

# Suffering According to James

*Christopher W. Morgan*

When people experience suffering, they deserve more than platitudes or pat answers from a 2013 version of Job's friends. They need the comforting grace of God and the compassionate people of God. And they need a grounded theological perspective, a vision of God, life, and themselves, that can enable them to see (even if dimly) as they move ahead in what may seem like darkness.

Without such a biblical lamp to guide, they might wonder if they suffer because there is no God. Or they may wonder if this God even knows about their plight, cares, or is able to help. They may suppose that they said, did, or failed to do something that directly resulted in their tragedy or pain. Or maybe they speculate that if they just

believe enough that they can persuade God to act on their behalf. While sound theological insight is never enough to comfort those suffering, if applied at the right time and with a great deal of pastoral wisdom, the biblical truth does play a necessary and critical role in sufferers finding comfort, faith, and hope.

James writes to churches that had considerable experience with suffering. In a pastoral, sagacious, and sometimes prophetic manner, James writes to real-life churches with real-life problems. James, a key leader in the Jerusalem church, writes to help churches largely consisting of Jewish Christians suffering oppression from without and encountering strife from within. Some of them also slip easily into being religious without genuinely following Christ. Throughout his letter, James counters these problems and more as he offers wisdom for consistency in the covenant community, the church. James grounds this pastoral instruction in his theology, largely rooted in the Old Testament, Judaism, and the teachings of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

---

**Christopher W. Morgan** is Dean and Professor of Theology, School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University, Riverside.

He earned his Ph.D. in Theology from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Morgan has authored *Jonathan Edwards and Hell* (Mentor, 2004) and *A Theology of James: Wisdom for God's People* (P&R, 2010), and he has co-edited with Robert A. Peterson numerous works such as *Hell under Fire* (Zondervan, 2004), *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (InterVarsity, 2008), *Suffering and the Goodness of God* (Crossway, 2008), *The Glory of God* (Crossway, 2010), *The Deity of Christ* (Crossway, 2011), *The Kingdom of God* (Crossway, 2012), and *Sin* (Crossway, 2013). He is also a teaching pastor at Helendale Community Church in Helendale, CA.

---

## THE CONTEXT OF THE SUFFERING

The tone, content, and range of teachings given on suffering are normally driven by the historical situation of those suffering as well as the nature of the suffering. Pastoral counsel to a believer suffering a loss of a long-time beloved spouse differs from that offered to someone whose son is killed by a drunk-driver. And those differ from counsel given to someone being tortured for their faith in Christ.

Thus, it is unwise and even dangerous to unpack James's teachings related to suffering without having some background of the churches receiving the epistle. We must ask: to whom was the letter written? What types of suffering did they face?

Although a detailed understanding of the historical situation and audience cannot be found in James, the letter does indicate some information about the audience, sometimes explicitly, but most often implicitly.

The recipients were primarily Jewish Christians. This seems clear from James 1:1 as well as regular references to Jewish institutions and beliefs. These Christians met in a "synagogue" (2:2) with "teachers" (3:1) and "elders" (5:14). They worshiped the one and holy God, the unique Judge and Lawgiver (1:13-15; 2:19; 4:12). Some claimed they had faith but demonstrated little concern for personal holiness (1:22-25; 4:4) and failed to assist the poor (1:26-27; 2:1-13; 2:14-26). The congregations also included others who wanted to be teachers but were unworthy (3:1-12). And these congregations were experiencing significant trials and serious oppression (1:2-12; 2:6; 5:1-11).

Where did these Jewish Christians live? James 1:1 states that the letter was addressed "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion." I. H. Marshall observes that while this is a Christian letter to Christians, "The writer here takes up the tradition of Jewish leaders writing to Jewish people living in exile from their homeland and exposed to the difficulties and trials of this

situation."<sup>2</sup> Most scholars view this literally, as referring to Jewish Christians who were scattered among the nations. Others point out that this phrase was used in intertestamental Judaism as a reference to the true people of God in the last days (cf. 1 Pet 1:1). It is possible that these Jewish Christians were located in Palestine and given this label as an encouragement to stand firm through the trials because of the eschatological hope they possessed. But more likely they were Jewish Christians literally scattered among the nations.<sup>3</sup>

From where would a letter to scattered or exiled Jewish Christians likely come? Richard Bauckham aptly proposes: "A letter to the Diaspora must come from Jerusalem. A Christian letter to the Diaspora could come from no one more appropriately than from James."<sup>4</sup> He adds that along with Peter and Paul, "James was one of the three most influential leaders in the first generation of the Christian movement."<sup>5</sup> This is in part because the Jerusalem church functioned for many as the mother church, as central and authoritative. With their heritage of acknowledging Jerusalem and its temple, Jewish Christians may have thought of the Jerusalem church as more lofty than we might imagine. Moreover, the Jerusalem church not only was used to convert many of these scattered Jewish Christians, it also would have sent out many as missionaries and would have received many who came back to Jerusalem every year for the festivals.

From the depiction in 1:1, the letter from James in Jerusalem appears to be an encyclical, that is, one sent to a number of churches.<sup>6</sup> Marshall captures the tension: "We thus have the paradox that the writer appears to be writing to a very broad audience, the Christians scattered among the nations, and yet seems to have a very specific congregation or congregations in view."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, even an encyclical is written from a context, to a context, and for a purpose.

