c) Verse 25 gives the good news. Let me explain the term "perfect law". It is more than just the idea that God's rules are the best way to live our lives. It is the idea that because we are forgiven of all our sins, we are in effect "free to sin all we want". The question then becomes how much do we want to sin? James is making the point that because we have the freedom to do what we want, we should use that freedom, not to sin, but to use our time to make a difference for God, as that is the best way to live.
18. Verse 26: If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.
- a) James final point in this chapter is that we should again be "slow to speak". (Remember that there are no chapter breaks in the original text.) When James uses the word religious, he is not talking about all religions. Remember this letter is addressed to Jewish believers in Jesus who are scattered throughout that region.
 - b) In other words, if one wants to live the type of life that God desires we live, a big part of that life is to "think before we speak". That is a lesson we all constantly have to learn and constantly have to remind ourselves of.
 - c) The chapter ends with a strange reference that in order to be "pure and faultless" before God, we need to "look after widows and orphans". To state the obvious, that does not mean that the only mission as Christians is to take care of people in those situations.
 - i) I believe, over and above the point of taking care of people less fortunate than ourselves, is the idea that the best way to deal with suffering is to be of service to someone else. The best way to get out of a "pity party" is to go help someone else who is in need. That is why James uses orphans and widows as examples.
 - d) Finally he says to keep oneself from being polluted from the world. Remember the basics that we are saved by faith. James is not denying it. He is saying that if we are saved by faith, then the best way to live is to live to make a difference for God and not live just for the sake of pleasure of own lives. That is what James means by this world. He is saying that we should not be influenced by what nonbelievers desire (self pleasure and using our lives in effect to build up our own ego's), but to use it to make a difference for God.
19. Let me expand upon that in my closing prayer. Father, Help us to use the most valuable asset we have, our time, to make a difference for You. Help us to live the life that You desire of us, based on gratitude for what You have already done and not try to prove our worth to You. Help us as we study this book to see it as guidelines as the best way for us to live as believers and not as a set of "do's or don'ts in order to prove our worth to God. Help the times of our suffering not be wasted as we do live to make a difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.