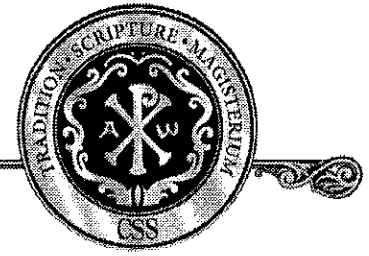


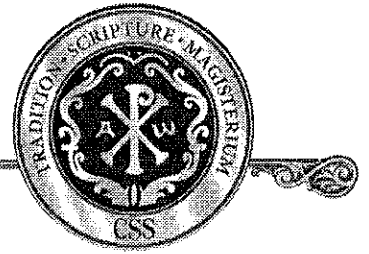
# *The Book of James*



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# The Epistle of St. James



## Lesson 1: Trials & Temptations

### Introduction



*Temptation of Jesus*

We all have two things in common. We all face trials of various kinds, and we all are tempted to do things we should not. For many of us, trials are met with a “hope for the best” attitude and temptations with a “well, I’m only human” posture. We learn in this first lesson of *James* that trials are meant for something greater than the angst they cause, and temptations cannot only be met head on but also overcome. For the Christian, trials and temptations can actually be a source of joy because we know that we can mature spiritually as a result of them. Our joy stems from the fact that we have God’s grace available to us in the midst of any hardship. Some people think that because they are unable to avoid trying circumstances, they should resign themselves to them. They adopt the idea of “whatever will be, will be.” But resignation is passive. Christians are called to actively persevere so that a greater good may emerge. Resignation results in defeat, perseverance in triumph. While going through this study, take note of how you have typically dealt with adversity and temptation and note how God has equipped

you to meet the challenges of life. Whatever obstacles may come your way, be assured that you have a glorious family support network to meet you in the midst of your challenges and cheer you on: your loving heavenly Father; your older brother, Jesus; the power of the Holy Spirit; your mother, Mary; and all your spiritual siblings, the Saints.

## James 1:1-18

<sup>1</sup> James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greeting. <sup>2</sup> **Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials,** <sup>3</sup> **for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.** <sup>4</sup> **And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.** <sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, <sup>8</sup> unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord. <sup>9</sup> Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like the flower of the grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. <sup>12</sup> Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. <sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup> Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death. <sup>16</sup> Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. <sup>17</sup> Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup> Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

## Points to Ponder

### What is the Catholic Teaching on Redemptive Suffering?

In coming to grips with suffering, a Catholic should bear in mind both Jas 1:2, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" and verse 17, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Because we have this eternal Father we can have an eternal perspective that arises from the eternal goal that awaits us. This fact not only allows us to make sense out of our suffering, but it also enables us to turn our sufferings into something with redemptive power. Such a concept is absolutely novel and revolutionary in human history! Nothing else before or after Christianity has really grasped that suffering can be redemptive. To be sure, the acorn is already present in pre-Christian Judaism and is starting to sprout, but it only really takes root and bears fruit in the Tree upon which Christ hung.

The audience to which James writes was facing two tendencies in pagan thought. On the one hand was Stoicism, which said, "Keep a stiff upper lip, bear suffering with a straight face" – but which never considered for a moment to "count it all joy." On the other hand was Platonism, which saw the body as a sort of prison for the soul and so could, at times, "rejoice" at the suffering of the body because it was a kind of death knell for the jailer. Both pagan thought systems had a germ of truth, but both were mixed with tremendous error as well. The Stoic was right to say we have to bear suffering, but he could not explain why or even consider how it could be associated with joy. The Platonist was right to look upon the body as a temporary dwelling, but he was wrong to think the goal of life was

to become disembodied. He did not know about the Resurrection, and so he thought the body was bad; whereas, in reality, it is the second-highest good. That is why we are called, like Jesus, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). There is no point to offering rubbish as a sacrifice, only that which is best. And you offer that which is best to show there is One you prefer even more.

So how do we offer our suffering to God? If we are suffering illness, we recognize our own human affliction and weakness. Certainly, we seek treatment, but in the meantime we grow in patience through endurance, knowing that even these sufferings can be united with Jesus on the cross. It is pure gold without any dross, if our sufferings are due to persecution for righteousness' sake. That is, we can thank God that he has honored us to share in Christ's very own sufferings. On the other hand, if our sufferings are due to punishment for sin, then even those can be united to Christ, as we see by the example of the Good Thief who was crucified with Jesus. Moreover, some of the most intense forms of suffering are not physical but spiritual. James, for instance, gives no hint that he is speaking to a persecuted Church. Rather, he addresses his consolations to poor Christians being exploited by the rich, many of whom appear to be Christian themselves. Also, there is the intense suffering that comes not from facing our own death but from watching a loved one die, as Mary had to watch her firstborn son die. To bear such suffering or to bear the betrayal of friends whom we had once trusted, as Jesus bore betrayal and abandonment by his disciples, is to be very close to the Spirit of Christ. The bottom line is this: there is no realm of human suffering outside of Christ. Some forms of suffering are most perfectly Christ-like, but every form of suffering is, in some way, able to draw us closer to Christ.

## Trials and Temptations

Are trials from God and temptations from concupiscence? To answer this question, we need to know what "concupiscence" is. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 1264) tells us that Baptism removes original sin; nonetheless, "certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, 'the tinder for sin' (*fomes peccati*).'" The first part of this list of temporal consequences may be considered various forms of trials that must be endured patiently and steadfastly, but the latter, "an inclination to sin," or *concupiscence*, may fall under the label of temptation, which the *Catechism* goes on to state is something we are left to wrestle with and must "resist ... by the grace of Jesus Christ."

