

A decorative graphic in the top-left corner of the page, consisting of a dense cluster of small, stylized icons in shades of orange, brown, and grey. The icons include various symbols such as snowflakes, arrows, geometric shapes, and abstract patterns, creating a textured, snow-like effect.

JAMES

BOOKS OF FAITH SERIES

Learner Session Guide

Mark Wickstrom

JAMES
Learner Session Guide

Books of Faith Series
Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

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SESSION ONE

James 1:1-18

Learner Session Guide



Focus Statement

The power of God for living daily life is revealed in the collection of sayings in the book of James.



Key Verse

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. **James 1:5**

What Is Wisdom?

Focus Image



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Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

Gracious God, thank you for revealing wisdom to us in the Bible. Empower us with wisdom to live faithfully in our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Focus Activity

Write down as many wisdom quotes as you can in one minute. “An apple a day keeps the doctor away” would be an example. When you have completed your list, put a star by those sayings you have actually followed in your life. What do you observe?

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Open Scripture

Read James 1:1-18.

- How did you feel as you heard this text read?
- What words or phrases stand out the most to you?
- What questions do you have about this text?

Join the Conversation

Literary Context

1. James is a letter that begins, like other letters in ancient times, by identifying the writer and recipient(s) and offering a salutation or greeting. The main theme of James and the key to understanding and appreciating this letter is wisdom. *Wisdom* here means the creative gift of God that enables God's people to live and grow in responsible maturity. This advice for responsible, faithful behavior is scattered throughout James like "pearls" of wisdom.

- Read James 1:1-4 and underline words and phrases indicating that James is a letter.
- Review James 1:1-18. Where does wisdom or the "word of truth" (1:18) come from, and how do we receive it?

2. Not only is wisdom the main theme and key to understanding and appreciating James, but also the letter is made up of a specific type of writing called *wisdom literature*. This type of writing has a rich tradition in the Old Testament and appears in many places in the New Testament as well, including Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Wisdom literature communicates advice and instructions from one in authority (a king, teacher, or parent), based

on his or her experience of how to lead a successful life. In wisdom literature, wisdom is God's perfect gift. It belongs to God's goodness and purpose in creation, and it empowers all of creation, especially those who know the fear of the Lord (respecting and honoring God, living according to God's commands) as the beginning of wisdom. As you read through wisdom literature, wisdom sometimes speaks as "I" (in Proverbs 1:23-26, for example).

- What evidence do you find in James 1:1-18 that it is part of the wisdom literature in the Bible?
- Read Proverbs 1:1-9 and 20-33; Proverbs 9:10; and Psalm 111:10. List the benefits that are in store for the person who heeds wisdom.
- Read 1 Kings 3:5-14—Solomon's prayer for wisdom. How does this compare with James 1:5? King Solomon would have faced the temptations of wealth and power. Make a list of what James 1:12-16 says about temptation.

Historical Context

1. There is little detail in the letter of James to tell us who wrote it, when it was written, and who received it. Traditionally, the author is identified as James the brother of Jesus, who led the Jerusalem church until his martyrdom just prior to the Jewish war of 66-70 C.E. (Galatians 1:19, Acts 15:13-21). However, many believe that James was written by someone who dedicated this religious work to a hero of the faith, a common ancient practice. If this is the case, James may have been written as late as 130-140 C.E. The moral exhortation and references to testing, rich and poor in the assembly, doing business and making money, and laborers and harvest could fit with many times and settings. The address to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" is also unclear. It may refer to the early Christian community and its Jewish roots, or to the people of Israel in general—and so to all Christians also.

- What do you think about the fact that many things about the author, time, setting, and recipients of James are unclear? How does this affect the way you think about this letter?

2. Many writings and books were available to the early church. Early on, when Christians drew up lists of books that were accepted, disputed, and rejected, James was one of seven books that were disputed. By the fourth century C.E., however, the 27 books in the New Testament, including James and the other "disputed" books, became *canon*—or the standard list—for Christians in the Greek and Latin traditions. Since that time, many Christians have drawn strength, comfort, and power from the letter of James.

