

***Good Word Schedule***  
**“The Book of James”**  
**October, November, December 2014**

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**Theme: James, the Lord's Brother**

**Synopsis: The Author of the Book of James**

The official study guide adopts the position that the author of the book of James is the Lord's brother by that name. Also known as James the Just, this brother of Jesus nowhere in his book refers to his familial relationship to Jesus. Indeed, Jesus' name only appears twice in the whole book (1:1; 2:1). But James was active in the early Christian community, chairing, for example, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

Two of Jesus' disciples were also called James: 1) son of Zebedee, who was killed by Herod Agrippa I in AD 44 (Acts 12:2); 2) son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3). Neither of these is seen as a serious candidate as author of the book

Another alternative has been proposed by more radical critics, namely, that the book was written later under a pseudonym. The Greek in the Book of James is very sophisticated, presumably beyond the skill of someone from Jesus' family. According to examples found in the Bible itself, however, someone other than James could easily have written the letter. In the Old Testament for example, Baruch was Jeremiah's scribe (cf. Jer. 36). And in the New Testament, Tertius wrote the book of Romans for Paul (Rom. 16:22); Paul also used an unnamed secretary to write his first letter to Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 16:21).

Interest in knowing the author of a book seems to be more important to us than to the Bible writers, at least to the writers of Old Testament books. Very few books in the OT clearly indicate the author. In New Testament times, however, authorship seems to play an important role in the acceptance of books into the canon. Apostolic authorship seems to have been a crucial factor.

**Questions for discussion.**

1. Why should it make any difference to us who actually wrote a book that is now found in our canon?

**Note:** Some books leave clear markers when someone other than the primary author has contributed to the book. Just before the last chapter of Jeremiah, for example, these words appear: "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah" (Jer. 51:64). What follows is simply a copy of the last chapter in 2 Kings, a testimony to the fact that Jeremiah's prophecy was fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem. The book of Jeremiah is a good example that was put together by the "Jeremiah Estate," probably after the prophet's death.

Proverbs is another book that leaves evidence of editors and compilers at work. Proverbs 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1 all indicate that these verses begin a fresh compilation. And Proverbs 30 is attributed to Agur son of Jakeh; Proverbs 31 is attributed to the mother of King Lemuel! But some scholars of the past have tried to argue that these were simply

other names for Solomon, all in an effort to preserve the idea that Solomon wrote the whole book.

2. Is there any evidence in the book of James that would suggest which James was the author? Would it make any difference in our appreciation of the book if we knew?

**Note:** Sometimes knowing the author can make a difference in how we see a document. I well remember when I was working with the Adventist Review staff on the series that would eventually appear as the “Sinai to Golgotha” series (December 1981; July 1982), I received a critique from the editors which I felt was somewhat unjust. But when I learned that the author of the critique was actually the new editor/editor-elect, Bill Johnson, I began to see the critique in a much better light!

Another example from my own personal experience involves the author of these beautiful lines:

“O the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person; having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but to pour them all out, just as it is, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keeping what is worth keeping and then, with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.”

These lines have been widely attributed to George Eliot. That was the author I linked with these lines when I memorized them. To my great disappointment, however, I later learned that the author was most likely Dinah Maria (Mulock) Craik (1826-1887). Is it not curious that I would be so troubled? George Eliot is a more famous name, but neither Eliot nor Craik mean anything to me personally. Yet I was disappointed when I learned the truth.

A similar logic seems to be a work when it comes to the authorship of biblical books. In theory, authorship should make no difference; in practice, it often means a great deal.

3. Where in the Bible itself would one find the suggestion that knowing who wrote an “inspired” work is crucial to our understanding or acceptance of a book?

4. How do we make peace with the fact that the Bible does not insist on knowing the author, and often does not tell us who the author was, and possibly uses a pseudonym at times, at least during the time of Christ (e.g. Enoch, and Ezra)?

**Note:** A similar psychology seems to be at work both with the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. When it is discovered that the author used sources without telling us, it can be shattering to faith. But letting the Bible itself inform us on such matters should make our faith secure. The “inspiration” of a particular book does not rely on knowing who the author was.

**Theme: The Perfecting of Our Faith**

**Synopsis: The Challenge of Perfectionism**

Taking its cue from the KJV of James 1:4, this week's lesson points to the "perfecting" of our faith. The KJV reads: "Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire." The NRSV wording is less "discouraging": "Let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete."

A more acceptable use of the word "perfect" is found in Hebrews 12:2 which refers to Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter" of our faith. In Hebrews, flawed human beings are not the primary focus of a drive toward perfection.

According to Pedrito Maynard-Reid's 1996 book on James in the Bible Amplifier series, the theme of "suffering" is the "lens through which the document is to be read" (PMR, *James*, 20). Given that perspective, then the 60 some imperatives in the book focus on people who are suffering in a variety of ways. That illumines a number of emphases in the book as we shall see in the weeks ahead.

