

Growing in the Christian Life



STONECROFT



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GROWING IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Stonecroft Bible Studies

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Welcome to Stonecroft Bible Studies!

It doesn't matter where you've been or what you've done...God wants to be in relationship with you. And one place He tells you about Himself is in His Word—the Bible. Whether the Bible is familiar or new to you, its contents will transform your life and bring answers to your biggest questions.

Gather with people in your communities—women, men, couples, young and old alike—and find out together how the Bible's book of James is like a handbook for life. You'll see how James connects faith with behavior—behavior based on God's principles that will improve your relationships and the quality of your life.

Each chapter of *Growing in the Christian Life* includes discussion questions to stir up meaningful conversation, specific Scripture verses to investigate, and time for prayer to connect with God and each other.

Discover more of God and His ways through this small-group exploration of the Bible.

Tips for Using This Study

This book has several features that make it easy to use and helpful for your life:

- The page number or numbers given after every Bible reference are keyed to the page numbers in the *Abundant Life Bible*. This paperback Bible uses the New Living Translation, a translation in straightforward, up-to-date language. We encourage you to obtain a copy through your group leader or at stonecroft.org.
- Each chapter ends with a section called “Thoughts, Notes, and Prayer Requests.” Use this space for notes or for thoughts that come to you during your group time or study, as well as prayer requests.
- In the back of the book you will find “Journal Pages”—a space available for writing down how the study is changing your life or any other personal thoughts, reactions, and reflections.
- Please make this book and study your own. We encourage you to use it and mark it in any way that helps you grow in your relationship with God!

If you find this study helpful, you may want to investigate other resources from Stonecroft. Please take a look at “Stonecroft Resources” in the back of the book or online at stonecroft.org/store.

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Christian Faith

James 1:1-4

I rang the doorbell of my friend's home, dreading what I would find. On my last visit several weeks before she had been emaciated, her skin gray and her eyes lifeless and sunken. The terrible and fatal disease of scleroderma was gradually capturing her body, turning it into cement, immobilizing her with excruciating pain.

To my surprise, her cheerful voice called out for me to come in. I found her sitting up in bed, her eyes sparkling with a smile that lit up her face. "Marcia!" I cried in delight. "What has happened to you?"

She smiled. "I started thanking God."

She explained that she'd been reading her Bible one day and came across 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (page 907), which says to be thankful in all circumstances. "I told God that I wouldn't lie to Him," she said. "I told Him I could never be thankful for this pain or for the fact that I won't live to see my sons be married. But I told Him I would start being thankful for other, legitimate things."

She told me that every day since then she had begun her morning by being thankful. "I thanked Him for my house, for the birds singing outside my window, and for the beautiful blue sky—my list grew longer each day and I couldn't believe what started to happen. My attitude of thankfulness took me into a deeper level of intimacy with

God than I'd ever before experienced. In fact, it's been so wonderful that one day I actually heard myself say, 'God, thank you for this disease that has brought me so much closer to you!'"

I looked at the glow on Marcia's face and could only marvel at the wonderful power of God to relieve even the most hopeless circumstances.

Now it has been almost 12 years since that visit. Against all odds, Marcia has lived to see both of her sons married and has three grandchildren who she delights in. Inexplicably, the relentless march of scleroderma through her body has stopped, allowing her to engage more fully in life. No one knows how long the remission will last. In the meantime Marcia says, "I'm just so thankful for all God has brought into my life as a result of my disease."

You are going to love the book of James! I am excited for us to do this study together because it overflows with principles that will change your life when you put them into practice.


Prayer

God, let faith continue strong in me—I know that you have not given me a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline. Let me hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching that is shaped by the faith and love that I have in Christ Jesus. Help me, through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within me, to carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to me (2 Timothy 1:5b,7,13-14, page 914).

The Author

More than one man named James is referred to in the New Testament. In fact, two of Jesus' disciples shared the name. However, the author of the book of James was not one of the 12 disciples—he was Jesus' half brother.

Knowing this connection gives insight into the heart of this godly man. When we consider that James and Jesus grew up together in the same family, doing things such as chores, playing with each other, and teasing their sisters, it is remarkable that James was able to make the transition from seeing Jesus as his sibling to seeing Him as his Savior! It would have required an extraordinary level of God-given faith. No wonder the theme woven into this wonderful book is faith. James lived what he wrote about.

The transition did not happen automatically, however. What do the following verses say about Jesus' family's reaction to His ministry and purpose?

John 7:1-5 (page 815)

Mark 3:20-21 (page 763)

It is not clear when James became convinced his brother was truly the Son of God. Perhaps it was after Jesus' resurrection. Read 1 Corinthians 15:4-7 (page 879).