- How does this affect the way you think about James?



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Lutheran Context

1. Martin Luther had questions about James. He believed that Jesus Christ, the cross, and the resurrection were at the heart of Scripture, but he did not see this reflected in James as clearly as in other New Testament books. Luther did include James in his translation of the Bible, however. He discussed it in prefaces to the New Testament and to the epistles and did not oppose people reading it. More importantly, Luther's theology, teaching, and approach to Scripture demonstrate his appreciation and use of wisdom.

- Read Luther's explanation to the First Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. What does God do? What does God provide? How does this compare with James 1:5, 17-18?
- Lutheran teaching emphasizes grace—the undeserved gifts of God poured out on us through Jesus Christ. Review James 1:1-18 and underline words and phrases that tell about God's grace. How are grace and wisdom connected to each other?

2. Luther taught that some books in the Bible, such as the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John, are more important than other books because they more clearly show who Christ is and what Christ came to do. This criteria or principle is called "what shows forth Christ."

- What do you think about the idea that some books in the Bible are more important than others?
- On your own, list the books in the Bible that are most important to you. Compare your list with others in your group, and discuss how you made your choices.

Devotional Context

1. Look again at the Focus Image for this session. You've probably heard of the phrase "pearls of wisdom." What pearls of wisdom have been important in your life? Did someone "give" you those pearls, or did you discover them on your own?

2. James 1:2 calls us to consider trials or times of testing as "nothing but joy." Tell about someone who faced a difficult time with joy. How was joy possible during this time?

3. James tells us to ask God for wisdom. We are to ask in faith, not doubt, which is "like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind" (1:6-8).

- Draw or describe how you would picture doubt, then do the same for faith. What similarities and differences do you see between doubt and faith?

- Write or say a prayer asking and expecting God to give you the gift of wisdom.

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work the group has done during the session.

Pray

God of wisdom, thank you for showering us with every good gift. When we face difficult times, give us the courage to change the things we can change and to let go of things we cannot control. When we have doubts, be our anchor and strengthen our faith. Give us the gift of wisdom to live and grow in your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the text for the next session: James 1:19—2:26.
2. Find three passages in James 1:1-18 that really speak to you. Write each one on an index card and carry the cards with you. After every meal, take out one of the cards and read it.
3. Check out the Book of Faith Web site at www.bookoffaith.org and consider starting or joining a conversation on the book of James.
4. Think about a trial or difficulty you are experiencing in your life right now. Pray for God's wisdom in this situation each day for the next week, expecting God to give generously.
5. As you review this week's session text or read the text for the next session, consider using the following questions to guide you:
 - Which verse or verses causes me some concern?
 - Which verse or thought enlightens me right now?
 - Which verse or thought encourages me right now?

Be prepared to share your responses with the group, if you wish to volunteer.

Enrichment

1. Do some additional research on the meaning of *wisdom* in the Bible. For example, read about wisdom literature in a study Bible, look at an introduction to the book of Proverbs, or do an online search on the term "biblical wisdom." Prepare a brief report to share with the group.



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2. If you are looking for insights on how to deal with trials related to addictions, check out a 12-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Gamblers Anonymous. Check local listings for groups meeting near you. If you are looking for insights on how to deal with a loved one who has an addiction, check out Alanon or a treatment center near you.

3. Listen to a recording of the song “Turn, Turn, Turn (To Everything There Is a Season)” (Book of Ecclesiastes/Pete Seeger, Columbia Records, 1965) by The Byrds. The song is based on the wisdom literature in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. What life experiences does it highlight? How many does it mention? They are presented in random fashion, probably because life can happen in just such random ways. Which of these experiences have you encountered in your life?

For Further Reading

First and Second Peter, James, and Jude by PHEME PERKINS. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

Available at www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude by John H. Elliott and R. A. Martin. Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 1982).

Lutheran Study Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).