



JAMES

A FAITH

THAT WORKS



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PREFACE

OUR PURPOSE

This study is designed to help you grow in Bible literacy. In doing so, it has two goals: first, it seeks to teach you the book of James in a way that will enable you to think maturely, retain what you learn, and grow in understanding. Second, it seeks to train you to ask better questions of any biblical text on your own. Many of us come to our study of the Bible eager to pull from it wisdom that will help us to live differently. And we should. But before we can move from awareness of what we don't know of the text to awareness of what we should do in response to the text, we must move through the learning process. This study is designed to help you learn and employ that process. It is a simple formula of approaching the text first for comprehension, next for interpretation and lastly for application. Each stage of this learning process asks a critical question:

Comprehension asks, "What does it say?"

Interpretation asks, "What does it mean?"

Application asks, "How should it change me?"

If we rush too quickly to application, we short-circuit the learning process and limit our ability to retain what we have learned. Not only that, but application that is not built on careful comprehension and interpretation is unlikely to be faithful to the text. All three steps matter, but they require patience on our part.

Reading the Bible can be confusing. Because nobody likes to feel lost or confused, most of us quit reading or rush to a commentary as quickly as possible to resolve our discomfort. That is actually the first sign that learning is about to occur and the first step in gaining and holding on to understanding. We need to learn to welcome the discomfort as a sign that our minds are being prepared for receiving instruction.

One of the most important skills we can develop as students of the Scriptures is learning to look for what is true about God as we read. At the end of each week's homework, you will be challenged to meditate on what you have learned about God in that week's portion of the text.

COMPREHENSION

What does it say?

- Read the passage repetitively.
- Read the passage multiple times.
- Look up key words in the dictionary.
- Write a main idea or draw a picture in the margin next to the section it describes.
- Note any literary techniques that the author is using and pay attention to genre rules.
- Look for repeated ideas, connected ideas or progressions of thought and mark them.
- Look for what the passage teaches is true about God (attributes).

INTERPRETATION

What does it mean?

- Explore why the author would have used a particular word or phrase or why he made it. Keep in mind that the textual, historical and cultural context.
- Make connections to other parts of the book or other parts of the Bible (cross-references).
- Paraphrase or summarize part or all of the passage.

APPLICATION

How should it change me?

- Consider how what the passage teaches about God should change the way you think, speak or act.
- Make meaningful connections to your own life:
 - Is there a sin to confess?
 - Is there cause for thanksgiving or praise to God?
 - Is there a promise or truth to trust in?
 - Is there an attitude to change or a motive to examine?
 - Is there a command to obey or an example to imitate?
 - Is there an error to confront or avoid?
- If you are going through the study on your own, first work through the homework and then listen to the corresponding audio for that week.
- If you are going through the study in a group, first do your homework, then discuss the questions your group decides to cover, and then listen to the teaching. Some groups listen to the teaching before they meet, which can also work if that format fits best for everyone.

INTRODUCTION

What does James have to say to me? James is practical.

Take problems. James knows nobody is perfect. So he doesn't tell us how to live trouble-free. He tells us how to live when troubles hit. Do I complain? Or do I use difficulties as an opportunity for growth?

Take words. We all talk. And sometimes we say things we wish we hadn't. James helps us use words more carefully, more positively. Do my words hurt others? Do they advance God's kingdom? Are they truthful? Are they loving?

Take money. It flows around us (despite our complaints about tight budgets and taxes). Do I withhold my money when others are in need? Do I put more value on worldly things than on the things of God?

Take time. If we have enough money, we know we never have enough time. We do all we can to get the most out of each hour of each day, filling our calendars with activity. But am I missing God's will and perspective in the midst of my schedule making?

James is practical—maybe too practical! So expect these quiet times to be challenging—not because they will be hard to understand, but because they will be all too easy to understand.

Eugene Peterson gives a thoughtful, caring approach to the book of James. In his commentary on James he says,

“When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business—and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church. So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with.”

James very candidly, practically and boldly draws in by lovingly and truthfully calling us out. James calls us to a consistent Christian life, for a practical faith—a faith that works.

