

The Book of James

The Perfecting of Our Faith

Lesson #2 for October 11, 2014

Scriptures: James 1:2-3,19-20; 1 Peter 1:6-7; Philippians 3:12-15; Luke 12:16-21; 17:5-6.

1. In this lesson we will see that the Christian's primary task is to focus on Jesus. Focusing on the life of Jesus will result in the transformation of our lives. This transformation is not our work but His. We may go through trials and difficulties. But, if we keep our eyes fixed on Him, He will bring us safely home in the end.
2. This means that we need to turn away from focusing on our past sins and, instead, focus on Jesus. Preoccupation with dealing with past sins is a recipe for disaster. Much of Christianity has been focused on forgiveness for past sins. If we become like what we focus on, isn't that going to get us even more and more involved and buried in our sins? (See #7 below.)
3. Is it reasonable for us to look to Jesus and trust Him—with the help of the Holy Spirit—to do the necessary work? Or, do we think it is too difficult for Him?
4. Read James 1:2-3; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 4:12-13. What should be our attitude when we face troubles and trials? Does God sometimes test us? Do we have any control over that testing? Are we supposed to be happy that God is testing us? Does the Devil ever test us?
5. When trials come, is it really possible to "Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven"? (Matthew 5:11-12, *GNB*) Compare 2 Timothy 3:12.
6. Do trials help us to better understand Jesus? There is much Scripture supporting the idea that God will not abandon us as we are being tested. (See Romans 8:28.) So, what is the purpose of such testing? James 1:3 tells us that it leads to patience which really means endurance or perseverance. That is, when we realize that we can survive it, we learn to trust God more. Do you find that testing and trials have improved your Christianity? Or, not? Of course, if we insist on holding onto our world and all its attractions, trials may not produce patience but, instead, only make us more irritable.
7. Read James 1:2-4. Look back at your own Christian experience. Do you agree with James that faith will lead to testing which will result in patience and ultimately perfection? Could we as Christians on this earth become "perfect and complete"? (James 1:4, *NKJV*) Is it possible for us to become more and more like Jesus?

It is a law both of the intellectual and the spiritual nature that by beholding we become changed. The mind gradually adapts itself to the subjects upon which it is allowed to dwell. It becomes assimilated to that which it is accustomed to love and reverence. (*Great Controversy* 555.1)

8. Read Ephesians 4:13 and Philippians 3:12-15. Do we really believe God's Word that it is possible to reach the "very height of Christ's full stature" as we focus on Jesus? (Ephesians 4:13, *GNB*) Does God actually promise that? Of course, that does not mean that we will puff out our chests and start telling people that we are perfect! Like Paul, we will be constantly striving to become more and more like Jesus. This is a journey not a destination. If our picture of God is not growing and improving, we are worshiping a static idol. Do you believe that when we reach heaven, we will see God and Jesus more clearly than we ever have before? If we believe that by beholding we become changed, won't that process continue? Shouldn't it continue for the rest of eternity? If so, there is no way that we can consider any human position as being perfect with no more effort or change to take place.
9. In Mark 4 Jesus told the story of a man who scattered seed in his field. First, there appeared

the single blade; then, the plant grew; and finally, the grain appeared and ripened. The farmer did not make that happen, but he rejoiced at the perfect progression of the plant, step-by-step. In the same way, if we trust God, allowing Him to make the necessary changes in our lives, He considers us perfect at each step of the way.

10. Read James 1:5-6. What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? Have you ever prayed for wisdom? Have you ever thought that you needed more of it? Could you define *wisdom* in your own words? Do we know how to make good use of the knowledge we have? That is wisdom.
11. Read James 1:19-21; 2:15-16; 3:13. These verses strongly suggest that wisdom is proven by good deeds. Shouldn't Christians be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, just as James suggests? Did Jesus ever become angry? Do we think about what we are about to say before we say it? Or, do we just regret it after we have said it? Plato once said: "Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they would like to say something." Think about all the talking that takes place around us every day. How much of it is wise? How much of it is foolish? Should Christians be trying to steer conversations in the right direction? If our focus is continually on Jesus, wouldn't we talk about Him more? If we are full of this world's wisdom, does that lead us to talk about Jesus?
12. What is the relationship between faith and doubt? Are they direct opposites? If *faith* means trusting God, does *doubt* suggest we have lost trust in God? Doubt tends to cripple people. They cannot seem to get anything done. They are not sure which way to go. And if they turn their eyes away from Jesus as their goal, they are likely to make a wrong choice. Is it better to make a wrong choice and move forward? Or, to remain paralyzed with doubt?
13. Look at the experience of the Israelites as recorded in Numbers 13 and 14. Why do you think they chose to believe the report of the ten spies who were filled with doubts instead of believing the two spies who were filled with faith? The report of the ten spies was inherently contradictory. Did any of the Israelites recognize that? When God told them that they would have to turn around and go back into the wilderness and that all the adults would die there, they suddenly appeared to change their minds and wanted to follow God's directions. Was that true repentance?

Now they seemed sincerely to repent of their sinful conduct; but they sorrowed because of the result of their evil course rather than from a sense of their ingratitude and disobedience. When they found that the Lord did not relent in His decree, their self-will again arose, and they declared that they would not return into the wilderness. In commanding them to retire from the land of their enemies, God tested their apparent submission and proved that it was not real.—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 391.4.

