



James

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Blomberg, Craig.

James / Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell.

p. cm. — (Zondervan exegetical commentary series on the New Testament ; v. 16)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-310-24402-8 (hardcover)

1. Bible. N.T. James — Commentaries. I. Kamell, Mariam J. II. Title.

BS2785.53.B56 2008

227'.9107 — dc22

2008026376

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*Interior design by Beth Shagene*

*Printed in the United States of America*

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# Series Introduction

This generation has been blessed with an abundance of excellent commentaries. Some are technical and do a good job of addressing issues that the critics have raised; other commentaries are long and provide extensive information about word usage and catalog nearly every opinion expressed on the various interpretive issues; still other commentaries focus on providing cultural and historical background information; and then there are those commentaries that endeavor to draw out many applicational insights.

The key question to ask is: What are you looking for in a commentary? This commentary series might be for you if

- you have taken Greek and would like a commentary that helps you apply what you have learned without assuming you are a well-trained scholar.
- you would find it useful to see a concise, one- or two- sentence statement of what the commentator thinks the main point of each passage is.
- you would like help interpreting the words of Scripture without getting bogged down in scholarly issues that seem irrelevant to the life of the church.
- you would like to see a visual representation (a graphical display) of the flow of thought in each passage.
- you would like expert guidance from solid evangelical scholars who set out to explain the meaning of the original text in the clearest way possible and to help you navigate through the main interpretive issues.
- you want to benefit from the results of the latest and best scholarly studies and historical information that helps to illuminate the meaning of the text.
- you would find it useful to see a brief summary of the key theological insights that can be gleaned from each passage and some discussion of the relevance of these for Christians today.

These are just some of the features that characterize the new Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series. The idea for this series was refined over time by an editorial board who listened to pastors and teachers express what they wanted to see in a commentary series based on the Greek text. That board consisted of myself, George H. Guthrie, William D. Mounce, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Mark L. Strauss along with Zondervan senior editor at large, Verlyn Verbrugge,

and former Zondervan senior acquisitions editor, Jack Kuhatschek. We also enlisted a board of consulting editors who are active pastors, ministry leaders, and seminary professors to help in the process of designing a commentary series that will be useful to the church. Zondervan senior acquisitions editor David Frees has now been shepherding the process to completion.

We arrived at a design that includes seven components for the treatment of each biblical passage. What follows is a brief orientation to these primary components of the commentary.

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## **Literary Context**

In this section, you will find a concise discussion of how the passage functions in the broader literary context of the book. The commentator highlights connections with the preceding and following material in the book and makes observations on the key literary features of this text.

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## **Main Idea**

Many readers will find this to be an enormously helpful feature of this series. For each passage, the commentator carefully crafts a one- or two- sentence statement of the big idea or central thrust of the passage.

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## **Translation and Graphical Layout**

Another unique feature of this series is the presentation of each commentator's translation of the Greek text in a graphical layout. The purpose of this diagram is to help the reader visualize, and thus better understand, the flow of thought within the text. The translation itself reflects the interpretive decisions made by each commentator in the "Explanation" section of the commentary. Here are a few insights that will help you to understand the way these are put together:

1. On the far left side next to the verse numbers is a series of interpretive labels that indicate the function of each clause or phrase of the biblical text. The corresponding portion of the text is on the same line to the right of the label. We have not used technical linguistic jargon for these, so they should be easily understood.
2. In general, we place every clause (a group of words containing a subject and a predicate) on a separate line and identify how it is supporting the principal assertion of the text (namely, is it saying when the action occurred, how it took place, or why it took place). We sometimes place longer phrases or a series of items on separate lines as well.

3. Subordinate (or dependent) clauses and phrases are indented and placed directly under the words that they modify. This helps the reader to more easily see the nature of the relationship of clauses and phrases in the flow of the text.
4. Every main clause has been placed in bold print and pushed to the left margin for clear identification.
5. Sometimes when the level of subordination moves too far to the right — as often happens with some of Paul’s long, involved sentences! — we reposition the flow to the left of the diagram, but use an arrow to indicate that this has happened.
6. The overall process we have followed has been deeply informed by principles of discourse analysis and narrative criticism (for the Gospels and Acts).

