



James

Denise J. Hughes



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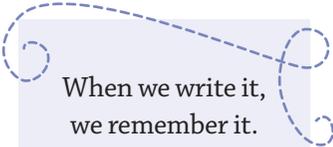
Welcome to Word Writers

Welcome to Word Writers! It's truly a joy to invite you to join me on this journey through the Bible by writing the words of Scripture. Word Writers is a Bible study specially designed for individuals as well as groups. It's an Inductive-Plus Bible Study that makes the Bible the primary source. A traditional Inductive Bible Study uses three key approaches to God's Word: *observation*, *interpretation*, and *application*. Word Writers adds a crucial fourth dimension to the Bible study experience: *saturation*—the opportunity to write the Word. Because when we write it, we remember it. So grab a few girlfriends and get together for some tea, conversation, and Word writing!

You'll notice Psalm 119:18 at the top of each new day's page, which says, "Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wonderful things from Your instruction." Let's make this our prayer every day before we begin our time in the Word. I'll be your guide through the pages of James, but the Holy Spirit is our Teacher.

Each day of the study will begin with a short illustration that leads into the daily Scripture reading. After reading the designated passages, you'll come to the Diving Deeper section, which asks a few questions. The first couple of questions will ask you about the biblical text (the *observation* and *interpretation* portion of the study). Space is provided for you to pause and answer these questions in your own words. Feel free to use this space to write some of your own questions too.

The next question or two will lead you to further contemplate how you can apply the truth of Scripture to your everyday life (the *application* portion of the study). Then you're invited to write the Word (the *saturation* portion of the

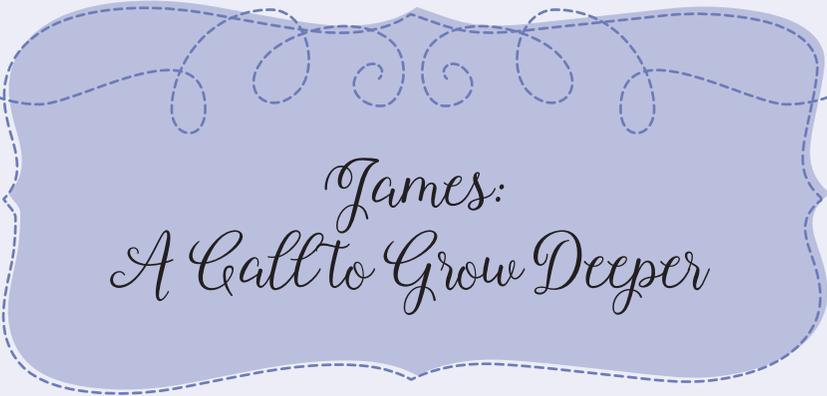


When we write it,
we remember it.

#WordWriters

study). Ample space is provided in the back of this book to write out the verses from James you read that day. Now, depending on your Bible's translation, the verses you write for one day may end with a comma rather than a period. That's okay. I'm using the Holman Christian Standard Bible translation, but you're welcome to use the translation you're most comfortable with.

Last, we finish each day the same way we begin—with prayer. A prayer is printed at the end of each daily study. Make the words of these prayers your own, for we know when we seek Him with all our heart, we will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).



James: *A Call to Grow Deeper*

My earliest childhood memories take place in the hot summer months. My two brothers—both older than me—would gather the kids in our neighborhood for a giant game of Capture the Flag. My oldest brother, Kendall, would lead one team, and my brother Mark would lead the other team. Since we lived in an agricultural area, we'd climb the fence on the edge of town and stake our territories at the two ends of a dry canal.

My brothers became neighborhood legends. For camouflage they covered their faces, arms, and legs with mud, and they strategically assigned team members to various locations—some to stand guard, others to attack and capture. They also made weapons out of clothespins and large rubber bands. If you got shot with a rubber band, you were “captured.” Since I was so much younger than all the other kids I was usually one of the guards. But I was always placed somewhere out of the way. I could never keep up with my brothers. I couldn't run as fast. Or shoot as well.

Eventually we all grew up. One brother joined the army. The other became a marine. If you met my brothers today, you'd meet two men who still possess a warrior's heart. But Kendall now lives his life in a wheelchair. At age 19 a car accident claimed his legs...and so much more. When it comes to suffering, you could say I've had a front-row seat. I've watched a cruel fate twist my brother's dreams into a life no one ever imagines when running through fields as a kid.