What can be made of the socio-economic

level of the recipients? Four distinct groups emerge: (1) the poor (the majority in this believing community); (2) the severely poor (those without decent clothes and often in need of daily food); (3) the merchants (those tempted to be overconfident in their plans); and (4) the wealthy landowners (those exploiting the poor).<sup>8</sup> The congregations were primarily composed of the first three groups, with the majority being in the first category.

### TYPES AND CAUSES OF SUFFERING

What types of suffering did these churches face? James begins his letter by noting their “various” trials (1:2). Suffering in 5:10 is linked to opposition and persecution. Suffering in 5:13 does not seem to refer to any particular form but “simply to the bad or distressing experiences in life.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, some were seriously ill, nearly to the point of death and possibly in a way related to sin (5:14–16). Those suffering in 5:13 were not in as severe of a condition as those referred to as sick in 5:14-16 because James simply exhorts this first group to pray. The latter group is to call for the elders, receive their prayer, and receive anointing.

There were some powerless, as depicted in the need to care for the widows and orphans (1:26-27). There was also widespread poverty, some of which was extreme, illustrated by the need of food and clothing (2:16). Many were persecuted, prosecuted, oppressed, and exploited by the wealthy (2:5-7; 5:1–11). They had little political, social, or economic clout to address these concerns.

In sum, particular types of suffering James addresses evidently include:

- unspecified various trials (1:2-12)
- powerlessness (1:26-27)
- general poverty (2:1-7, 14-26)
- severe poverty, to the point of lacking food and clothes (2:15-16)

- legal oppression by the rich (2:5-7)
- persecution (2:5-7)
- severe exploitation by wealthy landowners (5:1-6)
- “suffering” (5:10, 13)
- seriously ill, nearing death (5:14-15)
- sick, possibly in a way related to sin (5:15-16)
- eschatological suffering (5:19-20; cf. 5:1-6)
- unspecified various trials (1:2-12)
- powerlessness (1:26-27)
- general poverty (2:1-7, 14-26)
- severe poverty, to the point of lacking food and clothes (2:15-16)
- legal oppression by the rich (2:5-7)
- persecution (2:5-7)
- severe exploitation by wealthy landowners (5:1-6)
- “suffering” (5:10, 13)
- seriously ill, nearing death (5:14-15)
- sick, possibly in a way related to sin (5:15-16)
- eschatological suffering (5:19-20; cf. 5:1-6)

It is often impossible to detect particular causes of suffering. Yet a basic analysis of the types of suffering mentioned above seems to indicate that related causes of each include:

- unspecified causes regarding trials (1:2-12)
- death of spouse or father (1:26-27)
- overall economic situation of culture (2:14-26)
- failure of God’s people to help others (2:14-26)
- sinful greed of the rich (2:1-7)
- corrupt legal system (2:5-7)
- disdain for Christ (2:7)
- fraud (5:1-6)
- unspecified causes regarding suffering (5:13)
- sickness (5:14)
- possibly personal sin (5:15-16)
- personal sin (5:1-6, 19-20)

The causes are manifold: family deaths, economics, failures of the church, corruption of governments, human greed, hatred of Christ, sickness, and personal sin. Sometimes they are particular, sometimes vague. In addition, sometimes the cause of our suffering rests

with us, sometimes with others, sometimes with larger structural realities, and sometimes with a fallen world too often characterized by death and decay.

## **JAMES'S TEACHINGS CONCERNING SUFFERING**

As James applies his pastoral wisdom to suffering, he generally does so in two ways. First, he encourages those suffering. Second, he exhorts the church to respond properly to the sufferers.

In his encouragement of believers who were suffering, James urges that they respond with joy, with the realization that perseverance is doing a divine work in them, and with prayer to God for wisdom. They also should recognize that the wicked rich will be humiliated, the righteous will be exalted, and God will bless those who endure trials with faith and patience (1:2–12). They should not demean themselves by showing partiality to the oppressors (2:5–7) but be patient in the midst of suffering because the Lord knows of it, has not forgotten them, will return to judge, and will ultimately vindicate the righteous and punish the wicked (5:1–11). James later urges those who are suffering to pray (5:13) and those who are sick to call for the elders of the church to pray over them and to confess their sins to each other (5:14–16).

James also exhorts the church to respond appropriately to the suffering of others. The church is not to show favoritism to the rich but should stand with the poor (2:5–7). The church must not accept mere platitudes as a substitute for the important work of showing love to the hurting, feeding the hungry, and clothing the poor (2:15). The church is to be patient in the midst of suffering because the Lord sees the suffering, the church lives in the “already and not yet,” and the Judge will finally set the record straight. In the meantime, the church must persevere and not grumble at one another (5:1–11). Further, the church leaders should pray for the sick and suffering (5:13–16).

In his encouragement of those who are suffering and his appeals to the church to help those who are suffering, James offers much insight:

- Suffering Does Come, in Various Forms, and with Various Causes.
- Suffering Is Not Good but Is Used by God for Our Good (1:2–12).
- Suffering Is Temporary, Linked to the Present Age (1:9–12).
- God Will Bless Those Who Persevere through Suffering (1:9–12).
- Churches Must Care for the Poor and Suffering (1:27; 2:6–7; 2:14–26).
- God Will Judge All Who Oppress His People (5:1–6).
- Sufferers Must Be Patient, Not Grumble, Endure, Pray, and Seek the Church's Ministry (5:7–11, 13–16).