TITLE:

The title is derived from the author of James, James the brother of Jesus.

AUTHOR:

The author of the book of James has a few different possibilities, but the most likely is that the James who writes this book is James the brother of Jesus. He had a place in early Palestinian Christianity and is referenced elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor. 9:5, 14, 15:7; Gal. 1:15-2:12; Acts 15:13-21)

DATE:

Thought to be no later than 48 AD; mid-late-2nd Century.

THEMES:

- Suffering: the first theme James starts with, along with a discussion on trials and temptations. James makes it clear that while trials and temptation require patient endurance, what is the issue is not just the condition of the trial, but the attitude of the one undergoing trial. This theme occurs again in later sections and is also part of James' current state. Suffering takes various forms in the group of believers that James is writing to, such as evil impulses, money and status, and Satan.
- Sin: there are two primary sources of evil that James believes leads us to sin, external (Satan/demonic) and the evil desire that is in each one of us. James spends a significant amount of time unpacking the evil desires in each person, but also attributes a lot of the suffering and sin we experience to Satan and his helpers.
- Christology (The study of what we, as Christians, believe about the God and human natures of Jesus): James does not develop his own Christology or thoughts of the divinity/humanity of Christ, but rather, he presses into an assumed Christology when needed. This is fascinating because even though it's his own brother he writes about he says Christ is both divine and man, affirming the teachings of the other apostles/disciples. He uses the term "Lord" to describe Jesus, freely equating the resurrected Jesus as Lord with God the Father.
- The Poor are Righteous: Next to suffering, this is one of the most frequent themes in James. In James' time period, more than 90% of the people qualified as poor, often due to the frequent failings of the Israelite people, invading armies, etc. The poor affected individuals who came to be seen as righteous because they had nothing else to rely on but the Lord. James believes the poor are innocent sufferers and God is their defender. They are seen as righteous because they throw themselves on the mercy of God in the face of injustice. James' issue with the rich is not because they have much, but his issue is with their tendency to think they don't need God, often leading to James to attack the corrosive effect wealth has.
- Wisdom: This theme gets its own section in the book of James, as he spends

significant time developing what godly wisdom looks like. Wisdom is not of human origin, but rather comes as a gift of God. Wisdom is the source of virtue, closely linked to the work of the Holy Spirit, as seen in both the OT and NT.

BACKGROUND:

There are several people in the New Testament called James, including two apostles. Though they have never been completely certain, most church scholars have believed that a third man, James the brother of Jesus (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3), wrote this letter. While he probably joined the others in Jesus' family in rejecting Jesus during his earthly ministry, James certainly started following Jesus after His resurrection. In fact, James soon became the head of the church in Jerusalem.

James comes from humble beginnings and joins a rag-tag team of other people from the edges of society to follow Christ. James, as the brother of Jesus, watched his older brother grow up, never sin, and lead a mass of people to understand Himself as God; he watched his brother die for his own sins, and didn't believe Jesus was God until after the resurrection, just like the other disciples. James, with his background in mind, was empowered by the Spirit, the testimony of his brother, and the sacrifice of his brother, to preach to the 12 tribes of the diaspora, or spread apart Jews, about the goodness of the message of Christ. He preached to Jews in their synagogues against the prominence of status and roles in the church, in the midst of a culture that was well on its way to taking pride in knowledge, wealth, and success. His audience may have also included Gentile Christians and Jewish-Christians; early evidence of a mixed community.

It is probable that James led the first church council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), which decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before they could be saved. This is an important factor in assessing James' view of faith and works (which is to be noted in light of 2:14-16).

Yet James was aware of the very Jewish makeup of the church in Jerusalem and required Paul to squelch the rumor that he, Paul, was telling Jews to abandon the Law of Moses. James himself apparently followed Jewish law closely, enough so that he was known as "James the Just." He died a martyr in A.D. 62.

James addresses his letter to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." "Twelve tribes" could refer to Jewish Christians who through exile, enslavement and trade were spread throughout the entire Mediterranean basin. More likely it refers simply to Christians, since the New Testament compares the church to Israel (Gal 6:16; 1 Pet 2:9-10). In any case, the letter is not addressed to one specific congregation, as Paul's letters were. It is therefore called a general epistle.