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## Structure

Immediately following the translation, the commentator describes the flow of thought in the passage and explains how certain interpretive decisions regarding the relationship of the clauses were made in the passage.

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## Exegetical Outline

The overall structure of the passage is described in a detailed exegetical outline. This will be particularly helpful for those who are looking for a way to concisely explain the flow of thought in the passage in a teaching or preaching setting.

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## Explanation of the Text

As an exegetical commentary, this work makes use of the Greek language to interpret the meaning of the text. If your Greek is rather rusty (or even somewhat limited), don’t be too concerned. All of the Greek words are cited in parentheses following an English translation. We have made every effort to make this commentary as readable and useful as possible even for the nonspecialist.

Those who will benefit the most from this commentary will have had the equivalent of two years of Greek in college or seminary. This would include a semester or two of working through an intermediate grammar (such as Wallace, Porter, Brooks and Winberry, or Dana and Mantey). The authors use the grammatical language that is found in these kinds of grammars. The details of the grammar of the passage, however, are only discussed when it has a bearing on the interpretation of the text.

The emphasis on this section of the text is to convey the meaning. Commentators examine words and images, grammatical details, relevant OT and Jewish

background to a particular concept, historical and cultural context, important text-critical issues, and various interpretational issues that surface.

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## **Theology in Application**

This, too, is a unique feature for an exegetical commentary series. We felt it was important for each author not only to describe what the text meant in its various details, but also to take a moment and reflect on the theological contribution that it makes. In this section, the theological message of the passage is summarized. The authors discuss the theology of the text in terms of its place within the book and in a broader biblical-theological context. Finally, each commentator provides some suggestions on what the message of the passage is for the church today. At the conclusion of each volume in this series is a summary of the whole range of theological themes touched on by this book of the Bible.

Our sincere hope and prayer is that you find this series helpful not only for your own understanding of the text of the New Testament, but as you are actively engaged in teaching and preaching God's Word to people who are hungry to be fed on its truth.

CLINTON E. ARNOLD, general editor

# James 1:1 – 11

## Literary Context

The first verse of James's epistle contains all of the expected elements in a first-century Greco-Roman letter: the sender, the recipients, and a greeting. The rest of the document, however, does not resemble conventional epistolary format nearly as much. James pens no thanksgiving, no standard letter body (comprising information and exhortation, in that order), and no discernible letter closing. Instead, he immediately launches into the three key themes of his correspondence. First, he introduces them briefly in 1:2–11, and then he repeats them with some variation in 1:12–27. The letter body can be seen as beginning in 2:1, even though exhortation permeates everything he writes. James 1:2–4 introduce the topic of “trials” or “temptations” (πειρασμοί), vv. 5–8 emphasize the need for “wisdom” (σοφία), while vv. 9–11 turn to issues of riches and poverty.

James 1:12–18 begins the second cycle with a slightly expanded treatment of “trials or temptations,” but whereas James focused on the positive potential of these tests as character-building experiences in his first cycle, here he treats them primarily as seductions to sin. James 1:19–26 focuses more on speech than on wisdom, but the two concepts are intertwined throughout 3:1–4:12; James apparently views them as closely linked. James 1:19–26 also stresses the need for obedience to God's Word. Finally, 1:27 highlights the widow and orphan, paradigms of the dispossessed, in keeping with the theme of riches and poverty, while simultaneously forming the thesis statement of the letter, thus keeping personal piety and social action closely linked.

James 1:12 forms a hinge between 1:2–11 and 1:13–18. The “trial” (πειρασμός) here remains the positive kind — a test to be passed — as in vv. 2–4. But conceptually, this text introduces vv. 13–18, which go on to speak of the proper Christian response to temptation (using forms of the cognate verb “test” or “tempt” [περάζω]), whereas vv. 5–11 at best indirectly treat trials or tests. Nevertheless, despite the three discrete topics detectable in vv. 2–11, a thread seems to run through all three subsections. It is the trials discussed in vv. 2–4 that form the most immediate need to pray for wisdom (vv. 5–8). These trials, likely involving the economic exploitation by rich non-Christian landlords of largely impoverished Jewish-Christian

peasants, likewise lead naturally to James's comments about rich and poor in vv. 9 – 11.<sup>1</sup>

