

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 exceeding 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 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 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?

Heidy's Hope: Part 1

JUAN CAICEDO SOLIS

When 13-year-old Heidy Moreno and her cousin, Mirella, began questioning their mothers' rules, Heidy's mother decided to stop their rebelliousness before it got out of hand. She took Heidy to a spirit medium—a witch.

The medium claimed that Heidy had a bad spirit. "I see a gold feather over your head," the medium told Heidy. "The spirit that possesses you is powerful." The medium performed a ritual to remove Heidy's rebelliousness. Suddenly Heidy felt as if her body was not hers. She became dizzy, then fainted.

Soon after Heidy and her mother returned home to their farm outside Cali, Colombia, Heidy began acting strangely. She crawled on the floor like a snake and spoke with strange voices. The voices promised great riches but threatened the family members if they tried to stop Heidy's strange behavior. Sometimes family members felt an invisible hand slap them when they tried to touch Heidy. The invisible hands began destroying the furniture and punching holes in the walls.

The spirits came and went unexpectedly, leaving family members shaken and afraid. The family did not want to anger the spirits, for they still hoped to gain the riches that the spirits had promised.

Then one day the spirits spoke through Heidy's cousin, Mirella. She described the spirit that entered her as a strong man. No one else could see them, but they often felt their evil presence. The spirits entered the girls' bodies and forced them to gorge themselves with food. Then after the spirits left, the girls were hungry again.

After months of living in fear and confusion, Heidy's family decided to try to escape the spirits by moving to the city of Cali. But the spirits became angry and beat Heidy and Mirella with whips and sticks until their bodies were bloody and bruised. They gave the girls so much strength that four men could not hold them. The frightened families decided they must get help to free their daughters from these spirits.

Heidy's mother took her to one church after another in hope of finding release from the spirits. But the spirits remained as strong as ever. Then a neighbor told her about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The spirits had warned Heidy that something terrible would happen if she went to this church, so Heidy resisted her family's attempts to take her there. It took several strong men to overpower the devil in Heidy and get her inside the church. Once inside, Heidy suddenly felt at peace. *God has set me free!* she thought. That day Heidy worshiped God with all her heart.

Heidy knew now that only God could free Mirella from the devil's power. She urged Mirella to go to the church and seek God. The spirits in Mirella threatened her, but she agreed to go, hoping for deliverance from the spirits' torment.

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