In James 1:2-11, the section which is the focus of attention this week, two concerns are addressed in addition to the initial focus on perfection: prayer for wisdom (1:5-8) and the first of several passages which condemn the rich. Indeed, in the three passages dealing with the rich (1:9-11; 2:1-6; 4:13 - 5:6) not one kindly word falls in their direction. They are consistently condemned for their wealth.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- 1. Maturity or Perfection?** In 1:4, the NRSV reads: "let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." KJV has "perfect." Which one is better?
- 2. How am I doing?** If survival during difficult times is a dominant concern in James, is it helpful to ask, "How am I doing?" Are there times when it would not be helpful to ask?
- 3. Prayer: Don't doubt.** Why might it be dangerous to apply James 1:5-8 ("never doubting") to all prayer requests? The context suggests that prayer for wisdom is the one clear object of prayer.

**Note:** However grim our circumstances, we can always learn something, even if not what we wanted or expected. Difficult times can make us wiser than we were before.

**4. No hope for the rich.** James 1:9-11 speaks harshly about the rich with no glimmer of hope. Where in Scripture could one go to find a softening of that hard edge? Can the rich be saved? The Bible knows of many good rich people. But those don't show up in James. James knew only the oppressive rich.

**Theme: Enduring Temptation**

**Synopsis: Temptation and Anger**

This week's passage from James (1:12-21) focuses on two notable tensions within human experience: 1) the origin and role of temptation; 2) the proper role of anger. Both tensions involve the human response, but only temptation raises the question of God's role. Significantly, Scripture uses the same word for "tempt" as it does for "test." James declares that God does not tempt; but does he test?

The question of anger is a more volatile one. Anger does not appear on any of the New Testament virtue lists. Patience appears on them all. But one passage actually commands anger: Ephesians 4:25-27: "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. 26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not make room for the devil" (NRSV). This passage can be seen in the setting of three kinds of anger:

**A. The anger of communication.** This is where Ephesians 4 fits in. It is in the context of communication. Graham Greene puts this quote in the mouth of one of his short-story characters: "In her experience [Marie Duval] it was only when a man became angry that he told the truth." – "An Appointment with the General" in *The Last Word and Other Stories* (p. 148).

**B. Murderous anger.** This is the anger that Jesus condemned in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' . . . But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (Matt. 5:21-22, NRSV).

**C. Anger of purity.** Some evils demand an angry response. Perhaps Ps. 139:21-22 would be in that category: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (NRSV). Similarly, note Ellen White's description of the "wrath of the lamb" in DA 825:

"How would a father and mother feel, did they know that their child, lost in the cold and the snow, had been passed by, and left to perish, by those who might have saved it? Would they not be terribly grieved, wildly indignant? Would they not denounce those murderers with wrath hot as their tears, intense as their love? The sufferings of every man are the sufferings of God's child, and those who reach out no helping hand to their perishing fellow beings provoke His righteous anger. This is the wrath of the Lamb."

## Questions for Discussion:

**1. Tempting or Testing?** James is emphatic that God tempts no one (1:13). But the word “tempt” can also be translated as “test.” Would it be right to say that God tests, but does not tempt? In the famous story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac the KJV says that God “tempted” Abraham (Gen. 22:1); the NRSV states that God “tested” him? Can God send us a temptation that is also a test?

**2. Internal temptation.** Is James’ description of how one is “tempted by one’s own desire” (1:14) and “being lured and enticed by it,” an echo of the story of Cain and Abel? “If you do not do well,” God tells Cain, “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4:7, NRSV). Does James give us any practical help for resisting and overcoming temptation when it wells up from within? Or must we look elsewhere in Scripture?

**3. Trials as God’s gifts.** Is there a healthy tension between 1:2 (“whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy”), and 1:17 that claims that “every perfect gift is from above”? If trials help us grow, shouldn’t we see them as gifts of God?

**4. Anger.** James’ counsel is simple: “Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). What is the right place for anger? The discussion of anger in the synopsis above can give some guidance.

**5. Rid yourself of all sordidness.** James has already turned down the temperature on our anger (cf. “slow to anger,” 1:19). But do the last lines of 1:21 (“welcome with meekness the implanted word”) move in the direction of banishing anger completely?

**Theme: Being and Doing**

**Synopsis: Doing, Not Just Hearing**

In James 1:22-27, our focus for this week’s discussion, James prepares the way for much of the content yet to come in his book. When he admonishes his listeners to be “doers of the word, not merely hearers” (1:22), he is looking forward to his pointed discussion of faith and works (2:14-26). His comments on this theme might be less confusing if it were called “faith and deeds,” and deeds is what he stresses in 1:22.

Then, almost out of the blue, he talks about bridling the tongue (1:26), a theme which he develops with great passion in 3:1-12. If doing is more important than mere hearing, there is one form of “doing” which he vociferously opposes: the unbridled “doings” of the tongue (1:26).