MESSAGE:

James wrote to a church beset by numerous problems. The church we see in the book of James struggled with divisiveness, intolerance, favoritism, and an overpowering desire for wealth and status (fame). James is written as a general letter about a way of life that is in accord with true piety, holiness, and faith in God in the midst of varying circumstances.

CHAPTER 1

Read Chapter 1:1-27 before reading Chapter Summary

SUMMARY:

The first chapter of James gives us an introduction as to who James is, his role, and the community he is writing to. In this section, we get a picture of what suffering is and how we can have joy in the face of suffering, trials and temptations. All of this, as difficult as it may seem in the moment, produces perseverance, character, a deeper understanding of God's Presence, etc. James concludes this chapter with a discussion on what it means to listen to the Word and do what it says.

- Parallel passages:
 - Job: suffering broadened his understanding of God and of himself
 - Daniel: is steadfast through suffering
- James doesn't open 1:1 with saying he is the Lord's brother, why do you think that is?
 - What does he call himself instead?
- What connotations does the word servant have? What does this self-identification reveal about James? What does it suggest about the content of his letter? About his perspective on the Christian life?
- Read Mark 3:20-21. What did Jesus' family think about Jesus and why?
- How would you explain the difference between calling yourself a Christian and being a servant of Jesus Christ?
- Why do you think James starts with suffering?
 - In what areas of your life do you see connections between how James understands suffering, trials, and temptations and how you're currently experiencing suffering, trials, and temptations?
- How do trials make you aware of your need for God?

- Read what Peter wrote to his fellow Christians in 1 Peter 4:12-19. What similar themes do you see in Peter and James writing?
- Do you ask God for wisdom when a difficult situation arises? What is the first thing you ask for?
- What does it mean in verse 7 to be “double-minded”?
 - What illustration does James use to explain this?
- What other Bible Passage comes to mind when you read verse 12?
 - Read Matthew 5:11-12. What parallels do you see between Jesus’ and James’ teachings?
- What does it mean to preserve or remain steadfast?
 - How does Jesus model enduring temptation for us in Luke 4:1-13?
- How does the series of sin in verse 14 show up in life today?
- How often do you reflect on all that God has given to you/done for you?
 - How can we grow to honor God in how He has provided for us and also share with others all that He has done?
- How does James talk about human anger vs. Godly righteousness in verse 20?
- How did James’s earthly relationship with Jesus lend credibility and passion to his message of being a doer, not just a hearer, of truth?
- Why do you think James uses the mirror example as a way to talk about doing what the Word says in verses 23-25?
- Read James 1:22. What’s happening in your heart if you hear the Word but don’t do what it says? Why is doing what you know to do often much harder than knowing what to do?
- What is true religion? What does it look like, smell like, feel like? What does false religion look like?
- How does the image of God as Father help us understand “the perfect law, the law of liberty” as discussed in James 1:25?

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, thank you for teaching us what it looks like to suffer and thank you for suffering for us. Teach us to turn to you first in the midst of trials and temptations so that we may grow closer to your heart and become more aligned with the Spirit. Whatever sins we may be falling prey to, we ask that you guide us through relying on you to overcome them. And, as we move forward today, show us in our lives where we can practice the true religion you love so much.

CHAPTER 2

Read Chapter 2:1-26 before reading Chapter Summary

SUMMARY:

Chapter two consists of addressing issues in the church related to favoritism and faith vs. deeds. James discusses the roles, actions, and hearts of the rich and the poor, speaking against bribes, exploitation, and emphasis on status. James also shares a section on judgment; the judgment that is to come for those who do not do what the Word says, but merely listen to it. However, James is keen on stating that mercy triumphs over judgment. There is mercy still for those who have not changed their ways. The final section of this chapter emphasizes faith and deeds, but specifically targets how we are to act, not as an acts-based faith, but rather faith that works itself out in everyday living and is ultimately demonstrated.