The resurrection of Jesus was huge news. Although He had told His followers this would happen, no one could quite grasp the reality until they saw Him alive and well after He'd been put to death. Many people had already reported seeing Jesus alive when He appeared to James. It would have been difficult to doubt the word of people you knew and respected, but even more difficult to believe such reports—until

you saw for yourself. Once Jesus appeared to James, we see nothing but James' full and unreserved devotion to Jesus as the Son of God. The rest of James' life was spent spreading the gospel.

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven (Mark 16:19, page 778), James rose in responsibility to become the head of the church in Jerusalem. It was a difficult time for the Christians, who were experiencing both economic and religious oppression. Some remained in Jerusalem while others scattered. It was to these Jewish Christians that James was writing this book, wanting to encourage them and strengthen their faith through the very difficult times in which they were living. James experienced the ultimate testing of his faith around AD 62, when he was martyred, according to Josephus, a first-century historian.

Although James did indeed *pen* the words we are going to read in this letter, the Bible tells us who the true author of this book is in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (page 915).

Who is the ultimate author of the Bible?

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Christians Who Are Suffering

As we begin our study, you will notice the ancient custom of putting one's name at the beginning of the letter instead of at the end, as we do with the letters we write today. Read James 1:1 (page 930).

How does James refer to himself?

What do you think he meant when he referred to himself as a slave?

James was stating his total commitment to God, indicating that he had placed himself completely under God's authority.

To whom did James address his letter?

Most of the people who first believed that Jesus was the Son of God were Jewish. They established the first Christian churches and, in fact, wrote most of the New Testament. These are the people James is addressing in his book—Jews who believed that Jesus was the Son of God and their long-awaited Messiah. After Jesus' death and resurrection, these Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria due to severe persecution because of their belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Read Acts 8:1 (page 836). At the time James wrote his letter, Jewish Christians were living throughout the known world.

James knew that these Christians were being tested. He wrote to teach them how they could experience joy even in the midst of trials.

Immediately after his greeting, he told his readers what his letter was to address. Read James 1:2-3 (page 930).

To consider trouble or testing as an opportunity for great joy is unnatural by any earthly standard. But this is why this book is so powerful: It will teach us how to process the challenges that enter our lives in a way that will help us, rather than harm us. It will show us how we can experience an attitude of joy in spite of what we are facing.

Faith in the Midst of Difficulty

The secret to the power of this book lies in a little five-letter word tucked into verse three, which is also the book's theme.

What is this word?

Faith is essential to a relationship with Jesus. It is essential to our quality of life! James experienced this truth personally, and he wanted to pass it on to all believers.

How is faith defined in Hebrews 11:1 (page 926)?

Faith gives us both confidence and assurance to walk through each day regardless of what it might hold for us. It is that combination of confidence and assurance that makes endurance possible—and not just endurance but a joy-filled endurance, because it keeps our focus on God and not on our circumstances.

It is also important to note that in this same chapter of Hebrews, verse 6 tells us that “*it is impossible to please God without faith.*” God *values* our faith, and that same verse says He rewards our faith! It is impossible to overstate the importance of faith to our lives.

Look at James 1:3 (page 930) again. What will happen when our faith is tested?

Now read verse 4. What is the result of letting our endurance grow?

One of the exquisite benefits of following Jesus is that nothing is wasted. He has the ability to bring purpose and meaning to even the most agonizing experiences if we will trust Him with those times. Imagine a bad thing happening to you, and then imagine needing *nothing* because your faith has made you perfect and complete. Only God could work out something like that.

But let's not spend time imagining. We all experience some painful realities.

Is there a circumstance in your life right now that troubles you?
Please share.

Now write a summary of James 1:2-4, incorporating your
circumstance into it.

Now tell God that even though you don't completely understand the concept of experiencing joy, you are willing to trust that He can show you what He means in these verses. During this next week, every time you feel anxious or irritated by your circumstance, remind yourself of the words you just wrote down. Let them become a prayer.

Finding Joy in Our Circumstances

The Bible tells us that God controls the course of the world and our destinies (Daniel 2:21, page 668, and 5:23, page 672). It also tells us that God loves us.

According to 1 John 4:9-10 (page 943) how did God show His love to us?

If God is sovereign and if He loves us that much, doesn't it make sense that He will use the circumstances that enter our lives to strengthen us rather than defeat us?

When we acknowledge God's love for people, including you and me, then the next question that often comes up is why, if God loves us, does He allow bad things to happen? He doesn't always tell us the exact reason why difficult circumstances happen. But He does tell us that whatever comes into our lives is allowed by the same love that sent Jesus to the cross (Romans 8:32, page 863). God loves us enough to allow us to suffer for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28, page 863). And God gives us the great privilege of sharing in Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10, page 901).

In her books, Joni Eareckson Tada has documented her personal struggle to find joy in her circumstances. When she was 17, she dove into a river and was seriously injured, becoming a quadriplegic. Some 40 years later she writes,

My affliction has stretched my hope, made me know Christ better, helped me long for truth, led me to repentance of sin, goaded me to give thanks in times of sorrow, increased my faith and strengthened my character. Being in this wheelchair has meant knowing *Him* better, feeling His pleasure every day.