**Questions for Discussion:**

**1. An Echo of the Sermon on the Mount.** In Matthew 7:24-27 Jesus contrasts two kinds of listeners, those who hear and do over against those who hear but do nothing. The former are like those who build their house on a rock, the latter like those who build on mere sand. Is this teaching identical with that of James 1:22-25? Is James simply reminding his listeners of a self-evident truth?

**2. Good from an evil heart?** A more subtle question, not raised by James, is whether or not an evil heart can still do good. Matthew 7:11 affirms that good can come from an evil heart: “If you who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...” (NRSV). Could there be good reasons why James never raises this possibility of good coming from evil? Paul Tournier comments meaningfully on that perspective:

The most wonderful thing in this world is not the good that we accomplish, but the fact that good can come out of the evil we do. I have been struck, for example, by the numbers of people who have been brought back to God under the influence of a person to whom they had some imperfect attachment.... Our vocation is, I believe, to build good out of evil. For if we try to build good out of good, we are in danger of running out of raw materials. – Paul Tournier (*Person Reborn*, 80-81), via Philip Yancey (*Reaching for an Invisible God*, 264),

**3. Law and liberty.** James 1:25 links two words together that don’t seem to belong together. James states that those who “look into the law of liberty and persevere” will be blessed. Two questions emerge from this statement: a) How is law linked with liberty? And b) how does a focus on this law result in making doers not mere hearers?

Perhaps one could understand the linkage between law and liberty by suggesting that those who have internalized the law – perhaps in the new covenant sense of Jeremiah 31:31-34 – find themselves freed to obey spontaneously. Thus they are truly free.

How a focus on law results in making doers not mere hearers is more of a puzzle. From a motivational point of view, grace is generally more powerful when it precedes law. In Scripture, Romans 5:6-11 illustrates the idea of grace before law: “while we were still weak” (5:6), “while we were still sinners” (5:8), “while we were yet enemies” (5:10) – Christ died for us. In the Old Testament, the deliverance from Egypt came before Sinai, a deliverance scarcely deserved by Israel. But touched by that gracious act of God they were prepared to move on to Sinai where they would also experience law as a gracious gift of God.

**4. The tongue, widows, and the world.** Following the discussion of doing and hearing, James lists three activities that mark the “doer”: a) bridling the tongue; b) caring for orphans and widows; c) keeping oneself unstained from the world. What is the common ground between these three? How would James rank these three items in a hierarchy of values? Would we agree – readily, reluctantly, or not at all?



**Theme: Love and the Law**

**Synopsis: Partiality and the Royal Law**

This week's passage from James (2:1-13) presents an impassioned plea against favoritism. Showing partiality to the rich dishonors the poor (2:6). As one should come to expect in James, the rich are shown no mercy. These are the people who "oppress you" and who "drag you into court" (1:6)

The basis for James' appeal lies in what he calls the "royal law" (2:8). He also refers to it as "the law of liberty" (2:12). He concludes this section with a strong message of "judgment" against those who do not show mercy (2:13).

**Questions for Discussion:**

- 1. Law.** How does James understand "law"? The "royal law" commands you to love your neighbor as yourself. But can love be commanded?
- 2. Favoritism.** James sounds like he favors the poor and damns the rich in 2:1-6. Is there no hope for the wealthy? (Cf. 1:9-11). Leviticus 19:15, three verses before the quotation that James cites: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), declares that one should not show favoritism to the wealthy or the poor: "you shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor." James seems to ignore that call to balance. Is wisdom literature – James could be called New Testament wisdom literature, like Proverbs in the Old Testament – by nature imbalanced, oversimplifying and drawing sharp lines where there really are shades of gray?
- 3. Judgment, law, love.** How is being "judged by the law of liberty" (2:12), connected with love?
- 4. Mercy triumphs over justice, but....** If mercy triumphs over judgment (2:13), isn't it rather unmerciful to say that "judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy"? (2:13). How is it then that "mercy triumphs over judgment" (2:13) if "judgment is without mercy"?
- 5. Showing mercy when one has received mercy.** Jesus' parable of the two debtors (Matt. 18:23-35) stresses the importance of showing mercy when one has received mercy. Micah 6:8 also highlights the importance of mercy. Can one win the unmerciful to mercy by being harsh to them?

**Theme: Faith that Works**

**Synopsis: Faith and Works, James and Paul**

The most highly visible passage in James involves the apparent tension between Paul and James on the question of faith and works. The most striking “contradiction” is between James 2:24 – “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” – and Romans 3:28: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

As the author of this study guide, I must say that I wish every Sabbath School class could be exposed to the lively Good Word discussion on this lesson in which Pedrito Maynard-Reid played a key role. His Bible Amplifier volume on *James* (Pacific Press, 1996), reinforces the key points, but it was his tenacious verbal emphasis on the fact that James was emphasizing social concern, not theoretical theology, that made his point – and that of James – come clear.

In print, PMR (*James*, 114) calls James 1:27 the “thesis statement” of which chapter 2 is the natural expansion: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (1:27). Later, noting that chapter 2 opens and closes with hospitality illustrations, PMR argues: “The positioning of these two hospitality illustrations is another strong evidence that the entire chapter 2 of James should be read as a unit” (*James*, 122).