- ➔ **I. Greetings (1:1)**
- II. Statement of Three Key Themes (1:2 – 11)**
  - A. Trials in the Christian Life (1:2 – 4)**
  - B. Wisdom (1:5 – 8)**
  - C. Riches and Poverty (1:9 – 11)**
- III. Restatement of the Three Themes (1:12 – 27)
  - A. Trials/Temptations in Relation to God (1:12 – 18)
  - B. Wisdom in the Areas of Speech and Obedience (1:19 – 26)
  - C. The "Have-Nots" and the Responsibility of the "Haves": The Thesis of the Letter (1:27)

## Main Idea

Christians should respond to trials by rejoicing at the maturity they can foster, by asking God for wisdom, and by viewing them as leveling experiences that often invert the roles of rich and poor.

## Translation

(See next page.)

## Structure

V. 1 forms the standard letter introduction. Following that, the three key themes of James appear briefly, in turn, without any additional introductory formalities. While the trials of vv. 2–4 produce the need to ask for wisdom (vv. 5–8) and can involve economic exploitation (vv. 9–11), the three subsections of this text can be treated somewhat separately. Each subsection contains two main commands.

The initial treatment of trials calls believers to view them as opportunities for rejoicing (v. 2a).<sup>2</sup> The two subordinate adverbial clauses define the time and basis

1. Cf. the similar collocation of themes and language in *Exod. Rab.* 31:3: "Happy the man who can withstand the test, for there is none whom God does not prove. He tries the rich man to see if his hand will be opened unto the poor, and the poor man He tries in order to see whether he will accept

chastisement without repining."

2. The NLT brings this out more explicitly with its dynamically equivalent translation, "whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an *opportunity* for joy ... your endurance has a *chance* to grow" (italics ours).

**James 1:1-11**

1a	Sender	James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
b	Recipients	to the twelve tribes in the dispersion,
c	Greetings	greetings!
2a	Exhortation	<b>Consider it pure joy</b> , my brothers and sisters,
b	time	whenever you fall into various trials,
3	basis (of 2a)	because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.
4a	Exhortation	<b>And let endurance have its complete effect</b>
b	purpose	in order that you might be complete and whole
c	apposition	lacking in nothing.
5a	condition	Now if any of you lacks wisdom,
b	Exhortation	<b>you should ask from the God</b>
c	description	who gives to all without hesitation or
d	alternative	mocking
e	Result (of 5b)	<b>and it will be given to you.</b>
6a	Expansion (of 5b)	<b>But ask in faith,</b>
b	restatement	in no way doubting;
c	illustration (of 8ab)	for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea,
d	description	blown by the wind and
e	expansion	tossed about;
7	basis (of 6ab)	for that person must not suppose that they will receive anything from the Lord;
8a	expansion (of 6ab)	[for that] person is double-minded,
b	apposition	unstable in all their ways.
9	Exhortation	<b>Let the believer in humiliating circumstances boast in their exalted position.</b>
10a	Contrast	<b>But [let] the rich person [boast] in their humiliation,</b>
b	illustration (of 11c)	because like a flower of the grass they will pass away;
11a	expansion	for the sun rises with its scorching wind and
b	series	the grass withers and its flower falls and its beautiful appearance is destroyed;
c	basis (of 10a)	in the same way, <b>the rich will fade away</b> in the midst of their daily life.

for this command. Not just in some situations but “whenever” trials beset a person (v. 2b), one must rejoice, because the circumstances can build character — in this case most notably by fostering perseverance (v. 3a). The second imperative follows from this specific ethical observation: believers must allow perseverance to mold them into what God wants (v. 4a). The purpose for this command is stated positively and then restated negatively. As Christians grow, they come closer and closer to maturity or wholeness, that is, to a state in which they no longer remain significantly spiritually deficient (v. 4bc).

The first command in the subsection on wisdom enjoins believers to ask God

for it (v. 5b). Subordinate to this imperative are a condition for asking and a description of the nature of the God who is addressed. In response to proper asking, God promises to bestow the wisdom requested. The condition for asking is if someone has a need (v. 5a). The description portrays God as eager to give and as not “criticizing” (HCSB) the petitioner (v. 5cd). The result of asking for wisdom is receiving it (v. 5e).