14. Read Luke 17:5-6. What does it mean to have faith like a grain of mustard seed? Does that mean that even a little faith can go a long way? The most important thing about a grain of mustard seed—or for that matter any seed—is its capacity to germinate and grow. Faith that has the capacity to grow and continues to do so is what we need.
15. How many reasons can you think of to trust God? Think of stories from the Bible. Think of your own personal experience and the experiences of others that you know. Are you encouraged?
16. As we mentioned in our first lesson, many people, taking a hint from Martin Luther, have looked down on the book of James. We suggested that the teachings of James are almost all paralleled by teachings from Jesus Himself. Compare James 1:9-11 with Luke 8:14; compare James 1:27 with Matthew 25:37-40; compare James 2:15-16 with Luke 10:29-37;

and compare James 5:1-4 with Luke 12:16-21. Aren't the similarities pretty clear? What is the common message? Just as Jesus spent His time caring for those who needed His help, shouldn't we first of all care for our believing Christian brothers and sisters, and then, as suggested in Luke 10:29-37, care for anyone else who needs our help?

17. What do you think about James's attitude toward the rich and the poor? Is it really dangerous to be rich? Read 2 Corinthians 4:18. Do riches tend to make us turn our attention away from Jesus to the things of this earth? Remember that Jesus Himself said: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:21, *KJV*)
18. What do you see happening in our world today? Are wealth, education, and social influence creating gaps between the rich and the poor? Do we as Christians constantly look after those who are poor? As far as possible, are we willing to share our earthly riches as well as our spiritual riches?
19. Ellen White was strong on this point.

As long as there are hungry ones in God's world to be fed, naked ones to be clothed, souls perishing for the bread and water of salvation, every unnecessary indulgence, every overplus of capital, pleads for the poor and the naked.—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, June 20, 1892, par. 5; *Healthful Living* 276.4; *Welfare Ministry* 269.2.

20. So, what is your attitude toward money? Who does not want more of it? Some of us want more in order to help others. Others want more in order to indulge their wishes and wants. In a world that is consumed with keeping up with the Joneses, getting and spending more money, how do Christians maintain the proper attitude toward money?

God would have his servants become acquainted with their own hearts. In order to bring to them a true knowledge of their condition, he permits the fire of affliction to assail them, so that they may be purified. **The trials of life are God's workmen to remove the impurities, infirmities, and roughness from our characters, and fit them for the society of pure, heavenly angels in glory.** Then as we pass through trial, as the fire of affliction kindles upon us, shall we not keep our eyes fixed upon the things that are unseen, on the eternal inheritance, the immortal life, the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory? and while we do this, the fire will not consume us, but only remove the dross, and we shall come forth seven times purified, bearing the impress of the Divine.—Ellen G. White, *1 Testimonies* 706.2; *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 10, 1894 par. 11; ML 92.3. [Bold type is added.]

21. The Bible tells us clearly that at the end of time, things will be like they were in the days of Noah. There will be a time of Jacob's trouble. Many will go through experiences like those of Job. Do you look forward to those kinds of experiences? As you look back in your own life, do you find that times of trial and testing have increased your faith?
22. Do we really understand how Jesus Himself, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, perfects our faith? Do we recognize that trials are really for the purpose of strengthening and purifying that faith? Are we demonstrating Christian wisdom in everything we do?
23. A biblical definition of *faith* based on all of Scripture and stated so well by one of God's best modern friends, Dr. A. Graham Maxwell, is as follows:

Faith is just a word we use to describe a relationship with God as with a Person well known. The better we know Him, the better the relationship may be.

Faith implies an attitude toward God of love, trust, and deepest admiration. It means having enough confidence in God based on the more-than-adequate evidence revealed to be willing to believe what He says as soon as we are sure He is the One saying it, to accept what He offers as soon as we are sure He is the One offering it, and to do what He wishes as soon as we are sure He is the One wishing it without reservation for the rest of eternity. Anyone who has such faith would be perfectly safe to save. This is why faith is the only requirement for heaven.

Faith also means that, like Abraham and Moses, God's friends, we know God well enough to reverently ask Him, "Why?"—Spoken many times by A. Graham Maxwell.

24. True faith and wisdom reveal themselves in good deeds. Do they tend to make us proud? Or, humble? Faith, of course, must grow. The problem with earthly wealth and means is that it tends to turn our attention away from Jesus.
25. So, where does this wisdom come from? If we exercise true faith and do our best to follow the example of Jesus, does God give us wisdom as a gift as suggested by James 1:5? (Compare Mark 11:24.)
26. Do you see a parallel between the passages in James that we have studied this week and the description of the faithful in Revelation 14:12? Do we need to be constantly reminded that perfection is not our job but Jesus's job? (Hebrews 12:2)
27. Review once again the great men and women of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11. Could we have experiences like those of Abraham and even Enoch?
28. Are we certain that as we move forward in life, we are practicing true faith and not presumption?

Faith claims God's promises and brings forth fruit in obedience. Presumption also claims the promises, but uses them as Satan did, to excuse transgression. . . . It is not faith that claims the favor of Heaven without complying with the conditions on which mercy is to be granted. Genuine faith has its foundation in the promises and provisions of the Scriptures.—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 260.3.

29. Let us remember as suggested by Romans 10:17 that faith comes from hearing the Word, from studying it, focusing on it, and being transformed by it. The results will be out of this world!

Not even by a thought did He [Jesus] yield to temptation. So it may be with us. . . . So long as we are united to Him by faith, sin has no more dominion over us. God reaches for the hand of faith in us to direct it to lay fast hold upon the divinity of Christ, that we may attain to perfection of character.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 123.3. [Content in brackets is added.]

30. The 144,000 who live at the end of time as God's faithful people will not only be keeping the commandments of God but also will have the "faith of Jesus." (Revelation 14:12) As a result of our study this week, do we have a clear idea what that faith means and how it should impact us?

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