### ***SUFFERING COMES IN VARIOUS FORMS WITH VARIOUS CAUSES***

This principle is apparent from the preceding types and causes of suffering. Trials do come to faithful Christians as well as to healthy churches. The proponents of the health and wealth theology need to read afresh passages such as James 1:2–12 and 5:1–8 (as well as Rom 5:1–5; 2 Cor 1:3–7; 1 Pet 1:5–8; and 2 Tim 3:12). Just as the churches receiving James's epistle had been and would continue to suffer, we should not be surprised when we face trials or encounter suffering. In light of James's message, “Why me?” is a valid and perplexing question, but equally valid and perplexing is, “Why not me?”

### ***SUFFERING IS USED BY GOD FOR OUR GOOD (1:2–12)***

So what particular pastoral encouragement does James offer these suffering churches? At first glance, James's “encouragement” appears shocking, if not downright offensive. James instructs these troubled believers to consider it all joy when trials come (1:2–3), realize that perseverance is doing a divine

work in them (1:4), ask God for wisdom (1:5–8), remember to view the rich and poor from an eternal perspective (1:9–11), and keep in mind the blessedness that comes from enduring life’s trials (1:12).

James first urges his readers who faced such circumstances to “consider it all joy” (the verb is an imperative). This is the heart of James’s exhortation in 1:2–11. In the Greek text, joy, the object of the verb, is placed first for emphasis.<sup>10</sup>

To those familiar with the New Testament this is no surprise. Paul’s teaching on the matter in Romans 5:1–5 is similar:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Peter likewise stresses joy as a suitable response to trials: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested through fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:6–7).

Yet sometimes we are so familiar with the biblical teachings related to suffering that we forget to be surprised by their claims: count it all joy when you face various trials. Joy? When suffering comes our way we tend to respond with frustration, or a sense of helplessness, or even fear—but joy? In such times, how is joy a possible response?

To address this important question, it is crucial to understand what is and what is not intended by James’s command here. James is not offering advice in the manner of some self-help guru, or

even the glib answers that too often come from well-intentioned people at funerals. Nor is James saying that suffering is itself good. Some of the believers suffering in 1:2–4 are the same ones being persecuted and exploited by wicked wealthy landowners. As such, some of the trials mentioned here are caused by the sin of the landowners, the corruption of the governmental systems, etc. Such actions are castigated later in James 2:5–7 and 5:1–6. It is not that all things that happen in life are good (exploitation, oppression, and persecution are evil!), but that God works all things together for good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

So, then, what does James intend? As he does so often in this epistle, James here echoes the teachings of Jesus on suffering and persecution in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:10–12; cf. Luke 6:22–23): “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and falsely utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” When you are persecuted on my behalf, Jesus says, rejoice for you are blessed (cf. 1 Pet 2:19–23). James’s exhortation in 1:2 to consider it all joy, as well as his emphasis in 1:12 on the blessedness of those who persevere through the tests, reiterate Jesus’ encouragement to believers.

Not only does James stress joy because of the future blessing for those who endure, but he also points to the good byproducts of trials. Perseverance, completeness, and blamelessness are worthy effects that come as a result of people having faith in the midst of suffering (1:3–4; cf. Rom 5:1–5, 2 Cor 1:3–7; 1 Pet 1:5–8). James urges rejoicing, “for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (1:3), and thereby associates these trials with the testing of faith. Even though these oppressors’ sins caused the believers’ suffering, James asserts that God is at work using the suffering as a testing of the faith of his people.

What precisely does James mean by the “testing of your faith”? He uses a different word here altogether from “trials” in verse 2. Douglas Moo comments:

“Testing” translates a rare Greek word (*dokimion*), which is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in 1 Pet. 1:7 and in the Septuagint only in Ps. 11:7 and Prov. 27:21. Peter apparently uses the word to denote the result of testing; the NIV translates “genuine.” But the two Old Testament occurrences both denote the process of refining silver or gold, and this is the way James uses the word. The difficulties of life are intended by God to refine our faith: heating it in the crucible of suffering so that impurities might be refined away and so that it might become pure and valuable before the Lord. The “testing of faith” here, then, is not intended to determine whether a person has faith or not; it is intended to purify faith that already exists.<sup>11</sup>

What does this testing do? It develops perseverance (*hypomonē*). This has been translated perseverance, endurance, steadfastness, fortitude, and patience. Like a muscle that becomes strong when it faces resistance from a weight, Christians develop spiritual strength and stamina through facing trials. It is hard to imagine how perseverance could be developed in any way other than by such resistance, since perseverance presupposes a pressure to endure.<sup>12</sup> So when trials come, James says, consider it joy and recognize that God is developing in us perseverance and other good traits. The development of this perseverance is a gradual, real-life process of encountering trials and responding to them in faith.

Perseverance is not only an end; it is also a means to further ends: “and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” As we view suffering with wisdom and from an eschatological perspective, we discover that suffering in itself is not the end God has in mind; our maturity is.