The second command repeats but also elaborates the first: asking should be done with faith or, phrased negatively, without doubting (vv. 6ab). Three parallel clauses begin explicitly or implicitly with a “for” (γάρ). The second of these supplies the actual basis for the elaborated command to ask with faith and without doubt; otherwise God will not grant the petitioner anything (v. 7). The third offers an expansion of this rationale: such petitioners do not clearly believe that God is the source of all wisdom; thus they waver between dual allegiance to God and some other “god” or “gods” (v. 8ab; cf. 4:4).<sup>3</sup> The first clause provides an illustration of the rationale: such wavering resembles the billowing of the waves in a wind-blown sea (v. 6c). The illustration actually precedes the rationale and its expansion, perhaps to help the listeners better understand and/or accept James’s explanations when he presents them.

The third subsection pairs its two commands right at the outset. Materially poor believers are called to rejoice in their lofty spiritual position, with all of the privileges that God promises Christians (v. 9). In striking contrast, rich believers are called to rejoice in their abased spiritual position, acknowledging total dependence on God for everything good (v. 10a). Once again, an illustration precedes the principle being illustrated. Even rich people’s lives are remarkably fragile and transient, like the short-lived wildflowers of the field (v. 10b). This comparison is expanded by the series of descriptions of how these flowers wither so rapidly (v. 11ab). James concludes with the point of the illustration: rich people likewise die all too quickly and even unexpectedly (v. 11c). This undeniable observation from life-experience thus forms the basis for James’s implied exhortation for the rich not to trust in their possessions, a warning that forms the “flip side” of his explicit command for them to humble themselves before God (v. 10a).

3. It is possible that we are not meant to supply a “for” (γάρ) at the beginning of v. 8 but allow the sentence to stand asyndetically juxtaposed to v. 7 for emphasis, expanding the description of the person who doubts. Considerably less likely

is the HCSB: “An indecisive man is unstable . . .” — a rendering that leaves v. 8 conceptually almost unconnected to what precedes it.

## Exegetical Outline

### ➔ I. Greetings (1:1)

#### II. Statement of Three Key Themes (1:2 – 11)

##### A. Christians Should Respond to Trials by Rejoicing at the Maturity They Can Foster (vv. 2 – 4).

1. They should count them as grounds for thorough joy (vv. 2 – 3).
2. They should allow perseverance to lead them to maturity (v. 4).

##### B. Christians Should Respond to Trials by Asking God for Wisdom (vv. 5 – 8).

1. They must ask, sometimes persistently, and they will receive (v. 5a-d).
2. The assured result is that God will give wisdom (v. 5e).
3. The manner of prayer must be with faith that does not doubt that God can give (vv. 6 – 8).
  - a. This is because the doubter is unstable, like turbulent sea waves (v. 6).
  - b. This is because the doubter will receive nothing from the Lord (v. 7).
  - c. [This is because] the doubter is torn between two allegiances (v. 8).

##### C. Christians Should Respond to Trials by Viewing Them As Leveling Experiences That Often Invert the Roles of Rich and Poor (vv. 9 – 11).

1. Poor Christians must boast in their exalted position (v. 9).
2. Rich Christians must boast in their humble position (vv. 10 – 11).

## Explanation of Text

**James 1:1 James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings!** (Ἰάκωβος θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος ταῖς δώδεκα φυλαῖς ταῖς ἐν τῇ διασπορᾷ χαίρειν). The Greek name for James might easily have come down to English as Jacob. But in Latin the alternate rendering *Jacomus* developed alongside *Jacobus*, so that a number of modern European languages now have two male names from the same linguistic root.<sup>4</sup> “Slave” preserves the sense of the Greek word here (δοῦλος) better than “servant.” Christians committed themselves to Jesus as their absolute divine master just as actual slaves had to

swear unconditional allegiance to their human masters.<sup>5</sup>

Because “slave” is anarthrous, “God” and “Lord” follow suit, which means that Granville Sharp’s rule, in which two singular, personal, nonproper nouns joined by a coordinating conjunction and governed by a single article refer to the identical entity, does not come into play. But except for the article, all of the necessary elements are present, so this *could* be an early equation of Jesus with God.<sup>6</sup> He is, at the very least, Master and Messiah (Lord and Christ). “The Lord Jesus Christ” is the fullest of the many combinations of the name Jesus with various titles or appellations in the NT.<sup>7</sup>

4. OED, 5:549.

5. See esp. throughout Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999).

6. Cf. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The Tests of*

*Faith* (BTS; Leicester: IVP, 1985), 27.