- Why do you think James dislikes favoritism so much so that he includes a whole section about it? How does this prevent the work of the church?
 - In what areas do we see this as a problem today?
- Based off your reading, do you think the church consisted of mostly rich or mostly poor people?
 - Read Acts 2:45 to see
- How does bringing up the law prove James' point in verses 8-11?
 - How does "the law that gives freedom" compare with this?
 - Read Romans 13:8-10
- Why do you think there is "judgment without mercy" for those who don't show mercy to the poor?
- Read 1 Peter 1:13-25. What phrases and themes in Peter's letter are similar to those in James 2?
- Read 1 John 4:7-21. Pay attention to the connection between a person's relationship with God and with other people. What connection exists between the sincerity of our faith in God and the way we treat other people?
- How is keeping the law different from faith-based works of righteousness?
- How do you see elements of verses 15-17 happen in the church/world today? How can you change that?
- Why do you think faith by itself is not enough, as seen in verse 18? Why do you think James brings up demons believing in God?

- When you are at a low point, what do you do to increase your faith and seek God?
- What do you think it means for demons to shudder? How does this reality convict us about the nature of saving faith and works?
- How does James use Abraham and Isaac to explain his point? Rahab?
- What can we conclude from chapter 2 about faith and deeds?

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, show us what it looks like to love without borders; to share your compassion and mercy with those around us no matter their background or beliefs. Teach us to be your light to the world. Lord, we pray for unity in our church, in the churches around us, and in the churches of the world. Jesus, we know the law you teach, your Word, brings freedom. We ask that you cement that in our hearts' beliefs, and that you would make us confident to share the freedom we have received with others. Thank you for bringing us into your mission.

CHAPTER 3

Read Chapter 3:1-18 before reading Chapter Summary

SUMMARY:

Chapter 3 is a shorter chapter that covers taming the tongue, the standard leaders are held to, and wisdom. Our words have the power of life and death (Prov. 18:21). James teaches here that while the tongue is the most unruly, it can be tamed with godly wisdom, but not of our own power. Thus, he shares that there are two kinds of wisdom: "wisdom" that comes from the world and our evil desires, and wisdom that comes from God.

- Why do you think James begins this chapter with talking about the standard leaders are held to? Why are leaders held to such a high standard?
 - Read Romans 12:6-7
- Why is the tongue the hardest to tame? What can happen if we don't keep our tongues in check?
 - Why does James say the tongue is full of "deadly poison?"
- How have you used your tongue (words) in the past to curse others? To bless others?
 - How does this relate to prior sections on faith and deeds?

- What is the significance of the salt spring and freshwater spring illustration in verses 1-12?
- Read Hebrews 10:24-25. Why is encouragement an integral part of Christian community?
- How is the second mention of wisdom similar and different to previously? What are the 2 kinds of wisdom?
- Read James 3:13-16. In the following verses, highlight the three words used to describe false wisdom. When you read these descriptions of false wisdom, do they seem like an exaggeration to you? Why can't you afford to underestimate the effects of false wisdom?

Closing Prayer:

Lord, thank you for being patient with us when we don't have it all together. We have learned that our words have power, so teach us to use them to bring blessings instead of curses; to honor your creation. Jesus, we love you, and we are in awe of how much you love all of Creation. Help us to remember this as we grow as true disciples and to show that we believe this through our words and actions. Grow us in wisdom that comes from you.

CHAPTER 4

Read Chapter 4:1-17 before reading Chapter Summary

SUMMARY:

Chapter 4, a section on submission to God in all that we do, is a great segue from the previous themes. James addresses the quarreling he hears about what is happening in the church and challenges his audience to recognize they are more focused on the desires of their hearts as opposed to how they should be focused more on the desires of God. He challenges them to seek God in humility and repentance, realigning their hearts to God's heart. He also addresses the tendency of the people to act as judges in judging others, thus judging the lawgiver (or our Creator), telling them this is not their job. Nor is it right to boast about tomorrow and all that we think will happen when we cannot truly know all of the events that could occur. We are to be grateful for what we have now and look forward to the future with God, not by the standards of the world.

