

The Perfecting of Our Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 1:2, 3; 1 Pet. 1:6, 7; Phil. 3:12–15; James 1:19–21; Luke 17:5, 6; Luke 12:16–21.*

Memory Text: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (*Hebrews 12:2, NIV*).

A dentist explained why his crowns are always flawless. “Unlike some dentists,” he said, “I never have a problem with the crowns that come back from the lab. If I send them perfect work, they send me perfect crowns.” This dentist doesn’t worry about the end result. He focuses on his role in the initial stage of the process.

Likewise, as Christians, we need not get all worked up over whether or not our characters will be good enough in the end. That is God’s work. Our role is to “fight the good fight of faith” (*1 Tim. 6:12*) by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Such faith in Christ enables Him to work in us “both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (*Phil. 2:13*) and to finish the good work He has begun (*Phil. 1:6*). Without faith, it is possible to feel defeated, even before we begin, because we focus on ourselves rather than on Him.

As Jesus says, “‘This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent’” (*John 6:29, NKJV*). James, as we will see, helps us to understand this important spiritual truth.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 11.

Faith Lasts

Read James 1:2, 3; 1 Peter 1:6, 7; 4:12, 13. What is the common attitude of both James and Peter in regard to trials? How are we supposed to relate to this incredible biblical injunction?

No one likes suffering; we almost always avoid it if we can. The Greek word used in verse 3 for the testing of our faith is *dokimion*. It refers to the process of proving the genuineness of something. Peter likens this testing or trying of our faith to the way fire purifies gold; although such testing may not be pleasant, God expects a successful outcome. Trials should not discourage us; for, if we remain faithful, we will “come forth as gold” (*Job 23:10; compare Prov. 17:3*).

Thus, we are to rejoice when trials come, especially over our faith, for Jesus says, “Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven” (*Matt. 5:12*). Also, trials deepen our appreciation for what Christ endured for us. As 1 Peter 4:13 points out, they enable us to share in Christ’s sufferings.

In short, we need to look through and beyond each trial and visualize the result God intends. That is where faith comes in. We need to believe in a loving Father, rely on His wisdom, and act on the basis of His Word. We can safely entrust our future to Him (*see Rom. 8:28*). In fact, only through faith, through knowing for ourselves God’s love, and living by faith in light of that love could we ever possibly rejoice in our trials.

In James 1:3, the ultimate goal of the testing of our faith is “patience” (*NKJV*). The Greek word (*hypomonē*) can also be translated “endurance” (*NASB*) or “perseverance” (*NIV*). *Hypomonē* refers to that which outlasts everything else because it rests confidently in the assurance of God’s final deliverance (*as in Luke 21:19*).

It’s one thing to stay faithful to God during trials; that is, to not lose your faith but to cling to the Lord, even in the worst times. But we are told to “rejoice” in our trials. Isn’t that asking too much? After all, at times it can be hard enough just to stay faithful in trials but to rejoice in them? Yet, that’s what we are told. How, then, can we learn to rejoice, when rejoicing is the last thing we feel like doing?

Perfection

Read James 1:2–4. Notice the progression: faith, testing, patience, perfection. James begins with faith because that is the foundation of all true Christian experience. He then says we need trials to test the genuineness of our faith. Lastly, James states that trials can teach us perseverance, so that eventually 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 loftier. The word *perfect* (*teleios*) means spiritual maturity, while *complete* (*holokleros*) refers to wholeness in every way. Truly, we can become so much more in the Lord if we would die to self and allow Him to work in us “to will and to do of his good pleasure” (*Phil. 2:13*).

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

Like Paul, followers of Christ will never be satisfied with anything short of patterning their lives after the unselfish, sacrificial love of their Master. But we will never feel as though we have “already attained” or were “already perfected” (*NJKV*).

Notice, too, in the passages, the emphasis on the future. Paul is pointing toward what he has been promised in God through faith in Jesus. There’s never a time in the Christian walk where we can say, “I have arrived,” at least as far as character goes. (Have you ever noticed, too, that those who say that they have “arrived” are generally obnoxious and self-righteous?) 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, seeking to 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, regardless of whatever level of “perfection” you attain?