7. See further Craig L. Blomberg, “Messiah in the New Testament,” in *Israel’s Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 111 – 41.

Commentators have often marveled that James does not refer to himself either as an apostle (cf. Gal 1:19) or as Jesus' brother, and some have used these omissions as an argument for pseudonymity. Most likely, however, James is implying that his familial relationship to Jesus gives him no extra authority, while his addressees would have already known of his role as chief elder in Jerusalem. Instead, he wants to stress that he is a fellow slave to God in Christ, just like his readers.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it seems less likely that a pseudepigrapher would have used so nonauthoritative a descriptor.<sup>9</sup>

As we discussed in our introduction (pp. 28–29), “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” most likely refer to a collection of Jewish-Christian congregations somewhere outside Israel toward the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin, perhaps in Syria. “Greetings” (χαίρειν) forms the rough equivalent of our English “hello” and appears as the most common form of salutation in letter introductions of the day.<sup>10</sup>

**James 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you fall into various trials** (Πᾶσαν χαρὰν ἡγήσασθε, ἀδελφοί μου, ὅταν πειρασμοῖς περιπέσητε ποικίλοις). James begins his preliminary discussion of trials in this verse, introducing the theme of joy in the midst of the trial.

He addresses the “brothers and sisters” (ἀδελφοί), that is, fellow Christians. It is important to stress that this word remains gender inclusive when referring to coreligionists, unless context clearly dictates otherwise. In contemporary contexts in which “brothers” no longer automatically connotes both genders, faithfulness to the original meaning requires an inclusive language translation.<sup>11</sup>

This verse starts off with the command to “consider it all joy,” an imperative that has been highly abused in interpretation. First, the word for “all” (πᾶσαν) does not mean “everything” in this context, but functions adjectivally here, implying “pure” or “entire.” In other words, it does not form part of the direct object (“Consider *everything*”) but identifies the type of joy one should have.<sup>12</sup> “Joy” (χαράν), in turn, speaks of a state of being rather than an emotion.<sup>13</sup> Joy proves quite different from happiness, so that this verse does *not* support the idea that a Christian must smile all the time! Joy may be defined as a settled contentment in every situation or “an unnatural reaction of deep, steady and unadulterated thankful trust in God.”<sup>14</sup> Here appears our first example of James's use of a linking- or catch-word (recall p. 23), in this case with “greetings” (χαίρειν) in v. 1. This technique helps to tie together patterns of thought and ideas while moving the argument forward.<sup>15</sup>

8. “Thus the designation combines the softness of humility and the strength of authority in an integrated vision of leadership under the lordship of God” (Guthrie, “James,” 210).

9. Hartin (*James*, 51) adds that by not further identifying himself, the author leads his readers to assume that he is the most well-known early Christian leader named James at that time.

10. Burchard, *Der Jakobusbrief*, 50. For examples, see John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 265–68.

11. A point acknowledged even by Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem in *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God's Words* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 263–68, who severely criticize in-

clusive-language translations of the Bible at numerous other junctures.

12. Johnson (*The Letter of James*, 176) offers “consider it entirely as joy” as a translation of this line.

13. Patrick J. Hartin (“The Call to be Perfect through Suffering [James 1,2–4]: The Concept of Perfection in the Epistle of James and in the Sermon on the Mount,” *Bib* 77 [1996]: 477) notes that in James, “joy emerges as the proper response in situations where one's faith is tested.”

14. Derek Tidball, *Wisdom from Heaven: The Message of the Letter of James for Today* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 22.