She quotes Henry Frost, who said, "I feel it would have been nothing short of a calamity to have missed the physical suffering through which I have passed."¹

Joni is a vivid, indisputable example of someone who, by God's grace, has chosen to consider her circumstances as a reason for joy. By doing so, she has become greater than her tragedy. She has become a victor rather than a victim.

Have you ever asked, "Why is this happening to me?" It's a common question to ask when life veers off of the course we thought we were on. In times of heartache or tragedy it's not our natural

inclination to think, *I consider this as an opportunity for joy!* Read Romans 5:3-4 (page 860).

What words are mentioned in both this Romans passage and James 1:2-4?

The concept of rejoicing right in the middle of problems and troubles is the common theme. God uses this joyful attitude to help develop our character and our hope.

Read Hebrews 10:35-36 (page 926).

What will bring you a great reward according to these verses?

Our faith in God increases our ability to endure, which builds our confidence, which results in experiencing all that He has promised us.

We can view trials as catalysts that focus our attention, and sometimes the attention of others, on God.

What does Jesus say in Matthew 5:11-12 (page 736)?

Jesus wants us to know how to avoid destructive, debilitating pain and sorrow by choosing to be joyful in the midst of trials and persecution. He develops joy within us in and through trials, so that our faith will grow strong and our endurance will increase.

A Temporary Situation

What does 1 Peter 1:6-7 (page 934) say about the duration of these trials?

These trials are temporary. Even though we have to endure them now on earth, they will result in our growth and in God's honor when we are joyful through the experience. He knows that to choose joy in the midst of suffering is counter to our human nature. Yet He supplies us with the ability to choose joy, to be truly glad because of the hope that is before us. In the process, we discover that our trials cause our enduring faith to become genuinely clear. Our enduring faith reflects Christ, and that is good for everyone!

It's easy to feel that God is punishing us when things go differently than we planned. But while some pain is the result of our own poor decisions, other pain is the result of life in general. In the Old Testament book of Job we read about a good man who suffered deeply. In the depth of his pain he noted, "*How short is life, how full of trouble*" (Job 14:1, page 397). But Job kept his eyes on God, and in the end God restored him.

In what ways have you tried to diagnose the reason or purpose of your past sufferings?

What does Proverbs 3:5 (page 482) say?

God sees the whole picture—past, present, and future. We can trust Him because He knows what is going to happen today, tomorrow, and beyond and how to help us. We don't have access to that information. We have access to only the present moment, which makes our understanding extremely undependable compared to that of an all-knowing God.

The more we trust God, the more spiritual maturity we gain and the more natural it becomes to respond to our circumstances in a healthy way. Read Colossians 2:6-7 (page 903).

What must we do after we have received Jesus as our Lord?

What will the result be once we follow Christ and build our lives upon Him?

As our roots grow down deep into Jesus, our faith will grow strong, and we will become more thankful and spiritually mature. Read the following passages and note what we can do to make our roots grow strong.

1 Peter 2:1-3 (page 935)

Psalm 1:1-3 (page 415)

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (page 915)

Regular Bible reading is essential to our spiritual growth and health. God's Word keeps our thinking on the right track. It protects us from erroneous conclusions and unhealthy attitudes. As we study God's Word, the Holy Spirit fills us with wisdom, faith, and joy!

A Changed Attitude

God's Word not only fills us with joy, but it also calls us to find joy in the middle of troubles in our lives.

What is God's will for our lives, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (page 907)?

The message is clear. God wants to help us cultivate an attitude of thankfulness and joy. I know that, depending on what you have experienced in your past or are experiencing now, this may seem impossible. Please keep your mind open to what God wants to show you in this study. Will you be willing to experiment with what we've read?

Copy your personalized version of James 1:2-3 onto a 3-by-5 card or input it into your smartphone and keep it with you. Every time your circumstance comes to mind, read or listen to the verses.

God is always expressing His love for us—even in situations we cannot understand.

The purpose of this study is to help us grow by applying the truths we learn in God's Word. It will be beneficial to read the book of James as many times as possible during this study. It has only five chapters, so it doesn't take long to read. As you read you will find new insight and greater understanding.

Before you sit down to read,

- ask God to help you understand what you read.
- ask God to keep your mind focused on what you're reading.
- ask God to let you hear what He says to you.
- ask God to make you willing to do what He asks.

Personal Reflection and Application

From this chapter,

I see...

I believe...

I will...



Prayer

Lord, I understand that my trials will show that my faith is genuine. I understand that my faith is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though my faith is far more precious than gold. So help my faith remain strong through trials, so that I will bring you much praise and glory and honor. I love you even though I have never seen you. And though I do not see you now, still I trust you; and I rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. I know the reward for trusting you will be the salvation of my soul (1 Peter 1:7-9, page 934).