In the end, PMR makes this pointed statement about the relationship between Paul and James: “To have Paul and James in opposition is to misunderstand each author. They are not engaging each other; they are not involved in a debate. They are combating quite opposite problems” (*James*, 115).

It is also worth noting that James does not cite the same “symptoms” that Paul addresses in his discussion of salvation. Not even once does James mention circumcision or Jewish ritual practice. James is concerned about social issues, reaching out to those in desperate need. The two books might have been seen quite differently even today if it hadn’t been for Martin Luther’s intense concern with issues of personal salvation. Given his consuming passions, Luther found no help at all in James and thus called it an “epistle of straw,” virtually outside the canon.

Another way of approaching the issue is to note the diverse meanings of key words in the discussion. Crucial in that respect are 1) Justify, 2) Faith; and 3) Works. Note the following points about each.

**1. Justify.** The Greek verb meaning “justify” (*dikaioō*) with its cluster of related words reveals a remarkable spectrum of meanings. The noun form rendered “justification” (*dikaïosynē*) is translated in Matthew 6:1 as “piety”: “Beware of practicing your *dikaïosynē* before others” (NRSV). The English word “theodicy” means “justification of God” (in the presence of evil). But in Germany where the Lutheran emphasis is strong, I discovered that many of the believers were reluctant to speak of “justifying” God; God justifies human beings, humans do not justify God! In that setting, the English word “vindication” is generally more acceptable.

In the broad sense, then, to justify is to show the rightness of the action. In James, by helping the poor, one is not finding “justification” in the sense of salvation, but is simply confirming the “rightness” of the deed.

**2. Faith.** As PMR notes, James never defines faith for us (*James*, 117). He suggests that in James, “faith” indicates “one’s trust in God.” James could also be said to move closer to the Old Testament concept of “faithfulness.” Interestingly enough, in the famous line from Habakkuk 2:4 which informs both Paul and Luther, the KJV translates: “the just shall live by his faith.” Modern translations, the NIV, for example (also the NRSV), read, “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” James is rooted in that earthier sense of a faithful life, not the sense of simple trust in God as is suggested by Paul’s use of the term.

**3. Works.** To break the theological stranglehold of Lutheran theology when reading James, it would be much more accurate to use the term “deeds” rather than “works.” James simply wants to see that the faithful life is marked by social outreach, by good deeds. Using the term “works” muddies the waters.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

**1. Faith/Works: Breaking the deadlock.** What is the best way to develop the point that Paul and James are not arguing with each other? Can the reading of James 2 as a whole be effective in that respect?

**2. Telling factors.** Which of the following could carry some weight in letting the message of James be heard in its own right, not just as an argument with Paul:

A) James does not quote any other NT book and is not quoted elsewhere in the NT.

B) The book preserves the traditional, ethical concerns of early Jewish Christianity, but never mentions circumcision or dietary matters.

C) The phrase “by faith alone” comes from James (2:24), not from Paul. But it was Luther who borrowed the phrase from James, “by faith alone,” putting it to radically different use.

**3. Diversity of perspectives.** Could addressing the differences between James and Paul be a means of helping us to see other examples of diverse perspectives in Scripture? Ellen White argues that students need to learn from different teachers. And in that connection she argues for recognizing the diversity found among the New Testament writers: “Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul?” she asks. “It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain Scripture truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others.” – *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, 432

**Theme: Taming the Tongue**

**Synopsis: The Tongue**

In 1:26 James dropped a small bombshell against the unbridled tongue. Now in 3:1-12 he drops a large one, a blistering attack against the tongue. He does not really explain why this issue is so important to him, given his concern for social justice. Nor does he give us any direct help in controlling the tongue. But it is an urgent issue that deserves our attention.

**Questions for Discussion:**

**1. Sticks, stones, and words.** What would James say about our well-known nursery rhyme that tries to put a brave face on the damage done by the unbridled tongue: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Is that true? Hardly. Some internet entries offer another version:

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will hurt forever.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can kill me.

**2. Advice to teachers?** Some have argued that all of James 3 is counsel to teachers. It starts out with a word for teachers. Does 3:13-18 also address teachers?

**3. Medicine for the unbridled tongue?** James tells us: “No one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8). He gives us no solution, no hope. Where can we turn to find help in taming the tongue? This would be a good place for a wide-ranging discussion in a Sabbath School class.

**4. Do troubles tame or unleash the tongue?** The intensity of James attack against the tongue is startling. If, in fact, suffering is the theme in James, it would be well to explore the question of whether people who have fallen into difficulties end up attacking each other more or helping each other more. Or can both patterns be found, with trouble sometimes bringing people together, sometimes driving them apart?