15. William F. Borend II (*James and Jude* [NCBC; Cambridge: CUP, 2004], 34) calls this technique *gradatio*, which he describes as “literally a ladder leading the reader from one

## In Depth: Are the Rich in 1:10 – 11 Christians?

James clearly labels the poor person in v. 9 as a “brother” or fellow “believer.” But what about the “rich” person in vv. 10 – 11? In favor of seeing at least a few in James’s community as the rich depicted here is the overall parallelism between the two parts of the paragraph and especially the fact that “let him or her boast” (καυχᾶσθω) has to carry over from v. 9 to v. 10. It would be natural, then, to supply “brother” (ἀδελφός) as well. This is the view that has dominated throughout most of church history.<sup>75</sup> James 4:13 – 17 indicates that the community does have some at least moderately well-to-do people within it who can travel and boast of their hopes to make more money (on their Christian identity, see below, 206 – 7). On this view, the humility in which the rich person should boast is not eschatological judgment but their present spiritual state as believers. One should not take pride in possessions but in Christ alone.<sup>76</sup>

On this interpretation, James is enjoining both the rich and the poor to evaluate themselves by spiritual rather than material standards. For James to command rich *non-Christians* to boast in their eternal damnation would require him to be using a kind of bitter irony or sarcasm that the rest of the context does not support.<sup>77</sup> The idea of “fading away” at the end of v. 11 could still be a general conclusion about all, Christian or not, who depend on their riches for their identity.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of people’s spiritual condition, their economic state remains transitory. Realistically, “James may just as well be thinking of the death of the rich man as of his condemnation.”<sup>79</sup> There is nothing in this text that forces it to refer to eternal judgment.<sup>80</sup>

Others, however, argue that v. 10 is less literal, that “brother” (ἀδελφός) goes only with the “poor” (ταπεινός), and that the call to “boast” (καυχᾶσθω) is indeed bitterly ironic. The rich have already had their day and judgment is coming.<sup>81</sup> Maynard-Reid argues that those interpretations that try to spiritualize poverty to allow some rich to be considered believers are created solely to

75. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, 145.

76. See, e.g., James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 61 – 62.

77. See, e.g., Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of James*, 146.

78. Williams (“Of Rags and Riches,” 281) shows how Jer 9:23 – 24 is regularly used in Jewish texts to “cause God’s people to re-evaluate their understanding of wisdom, strength, and riches. . . . Judgment will come in the future to those trusting in their own human wisdom, strength, and riches.” This text as a background supports the traditional view of Jas 1:10.

79. Moo, *The Letter of James*, 68.

80. James’s knowledge of the Sermon on the Mount could suggest that his illustration of withering like wildflowers alludes to the transient clothing of *believers*, like the lilies of the field in Mt 6:28 – 30.

81. See, e.g., Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 77; George M. Stulac, “Who Are ‘The Rich’ in James?” *Presb* 16 [1990]: 98 – 99; and, in most detail, René Krüger, “El vuelco irritante y definitivo: Santiago 1:9 – 11 y el anuncio de la inversión total de la situación,” *Cuadernos de Teología* 23 (2004): esp. 55 – 59.

“placate the wealthy Christians within our own contemporary communities,” and that the question of whether the rich can also be Christian is somewhat irrelevant. Rather, he decides that James uses an ironic twist regarding the economically wealthy to “underscore the humiliation in which the rich person lives.”<sup>82</sup> Martin argues that James’s one entirely unambiguous example of the non-Christian wealthy (2:7) helps tip the balance in favor of a non-Christian referent, given the ambiguity of 1:10.<sup>83</sup> James then uses “rich” (πλούσιος) with a polemical overtone here and holds out no future hope for them, implying that they are not Christians at all.<sup>84</sup> Tamez insists that the rich “will fail completely in their pursuits, namely, their business dealings, which are precisely the cause of their ruin since usually they are rooted in injustice and the desire for gain.”<sup>85</sup>