So before we begin this journey through the book of James together, I have to be honest. When I first met James, I didn't like him. I barely got two verses

into his book before rolling my eyes. Right away he says stuff like, “Consider it pure joy . . . whenever you face trials” (1:2 NIV). In my mind, I translated “trials” as “suffering,” and I had a hard time swallowing it. Granted, I was only 17 the first time I read James’s words. But still, they sounded too much like a platitude. And I don’t care much for platitudes. I heard plenty in hospital hallways when well-meaning folk tried to minimize the pain my family was experiencing.

Consider it pure joy? Whenever you suffer?

When I read his words, I wanted to slam the Bible shut. But something caught my eye. A different font on the page said James was the younger brother of Jesus. Suddenly I saw this New Testament writer in a different light. James was the sibling of Suffering. Perhaps we had something in common after all. I knew what it was like to watch your big brother suffer, but I didn’t know how to find any joy in that suffering. It didn’t make sense.

So I kept reading.

Near the end of his book, James says, “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14 NIV). Now, some might see a negative connotation in this verse. At first glance it appears to say our lives are of little value because we’re likened to a vapor that quickly disappears. But that’s not what James is saying. He’s comparing the length of our earthly lives to the unending expanse of eternity. In other words, our earthly lives are quite short when compared to all of eternity.

This shift in perspective changes the way a Christian can view suffering. Suffering is real, and I will never minimize another human being’s pain. But all suffering is bound by time. Relief is coming. And a new life—with a new body!—awaits those who believe.

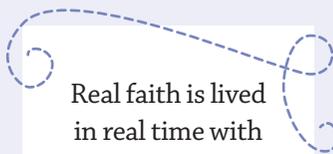
I grew up attending church, but my brother’s accident sent each member of my family reeling in their own way. I became a teenager who sat on a spiritual fence, unsure of which way I should go. Could I trust God? Especially after the suffering I’d witnessed in my family? James told me I could. He also told me, the same as he told everyone else, that our beliefs should influence our behavior. Saying I believe in God isn’t enough. Faith isn’t an abstract, fanciful idea.

Real faith is lived in real time with real action. Sitting on a spiritual fence isn't an option. I must choose. Either God's way or my way.

After reading the book of James, I got off the fence. I chose God. And I've never been the same since.

More than 25 years have passed since I first met James. And every time I venture back to the familiar passages in his book, it's like going home. Because there's something comforting about listening to someone tell it straight. James isn't interested in impressing people with a lyrical style. He wants to help believers become more like Christ, and he does so in a straightforward manner. His book reads like a collection of proverbs; in fact, many of his admonitions echo Jesus's words from His Sermon on the Mount.

James is more practical than poetic, and I appreciate his candor because God used his words, his testimony, to help me grow deeper in my faith. Knowledge about God isn't enough. Our faith must coincide with our actions. That is my prayer for us as we journey through this book together. The book of James is a candid call to grow deeper in our faith.



Real faith is lived
in real time with
real action.

#WordWriters

Day 1

The Source of Our Identity

Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wonderful things from Your instruction.

PSALM 119:18

When I heard my name called, I stood with confidence and shook the hands of my interviewers. I had made a list of every question possible, and I'd rehearsed my scripted answers so they wouldn't sound rehearsed. This interview would be a cinch.

But the first question wasn't even a real question. Someone on the panel said, "So, Denise, tell us about yourself."

What? Can't they read the application that tells them my job history? This is a teacher interview. Don't they want to ask me about my philosophy of education? Or how I would respond to a misbehaving student or an upset parent?

My interview training told me to be natural and say what came to mind. So with all the eloquence in the world, I said, "Um, I like football."

They laughed. While I wanted to crawl under the table. But then they asked, "What team?"

It ended up being the best interview ever because I ditched the formal answers. I quit trying to impress my potential employers, and I just told them about myself. I like the Green Bay Packers. I like drinking tea and making quilts too. These things may not seem to go together, but they're all true of me.

Now, if someone had asked me the same thing a long time ago, I might have said I'm a pastor's kid. Because it's easy—almost automatic—to identify ourselves based on who we're related to or what we do. So when we read the first verse in the book of James, the way he describes himself is telling.

Read James 1:1.