**Theme: The Humility of Heavenly Wisdom**

**Synopsis: Yearning for the Good Wisdom from Above**

James gives us a wonderful description of heavenly wisdom in 3:17. But he gives us very little help in knowing how to acquire it. Exploring that practical question would be a good task for a Sabbath School class this week.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- 1. Tainted heart, heavenly wisdom?** If our hearts are tainted with evil, how is it possible to acquire that good “wisdom from above” as James calls it, a wisdom that is “pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits”?
- 2. Wisdom for teachers?** Is the section on wisdom (3:13-18) to be linked with the qualifications for teaching, a link suggested in 3:1?
- 3. Description and prescription.** How does one “fix” or “cure” the presence of “bitter envy” and “selfish ambition” (3:14)? Does the repetition of proverbial wisdom help?
- 4. Striving for the ideal.** Is the model of “wisdom from above” too idealistic? Is it helpful to dwell on the ideal, even if we know we will fall short of the mark?

**Note:** Arthur Patrick, the late Australian historian of Adventism, shared a quote with me on “idealism” that I have found helpful. It is from Carl Shurz (1829-1906), German-American politician, journalist, reformer:

Ideals are like stars. You will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But, like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you can choose them as your guides. And following them, you reach your destiny.

- 5. The inner war.** Is the battle described in James 4:1-3 the same battle as described in Romans 7? If so, James does not point us to the “cure” that comes in Romans 8:1: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Can one get help from the Old Testament in taming the inner war? After all, the Jesus solution was not an option in Old Testament times.
- 6. Not asking, not asking right.** James tells us that we do not get what we need because we don’t ask, and when we do ask we ask wrongly (4:2-3). How does one break that cycle?

**Theme: One Lawgiver and Judge**

**Synopsis: Judging and Boasting**

This week's passage from James actually brings together two items that don't really mesh very well. A warning against the dangers of judging (4:11-12) is followed by a section which warns against the dangers of dangerous boasting (4:13-17), a section that would probably fit better with James 5:1-6, another warning against the rich, this time against rich, oppressive farmers. We will explore both sections this week and build the bridge between chapters 4 and 5 next week.

**Questions for Discussion:**

**1. Correcting without judging.** James 4:11-12 is a strong warning against the dangers of judging others. But at the end of the book, there is a kind of blessing pronounced on those who are able to rescue wayward souls and bring them back to God. How does one distinguish between damaging judging and helpful correction?

**2. Leaving it in the hands of the Lord.** James declares that one should explicitly say, "If the Lord wishes...." before embarking on a plan (4:15). Can one accomplish the same by making such an proviso implicitly? What value is there in saying something out loud compared to saying it silently?

**3. The callous traveling merchant.** If 4:13-17 is another frontal attack on the wealthy, this time the traveling merchant, how might that change our understanding of the counsel to say, "If the Lord wishes....?"

**4. Sins of omission.** In the light of 4:17 – "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" – how would we evaluate the degree of guilt between sins of omission and sins of commission? It is worth noting that several passages in the Gospels assign sins of omission a high place in a hierarchy of values. Three passages are worth noting: a) the servant who failed to use the money entrusted to him (Luke 19:11-17); b) the goats in the parable of the judgment who did nothing to help those in need (Matt. 25:31-46); and c) the servant who knew the master's will but did nothing about it, receiving a severe beating as a result (Luke 12:47).

**5. Nothing but a mist.** Describing the merchant as a mere mist (4:14) may be intended to have a very specific focus, yet the use of the image of "mist" raises the question of how James views humankind: As a can of worms? Or as a jewel in the rough, waiting to be polished?

**Theme: Weep and Howl!**

**Synopsis:**

James 5:1-6 is the third frontal attack on the rich in the book, and this one the most brutal. Here the oppressive rich are the wealthy landowners who abuse their workers. In short, they have kept back the wages of their workers (5:4).

The attacks against the rich represent different groups within society. In 3:6 the offending ones are the bankers who drag the poor into court; in 4:13-17 the offenders are the traveling merchants; in 5:1-6 the offenders are the wealthy landowners.

**Questions for Discussion:**

**1. Are there any righteous rich?** James roundly condemns the oppressive rich, and to the point where he seems to leave no room for the righteous rich. Where would one go in Scripture to show that there are wealthy righteous people? Abraham, Job, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus? What justifies James for giving such a one-sided perspective?

**2. The charge against the rich.** Of the three categories of evil rich people – financiers, merchants, landowners – James 5:1-6 seems to direct James’ strongest critique against the wealthy landowners. The charges are sobering: Withholding the wages of their workers (5:4), condemning and murdering the righteous (5:6). Why are these charges the most serious of all? Where in Scripture does one find wealthy people who do care for their workers and do not defraud?

**3. Wealthy wicked, envious righteous.** The official study guides cites Psalm 73 as an example of the envy of the righteous toward the arrogant, cruel, and wealthy wicked: “My feet had nearly slipped,” admits the Psalmist (73:2) 3. What is the proper attitude of God’s people toward those who prosper in their wickedness? Does James help us answer that question?

