Chapter One

THE CHALLENGE OF HARD TIMES

PURPOSE

To remind us that faith grows out of trials endured, temptations overcome, and beliefs practiced.

BIBLE PASSAGE

James 1:2-4, 12-15, 19-27
Background: James 1

GET READY

During this study, we will be working our way through the Book of James, a book of practical religion. It forces us to accept the fact that the faith we confess has consequences for the life we lead.

You and your class may feel woefully inadequate in light of James’s high standards. Remember, however, that James is not the whole gospel. Sometimes we need to hear James’s stern warning to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22). At other times we need the reassurance that, when we fail, God is there to forgive us and to empower us to try again. As you work through these five lessons, pray for sensitivity to your class members so that you may help meet their spiritual needs.

BIBLE BACKGROUND

Although we speak of the “Letter of James,” the book is only superficially in the form of a letter. Comparing James with Paul’s short letter to Philemon illustrates the differences. Paul’s letter opens with a greeting, identifying Paul as the sender and the church in Philemon’s house as the recipient (verses 1-2). Then, following a word of blessing (verse 3), Paul moves on to a thanksgiving for Philemon (verses 4-7). Next comes the body of the letter, expressing Paul’s purpose in writing (verses 8-22). Finally, Paul offers greetings from others to Philemon (verses 23-24) and closes with a benediction (verse 25). Apart from a few Christian modifications, this was the way people of Paul’s day wrote letters in the Greco-Roman world.

Now compare Philemon to the way James is written. Although James opens like a letter, with a typical greeting (James 1:1), the writer then forgets all about the letter form. In fact, it may seem as though the writer forgets all about any kind of form or structure. Rather than advancing a logically developed and clearly presented argument, James presents short, pithy sayings, loosely arranged by subject. Transitions between sections are abrupt, and the connections are not always clear. For instance, the only apparent connection between James 1:4, on the subject of maturity, and James 1:5, on wisdom, is the word lacking. This method of writing, called organization by catch-word, is found especially in the Old Testament Book of Proverbs—another loose collection of short, practical sayings.

In content as well as in form, James resembles Proverbs more than it does anything else in Scripture. Proverbs is a book of ancient Israelite wisdom, teaching the reader how to live rightly before God and others. We could think of James as a book of early Christian wisdom, aiming—like Proverbs—to teach the reader how to live rightly and well. The major themes of this book are set forth in the first chapter: testing (James 1:2-4, 12-16), wisdom (1:5-8), wealth and the wealthy (1:9-11), good works (1:19-25), and the control of the tongue (1:26-27). These essential ideas are then picked up and developed later in the book.

As we will see especially in Chapter 3, the person
responsible for this collection of wise sayings appears to know and respond to the letters of Paul. To be sure, Paul had a profound effect on early Christian writing as well as thought. Of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, all but six are either actual letters or, like James, books written in the form of letters. Perhaps, then, the reason for the superficial letter form in James is that, at the time this book was written, the letter had become the dominant form of Christian literature.

James 1:1. This is the only part of the Book of James that fits the letter form, and it contains the only mention of James as the writer (For more on the identity of this James, see the article “James: The Man and the Book” [pages 5-7 in this publication]). This is also one of only two places in the book that mention Jesus Christ (The other is James 2:1). For this reason and because of the book’s focus on works rather than faith, the great Reformer Martin Luther said of James, “I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible.”

To be sure, James is not the whole gospel. Our picture of God’s plan would be incomplete if we read only James. James does speak to a very important—and often ignored—part of the gospel, however. We can illustrate this with an analogy used, in a different context, by James: the rudder of a ship (3:4). Clearly, the rudder alone cannot make the ship go; for that you need wind for the sails (or fuel for the motors). Yet you must have the rudder to steer. In the same way, the teachings about right living in the Book of James are not enough to motivate and empower a Christian life. For that we need the grace of God, faith in Jesus Christ, and the wind of the Spirit in our sails. However, if we want to steer a clear course through life, putting faith into practice, the wise sayings of James will help us.

