

# THEOLOGY FROM SCRATCH— WEEK 8



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*The Cover Picture is S.t James the Minor by Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640),  
on display in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain.*

Week 8 begins a four-week dialogue on James’s epistle. It begins with a blunt description of life in Christ and the challenges Christians face. A Christian’s trials are actually opportunities to do great things for the Lord, but are also opportunities for failure.

No excuses.

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Theology From Scratch — Week 8

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## Dialogue 36 — Introduction to James

So, how are we going to do this study of James?

Each lesson will start with a passage and then explain it. Here goes, with James 1:1–4

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,*

*To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:*

*Greetings.*

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (NKJV)*

Wow. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds?!?* Is James for real?

Yes, and look at who he’s writing to—*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*. The Dispersion (διασπορά, diaspora in Greek) literally means the Jews that were “dispersed” around the world by persecution.

You mean after the Roman crackdown?

Not the crackdown in AD 70; this was written before that. (James was martyred in AD 62.) Still, Jews were generally dispersed by persecution—and that was mainly Roman.

But this specifically is for the Christians (especially Jewish Christians) who were dispersed after the martyrdom of Stephen.

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. — Acts 8:1b–2 (ESV)*

The trials faced by James’s readers make our trials look like picnics. Many of them were literally refugees.

Counting trials like these as *all joy* is not exactly the first thing that comes to mind. Praying to be delivered is more like it.

And that’s why James wrote this. He is instructing his readers to do something that’s anything but obvious. He’s also not minimizing their suffering. He’s steeling his readers for the trials to come.

So, he’s saying that it’s all worthwhile?

Yes, but James’s main point isn’t simply that the suffering is worthwhile; it’s how—because it produces steadfastness. The Greek word that’s translated as “steadfastness”

(ὕπομονή, hoo-pom-on-ay) means patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, endurance. The NKJV translates it as “patience” here; the NIV translates it as “perseverance.”

But how is learning steadfastness/patience/endurance so important that it’s worth major trials?

That question is the perfect intro to the book of James. Growth in Christ (AKA sanctification) is at the core of the practice of Christianity. The word “practice” is particularly apt here.

James is writing against the variation of “Christianity-lite” that says, “Just say the sinner’s prayer, and I’ll meet you at the pearly gates.”

But isn’t that how Christianity is often “sold”?

Yes, but this isn’t about how to become a Christian; James’s readers already are Christians. This is about how to glorify God by being a useful one.

So, this is coming back to your main theme—God’s glory, right?

Yes, and don’t miss the tie-in to the lessons about Job. Remember Job’s character development was “worth” all the pain and suffering.

Here, James says, “*the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*”

But it’s the next sentence that’s the full character development. “*And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*”

This is the growth in faith that we just discussed. It’s part of how we glorify God.

Interesting that James would start on such a negative note though.

Yes! This kind of reminds me of someone saying, “Location, location, location. Did I mention location?” James is absolutely hammering this point.

In the first century, people needed to be hammered with this lesson to help them face their trials. Ironically, we need to be hammered with the same lesson to help us face our lack of trials.

We need to be reminded that Christianity is designed to be tough. The attitude that Christianity is there simply to help us is toxic. Many churches make it seem as if Christianity is all fun and games. They expect nothing from Christians except, maybe, money.

Yeah, I’ve noticed.

Good. Our study of James will show you that there’s a serious Christianity—one that you, and the media, don’t see. On to tomorrow!

## Dialogue 37 — Doubt

*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. — James 1:5–8 (NKJV)*

He who doubts? Doubts what?

That it's all true—that Jesus is who He claimed to be.

And for the first-century Christian (and for us), this all hinges on one thing—that He rose from the dead.

While Jesus was in the grave, His disciples were confused and depressed. They were, for a few days, *like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind*.

Then the risen Jesus showed up.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall.

Ha! Yeah, that must have been a moment for the ages—literally.

Yesterday's lesson was on the value of trials. There is no better example of this than the back-breaking trial the disciples went through while Jesus was in the grave.

Imagine the confusion. Imagine the pain. Imagine the questions they asked each other as they looked for answers to impossible questions.

And it was all a set-up. When Jesus showed up and flipped the script, the release of pressure would have killed a weak heart.

So, the disciples went from total doubt to total certainty in the blink of an eye.

Actually, no they didn't, and that's the lesson. When Thomas refused to accept what his eyes were telling him, he was acting normally. What he said that day was what many of the other disciples could have been thinking.

The mind does not switch gears easily. Humans are wired to have a consistent, coherent view of reality (sometimes called a worldview). This keeps us sane. We process everything through the lens of our worldview.

Any major disruption is not easily processed. In fact, we often outright ignore anything that contradicts our worldview. It “doesn't make sense,” so it's quickly forgotten.

You're saying that everyone is, in a sense, closed-minded. That's pretty strong. Can you give me an example?

Well, we all believe that the past is fixed. We can lie about, or forget about, the past, but we cannot change it. If something were to come up that challenged this view, we wouldn't just go, "Oh, I see," and change our minds. This new idea would be a super hard sell. Doubt would rule.