Asking in Faith

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 wisdom.” Who thinks he or she has enough wisdom to begin with? Solomon, for instance, recognizing his need, humbly asked for “an understanding heart to . . . discern between good and bad” (*1 Kings 3:9*). Later, he wrote: “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (*Prov. 9:10*).

We tend to think of wisdom as that which we know. How do the following texts, however, show us what another side of true wisdom is? *James 1:19–21; 2:15, 16; 3:13.*

Both Proverbs and James describe wisdom as something very practical: 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, because they would like to say something.” In other words, we can have all the knowledge the world offers but lack true wisdom.

Of course, because God is the Source of all true wisdom, we gain wisdom most by *listening* to Him—reading His Word and spending thoughtful time contemplating the life of Christ, “who became for us wisdom from God” (*1 Cor. 1:30, NKJV*). By learning to reflect 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. Isn’t that sometimes hard? Who doesn’t, at times, struggle with doubt? When that happens, what’s crucial is to pray and to start dwelling on all the reasons we have for faith: the story of Jesus, the prophecies in the Bible, and our own personal experiences. How could doing this help us to work through whatever doubt might occasionally arise?

The Flip Side of Faith

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

The word for “doubt” refers to one being inwardly divided; 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: move forward in faith or rebel against the Lord. Amazingly, they chose rebellion and wanted to return to the bondage of Egypt. When God intervened and announced through Moses that they would die in the wilderness, suddenly the people “believed”! They said, “ ‘We will go up to the place which the LORD has promised, for we have sinned’ ” (*Num. 14:40, NKJV*).

“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.

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

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

But doubt sometimes gets in the way. Our world bombards us with doubt and skepticism; no one is immune. All we can do is pray our way through it, remembering God’s faithfulness in the past and trusting Him for our future.

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

The Rich and the Poor

In this short letter, James shows great concern for poor people; some even consider it his major theme. But to modern ears, his diatribes against the rich and in favor of the poor seem extreme, even shocking. At the same time, however, James isn't 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's the common message there to us? What warnings and admonitions can we all take away from what's so clearly expressed here?

James, of course, does not shut the doors of the kingdom on all rich people. But, like Jesus, he recognizes the insidious temptations that come with wealth. Rich or poor, we need to keep our eyes on the real prize. The problem with money is that it tends to deceive us into focusing on the temporal instead of the eternal (*2 Cor. 4:18*).

No question, the acquisition of wealth, higher education, or social influence tends to separate people from the “less fortunate.” But the early church kept the two classes together by turning worldly values upside down. The one who takes the lowest place, the role of humility, is the one who can glory in exaltation.

“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, *Welfare Ministry*, p. 269.

What about yourself? Whether rich or poor, it doesn't matter; what matters is how you relate to money. What is it about money that makes it so potentially dangerous to our souls?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“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? [A]nd 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, *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 to do this. At the same time, if you haven’t been able to rejoice in your sufferings, talk about that in class, as well (if you feel comfortable doing it).
- 2 Dwell more on this idea that true wisdom is not so much head knowledge but what we do in faith through Christ. At the same time, why does this not mean that head knowledge isn’t important? How can having, for instance, wrong doctrine be very detrimental to one’s walk with the Lord?
- 3 A young man had a friend who went through severe trials. Although the young man found the trials painful to watch, he did notice that his friend was growing in grace. When the trials were over, his friend really had changed—and for the better! What things have you learned from your trials that have been spiritually beneficial to you? Ask yourself, Could I have learned them any other way?
- 4 What can you say to someone who appears sincere in faith and yet admits to being, at times, overcome with doubt? How can you help?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Hebrews 12:2*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: (1) Realize that Jesus is the Perfecter of our faith; (2) recognize that trials are tools that strengthen and purify faith; (3) understand that true wisdom is more about how we live than what we know.

Feel: Experience the joy and satisfaction that come from trusting God, receiving His wisdom, and growing in spiritual maturity.

Do: Determine to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, focusing on eternal realities rather than on temporary ones.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understanding How Jesus Perfects Our Faith

A What is faith? How do trials build and strengthen faith? Why are we told to *rejoice* in trials? How is that possible?