**Theme: Getting Ready for the Harvest**

**Synopsis: Patience and Swearing**

After firmly condemning the rich, James then turns to his readers/listeners and admonishes them to be patient. After nearly inciting them to riot by condemning the rich landowners (or so it might seem), he then counsels them to accept their troubles with patience. James refers to the prophets and to Job as examples of those who suffered and were patient.

After the call to patience, James seems to drop in another unconnected admonition: Don't swear at all, either by heaven or by earth (5:12). The connection with what precedes or what follows does not seem to be clear.

The prohibition against swearing has nothing to do with "dirty" language, but seems to be directed toward the need to be absolutely honest without having to overlay one's words with additional oaths. In the Sermon on Mount, Jesus gives almost a carbon copy of James, forbidding swearing by heaven, by God's throne, by the earth, by Jerusalem, or by your own head (Matt. 5:34-36). "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" said Jesus. "Anything more than this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:37, NRSV).

**Questions for Discussion.**

**1. Patient complaining.** James heartily endorses the "endurance of Job" (5:11), yet Job complained mightily to God. How can we get the best of both worlds?

**Note:** Pedrito Maynard-Reid (*James*, 204-205) indicates that some scholars think James has been influenced the intertestamental Jewish book, *The Testament of Job*. In the biblical book, Job's patience (or endurance) lasts only through chapter 2. Beginning with chapter 3, he "opens his mouth and curses the day of his birth." In the *Testament*, it is Job's wife who complains; Job maintains his patience throughout.

In the biblical book of Job, the preamble (Job 1-2) twice declares that Job did not sin through all his trials (1:22; 2:10). But some Jewish rabbis, noting the sharpness of Job's critique against God, declared that Job really did sin after all. Therefore he was not granted a place in the world to come. The Lord relented somewhat, however, and doubled Job's earthly wealth, a kind of second-place prize to compensate for the fact that he would have no place in the world to come.

**2. Why patience?** James exhorts to patience (5:7), but patience in the face of what? What would be the temptation to "impatience" in this connection? Would the oppressive measures adopted by the wealthy landowners (5:4-6), be enough reason to admonish the believers to be patient? Could one not make a case that the oppressed should cry out against their oppressors, as the widow did against the unjust judge in Jesus' parable? (Luke 18:1-8).



**3. The coming of the Lord is near.** Was James referring to the second coming when he said “the coming of the Lord is near” (5:8)? The hope in the return of Jesus is strong in the New Testament and “coming of the Lord” does suggest second coming. PMR (*James*, 199-200), notes that the use of the word *parousia* is the strongest argument for this position. But another option would be to see the Lord here as the Old Testament Lord of judgment who comes in connection with the frequently-cited “Day of the Lord” in the prophetic books. In the OT, such a “day of the Lord” could be imminent and refer to a local event when God comes to put things right. James’ roots in the OT prophets may have led him to think of such a context. Each local “Day of the Lord” would also typify the final “Day of the Lord” at the time of the Second Coming. But an OT “day of the Lord” would have a much more imminent flavor. Christians have now been waiting for 2000 years for the *parousia*. That doesn’t seem very near.

**4. How near is near?** James says that the coming of the Lord is near (5:8). How near is near? Is it still near after 2000 years?

**Note:** The New Testament makes it clear that “nearness” should not be a major factor in our expectations of the end. Indeed, all the parables in Matthew 25 seem to point in the direction of a delay, and thus the need to always be ready. C. S. Lewis addresses that point in his essay, “The World’s Last Night”:

“We must never speak to simple, excitable people about ‘the day’ without emphasizing again and again the utter impossibility of prediction. We must try to show them that the impossibility is an essential part of the doctrine. If you do not believe our Lord’s words, why do you believe in his return at all? And if you do believe them must you not put away from you, utterly and forever, any hope of dating that return? His teaching on the subject quite clearly consisted of three propositions. (1) That he will certainly return. (2) That we cannot possibly find out when. (3) And that therefore we must always be ready for him.” – C. S. Lewis, “The World’s Last Night” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, 107.

**5. Grumbling against one another.** In 5:9, James admonishes the believers not to grumble against each other. Does the long wait make it easier to grumble?

**6. No swearing (5:12).** What is the big deal about swearing? What is the hidden agenda against which James is warning?

**Theme: Prayer, Healing, and Restoration**

**Synopsis: Restoration of the Sick and the Lost**

As James draws his book to a close, his final section deals with restoration, first of the sick (5:13-18) through the prayers of the righteous, then of the wayward through the one-on-one efforts of the righteous.

This is the second passage in James where he gives the impression that prayer will be 100% effective if the one who prays is steadfast in praying. But both in 1:5-8 and in 5:13-18, it is possible to qualify his language so that his message correlates more directly with the reality of a world where many honest prayers are not answered as those who pray hope they will be.

The final admonition is a beautiful one, a promise of rich blessings to those who bring back someone who has wandered from the truth. The problem is that James tells us almost nothing about how to accomplish that goal.