I can't even picture that. Try again.

Okay, how about my earlier lesson how crucifixion kills. The idea that people suffocate has been well known—and believed—for many decades. You have even heard of it. Even though you had no stake in that point of view, how easy was it for you to change your mind?

And what about someone who had previously taught the suffocation theory? Having a stake in, or a significant history with, a particular point of view increases that effect. Zugibe's evidence is solid, yet his theory has been slow to catch on.

I guess I can see that.

Maybe a more general case is how slow Einstein's Theory of Relativity was to catch on in the early 1900's. It didn't exactly contradict anything; it was just so mind-bendingly different that people just couldn't adjust. You could call it an acquired taste.

Come to think of it, the whole concept of acquired tastes might explain this better than anything else.

And there's another deeper example. This is how optical illusions work. What you "see" is what your mind thinks is there based on prior experience. Thus, it's subject to error.

Okay. Let's get off this tangent and return to your point.

So it was with Jesus's resurrection. Death is, by definition, irreversible. If your condition is reversible, you're not dead. The disciples couldn't just instantly process and accept the new reality of resurrection. The human mind just doesn't work that way.

That makes sense.

This is connected to James's point about doubt leading to instability. The same psychological effect that we call closed-mindedness, we could also describe as stability.

You're resistant to things you are confident can't be right and/or real. That's usually a good thing, though it can be wrong if your confidence isn't well placed.

I see that generally. How does that apply to James's point?

One has to have fully incorporated the resurrection into their worldview or they're in a state of confusion.

Got it. On to tomorrow!

## Dialogue 38 — Status

*Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits.*

*Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.* — James 1:9–12 (NKJV)

I can see this lesson—I think. I’ve sometimes been impressed with Christianity’s lack of concern for status or wealth, though it could be better. The rest of our society is worse.

My wife has a bunch of Girl Scout buddies who love to get together. They come from all levels of society. Some of them can barely afford to travel to their get-togethers. Others fly first class.

But when they’re together, none of that matters. Instead, it’s who knows how to tie a particular knot, or the best way to cook corn in a campfire. In the Girl Scouts’ universe, what matters is Girl Scout things. Many of the things that matter in our world aren’t important in theirs.

Christianity is like that. It’s separate from the secular world.

*Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”* — John 18:36

Like the Girl Scout universe, Jesus’s kingdom has its own priorities. Wealth, fame, power, and all other forms of status in our culture mean nothing to this King.

And do not miss why *the lowly brother* [should] *glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation*. It’s because these things are as transient *as a flower of the field*. They mean nothing; the eternal means everything.

This sets up an interesting segue to James’s discussion of temptation. Unlike riches, temptation connects to the eternal. The one who resists temptation *will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him*.

That last part is curious. Why not just say, “*will receive the crown of life*”? Why add, “*which the Lord has promised to those who love Him*”?

Because it forces a connection between loving Him (Jesus) and resisting temptation. This is made clearer by deconstructing the Greek word that’s translated as love here (ἀγαπᾶσιν, agaposin). It’s a conjugation of the verb love, which is related to the noun agapé, which means sacrificial love—giving priority to someone other than yourself.

I can see this in terms of loving your neighbor, but what does it mean to love God?

It's pretty much the same idea. Loving Jesus means giving priority to Him. This explains John 14:21a. *"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me."* (ESV)

So, loving God means obeying Him?

Yes. Loving God means prioritizing Him over your own things. If you give in to temptation, then the Lord is not your top priority. That's not agapé.

That's weird. I don't think of obedience as love.

Yeah, we don't usually think in terms of that extreme level of subservience, but we should. This is an eye-opening lesson on how inferior we are to God.

Consider this. How can my dog best love me?

I suppose, by being a good dog.

Yeah, but what does that mean? She thinks it means making sure that anyone who comes to our house is scared off by her barking.

But that's not really useful. How she can actually love me is by obeying my rules—most importantly, by not peeing on the carpet. She knows the rules, sort of, but she has no idea which one is most important.

But all she really needs to know is that loving me means obeying my rules. If she does that, then she's a good dog. Have cookie.

And this concept applies to us?

In spades. The gap between us and God is greater than the gap between my dog and me.

That's pretty humbling.

It's supposed to be. We do have one advantage though. We can understand what God wants. My dog can only see that I'm angry; she can only guess what she did wrong from the context.

That's why the experts say that you can't punish dogs for pee you discovered after the fact; they won't understand why you're upset. If you don't catch them in the act, you just have to clean it up and forget about them learning anything from that event.

But humans have more clues—especially the Bible. We can read what God wants.

So, you think you know what God wants?

I know that God doesn't want me to give in to temptation. Let's continue this tomorrow.

## Dialogue 39 — Temptation

*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.*

*Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. — James 1:13–18 (NKJV)*

There’s an amazing lesson in the Greek word (πειρασμός, pay-ras-mos) that is translated as “tempted.” It’s the same root word that’s translated as “trials” back in verse two at the beginning of the book.