B What is the relationship between faith, wisdom, and spiritual maturity? How do we gain these important attributes?

C Whether rich or poor, why does it matter how we relate to money? What is so dangerous about earthly wealth?

II. Feel: Experiencing True, Lasting Joy

A In what ways do wisdom and spiritual maturity contribute to true, lasting joy?

B What kind of feeling(s) do you experience when you know that you are right with God?

III. Do: Focusing on Eternal Realities

A Do you find it easier to believe in what you can observe with your senses? Why, or why not?

B In what specific ways can we focus on the eternal realities of God rather than on temporary pleasures and sorrows of this earth?

► **Summary:** James shows us how Jesus, the Perfecter of our faith, uses trials to strengthen and purify our faith. James also stresses how true wisdom reveals itself through “good conduct” and meekness. He reminds us that faith requires exercise to grow. Finally, James reminds us not to be bound by earthly wealth but instead to reveal a kind, generous spirit.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Hebrews 12:1, 2*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: As we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Perfecter of our faith, we learn to recognize trials as tools God uses to strengthen and purify our faith.

Just for Teachers: Some individuals become uneasy when the words *perfect* or *perfection* are mentioned. After all, no one, except Jesus, is “perfect,” right?

But how wonderful it is to know that Jesus is “the author and perfecter of our faith” (*Heb. 12:2, NIV*). Focus on this promise and its practical implications with your class. What does it mean to have perfect (also translated as complete or finished) faith, and how is this accomplished?

Opening Activity/Discussion: David and Nancy Guthrie appeared to be like any other expectant parents, happily looking forward to the birth of their child. But when little Hope was born, early signs signaled that something had gone terribly wrong. The newborn was unable to suck, and she had clubfeet. Testing revealed that Hope had Zellweger syndrome, a disease that “devastates essential bodies called peroxisomes in every cell. Zellweger newborns are severely brain-damaged, often blind and deaf, unable to take food orally.”—David Van Biema, “Modern-Day Job: When God Hides His Face,” *Time*, quoted in *Baptist Standard*, July 30, 2001, http://assets.baptiststandard.com/archived/2001/7_30/pages/guthries.html. With no known treatment or cure for Zellweger’s, Hope lived just 199 days.

The odds of carrying a recessive gene for Zellweger syndrome are 1 in 160; both David and Nancy learned that they were carriers. “The odds of two carriers meeting and having a child who suffers from the syndrome are about 1 in 100,000,” according to the *Baptist Standard* article.

After the heart-wrenching experience with baby Hope, David decided to have a vasectomy. The odds of a woman becoming pregnant after her husband has had this procedure are approximately 1 in 2,000. One and a half years later, Nancy was pregnant again. A placenta-sampling test revealed terrible news—the baby had Zellweger syndrome. Before his first birthday, this baby would be sharing a grave with his sister, Hope.

“If God would ask me to suffer this significantly,” said Nancy, “I think [H]e has something significant [H]e wants to do with it through me, if only just in my heart.”

Thinking of Job, Nancy reflected that he “was blessed through his brokenness, by his restless pursuit of God. He had a new, more intimate relationship

with God, one he could never have found without pain and sorrow.

“In the darkest of days, we’ve experienced a supernatural strength and peace. We often cannot see the hidden purposes of God. But we can determine to be faithful and keep walking toward [H]im in the darkness.”—David Van Biema, “Modern-Day Job: When God Hides His Face,” *Time*, reprinted in *Baptist Standard*, July 30, 2001, http://assets.baptiststandard.com/archived/2001/7_30/pages/guthries.html.

Consider This: In the story above, Nancy states that Job “had a new, more intimate relationship with God, one he could never have found without pain and sorrow.” What do you think? Is it possible to have a strong, intimate relationship with God without ever experiencing pain and sorrow? Why, or why not?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Significantly for us as Seventh-day Adventists, James connects wisdom with the kind of tests and trials that God’s people will face at the end of time. Such wisdom is “the present possession of the righteous remnant, as that which enables them to resist and endure the tests of this age.”—Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 71, 72. This kind of wisdom, according to James, comes as a gift, by faith. It stands up under testing; and if we believe and listen to God’s Word for this wisdom, it will be ours (*Mark 11:24*). Show the class how these themes found in James are similar to the description of the remnant in Revelation 14:12, which refers to the “patient endurance” of those who have “the faith of Jesus” and live to see Him come (*see Rev. 14:14–16*). Emphasize that Jesus is the Perfecter of our faith (*Heb. 12:2*) and that He does that through various means, including trials and other faith-building experiences that teach us wisdom, leading us to be drawn to eternal rather than temporal things.

