

The Perfecting¹ of Our Faith



SABBATH—OCTOBER 4

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 1:2, 3; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; Philippians 3:12–15; James 1:19–21; Luke 17:5, 6; Luke 12:16–21.

MEMORY VERSE: “Let us keep looking to Jesus. He is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect. He paid no attention to the shame of the cross. He suffered there because of the joy he was looking forward to. Then he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, NIV).

A DENTIST EXPLAINED WHY HIS CROWNS ARE ALWAYS WITHOUT FAULT. He said, “I never have a problem with the crowns [top of a tooth] that come back from the lab. If I send them perfect work, they send me perfect crowns.” This dentist does not worry about the end result. He focuses on doing the best job he can.

In the same way, as Christians, we need not worry about whether or not our characters (thoughts; feelings; actions) will be good enough in the end. That is God's work. Our part is to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Timothy 6:12, NIV) by keeping our eyes on Jesus, “the author and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:2, NASB). Such faith in Christ helps Him “make you willing and able to obey him” (Philippians 2:13, CEV) and to finish the good work He has begun (Philippians 1:6). Without faith, it is possible to feel lost even before we begin, because we focus on ourselves rather than on Him.

As Jesus says, “ ‘God wants you to have faith in the one he sent’ ” (John 6:29, CEV). James helps us to understand this important spiritual truth.

DEFINITIONS

1. perfecting—the process (method) of making our faith more complete or stronger.

FAITH ENDURES (CONTINUES) (James 1:2, 3)

Read James 1:2, 3; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; and 1 Peter 4:12, 13. What is the common attitude (feeling) of both James and Peter about trials (hardships)? How are we supposed to accept this Bible teaching?



The greatest goal of the testing of our faith is patience.

No one likes suffering. We almost always avoid it if we can. The Greek word used in verse 3 for testing our faith is *dokimion*. This word refers to the way of proving whether or not something is real or true. Peter compares² this testing or trying of our faith to the way fire makes gold pure. Such testing may not be pleasant, but God expects a successful result. Trials should not discourage us. This is because if we remain faithful, we will “come forth as gold” (Job 23:10; compare Proverbs 17:3).

So, we are to be glad when trials come, especially over our faith. Jesus Himself says: “ ‘Be joyful and glad. Your reward in heaven is great’ ” (Matthew 5:12, NIV). Also, trials help us to appreciate better what Christ suffered for us. As 1 Peter 4:13 points out, they help us to be able to share in Christ’s sufferings.

In short, we need to look above each trial to understand the reason that God has allowed it. That is where faith comes in. We need to *believe* in a loving Father, *depend* on His wisdom, and *act* on the basis of His Word. We can safely entrust our future to Him (read Romans 8:28). In fact, it is only through faith and knowledge of God’s love that we can ever possibly rejoice in our sufferings.

In James 1:3, the greatest goal of the testing of our faith is “patience” (NKJV). The Greek word *hypomonē* can also be translated “endurance” (NASB, 1995) or “perseverance” (NIV) or “strength to continue” (NIV). *Hypomonē* means something that outlasts everything else because it depends confidently on the promise of God’s final salvation and freedom (as in Luke 21:19).

It is one thing to stay faithful to God during trials and troubles. We are not to lose our faith but to hold on to the Lord, even in the worst times. But we are told to “rejoice [be glad]” in our trials (sufferings). Is that not asking too much? At times it can be hard enough just to stay faithful in trials, but are we to rejoice in them? Yes, that is what we are told. Then, how can we learn to rejoice when rejoicing is the last thing we feel like doing when we are suffering?

DEFINITIONS

2. compares—to show how two or more things are the same or different.