### **SUFFERING IS TEMPORARY, LINKED TO THE PRESENT AGE (1:9–12)**

James 1:9–11 plays an important role in James’s teaching related to suffering as it clarifies that although the rich oppressors appear to be winning now, in the end, they lose; and although the poor and oppressed seem to be losing now, in the end, they win. As Jesus so often does (e.g., Luke 16:19–31), James points to a future reversal: the rich exploiters will be brought down and destroyed, but the humble believers will be exalted and blessed (1:9–11; cf. 5:1–8).<sup>13</sup> So despite the fact that the suffering addressed in James 1:2–12 is a result of human evil, believers can rest assured that God providentially guides all history and that they will be faced with no circumstance that he ultimately will not use for their good and his glory (cf. 2 Cor 4:1–18).

### **GOD WILL BLESS THOSE WHO PERSEVERE THROUGH SUFFERING (1:9–12)**

James 1:12 is transitional, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” The persevering ones in 1:12 probably refer to the same people characterized as the poor in 1:9–11. As the poor will receive exaltation, the persevering will receive divine approval, even the promised crown of life. The crown spoken of here is compared with a head wreath or garland that was given as a victor’s prize in the Greek Olympic Games. At times it was given to men whom the community wanted to honor, and it was worn in religious and secular feasts. The persevering ones receive a crown that consists of eternal life versus the fading crown of earthly prosperity and fame (cf. Rev 2:10).

The importance of persevering through trials is striking. Just as James does not teach that suffering is good, he does not assume that trials always produce good, but as Dan McCartney observes: “This chain of life in James 1:12 stands in opposition

to a chain of death in 1:13–15, where trials lead to desires which give birth to sin, which brings forth death. Again, this shows that it is not the trial itself that produces maturity and life, for a trial could result in non-endurance, in the giving in to desire, and in the birthing of sin and death.”<sup>14</sup> As such James 1:12 offers hope to the believer because of the covenant promise of true joy and life, and it also warns those undergoing trials to choose the correct path: covenant faithfulness.

**CHURCHES MUST CARE FOR THE POOR AND SUFFERING (1:27; 2:6–7; 2:14–26)**

James 1:26–27 is central to James. This is clear not only because of its structural implications for the book, but also because of how many themes of the epistle it contains—consistency, suffering, speech, love and mercy, and the poor. Among other things, it makes plain that God’s people have a special responsibility to care for the poor<sup>15</sup> and oppressed. This is not merely the mark of spiritual elites but of what James calls “pure and undefiled religion before God.”

Scripture instructs us to worship corporately; listen to the reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture; to give; to pray; to participate in the Lord’s Supper; and so forth. These are important spiritual realities that God has prescribed for us to worship and follow him. But James warns that too often people think that participation in the outward expressions of religion is all that God demands. James stresses that the practice of religion occurs not merely in worship services but also through our very lives. God wants worship through consistent lives. True religion, that which pleases God, means that we reflect God. And part of this Godward and consistent way of life includes showing love to those whom God loves—the poor and oppressed.

James 1:26–27 forcefully contrasts two differing approaches to religion, both of which must have been vying for people’s allegiance. True religion is depicted as “pure,” undefiled,” and that which God accepts. It is concerned with self-control over words, active love for the poor, and moral purity. Some undercurrents are at play here. Notice that James uses

purity language, which would be revered by these Jewish Christians. James calls true religion “pure and undefiled,” and thereby insinuates that the religion embraced by some in these churches is impure and defiled. Their so-called worship is unclean, contaminated, and unsuitable for the holy God. James refers to true religion as keeping oneself “unstained from the world” (1:27), and in so doing charges them with being preoccupied with ritual cleanness without corresponding interest in moral cleanness or godly values. And by stressing that God accepts true religion, he implies that God rejects some of their approaches. That James calls their efforts at worship “worthless” strengthens that effect. It is worthless because it does not demonstrate love for God or love for others. Indeed, it is worthless because it does not demonstrate love for God *through* loving others.

Martin Luther, not known for his affection for James, frequently stressed this very point. Luther complained that believers should not live in monasteries to serve God because there they were actually only serving themselves. Instead, Christians must follow Christ and love and serve their neighbors through their vocations in the world, where their neighbors encounter and need them. Luther argued, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”<sup>16</sup> When we seek to offer our good works to God, we actually display pride before God and neglect to love our neighbor. Luther contends that in so doing we parade ourselves before God and yet fail to do the very thing Jesus commands. In other words, we fail both to love God and love others. Michael Horton ably captures Luther’s point:

God descends to serve humanity through our vocations, so instead of seeing good works as our works for God, they are now to be seen as God’s work for our neighbor, which God performs through us. That is why both orders are upset when we seek to present good works to God as if he needed them. In contrast, when we are overwhelmed by the superabundance of God’s gracious gift, we express our gratitude in horizontal works of love and service to the neighbor.<sup>17</sup>

Love is not self-absorbed but genuinely seeks the welfare of others. It is active and outward. Luther is right: religious people often feel noble when they perform external religious acts because they believe they are serving God. But as Solomon Andria suggests: “Rather than serving God, they serve themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

Serving others feels far less noble; it often seems only mundane, even insignificant. Yet Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and demands that his followers do the same. Jesus’ command would not be so burdensome if he merely required that we wash his feet; we could find dignity in helping Jesus. But Jesus demands that we wash one another’s feet, which does not seem stately but smelly. It reduces us to feeling like unimportant, humble servants. And that is exactly what James stresses: genuine, humble, dependent, loving followers of Jesus will display their true concern for others through ministering to others, particularly those in desperation.