Interestingly, the same word in Greek (*peirasmos*) is used for both "trial" and "temptation." But there is an important distinction to be made. A trial is an external test. A temptation is an internal test. The same word is used in Jas 1:2 and then again in Jas 1:12-13. We have to recognize the different meanings from the context. In verse 2, we are told that the testing of our faith "produces steadfastness." So it involves endurance, perseverance, patience, and courage. It is like a muscle workout for the soul, making healthy muscles even stronger. In contrast, the internal test we undergo due to our own weakness, for example concupiscence, is what is described in verses 12 and 13. James relates this passage back to verse 2 and says, "Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life." But then he goes on in verse 13 to say, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." So, on the one hand, we are exalted by trials yet humbled by temptations. Whenever disordered desires arise in our hearts, we should take a good long look in the mirror and repent. In Jas 1:23-25 this is described as the "perfect law of liberty." In temptation, we suffer, not like athletes at the gym, but as sick people going through physical therapy.

Sometimes it may seem difficult for us to know if we are facing a trial or a temptation. Original sin undoubtedly leaves us vulnerable to both. And left to our own disordered rationalizations, we may even deceive ourselves into believing that a temptation is a good. The *Catechism* states, however, that it is the Holy Spirit who helps us “discern between trials, which are necessary for the growth of the inner man, and temptation, which leads to sin and death.” Furthermore, it is the Holy Spirit who helps us “discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation” (CCC 2847). And Scripture assures us that God will never allow us to be tempted beyond our strength, “but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13).

So are trials from God and temptations from concupiscence? James tells us that “[God] tempts no one;” Scripture also states, “the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb 12:6). In this context, we may say that trials are from God and temptations are from concupiscence. Yet both have their place in God’s plan to do us good.

### Catechism Connections

- CCC 2846-2849 explains the petition, “And Lead Us Not into Temptation.”
- To learn how man achieves perfect happiness, read CCC 45.
- CCC 769 describes when and how the Church will achieve perfection.
- The relationship between human freedom and divine grace is examined in CCC 1742.


### Rome to Home


“The Gospel of suffering is being written unceasingly, and it speaks unceasingly with the words of this strange paradox: the springs of divine power gush forth precisely in the midst of human weakness. Those who share in the sufferings of Christ preserve in their own sufferings a very special particle of the infinite treasure of the world’s Redemption, and can share this treasure with others.”

—Pope John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris*, 27

### Study Questions

1. Most people imagine joy as a “happy” feeling or mood that can come and go, but James tells Christians to “count it all joy,” advocating joy as the constant disposition of the Christian soul, even in the midst of great trial and tribulation. What is true Christian joy in this context? (See Mt 1:23, 25:21, Jn 15:11, CCC 1721)

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2. What enables man to enter into divine joy? (See CCC 1722, 1832) What kind of person finds Christian joy elusive and what is the remedy for this weakness? (See Jas 1:5-8; see *Wisdom* in the CCC Glossary)
  3. The Greek word used for both “trials” and “temptations” is *peirasmos*. When used for the word “trials,” *peirasmos* speaks of a testing with a goal to become strong and pure. What trials of this kind do God’s people experience in the Old Testament? (See Gen 22:1-2, Judg 2:21-23, 1 Kings 10:1)
  4. James states in 1:3-4 that the testing of faith produces “steadfastness,” which makes the Christian “perfect and complete.” How does he further describe the fulfillment, or “full effect,” of such testing or suffering upon the Christian soul? (See Rom 5:3-5, CCC 1817)



5. In verses 9-11, James provides consolations to those tested by poverty as well as warnings to those who are tempted to pursue material wealth for its own sake. If Christians are to place their trust in God, what is the value of material goods? (See CCC 2547)

6. The Gospel of Matthew speaks of a time when the Lord was led into the wilderness and tempted by the devil. In that passage, how does Jesus deal with temptation? (See Mt 4:1-11)

7. James refers to God as the “Father of lights,” from whom every perfect gift comes and to humanity as the “first fruits of his creatures.” How does this imagery reflect the nature of God and mankind? (See Gen 1:3-4, 14-15; Rom 8:22-25)



## Voices of the Saints

“For this reason he was clothed with flesh so that he might know chastisement. God punishes his only Son who is without sin; does he then leave unpunished an adopted son who is with sin?”

—St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon on Pastors*

## Questions for Reflection

*The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you've made in this lesson can be applied to your own life.*

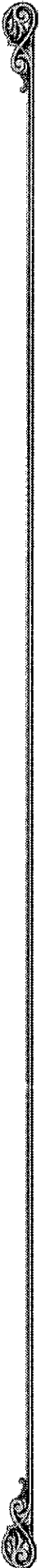
1. Based on your observations, how does our culture tend to view trials and temptations? How has your response to various hardships either reflected or contradicted these cultural norms?
2. James tells us that, “the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” and bids us “let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Do you know someone in your life to whom this has actually happened? What is it about that person that impresses you?

## Summary

*In Lesson 1, we observed that:*

1. It is important to distinguish between trials and temptations in life.
2. A trial is a test of faith from an external source with the hope that one will become perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.
3. Our heavenly Father, God's desire for us is spiritual maturity so that we may enter into the joy of eternal life with Him.
4. When facing a trial, we must immediately turn to the Holy Spirit in prayer and search for the test, “What does God want to accomplish in my life?”
5. Our heavenly Father will generously give wisdom to us if we approach him with humility and a sincere faith.
6. Temptation is also something that we all have to deal with in our lives.
7. If we do not deal with our temptations, these disordered desires will conceive and give birth to sin, ending in death.
8. When we are tempted to do something that is displeasing to the Lord, we must not blame the Lord.





# Notes