PERFECTION (James 1:2–4)

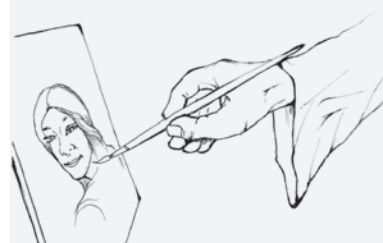
Read James 1:2–4. Notice the order of traits: faith, testing, patience, perfection. James begins with faith because that is the foundation (basis) of all true Christian experience. He then says we need trials (troubles; sufferings) as tests to see how strong and real our faith is. Last, James says that trials can teach us to be patient. In that way, we will not be caught by surprise and be overcome by them. God’s goal for us is that we “may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:4, NKJV). The language could not be better. The word *perfect* (*teleios*) means full growth spiritually. But *complete* (*holokleros*) means fullness or wholeness in every way. Truly, we can become so much more in the Lord if we would die to self and let Him work in us “to be in keeping with his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13, NIV).

Read Ephesians 4:13 and Philippians 3:12–15. What attitude (feeling) toward “perfection” are Christians encouraged to have?

Like Paul, followers of Christ will never be satisfied if they fail to model (copy) their life after the unselfish, sacrificial (unselfish) love of their Master. But even when we live this life of love, we will never feel as though we have reached perfection. See Philippians 3:12.

Notice, too, in the verses that Paul is speaking about the future. He is pointing toward what he has been promised in God through faith in Jesus. There is never a time in the Christian walk when we can say, “I have become perfect.” (Have you ever noticed, too, that those who say that they are “perfect” are snobbish, critical, and self-righteous?³) We are like a work of art. We can always be improved upon. And God promises to do just that as long as we press on in faith and surrender to Him daily in trust and obedience.

If you died right now, would you be good enough to be saved? Or if you had died two weeks after you had accepted Jesus, would you have been good enough to be saved? Do you think in six months you will be good enough? What does your answer tell you about your need for the perfect robe of Christ’s righteousness (holy life), no matter how “perfect” you are?



We are like a work of art that can always be improved upon.

DEFINITIONS

3. self-righteous—when someone believes he or she is better than others.

ASKING IN FAITH (James 1:5, 6)



Wisdom is not what we know but how we live.

Read James 1:5, 6. How is wisdom different from knowledge? What connection does James make between wisdom and faith?

It may seem a bit odd that James says, “*If any of you lacks [does not have] wisdom*” (ESV). Who thinks he or she has enough wisdom to begin with? For example, Solomon knew of his need. So, he humbly asked for “an understanding heart to . . . discern [see and understand] between good and bad” (1 Kings 3:9). Later, Solomon wrote: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10).

We like to think of wisdom as that which we know. But how do James 1:19–21; James 2:15, 16; and James 3:13 show us what another side of true wisdom is?

Both Proverbs and James describe wisdom as something very useful: not *what we know* but *how we live*. For example, being “quick to listen, slow to speak” (James 1:19, NIV). Plato said, “Wise men talk because they have something to say. Fools speak because they would like to say something” (adapted). In other words, we can have all the knowledge the world offers but still not have true wisdom.

Of course, God is the Giver of all true wisdom. So, we gain wisdom most by spending time with Him—reading His Word and spending thoughtful time studying the life of Christ, “who became for us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30, NKJV). By learning to show the character of Christ in our own lives, we live out the truth as it is in Jesus. *That* is true wisdom.

Read James 1:6 again. We must ask in faith, not doubting. It can be hard sometimes. Who does not, sometimes, struggle with doubt? When that happens, it is important to pray and to start thinking about all the reasons we have for our faith: the story of Jesus, the prophecies (special messages from God) in the Bible, and our own personal experiences. How could doing this help us to work through doubt that we might have sometimes?

THE OTHER SIDE OF FAITH (James 1:6–8)

Read James 1:6–8. What is James saying to us?

The word for “doubt” means a person feeling divided inside. This helps us to understand its connection to double-mindedness. We see a clear example of this at Kadesh-Barnea. Israel faced a choice there. They could move forward in faith, or they could rebel (fight) against the Lord. Surprisingly, they chose rebellion (war) and wanted to return to slavery in Egypt. So, God took action and announced through Moses that they would die in the wilderness. Then, suddenly, the people “believed”! They said, “ ‘We will go up to the place which the Lord has promised, for we have sinned!’ ” (Numbers 14:40, NKJV).