Some in James’s audience were more concerned about ritual purity than moral purity, and they were content to express empty words without active compassion for the oppressed. Ironically, some in these congregations stressed the ritual purity taught in Leviticus, but failed to notice that Leviticus also stresses moral purity and especially love for the oppressed. It is not by coincidence, in my opinion, that James refers frequently to Leviticus 19 as a basis of his instructions.<sup>19</sup> He takes his audience back to study the very law they claim to be defending.

To such people, James charges that true religion is “to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (1:27), and thus reiterates the teachings of Exodus 22:22 (“do not take advantage of a widow or orphan”) and Isaiah 1:10–17 (“defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the cause of the widow”), which also makes plain God’s requirements for acceptable religion and worship (cf. Deut 10:16–19; Ps 69:32–33; Zech 7:9–14). Together widows and orphans represented those who were without protec-

tion or provision. James instructs the church to support of the poor, disadvantaged, and oppressed. And in so doing, he again reflects the teachings of Jesus, who articulated that one’s treatment of “the least of these” is linked to future judgment (Matt 25:31–46).

So James is interested in encouraging the believers who encounter painful trials, but he is at least as interested in how God’s people respond to those who are suffering. McCartney observes:

Just as genuine faith endures trials, so a Christian must respond to the suffering of others as a fellow sufferer. Hence he says true religion<sup>20</sup> is to care for sufferers (James 1:27). Because real faith (2:14–17) is faith that God will exalt the humble (1:9), the works that proceed from true faith will involve showing mercy to those who suffer. Of particular concern to James are the truly destitute, such as “orphans and widows” (1:27), or the man in filthy garments (2:2), who in that social environment were often the most marginalized and powerless people. The church is the community that anticipates the eschatological reversal by caring for and respecting the poor.

Therefore James has little tolerance for those who show favoritism to the rich. This kind of favoritism is offensive first because it violates the law of love and misrepresents the character of God, who cares about the poor. Note that the context of the law of love in Leviticus 19 specifically condemns partiality (Lev. 19:15).<sup>21</sup> Second, partiality belies the eschatological nature of the community, which ought to display in advance God’s exaltation of the poor. James 2:1–17 thus teaches us that faithful living does not just pity the poor, it *respects* the poor.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the church is an eschatological display of God’s good news, and it is a primary means by which God meets the needs of the poor.

**GOD WILL JUDGE ALL WHO OPPRESS HIS PEOPLE (5:1–6)**

Like an Old Testament prophet, James castigates the rich who have exploited the poor. The oppressors should weep and wail because God's judgment on them will be severe. Misery and suffering are coming their way. The corrosion of their wealth will serve as a witness against them, and the wages they failed to pay their workers will testify against them. By living in luxury and self-indulgence, they increase their punishment at the last judgment. In light of this judgment, the righteous poor are to be patient and not grumble against each other, knowing they too will be judged (5:7–11).

The passage powerfully reveals James's theology of suffering, particularly as it relates to the poor and rich. It puts forward three truths: (1) God hears the cries of the righteous poor; (2) God will punish those who oppress the righteous poor; (3) God will vindicate the righteous poor by punishing the wicked and blessing the righteous who endure. Let's look at each in turn.

James graphically proclaims, "Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts" (5:4). Evidently, the wages of hired laborers were being dishonestly withheld by rich landowners. These day laborers mowed and harvested the fields of absentee landlords. Their earnings were paltry, and they were to be paid every day because they could not afford to miss a paycheck. These defenseless workers toiled daily under a blistering sun only to be swindled by rich, powerful landowners. The landowners methodically held back their wages, defrauding their powerless employees. The practice of paying wages late or legally defrauding the worker of his wage was not unusual. That is why many Old Testament laws and prophetic threats declare God's hatred of the practice (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14–15; Jer 22:13; Mal 3:5).<sup>23</sup> James dramatically portrays

the shrieking cry of withheld wages', followed by the cry of the harvesters themselves.

Who hears this cry? It is certainly not the wicked landowners who are enjoying luxurious lives, too self-indulgent to care (5:5).<sup>24</sup> It is not the corrupt justice system which is currying the favor of the wealthy. Is anyone with power to help listening to these cries? Oh, yes! God himself, the omnipotent Lord of armies, hears these cries.

When God's people utter cries in the Bible they are usually praying for deliverance from danger and seeking justice (cf. Exod 2:23; 1 Sam 9:16; 2 Chron 33:13).<sup>25</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson observes, "Here James definitely evokes the experience of Israel in Egypt. At the burning bush Yahweh says to Moses, 'I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt and I have heard their shouts (Exod. 3:7).'"<sup>26</sup> Here too the cries of the exploited poor "have reached" the Lord of hosts. This depiction of God as "Lord of hosts" or "Lord of armies" is frequent in the Old Testament, where God is likened to a warrior leading an army of warriors who slay enemies and enforce justice. The Lord of all power will come to the aid of the suffering, not only hearing the cries of the righteous poor but also punishing their oppressors and bringing vindication. As in James 1:9–11, the oppressed believers have reason to hope: there is a day coming where God sets the record straight, where evildoers lose and God's people are vindicated.

**SUFFERERS MUST BE PATIENT, ENDURE, PRAY, AND SEEK THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY (5:7–11, 13–16)**

In James 5:1–6, James writes as a prophet, denouncing the oppression. In verses 7–11 and 13–16, he speaks as a pastor, heartening and warning the oppressed and sick people of God.