James could easily refer to himself as the brother of Jesus—you know, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. He could easily remind his listeners that he grew up with Jesus and arguably knows more about Him than anyone, save their mother, Mary. But James doesn't identify himself by his familial relationship. He doesn't pull the family trump card. Instead, he calls himself “a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” A slave. Some translations say “a bondservant.” Both terms mean a person who yields and surrenders to the lordship of a master. James is calling Jesus his Lord, his Master, his Savior.

This is a huge shift from his younger years.

Read John 7:1-5 and Mark 3:7-21.

James was late to the believing party; in fact, Jesus's whole family thought He was out of His mind. It wasn't until after Jesus's resurrection, when He appeared to the disciples and His family, that James and the rest of the family believed in Jesus as the Messiah.

Read Acts 1:1-14 and 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

After the crucifixion, Jesus's family is specifically mentioned as being with the disciples when Jesus “presented Himself alive” and gave “many convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3). Then in Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers, we learn Jesus appeared to His brother James. We don't know what was said in this meeting. It was a private conversation between two brothers, between Creator and creation. But after this meeting, James was a changed man, and he became the uncontested leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

Because of Jesus, I am changed. It's the most important thing you could ever know about me.

#WordWriters

Because of Jesus, I am changed too. Yeah, I like

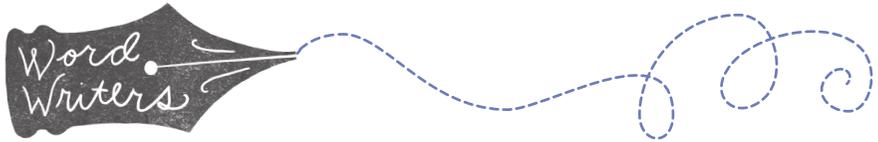
football, quilts, and tea. Yeah, I grew up wearing the moniker PK for pastor's kid. But the most important thing you could ever know about me is that I belong to Jesus. He is the true source of my identity. And while it may sound strange to our modern ears, this is who I am: a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Diving Deeper

Who are the recipients of this letter?

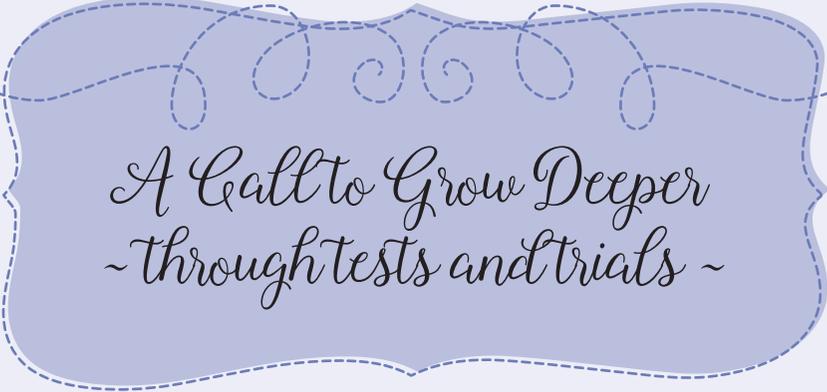
When you meet someone for the first time, how do you introduce yourself? What is the first thing you want people to know about you?

When have your friends, your coworkers, or your own family members struggled to believe in you? What happened?



As you turn to page 124 and write out James 1:1, thank Jesus for being the true source of your identity.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for believing in me, even when I failed to believe in You. Thank You for never giving up on me. Thank You for calling me Your own and for grafting me into Your family. In You alone, I discover who I really am. Amen.



A Call to Grow Deeper ~ through tests and trials ~

The blogging world has as many different kinds of blogs as it does bloggers. But most blog posts fall into one of two categories: “how to” or “me too.” The “how to” post typically offers a bullet-point list of helpful tips—practical advice for everyday living. The “me too” post is more narrative—usually a story from real life the reader can relate to, meant to inspire and encourage.

If James were writing today, his letter to believers would fall into the “how to” category. His words are highly practical and applicable to our modern lives. In the first section, James tells us how to persevere when difficult trials come our way. He offers a road map for the journey of life. It begins with the acknowledgment that everyone will experience tests and trials, and that our destination is spiritual maturity (1:2-4). Then he advises us to ask God for wisdom for the journey (1:5-8). Next, he reminds us how temporary this life is and that our real reward awaits us in heaven (1:9-12). Last, he explains where temptation comes from and how to overcome it.

Day 2

The Test of Faith

Open my eyes so that I may contemplate wonderful things from Your instruction.