*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, — James 1:2 (NKJV)*

This is hard for English speakers to wrap their brains around, but *payrasmos* doesn’t mean temptation or trial depending on the context. It means both.

How can it be both?

Temptations and trials are the same thing. Every temptation is a trial, and every trial is a temptation. They’re both *payrasmos*.

Spend a moment letting that sink in. This is how God’s “school of hard knocks” works. Trials (temptations) have a purpose.

You’ve made that point before.

But James lays on an important caveat. Do not say, “*I am tempted by God.*” That’s not how it works; trials are rooted in our sinfulness. *One is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.* (This is not to ignore Satan’s role. See <https://www.ailbe.org/columns/the-deep/the-first-cause.>)

Thus, there is danger in these trials. Our sin can blossom; *and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.* The lack of *agapé* that we mentioned yesterday can get extreme.

So even though trials have a purpose, they can lead to disaster?!? What’s God’s purpose in that?

Good question. They’re called trials for a reason. The possibility of failure is real. James is writing this letter to help the recipients endure the trial (that is, pass the test).

It’s all dreadfully serious.

What if they fail?

One sure result is that they fail to glorify God. If you're wondering if their failure sends them to hell, I'm not going to go there. That's way too advanced a lesson.

So, *do not be deceived, my beloved brethren*. The Greek word translated as *be deceived* (πλανᾷσθε, plan-as-theh) is not in the future tense; it's in the present. This hints that some of the people James is writing to are struggling with the belief that God tempts.

So James kills this view once and for all by showing God to be the exact opposite.

*God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ... Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.*

You already taught that in the Job lessons.

Right, but the big takeaway here is in the final sentence, which gives the purpose behind all this.

*Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.*

As you keep saying, the purpose of everything is His glory.

Right. It's not all about us. Even gifts that come *down from the Father of lights* are not all about us. Sure, we benefit, but for the purpose *that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures*.

However, this is best understood by interpreting "we" in that sentence as the early Christians that James was writing to.

They were the firstfruits of the most consequential movement in the history of man.

So, how can we use this if it's not really for us?

Fair question. We are not the firstfruits. We can only learn **about** the firstfruits. Obviously, the lessons for the firstfruits apply to us in a general sense, but their trials are not our trials.

We should be both humbled and grateful for that. While all Christians should be prepared for martyrdom, no one should **want** to be a martyr.

I should hope not.

Yeah, anyone with that attitude has issues I cannot help with.

I don't think that's a common problem.

Right. See you tomorrow.

## Dialogue 40 — Forgetting Who We Are

*So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

*Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*

*If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*  
— James 1:19–27 (NKJV)

Wow. That's incredibly blunt.

Yes, it is blunt. James now moves on to tell his readers the details of how they will be the firstfruits of a movement that will turn the world upside down.

And James's teaching is anything but easy. He begins with keeping wrath in check.

I haven't heard anyone use the word "wrath" in a while.

Yeah, it's one of those words you see in the Bible, but not much elsewhere. It's anger out of control. Wrath is bad, even when it's righteous anger.

That makes this a great example of how sin can ruin anything. Righteous anger comes from our innate sense of justice. As such, it's a good thing.

But our sinful nature can cause righteous anger to boil out of control—turning a good thing into one of the seven deadly sins.

Seven deadly sins? What are they?

They're not actually listed in the Bible; they're just classical definitions widely adopted in western Judeo-Christian culture long ago.

They are traditionally listed, in alphabetical order: envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, rage, and sloth.

Of course, that substitutes rage for wrath; they're synonyms.

Anger out of control is obviously bad. I suppose anything out of control is bad. That's reasonable.

“*Therefore,*” James continues, we must act like the people we're supposed to be, laying aside wickedness and being doers of the word, not just hearers.

He's really just reminding Christians of who we are.

James then makes a clever point; forgetting that you're a Christian is as absurd as forgetting what you look like in a mirror.

Sounds like he's mocking them.

Yes, and such strong language is justified. This “forgetting” not really forgetting; it's faith that's unserious. Remember, this all traces back to a pledge of fealty to Christ.

As I explained two days ago, loving God (which the first and greatest commandment) means obeying His commands. People who claim to be followers of Christ need to actually follow Him.

That's kind of obvious.

James then gives two examples of Christian behaviors that we shouldn't “forget” — controlling our tongue and ministering to the afflicted.

These are the hallmarks of Christianity that everyone knows about. I suppose I should say that they used to be the hallmarks.

Yes, but note that even in the first century, James needed to bluntly remind his readers of these things.

So, all this was never automatic.

Exactly. We've always needed preachers to preach. Christianity isn't easy, and it's silly to think that confessing Christ suddenly gives you some kind of super-power to behave perfectly.

These “hallmarks,” along with being slow to wrath and laying aside wickedness (and keeping oneself “*unspotted from the world*”), are of prime importance to the principal task of a Christian—glorifying God.

This sets the stage for the rest of the book, which fills in the essentials of the practice of Christianity. Some of James's points will be hard to hear, and even harder to practice, but they're foundational.

If they're like what we've already read, they won't be easy.

Right. More to come. See you tomorrow.