Since the judgment of the wicked remains in the future, those suffering need encouragement on how to live in the meantime. First, those suffering need to live with patience, which is rooted in many things, primarily the coming of the Lord, to which

James refers three times in this section (5:7, 8, 9). James also gives three concrete examples to inspire patience: the farmer (5:7), the prophets (5:10), and Job (5:11). James Adamson reminds: “The farmer awaiting the harvest is a familiar Jewish picture of salvation and the last judgment. Like the farmer the Christian must be patient and depend on God to consummate his purpose.”<sup>27</sup> James reiterates the same command with which he began 5:7, “Just like the farmer, you also be patient” (5:8). He then adds another, “establish your hearts” (5:8), which is followed by an explanation: be stable in your faith because of the blessed hope of the Lord’s coming.

James then warns of grumbling, a habit of those who do not practice patience. Recalling the Israelites in the wilderness, James insists, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door” (5:9). While grumbling may be occasioned by difficult circumstances, it is rooted in pride, ingratitude, and impatience. Grumbling declares that someone has either not done something that he ought to have done, or that he has done something wrong. When we grumble, therefore, we judge. If, however, we exercise patience and develop Christian stability—with our eyes on the Lord’s return—we appreciate that his return will herald the final judgment. In the meantime, we must leave all judgment to the Judge. Few take grumbling seriously, but God does (cf. Matt 7:1–2).

James then points to the prophets who exhibited patience and faithfulness despite the suffering they endured (cf. Matt 5:11–12; Heb 11). Elijah was hounded and hated (1 Kings 18:10, 17). Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern and threatened with death by starvation (Jer 38:1–13). Amos was falsely accused of raising a conspiracy and was told to go back to where he had come from (Amos 7:10–13).

Third, James urges steadfast endurance in the face of affliction. But the term James uses here is not patience, as in verse 10, but “endurance, steadfastness,” as in 5:11a and 1:3–4. In spite of all his unexplained sufferings, Job is a stellar model of

endurance under tremendous suffering, and under it all he remained devoted to the Lord (Job 1:21; 2:10; 16:9–21; 19:25–27). Endurance is apt in light of the purpose of the Lord, who is compassionate and merciful, faithful to his covenant people (5:11).

Fourth, James advises prayer as an appropriate response to suffering. James urges sufferers to pray; and he urges the cheerful to praise (5:13). “Suffering” here apparently does not refer to a particular type but more generally to the troubles of life. “Cheerfulness” refers to the experience of “God’s goodness in ways that are desirable from a human point of view.”<sup>28</sup> No matter the circumstances—when times are tough and when the life is going smoothly—prayer is warranted, prayer for help, and praise with gratitude. So when suffering comes, pray, James insists. This is not some generic comment but a revolutionary declaration of dependence and hope—that God hears, cares, and remains steadfastly faithful to his covenant people. Further, it is not a passive acquiescence but an active, effective, and wise pursuit that God uses to accomplish his purposes for his glory and our good.<sup>29</sup> Recall James’s previous assertion, “you have not because you ask not” (4:2). And note his subsequent confident statements about how God answers faithful and appropriate prayer (5:15–18).

Fifth, James offers counsel to the very sick (5:14–16).<sup>30</sup> As before, prayer is fitting. But in this case, the person who is ill calls the elders of the church to come and pray over him (5:14). Elders are mature, godly leaders in the church who represent the congregation and would plausibly pray with wisdom, fervency, and faith. Evidently, “they are capable of exercising the faith necessary for the healing but also to discern the mind of the Spirit in such matters.”<sup>31</sup> The elders come and anoint the sick person with oil, which I cautiously interpret as a symbol of God’s blessing and presence with his people.<sup>32</sup> The elders then pray over the person. In James’s example God blesses the believing prayer: the prayer offered in faith will restore the sick one; the Lord will raise him up; and if he has sinned, he will be forgiven (5:15).

## **JAMES'S THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR SUFFERING**

We began by surveying the context of James's teaching about suffering, as well as the various types and causes of suffering he addresses. We then highlighted James's particular teachings about suffering. Along the way, we noticed that James's insightful teachings are not exhaustive (how could they be in five chapters?) but timely pastoral words to the *Diaspora* churches.

The question must now be asked: what theological foundation drives James's teachings about suffering? In general, he uses the doctrines of God, eschatology, and the church both to instruct and exhort.<sup>33</sup> But the bulk of the exhortations related to suffering are grounded in the nature of God. Let's consider a few of the major passages that display the Godward substructure of James's teachings about suffering.