- What does James mean when he says in verses 2-3 that the people "do not have because they do not ask God?"
 - How are you challenged to pray boldly? Unselfishly?

- What are some contrasting desires of the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of the world?
 - How might this lead to “adultery” and “idolatry” in the people of God?
- Read James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15-17. Summarize the relationship between godliness and friendship with the world.
- What do you imagine when you read in verse 5 that God “jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us”?
 - Why do we need grace for this?
 - Read Proverbs 3:34
- How do we find freedom when we submit ourselves to God, loosing the chains of the devil?
- Read James 4:7 and Ephesians 6:10-18. Why is it important to remember that your struggles are spiritual? What are the pieces of armor? What do they reveal about godliness? What’s the only offensive weapon described? What does it reveal about godliness?
- What do we get in verse 10 when we humble ourselves before God?
 - How do we humble ourselves?
- How are we judging God by judging each other?
 - Read Revelation 12:9-10 and 1 John 2:1-2 to see who we really sound like when we do this.
- Read James 4:13-17 and underline and write down the key words that signal a posture of arrogance.
- How does James teach us to value the time we have today?
 - How do we submit to God in this?

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, teach us to pray boldly and humbly. Lord, we recognize that you are the one who holds everything together, that nothing can exist apart from you. Thank you for keeping the world in motion and thank you for being our foundation. Teach us to honor others instead of judge them and to recognize your desires for the world over the world’s desires for itself. Help us to be your agents of change in this world, but to do so through the power of your Spirit and not of our own power. Lord, free us from the power of the enemy and forgive us for our sins. Teach us to continue to seek you in humility and repentance, honoring you in all we do.

CHAPTER 5

Read Chapter 5:1-20 before reading Chapter Summary

SUMMARY:

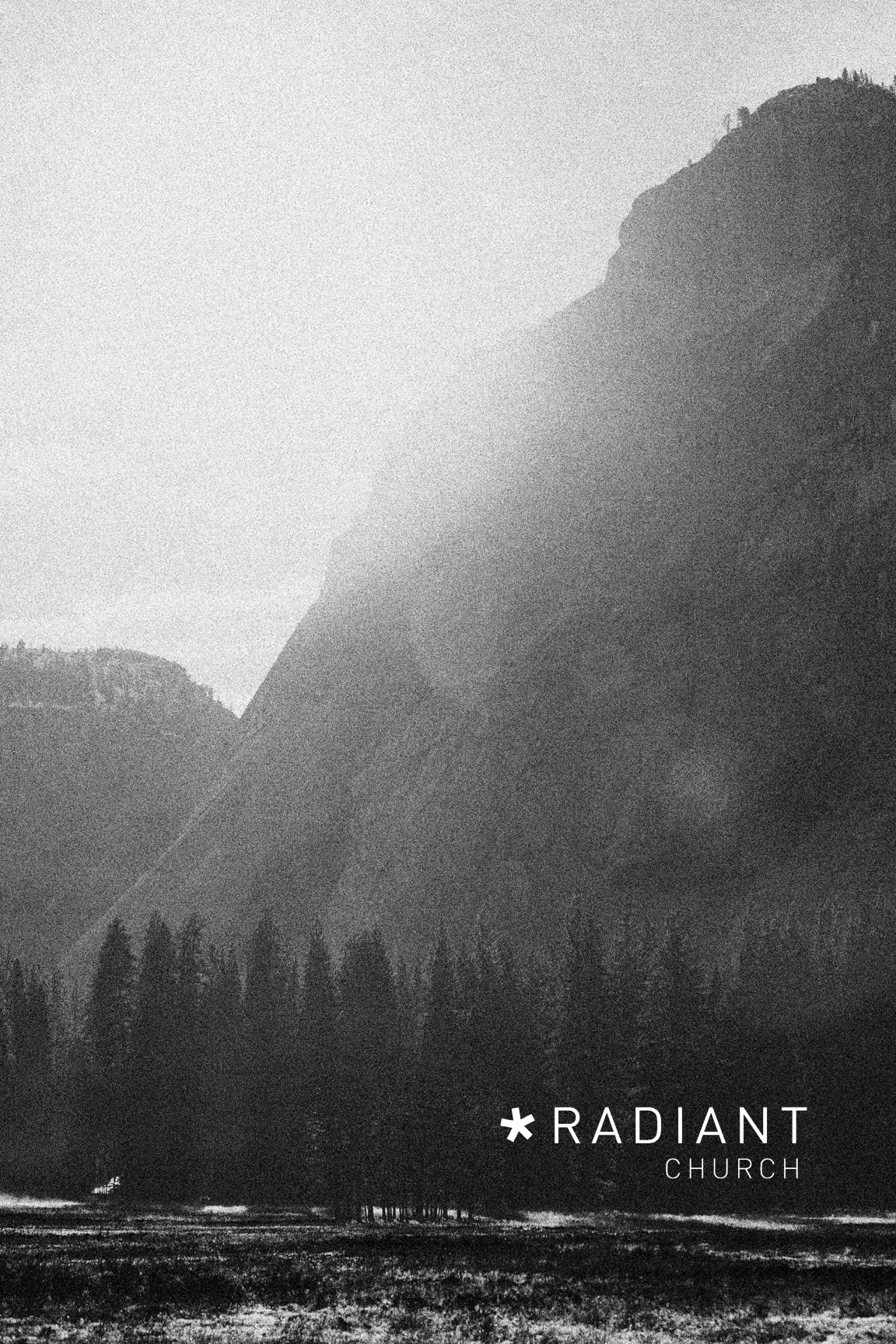
James, in chapter 5, closes his book with a couple warnings, while also providing some comfort and confidence for his readers. James opens this chapter with a warning to rich oppressors, noting the abuses of the rich which brings their judgment; specifically that of the rich in the church he is writing to here. The poor who hear James' words should find comfort in their cries reaching the ears of God, for He is their defender. He sees their suffering and will bring victory. Until the time their suffering is complete, James challenges his audience to have patience in suffering, referencing the prophets and their history, to attest to the benefit of enduring persecution. His final section of chapter 5 is focused on the significance of prayer. In this section, we get a view of what to do when we're struggling, pray. And not just pray alone, but pray with our communities. Just as Elijah, we can pray in faith boldly and see the moves of God. And as a community that prays, we are challenged to do such.