**Questions for Discussion:**

**1. Unanswered prayer.** If our prayers are not answered, does that mean we did not have enough faith? James 1:6-8 declares that we are to “ask in faith, never doubting” (1:6), reinforcing that message with these pointed words: “for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (1:7-8). Then James 5:15 seems to give a blank check: “The prayer of faith will save the sick.” When the promised results don’t materialize, the believer can be crushed by the conclusion that it was the lack of faith that caused the failure. Yet faith is not something that can be generated by human effort, as if we get more faith by peddling harder on a bicycle. That calls for further comment in an “Excursus on Petitionary Prayer.”

**An Excursus on Petitionary Prayer**

The title of a C. S. Lewis essay says it all: “Petitionary Prayer: A Problem Without an Answer” (*Christian Reflections*, 142-151). Originally addressed to the Oxford Clerical Society in 1953, the essay points out that Scripture presents us with two thoroughly contradictory patterns for petitionary prayer. The one is expressed in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done,” and confirmed in Jesus’ experience in the Garden, “Not my will but thine be done.”

The other pattern is suggested by a number of passages of Scripture, and perhaps most vividly stated in James 1:6-8: “But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.”

Both approaches are solidly supported by illustrations in Scripture, but Lewis sees no way

of harmonizing them and concludes his essay with this simple plea: “I come to you, reverend Fathers, for guidance. How am I to pray this very night?” – *Christian Reflections*, 151

For a number of years, in a class I team-teach with Bev Beem of our English Department, Research and Writing in Religion, we have asked our students to do a cluster book review of three authors/books: Roger Morneau, *The Incredible Power of Prayer* (RH, 1997); Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Schocken, 1981); and C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, and “The Efficacy of Prayer,” in *World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, 3-11, originally published in *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1959.

Our rationale for these three authors is that they each present such a different approach to petitionary prayer. Morneau was a Seventh-day Adventist layman whose remarkable experience with the occult is told in his book, *A Trip into the Supernatural* (RH, 1982, 1993). His thesis is: If you are right with God, you will get what you pray for. His book is full of miracle stories, all of which are direct answers to prayer. It is worth noting, however, that he never addresses the problem of unanswered prayer.

Kushner, at the other end of spectrum, has concluded that God does not, indeed cannot, intervene in human affairs. A conservative Jewish rabbi, he was driven to this conclusion by the horror of watching his boy shrivel up and die at age 14, a victim of progeria, early aging disease. Kushner could not believe that God was responsible for such a tragedy. So, to preserve God’s goodness, he totally sacrificed God’s power. God is a good listener, but he cannot intervene.

Lewis holds a middle position, affirming that God does answer prayer, but in ways which we are not able to understand. The last lines of his essay, “The Efficacy of Prayer” – in my view one of the finest short treatments of petitionary prayer – lay out his position with clarity.

And I dare not leave out the hard saying which I once heard from an experienced Christian: “I have seen many striking answers to prayer and more than one that I thought miraculous. But they usually come at the beginning: before conversion, or soon after it. As the Christian life proceeds, they tend to be rarer. The refusals, too, are not only more frequent; they become more unmistakable, more emphatic.”

Does God then forsake just those who serve Him best? Well, He who served Him best of all said, near His tortured death, “Why hast thou forsaken me?” When God becomes man, that Man, of all others, is least comforted by God, at His greatest need. There is a mystery here which, even if I had the power, I might not have the courage to explore. Meanwhile, little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle. – *The World’s Last Night*, 10-11.

While not solving the dilemma which Lewis addressed in his essay on petitionary prayer, I do believe we can find some helpful explanations for the two passages in James that represent the “hardline” position on prayer, 1:5-8 and 5:14-15, cited here from the NRSV:

**James 1:5-8:** 5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

**James 5:14-15:** 14 Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.

A helpful approach to the passage in James 1 is to allow the context to direct the focus. Rather than seeing the passage as referring to all petitionary prayers, it speaks specifically to the prayer for wisdom, a prayer that God will always answer. Whatever we ask, expect, or receive, it will always be a learning experience, one which enhances our wisdom.

The approach to the passage in James 5 is not quite so tidy or convincing, but I believe it is a possible approach that would relieve the sensitive believer from being crushed by a load of guilt when a prayer for healing of the sick does not have the desired result.

My suggestion starts with Psalm 23 rather than James 5, but I believe can offer some help in the interpretation of James. Several years ago church historian Philip Jenkins was giving a lecture on our campus when he noted what the people of Zimbabwe did to survive under the difficult rule of their president, Robert Mugabe. When they cited Psalm 23, instead of giving the normal emphasis: “the Lord is my *shepherd*,” thus lending a gentle pastoral interpretation to the psalm, they shifted the emphasis to Lord, giving the psalm an almost militaristic flavor, a kind of taunt to their oppressive president: “The *Lord* is my shepherd.” Whatever Mugabe might attempt, the believers clung to the conviction that the *Lord* was stronger and able to come to their defense.