### **JAMES 1:2-8**

James 1:2-8 encourages those facing trials to consider it all joy, to let perseverance finish its work, and then urges those who lack wisdom to ask God for it. On what basis should they do so? The nature of God. James here assumes the Old Testament idea that God is the source of wisdom (Prov 2:6, "The Lord gives wisdom"), echoes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:7, and stresses that God gives wisdom generously to all without finding fault. We ask God for wisdom in the midst of trials because God generously gives wisdom to those who ask him for it. Even more, our asking should coincide with the way God gives—with singleness, not double-mindedness.<sup>34</sup> God responds to our prayers when they reflect our spiritual integrity, a basic consistency of which God himself is our example. Ralph Martin observes: "Hence it is appropriate to stress the character of God. There are three reasons supplied to encourage the approach in prayer. God is good to all who call on him; he gives with an open hand and without reservation; and his giving

is not intended to demean the recipient with feelings that God is reproachful or reluctant to give what is for our good" (cf. Luke 11:5-8).<sup>35</sup>

### **JAMES 1:26-27**

Religion God accepts as pure and undefiled looks after orphans and widows in their distress and refrains from being polluted by the world. On what basis does James point to this behavior? The nature of God. Here the nature of God is presupposed as these Jewish Christians knew that God was a "father to the fatherless and defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). Just as God defends and cares for the widows and fatherless, so must his people. Daniel Doriani marvelously captures the idea: "Kindness to the needy is God-like. *We* sustain aliens, widows, and orphans because he sustains aliens, widows, and orphans (Ps. 146:9)." <sup>36</sup>Further, James points to our need for holiness as he urges the churches to be "unstained from the world" (1:27). God's own holiness calls us, his covenant people, to holiness, as Leviticus 19:2 reminds, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (cf. 1 Pet 1:15-16).

### **JAMES 2:1-7**

James 2:1-7 urges believers not to show favoritism toward the rich and against the poor. It offers a particular example of a church community giving the red carpet treatment to the rich but disregarding the poor. While there are various reasons put forward for not showing partiality, a primary one is that God chose the poor to be rich in faith and inherit the kingdom. God chose the poor, so why would his people neglect or reject them?

### **JAMES 5:1-11**

James 5:1-11 thunders a warning of the divine judgment coming upon exploitive landowners, who should weep and wail because of the severe and impending judgment. On what basis does James appeal? On the nature of God, who hears the cries of the oppressed and is the

Lord of hosts, the all-knowing warrior who avenges his people. Because God is a warrior, those who oppress his people had better prepare for their just judgment, and his people need to persevere in the midst of these trials.

James continues, stressing the need to be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. This should not lead us to presumption but to carefulness. We must not grumble against one another because we too will be judged. Indeed the Judge is nearby, standing at the threshold! In sum, the nature of God and his eschatological victory and judgment incites us to patience, standing firm, and love for one another, with no room for grumbling.

James then points to the prophets and Job as examples of those blessed through persevering. He then tells them why: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11). James's teaching recalls Exodus 34:6, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty."

James teaches much about God—his holiness, oneness, love, mercy, covenant sovereignty, wisdom, omniscience, goodness, generosity, integrity, covenant faithfulness, providence, eagerness to hear our prayers, concern for our plight, love for the powerless, role as judge, role as lawgiver, role as warrior, role as savior, and much more. And he teaches much about God to help the churches live with consistency, integrity, covenant faithfulness—even in the face of suffering.

## SUMMARY

Because of who God is, James insists, we who suffer should rejoice even in persecution, trust his providential process for maturing us, ask him for wisdom, ask in faith, rejoice in his ultimate vindication, persevere, live in holiness, have confidence that God will ultimately act on our behalf, be patient, resist grumbling, remain

steadfast, pray, and be strengthened by the loving and faithful ministry of the church. And because of who God is, we as the community of Jesus should come alongside those who suffer, pointing to the character and purposes of God, caring for the powerless, helping the poor, praying for the sufferers, and serving them in ways that meet to their needs.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> I base much of this essay on my previous work in Christopher W. Morgan, *A Theology of James: Wisdom for God's People* (Explorations in Biblical Theology; ed. Robert A. Peterson; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010). See also Christopher W. Morgan and B. Dale Ellenburg, *James: Wisdom for the Community* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2008). For an examination of suffering from biblical, theological, philosophical, and pastoral perspectives, see Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Suffering and the Goodness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> I. H. Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 628.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the twelve tribes of the *Diaspora*, see Robert W. Wall, "James, Letter of," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament* (ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 548–51; cf. P. R. Trebilco, "Diaspora Judaism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, 287–300.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, *James: Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Routledge, 1999), 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–28.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 629.

<sup>8</sup> Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 14–18. More than one hundred years before the writing of James, the Roman general Pompey reduced Judean territory and left many Jewish peasants without land. Later the extreme taxation by Herod the Great drove more small farmers out of business. The result was that in the first century many peasants worked as tenants on large feudal-like estates while others became day

laborers, hoping to find good work and often finding it only around harvest time. Resentment against aristocratic owners was significant and often deserved. See Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 688.

<sup>9</sup> Dan G. McCartney, *James* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 253.

<sup>10</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 54–55.

<sup>12</sup> Patience, longsuffering, forgiveness, bearing with one another, peacemaking—they too are appropriate responses to challenging circumstances or people and can only develop as such problems are encountered.

<sup>13</sup> This is what I call “the comfort of hell.” Biblical writers often point to hell as an encouragement to and comfort for the persecuted believers. Unlike many in our society, the doctrine of hell does not lead them to raise questions about God’s love but it actually answers their questions about how evil can temporarily appear to win. For the biblical writers, hell demonstrates that justice will prevail and reminds the persecuted believers that they will ultimately be vindicated (cf. 2 Thess 1:5–11; Rev 14:9–11; 20:11–15; and 21:8).

<sup>14</sup> Dan G. McCartney, “Suffering and the Apostles,” in *Suffering and the Goodness of God* (Theology in Community; ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 106; cf. Tracy L. Howard, “Suffering in James 1:2–12,” *Criswell Theological Review* 1:1 (Fall 1986): 71–84.