“Now they [the people of Israel] seemed sincerely to repent [feel sorry] of their sinful conduct [actions]. But they were sorry because of what happened to them as the result of their evil course rather than being sorry for their ungratefulness and disobedience. When the people found that the Lord did not change His mind, their stubbornness again arose. And they announced that they would not return into the wilderness. God commanded them to retire [turn away] from the land of their enemies. In this way He tested their obedience, but they proved that it was not real.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers and Leaders] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 391.

Read Luke 17:5, 6. What is Jesus telling us in Luke 17:5, 6 about faith?

When the disciples asked for more faith, Jesus said mustard seed–sized faith was plenty. What is important is whether our faith is alive and growing. And this can and will happen only as we continue to use that faith by reaching out and trusting in God in all situations.

But doubt sometimes gets in the way. Our world hits us with doubt and skepticism (unbelief). No one is safe from them. All we can do is pray our way through doubt, remember God’s faithfulness in the past, and trust Him for our future.

What are all the reasons you have for trusting in God and His promises and living by faith? Think deeply about them, and your faith will only increase.



It’s not how much faith you have but whether it is alive and growing.

THE RICH AND THE POOR (James 1:9–11)

In this short letter, James shows great concern for poor people. Some people think it is his most important theme (topic; idea). But to modern-day readers, his complaints against the rich and in favor of the poor seem to be too much, even shocking. But, at the same time, James is not saying anything much different from what Jesus has said.

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. What is the common message for us? What warnings can we all learn from what is so clearly explained here?

James does not shut the doors of the kingdom on all rich people. But, like Jesus, James sees the terrible temptations that come with wealth. Rich or poor, we need to keep our eyes on the real prize—Jesus. The problem with money is that it deceives us into thinking that worldly things are more important than eternal things (2 Corinthians 4:18).

No question, wealth, higher education, or social influence separate people from “less fortunate” ones. But the early church kept the two classes together by turning worldly values upside down. The one who takes the *lowest* place or is humble is the one who can enjoy the place of glory (power and honor) in God’s kingdom.

“There are hungry ones in God’s world to be fed. There are naked ones to be clothed. There are souls dying for the bread and water of salvation. People need to spend the extra money they have helping and feeding the poor and clothing the naked.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry [Work Done for God]*, page 269.

What about yourself? It does not matter if you are rich or poor. What does matter is how attached or absorbed you are by money. What is it about money that so often makes it dangerous to our souls?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pages 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“God would have His servants know their own hearts well. In order to bring to them a true knowledge of their condition, He allows them to suffer hardships. In this way they may be made pure. The trials of life are God’s workmen to form within us His strong and perfect character. They also make us fit for the society of pure, heavenly angels in glory. Then as we pass through the fire of suffering, shall we not keep our eyes fixed upon heavenly things, the rewards and glory of eternal life in heaven? They are far more valuable than what we have on earth. While we do this, the fire [suffering] will not destroy us, but only remove the parts of us that have no value. And we shall come forth seven times purer, having the stamp on us of God’s holy character.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 10, 1894.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1 What Bible characters do you find most encouraging in times of suffering? Have you learned to find joy in trials? If so, share with the class what has helped you do this. At the same time, if you have not been able to find joy in your sufferings, talk about that in class too. (That is, if you feel comfortable doing it.)

2 Think more deeply about the idea that true wisdom is not just head knowledge. Instead, it is what we do in faith through Christ. At the same time, why is head knowledge also important? How can having wrong doctrines (teachings) be very harmful to a person’s walk with the Lord?

3 A young man had a friend who went through serious trials. The young man found the trials painful to watch, but he did notice that his friend was growing in grace.⁴ When the trials were over, his friend really had shown much improvement! What things have you learned from your trials that have been spiritually helpful to you? Ask yourself, could I have learned them any other way?

4 What can you say to someone who appears sincere in faith but still admits to being filled with doubt? How can you help?

DEFINITIONS

4. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sin.