- Why does James end his book with a pronouncement against the rich?
- Read James 5:1-6. Describe the situation being addressed in these verses. How might we be prone to misunderstand James's message? What's actually being condemned here? What isn't being condemned?
- What are ways you can identify in your own life with both the rich and the poor in this section? How have you been in both positions?
- Do you find comfort in the cries of the poor reaching the ears of the Lord in verse 4? In what ways?
- Read James 5:7-11. Highlight the words patient and patience in the verses. How many times do they appear?
- What does it mean to be patient in chapter 5? What does James teach us about patience?
 - How can we be patient in suffering?
 - What does the example of the prophets mean?
- Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-17 How is Paul's view of suffering similar to the view of suffering expressed in James?
- Read James 5:15-18. What examples did James give to demonstrate the power of prayer in the life of a faithful believer?

- What is the significance of community in prayer in verse 16?
- How does the story of Elijah impact your understanding of what James shares on prayer?
- Read James 5:13-18 again and be brutally honest with your Father in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal what you may not even recognize you need in order to live out your faith.
- Read James 5:19-20. Why is this a fitting end to James's teaching on faith and works?
- Read Luke 15:1-7. What similarities do you see between Jesus' parable of the lost sheep and James 5:19-20
- Have you ever pursued a person who was wandering from the truth? What was that process like? How did he or she respond? Who do you need to pursue who's wandered from the faith?

Closing Prayer:

Father God, forgive us for all the times we've ignored the poor and marginalized. Break our hearts for what breaks yours and help us to see the good, Your Good, you want us to accomplish in the world around us. Thank you, Lord, for hearing our cries and for both delivering us from our suffering and showering us in unending grace. Teach us to pray boldly, faithfully full of trust in you, as we join together in praying for your people. Thank you, Lord, for the work you've begun and the work we get to participate in.



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