<sup>15</sup> James stands in the traditions of the Old Testament and Jesus, following their literary use of the “poor” as oppressed and righteous. For James and the other biblical writers, the poor are not righteous because of their socio-economic standing but through faith in God. The identity of the poor also may be linked with the exiled people of God (Isa 26:6; 49:13; 51:21), who hope in God’s ultimate eschatological vindication (Isa 49; 51; 54; 61). This was true for Israel, the

Qumran community, and likely James’s recipients, the Christian covenant communities of the Dispersion. The identity of the poor as the people of God in James is additionally clarified by the identity of the rich, who are not merely people with many possessions, but are characterized as proud (James 1:9–11), receiving an eschatological humiliation (1:9–11), oppressors, defrauders, and persecutors of believers (2:5–7; 5:1–6), blasphemers of Christ (2:7), and as those who will be severely punished by God (5:1–6). Further, there seem to be two categories of the poor in James: the severely poor destitute of even decent clothes and often in need of daily food (2:14–17); and the majority of the people in the churches who evidently had enough to be responsible to help the severely poor. So while the identity of the poor in James is hard to pinpoint precisely, it seems to combine some of the following connotations: financial poor; marginalized; powerless; oppressed; dependent on God; humble; righteous people of God; exiled people of God. James’s reference to the widows and orphans (1:26–27) reflects passages that also necessitate concern for aliens/sojourners (Exod 22:21–22; Lev 19:9–10; Deut 10:18–19; Ps 146:9; Zech 7:9–14). So while James primarily stresses God’s concern for his oppressed covenant people and how the church is to embody that same concern, James 1:26–27 (and Luke 10:25–37; Gal 6:10; and many more) indeed teaches that God’s people are also to reflect God’s love for the poor, including those who are outsiders. And as we do, we display God’s goodness and showcase God’s kingdom.

<sup>16</sup> Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (trans. Carl C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957; reprint, Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 2004), 2. I was reminded of Luther’s insights through reading Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 304.

<sup>17</sup> Horton, *People and Place*, 304.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon Andria, “James,” in *Africa Bible Commentary* (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1514.

<sup>19</sup> Note how James links holiness and love in a way that

is reflective of Leviticus 19. It is striking how Christopher Wright's comments on Leviticus 19 fit James. "We are inclined to think of 'holiness' as a matter of personal piety or, in Old Testament terms, of ritual cleanness, proper sacrifices, clean and unclean foods, and the like. Certainly, the rest of Leviticus 19 includes some of these dimensions of Israel's religious life. But the bulk of the chapter shows us that the kind of holiness that reflects God's own holiness is thoroughly practical. It includes generosity to the poor at harvest time, justice for workers, integrity in judicial processes, considerate behavior to other people (especially the disabled), equality before the law for immigrants, honest trading and other very 'earthy' social matters. And all throughout the chapters runs the refrain 'I am the LORD,' as if to say, 'Your quality of life must reflect the very heart of my character. This is what I require of you because this is what reflects me.'" Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 39.

<sup>20</sup>McCartney, "Suffering and the Apostles," 107, fn15 reads: "The term used here for 'religion' (*threskeia*) means not one's overall faith commitments, but religious practice, acts of piety, or cultic activity. By 'true religion,' therefore, James does not mean 'the essence of true Christian faith' but 'the essence of true Christian religious activity.'"

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 107, fn16 reads: "The love command of Lev. 19:18 is shared throughout the New Testament as definitive for Christian life. Its widespread use as the basis of ethics is probably due to the fact that it was promulgated by Jesus himself (Mark 12:29–31 and parallels). James's point is that showing favoritism violates the most basic ethic of God and, hence, violates the whole law."

<sup>22</sup>McCartney, "Suffering and the Apostles," 107 (italics in original).

<sup>23</sup>Alec Motyer, *The Message of James* (Bible Speaks

Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1985), 177. James's teaching again reflects Leviticus 19. See Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Use of Leviticus 19 in the Letter of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101:3 (1982): 391–402.

<sup>24</sup>Other sins related to money in this passage include greed, hoarding wealth, defrauding others, living in excessive luxury, and self-indulgence.

<sup>25</sup>Moo, *The Letter of James*, 54.

<sup>26</sup>Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 302.

<sup>27</sup>James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 191.

<sup>28</sup>McCartney, *James*, 253–54.

<sup>29</sup>Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 241.

<sup>30</sup>For a good rationale to view this illness as serious, see Motyer, *The Message of James*, 193–94.

<sup>31</sup>Richard R. Melick, Jr., "Warnings and Instructions," *Mid-America Theological Journal* 10:1 (Spring 1986): 70.

<sup>32</sup>For solid treatment of this tricky passage and for a helpful overview of its diverse interpretations, see McCartney, *James*, 250–61.

<sup>33</sup>For more on how James's theology functions, see Morgan, *A Theology of James*, 169–85.

<sup>34</sup>Moo, *James*, 60. John Calvin commented on James 1:8: "[T]here is an implied contrast between the simplicity or liberality of God, mentioned before, and the double-mindedness of man." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of James*, in Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 22 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 284.

<sup>35</sup>Ralph P. Martin, *James* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 21.

<sup>36</sup>Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 59 (italics in original).