Transferring that approach to James 5, we can shift the emphasis from *heal* to *faith*. Instead of reading: “The prayer of faith will *heal* the sick,” we can read: “The prayer of *faith* will heal the sick. In other words, a prayer which is not of faith will have no effect at all. But if there is to be healing, it will be the prayer of *faith* that makes it happen.

The challenge of petitionary prayer remains. But by God’s grace and by careful reading, we can soften the hard edges on those passages dealing with prayer so that they can be encouraging rather than discouraging to devout believers.

**2. Praying opposite our mood.** James 5:13 doesn’t highlight the problem of mood as much as some other passages in James. James 1:2 calls for joy in the face of trials, for example; and James 4:9 calls for turning laughter into mourning. Under most circumstances, one would think that the counsel of 5:13 would be appropriate: Sing when you’re happy, cry when you’re sad. But are there times when we should pray contrary to our dominant mood?

**3. A good example.** In 5:17, Elijah is named as a good example of someone who knew how to pray. Is that an encouraging example for us today? James cites his upbeat experiences; but in Scripture we can also read of those moments when he wished he were dead. According to 1

Kings 19, he was so frightened by Jezebel's threat that he "fled for his life" (19:3). Having already run 25 miles in a driving rain from Carmel to Jezreel, Jezebel's threat triggered another sprint, this time of over 100 miles, the distance between Jezreel and Beersheba. But Elijah did not stop at Beersheba, the last stop before the southern wilderness. He ran another full day into the desert. Here was one frightened man. That's why he said to the gracious angel who awoke him with some food: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." (1 Kings 19:4). In that connection Ellen White's comment is an encouraging one:

If, under trying circumstances, men of spiritual power, pressed beyond measure, become discouraged and desponding; if at times they see nothing desirable in life that they should choose it, this is nothing strange or new. Let all such remember that one of the mightiest of the prophets fled for his life before the rage of an infuriated woman. A fugitive, weary and travel-worn, bitter disappointment crushing his spirits, he asked that he might die. But it was when hope was gone, and his life-work seemed threatened with defeat, that he learned one of the most precious lessons of his life. In the hour of his greatest weakness he learned the need and the possibility of trusting God under circumstances the most forbidding. *Prophets and Kings*, 173

**4. Bringing back a sinner.** In 5:19-20, James encourages his listeners to win back those who have wandered. Would James' own rhetoric be effective to that end? Does he sound a bit harsh for the task of winning someone back? We probably should recognize that for some, such strong words can actually do the trick. Here the words of Paul at the end of 1 Corinthians 4 are instructive as we look at the breadth of methods that God is willing to use: "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (1 Cor. 4:21). Ellen White's counsel to a strong-willed brother points to the same diversity of methods:

You need to educate yourself, that you may have wisdom to deal with minds. You should with some have compassion, making a difference, while others you may save with fear, pulling them out of the fire [Jude 22-23]. Our heavenly Father frequently leaves us in uncertainty in regard to our efforts. – Testimonies 3:420 (1875)

**Theme: The Everlasting Gospel**

**Synopsis: Escaping from James to Find the Gospel?**

The official study guide reveals, perhaps unintentionally, how powerful Luther's argument against the book of James has been. Instead of dividing James into 13 sections, the editors divided it into 12 so that the last section could deal with the topic, "The Everlasting Gospel."

The word Gospel simply means "Good News" and offers a wide variety of possible applications. Luther, however, and those evangelicals who follow his lead, define the word very narrowly as referring to the forensic, substitutionary atonement. Not finding that view in James, they have declared the Book of James to be bereft of the Gospel.

But given the circumstances James faced, his call to social action would have to be seen as "good news" to his listeners. And that is all the word means: "good news." Thus in Luke 4:18 Jesus proclaims in the synagogue in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring *good news* to the poor. That was James' message to the poor and oppressed. It was Gospel. It need not be the narrow definition that the followers of Paul want to find.

In the Old Testament the positive appreciation for *torah* (the law) has led some to coin the phrase, "the law as gospel." Certainly if one reads Ps. 119 or Deut. 4:5-8, the label fits: law is a gracious gift from God; it is good news.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- 1. Broadening the search.** The word "gospel" doesn't appear in John or James, and only once in Revelation (14:6). If we cast the net further afield, can we find other ways of defining a message as being "good news," with or without the label?
- 2. Luther's long shadow.** Does the fact that the official Sabbath School study guide dedicates the last lesson to a discussion of the "everlasting gospel" and looks outside of the book of James for support, suggest that Luther has been allowed to play too strong a role even in Adventism?
- 3. Different perspectives on the cross.** Instead of pointing the cross heavenward as key Pauline passages do (e.g. Rom. 8; 2 Cor. 5), John 14-17 points the cross earthward. In the one model (Paul), Jesus represents us to the Father; in the other (John) Jesus represents the Father to us. Why should we insist on only one view of the cross when Scripture gives more than one?
- 4. The best good news book.** At the end of this quarter, a good exercise for a Sabbath School class is to ask each member to identify the book of the Bible that helps them most. Most classes discover a healthy diversity. That's why we have so many different books in the Bible.