Good arguments thus appear for both positions. On balance, we agree with William Baker, who argues that “in terms of logic, the irony of suggesting that a person should take pride in what amounts to his own eternal condemnation is too twisted to be taken seriously.”<sup>86</sup> Drake Williams adds that the background of Jer 9:23 – 24 helps us to understand this boast not in terms of irony, but rather as a “heroic boast of believers,” encouraging “God’s people to look towards the future when riches will mean little and being in God’s plan will mean a great deal.”<sup>87</sup> James 5:1 – 6 offers a sharp denunciation of the non-Christian rich, but the words mean exactly what they say (“Weep and wail for the miseries coming upon you”). Nowhere else in this letter does James employ a kind of irony in which the actual meaning of a command is the exact opposite of its literal meaning. Combining this observation with the recognition of at least some diversity of socioeconomic status within the earliest church more generally, the Christian interpretation seems preferable.<sup>88</sup>

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## Theology in Application

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### *Introduction (1:1)*

Although James is no messiah, the title “servant of God” recalls the suffering “servant of the Lord” from Isaiah (esp. Isa 52:13 – 53:12). If Jesus’ own brother and chief elder of the Jerusalem church refused to exploit his office and his relationships, how much more ought Christian leaders in other times and places view themselves

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82. Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*, 44.

83. Martin, *James*, 26. Basically, he argues that if James had wanted to identify this person as a believer, he could have done so clearly, as he shows the opposite in 2:7.

84. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 77.

85. Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James*, 34.

86. Baker, “James,” 22.

87. Williams, “Of Rags and Riches,” 282.

88. Cf. also Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 149 – 50.

and behave as mere slaves. First Corinthians 4 offers important later reflection in more detail on this theme.

### *The Positive Potential of Trials (1:2 – 4)*

The first of the three key themes in James demonstrates that tough times can be viewed positively. V. 12 will support this conviction. James 4:13 – 5:18 elaborates on the theme of testing, in the contexts of temptation to worship riches (4:13 – 17), experiencing economic exploitation (5:1 – 12), and suffering severe illness (5:13 – 18). By introducing all three of his themes here, at the beginning of his letter, in short compass, James implicitly applies his teaching on trials to the social circumstances of his audience. Despite the fact that the majority of them are afflicted by unjust discrimination and deprivation, they can nevertheless choose to view their situation as an opportunity for character building.

Jewish Christians would naturally recall the accounts of the Israelites' rebellious wandering in the wilderness for forty years between the exodus and the entry into the Promised Land. Instead of imitating their ancestors' failure, they should instead emulate the Maccabean martyrs, whose faith and joy under torture had become legendary (cf. 2Mc 7).<sup>89</sup> Jesus in his Beatitudes had pronounced those who were persecuted for his sake blessed (Mt 5:11 – 12; Lk 6:23) and had called on his followers to become mature (or perfect, Mt 5:48), as in Jas 1:4.<sup>90</sup> Ro 5:2 – 5 and 1Pe 1:6 – 7 (cf. 4:13) likewise describe the need to rejoice in various trials and sufferings because of the genuineness of faith that they can produce. The verbal parallels among these passages suggest that James, Paul, and Peter may have all drawn from a common early Christian ethical tradition in their directives.<sup>91</sup> If this is the case, then James's teaching proves all the more fundamental for Christian living.

But how can believers rejoice in tough times (v. 2), especially when they find themselves suffering intensely? Frankly, many of us would prefer that this passage were not in the Bible! But it may also be one of the most profound and crucial for truly mature Christian living.<sup>92</sup> To begin with, James does not command us to wear the artificial "happy faces" that so many seem to think are required in church or other Christian circles. Denying one's true emotions seldom accomplishes anything good. But while we cannot *will* ourselves to be jovial rather than depressed, we can choose how we *think* — hence the verbs about considering and knowing in vv. 2 – 3.<sup>93</sup> The joy James has in mind "is an eschatological catchword, not an emotion

89. For other intertestamental texts, see Rudolf Hoppe, *Der theologische Hintergrund des Jakobusbriefes* (Wurzburg: Echter, 1977), 19.

90. Just as the Beatitudes and antitheses in Mt 5 help explain the perfection or maturity enjoined in the Sermon on the Mount, so Jas 3:17 – 18 enumerates the attribute James has in mind by the same term here (*teleios*). See the excursus in

Hartin, *James*, 75 – 80.

91. See the tables and discussion in Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 65 – 66.

92. Cf. the NLT rendering of v. 4: "for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything."

93. On these right and wrong ways to apply v. 2, see esp. R.