James is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). Usually, the term Dispersion referred to Jews living outside Palestine. However, James is “a servant [the Greek term means literally “slave”] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). This is a Christian book, addressed to a Christian audience. Probably, then, “the Dispersion” here means the church throughout the world, understood as the new Israel (compare 1 Peter 1:1). Remember, too, that the James whose tradition is continued in this book was a leader of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18; Galatians 2:9, 12). So this book, like the Book of Hebrews, is probably addressed in particular to Jewish Christians.

Verses 2-4. The Book of James opens with advice to consider trials “nothing but joy” (1:2). These words sound quite similar to the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12). True, as the student book observes, the trials of which James speaks are not persecutions but rather “the ordinary troubles of everyday life” [page 6]. But such troubles and trials can grind us down, wear us out, and rob our lives of joy. Just as Jesus calls those who are reviled and persecuted “happy” (the literal meaning of the Greek word translated “blessed” in both Matthew 5:11 and James 1:12), so James insists that “trials of any kind” can be a source of joy (1:2).

The reason for this affirmation is given in the following two verses. Just as strenuous exercise builds physical endurance, to the end that our bodies become strong and healthy, so spiritual testing produces endurance, leading to spiritual maturity. Notice, however, that this growth is not automatic. The pastor quoted in the section of the student book entitled “Our Need” observed that “most of the people who tell me they have lost their faith say the pain and suffering in their lives is the reason they’ve turned away from God” [page 5]. Clearly, not everyone grows through trial; some people become bitter or even lose their faith entirely.

Unlike the case with physical exercise, we often have no say in the trials that life brings upon us. No one asks for cancer or an unfaithful spouse or the death of a loved one. Nor do we have any guarantee that trials will come one at a time, in neat order. In fact, it often feels as though everything that can go wrong piles up on us all at once.

Still, we can have a say in how we respond to trials. By practicing the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, and public worship, we can build up a store of spiritual strength for our times of trial. Remember, too, that we are not expected to face our trials alone. Just as we should not attempt any exercise regimen without the guidance of a physician, we should not attempt to face the trials of life without the support of Christ’s church. As the student book observes, the Book of James presupposes that the reader is part of a Christian community (2:2-3; 5:13-16). With the support and prayers of Christian brothers and sisters and the guidance of spiritual leaders, we can win through...
Verses 12-18. Sometimes James’s teaching about spiritual growth through suffering leads to the mistaken conclusion that God sends suffering and trials to make us grow. James firmly rejects this idea: “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one” (1:13; note that the Greek word translated “tempted” here is a verbal form of the word translated “trials” in verse 2). This statement is further strengthened by a warning not to be deceived (1:16).

For James the goodness of God means that God cannot be involved with evil, even indirectly. How could “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17) possibly become a source of darkness? Rather, James insists that God is the source of “every perfect gift” (1:17), to the end that we might “become a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (1:18). God’s only involvement in temptation is empowering us to triumph over it so that, having “stood the test,” we might “receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (1:12).

At first, this issue may seem unimportant. What is the difference, after all, between saying that testing leads to spiritual growth, which God certainly wants for us, and saying that God sends trials and temptations in order to make us grow? A moment’s thought, however, will show that while the first statement is a spiritual truth, the second is a falsehood. Consider the case of Lee [pages 7–8 in the student book]. We rejoice that, through his illness and suffering, Lee found reconciliation with God and with his family. But suppose I told you that someone had deliberately injected him with the AIDS virus in order to bring these events about? The very idea is monstrous, horrible! Yet is this not the very thing we accuse God of doing if we say that God sent this trial? I believe that good can come out of evil; I cannot believe that God sends evil in order to bring about good.

Those who claim that God is responsible for sending trial and temptation picture God as aloof and above the world, moving us about like pawns on a chess board. However, the entire witness of Scripture and Christian tradition denies that God is anything like this. God is passionately involved with this world—indeed, so involved that God entered the world in the life of Jesus Christ to share our joys, our sorrows, our suffering, and even our death. How can we think that God who loves us so much would try to tempt us to evil?