Bible Commentary

I. A Great Cloud of Witnesses (*Review Hebrews 11 with your class.*)

Abel, at the cost of his life, followed God’s instructions relative to the kind of sacrifice he must bring in worship. Enoch lived in such close communion with God that he was translated. Noah stood virtually alone against a skeptical world about to be destroyed. Abraham left his home and country for a “better country” that God promised to show him. Sarah believed that God would keep His promise and that she would have a son, even though

that was physically impossible. All of these people, as well as the others mentioned in Hebrews 11, put their faith and trust in God’s words and promises, even though they may not have understood them completely and would not live to see their complete fulfillment. Many of these heroes were a kind of “faithful remnant”—they stood almost alone when the vast majority thought differently. Enoch especially lived at a time when wickedness was rampant; yet, “he was unsullied with the prevailing sins of the age in which he lived. So may we remain pure and uncorrupted.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 122.

Consider This: Which Bible heroes in Hebrews 11 are most meaningful to you as examples of faith, and why?

■ *How would you explain the difference between true faith and spurious faith? Note Hebrews 11:3, 6 and this statement from Gospel Workers: “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.*

■ *What specific actions is this “great cloud of witnesses” meant to encourage in us today? (See Heb. 11:13–16, 12:1.)*

II. Looking to Jesus From Beginning to End (Review Hebrews 12:1–4 with your class.)

Jesus is called the “author and perfecter” of our faith (*Heb. 12:2, NASB*). Faith itself is a gift, which is why Jesus is its Author. The word for “author” is *archēgos*, which is used in the New Testament only of Jesus. He is “the Author of life” (*Acts 3:15, ESV*) and Founder of our salvation (*Heb. 2:10*). In Hebrews, the word refers specifically to Jesus’ work of opening a path of salvation for believers to follow. It is by our listening to His Word (*Rom. 10:17*) and finding salvation in Him that faith is born. He is also the Perfecter of our faith, because only the One who took our nature (*Heb. 2:14–18*) and was tempted as we are without ever sinning (*Heb. 4:15, 16*) can give us power to obey and teach us how to resist temptation. By studying His life and thinking deeply about the way He treated others, especially those who opposed Him, our faith grows. “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.

Consider This: Why is the remnant just before Jesus comes said not only to keep the commandments of God but also “the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12*)? How are

these two attributes related?

■ *How many parallels can you find between Enoch and those who live to see Jesus come? (See Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 86–89.)*

■ *Reread James 1:2–4 in light of Revelation 14:12. What is the relationship between resisting temptation, patiently enduring trials, and character development?*

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: This lesson points out a clear pathway of faith: keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, it is easier to focus on eternal realities rather than on temporal life, which helps us to endure trials with patience, strengthening and purifying our faith. This heaven-given patience and faith, described in James 1:3, 4, are the same two attributes described in Revelation 14:12—“Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” How does this reality help us to rejoice and to “count it all joy” when we suffer from trials?

Thought/Application Questions:

Read Colossians 3:2 and ask your class the following questions:

- ❶ What does it mean to focus on “eternal realities,” or “setting our mind on things above”? How, specifically, do we do that while living on earth?
- ❷ What are “eternal realities,” and why should we focus on them?
- ❸ Faith is a gift, but how do we receive it? (*See Rom. 10:17.*)

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Invite students to participate in one or more of the following activities:

- ❶ Identify a hymn that has given you strength and courage during a difficult time in your life. Sing that song for your class, or make a beautiful, decorated poster featuring the words of the hymn.
- ❷ Locate one or more photos from the past taken during a time when God was particularly close to you. Show the photo and share the story about that time with someone who could use some encouragement.
- ❸ Go for a walk outdoors and look for ways that God has brought forth beauty, even from less-than-ideal circumstances.