James insists that blaming temptation upon God denies our responsibility for our own spiritual welfare. Notice the intriguing parallel between verses 3-4 and 14-15. Just as testing leads to endurance and endurance leads to maturity and wholeness, so yielding to desire leads to sin; and sin, to use James’s striking image, “gives birth to death” (1:15).

Verses 19-27. The sayings in this section all deal with the relationship between words and actions—beginning, intriguingly, with a reminder not to talk too much (1:19). In these days of TV talk shows and talk radio, we seem to have flipped James’s words on their head: Everyone on the airwaves seems quick to speak, quick to anger, and unwilling to listen at all. Far from “clearing the air,” such irresponsible and insensitive blather fouls the air, inhibiting the very free speech it claims to represent. The result is much as James warns: “sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” (1:21). No wonder James sternly declares, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless” (1:26).

What is needed, James argues, is not more human words but “the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (1:21)—the word of God. This divine word must be received in humility and meekness. With Paul, James affirms that our salvation is not a personal accomplishment but a gift of God’s grace (Romans 3:23-24). However, James emphasizes the consequences of welcoming that “implanted word” into our hearts. The life of the believer will be changed—must be changed. The “sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,” the anger and self-seeking that for James are the cause of sin and violence, must be rooted out of our lives (James 1:19-21). In short, the word of God cannot remain dormant within us. It must be put into action (1:22).

We will return to this question of faith and works later in this study. For now, note that James and Paul do not proclaim a different gospel but rather the same gospel with different points of emphasis.

In these verses we again find an intriguing parallel between James and the Sermon on the Mount. Remember that, at the close of that message, Jesus tells the story of the wise builder, who built on the rock, and the foolish builder, who built on sand (Matthew 7:24-27). The house built on the rock could stand against rain, wind, and flood; but the house with no foundation was swept away. The point of the story is found in Matthew 7:24 and 26. The wise builder, Jesus
James says, stands for everyone “who hears these words of mine and acts on them”; the foolish builder stands for “everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them.” For Jesus as for James, it is clear that hearing the word is not enough. The word must be put into practice in the way we live our lives. James rejects casual Christianity, comparing those who hear the word but do not act upon it to people glancing in a mirror, then looking away and immediately forgetting what they saw (James 1:23-24). The word of God holds a mirror up to our lives, showing us ourselves as we truly are. We cannot afford to treat that revelation casually. If we do not conform our lives to the implanted word within, we deceive ourselves; and our “faith” is no faith at all.

James describes the word of God as law, which may be a surprise. We are accustomed to thinking of the law in negative terms, as a bondage from which the gospel of Christ has set us free. James, however, speaks of the gospel as “the perfect law, the law of liberty” (1:25). The gospel is law, inasmuch as it places a demand upon us. As James everywhere makes clear, Christians are not “free” to behave as they like, yielding to their own selfish desires, refusing to listen to others or to learn from their own mistakes—not if they want to remain Christians. However, the word of God is the perfect law of wholeness and completion. The gospel is what makes it possible for us to reach the goal set out in James 1:4: “that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Further, the word of God is the law of freedom. Those who live moment to moment without discipline or direction may think that they are free; but, in fact, they are caught up in the cruelest bondage of all. They are slaves to their own selfish desires, unable even to think of resisting temptation. The obligations of the gospel, then, which place us under obedience to Christ, set us free from bondage to sin and self. James, the self-described slave of Christ, is freer than anyone.

INTRODUCE OUR NEED

Recently, I went to the funeral of a friend—a young mother with two children, a loving husband, and everything in the world to live for. I listened to a well-meaning family friend saying that we should not grieve, that my friend was with Jesus and the angels. As I listened, I became more and more angry. Why shouldn’t we grieve? Why shouldn’t we rage against the injustice of this life so tragically and unfairly cut short?

When the pastor began to speak, it was a relief to hear him begin by saying, “This day is an abomination before God. Children shouldn’t die before their parents. Little girls shouldn’t lose their mother. A husband shouldn’t be robbed of his best friend and soul mate.” The pastor went on to speak of the Resurrection, of new life, of the power and presence of God. But I was comforted first of all by having my grief and the grief of the family acknowledged and affirmed.

James reminds us that we can grow through suffering and trial, that good can come from evil. I know that my friend’s life reflected joy and confidence in the presence of God, a confidence hard-worn and proven through suffering and trial. I know that my life is better for having known this woman. I know too that through her long struggle against cancer, her doctors learned much about her disease that can be used to treat others so that some other child may not have to weep at a mother’s funeral. But I will not believe that God gave my friend cancer in order to teach her or me or anyone else a lesson. James, who speaks of the hard lessons learned from trials, also rejects the idea that God is the author of temptation and testing. It would be a shame if, having learned the first lesson from James, we failed to learn the other.

LESSON PLAN

Following your opening prayer, ask: How do we go about writing a letter? (If people are slow to respond, prompt them with questions such as, “What comes first?” and “What would you write next?” As people suggest parts of a letter, write them down on a chalkboard or on a large piece of paper. Probably, your letter will begin with “Dear So-and-so,” then move on to something like “How are you? I am fine.” before getting down to the body of the letter. Then the letter will probably close with “Sincerely” or “Yours truly,” followed by the signature. Tell your class that letter writing in the first century also followed a clear structure [You may want to use Philemon as an example].)

Now turn to the “letter” of James. Note that, while the text begins like a letter, it has none of the other features we would expect to find in a letter. Describe for your class the similarities in structure and content between Proverbs and James noted above, suggesting that James is an example of early Christian wisdom literature.

You may also want to discuss the authorship of James, using the article on pages 5–7 in this publication. Note, at any rate, that the book is addressed to...
“the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” which could suggest a Jewish Christian audience in keeping with the traditions associated with James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church.

Now turn to the text of James. Ask someone to read aloud James 1:2-4. Then ask the question at the end of the introduction to the student book section entitled “Faithful Living” [page 9]: “What experiences have you had of times of hardship that were also times of joy?” (If the class members are slow to answer, break the ice with a story of your own or with the story of Lee in the student book or with the story of the young mother with cancer above. Some class members may mention times of illness or joblessness or loneliness when they found God very close to them. Others may question whether hardship can ever really be a joy.)

Recall the pastor’s words about loss of faith during times of trial found above and in the student book: Then ask: How do we live as people of faith in the midst of the trials of life? (A variety of answers are possible: by having a strong, positive self-image as a person loved by God; by receiving the support of Christian friends; by praying; by Bible reading; and so forth.)

Remind your class that James is a Christian text and presupposes that the reader is involved in a Christian community. Note that he addresses his readers as “brothers and sisters,” assumes that they are part of an assembly (2:1-4), and speaks of “the elders of the church” (5:14). Our fellowship as the body of Christ is meant to be a source of strength and support.

Now ask: Does God send trials? Why or why not? (Some class members may want to claim that God does send trials in order to make us strong. Note, however, that James rejects this way of thinking about God [James 1:13].) James insists that we are responsible for our own spiritual welfare. Temptations do not come from God but rather from our own uncontrolled desires. We could say that, for James, it is the “me-first” attitude that lies behind all human sin. You may want to review the discussion from above or refer to the illustration from the “Introduce Our Need” section.

Move next to the final section of this lesson in the student book, entitled “Shaping Words and Actions,” by reading aloud James 1:19-21, 26. We sometimes chant the little rhyme “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” However, we all know that is a lie. Words can bring great pain and do untold damage. In contrast to the destructive power of human words, James affirms the creative power of God’s implanted word. As the student book observes, to speak of the “implanted word” is to affirm, with Jeremiah 31:33b, that God’s word has become a part of us. This cannot help but make a difference in our conduct. James therefore affirms that we must put that word into action: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Ask a class member to read aloud James 1:22. Then ask the question at the end of the lesson in the student book [page 12]: “How through your words and through your care for those in need can you be a more faithful doer of the word of God?” (Class members may suggest visiting shut-ins or volunteering in one of the ministries of your church. Some may also want to resolve to speak well of others and to avoid idle gossip that can wound others.)

After all who wish to do so have responded, lift your resolutions to God in prayer. Then close the session by having the class sing “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian.”

1 From Luther’s “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” in Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings, edited and with an introduction by John Dillenberger (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961); page 36.