PSALM 119:18

When I was growing up, my mom made a trip to the local library every week. I loved tagging along. The lady behind the counter even gave me my own library card. I could check out any books I wanted from the children's section. Every visit felt like Christmas.

I still love going to my local library, and whenever I visit a new city, I always want to check out its library. There's a certain solemnity to libraries; they're like sanctuaries. My favorite "library," of course, is the Bible, which holds the most important 66 books in the history of the world. But these books aren't arranged in chronological order.

Even though Genesis appears first, the book of Job was written years earlier. This means the first story told in the canon of Holy Scripture is a story of suffering. It's the first thing God wanted us to know, that life will be hard. Jesus Himself said, "You will have suffering in this world" (John 16:33). And just in case we missed it, God said it again on the first page of the first book written in the New Testament, in James. While the Gospel accounts appear first in the New Testament, James wrote his book several years before Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John wrote theirs. Not even Paul had penned a letter yet.

So the first story written in the Old Testament is about suffering.
And the first topic written about in the New Testament is suffering.
Well, we already know life is hard. So what is God saying here?

Read James 1:2-4.

Do you feel like rolling your eyes? I wouldn't blame you. I've already admitted I had a hard time with this passage when I first read it. Sure, I want to develop perseverance and endurance. But without the tests and trials, thank you.

I don't know many people who enjoy tests. Even as a teacher I never enjoy giving them. Some argue a teacher needs to give tests to know how well her students are learning. But the truth is, I already know how well my students are catching on to the material by the way they engage in discussion, by the kinds of questions they ask, and by the papers they write. The information a paper test gives me basically confirms what I've already observed in the classroom. But the results of a test *can* be instructive for my students. If we go over the answers together, and if they have a chance to take the test again, they'll likely do better the next time around.

God uses tests the same way. He already knows how we're doing in our faith-life. So if we fail in a certain situation, our failure informs *us* of where we are spiritually. Our failures can be instructive, especially when we invite God into the situation and ask Him to give us the grace and guidance we need to do better.

Our failures can be instructive, especially when we ask God to give us the grace and guidance we need to do better.

#WordWriters

I love the way Eugene Peterson translates this same passage in *The Message Bible*. He says, "You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors." The tests and trials we experience, even the suffering we endure, are opportunities not only for us to grow in perseverance, but also for our faith to shine in an unbelieving

world. I've known people—and perhaps you have too—who've endured deep pain and trauma with a genuine peace that surpasses all human understanding. That kind of peace is other-worldly; it can come only from God. This is one of the ways God is glorified.

Why tests and trials? James says they develop our perseverance and help us grow deeper in our faith. How can we overcome these tests and trials? James answers this question a few verses later by reiterating Jesus's words from the Sermon on the Mount.

Read Matthew 5:1-12 and James 1:12.

Jesus began His famous sermon with a collection of truths we now call the Beatitudes. He framed His words with the idea that a believer's suffering will end in blessing. Jesus said, "Those who mourn are blessed, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Then He said, "You are blessed when they insult and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven" (Matthew 5:11-12). The Bible doesn't command us to be lovers of pain; rather, Jesus wants us to remember that, when we persevere, our suffering will lead to rejoicing one day—when He rewards us in heaven. So we can see where James gets the idea. He says, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (1:12 NIV).

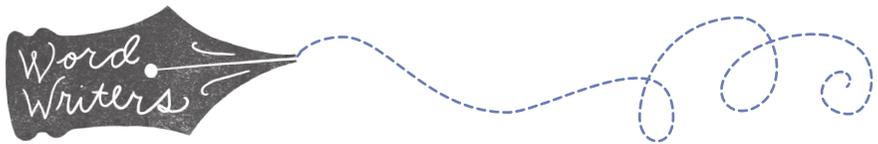
The believers in Jerusalem were experiencing tests and trials. They were being persecuted for their faith, and false things were being said about them. If Yelp had been around back then, some naysayers would have given the church in Jerusalem a bunch of one-star reviews. So when James talks about tests and trials, he's referring to the suffering the believers are enduring for their faith. His words are for us too. How can we consider it a joy when we experience tests and trials? We remember the end goal: to become more like Jesus. Because one day He will give us the crown of life.

Diving Deeper

According to James, what do perseverance and endurance produce?

When have you faced a test of your faith and failed? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about God's grace and forgiveness?

When have you faced a test of your faith and responded in such a way that you made God smile? How was God glorified from this experience?



While writing James 1:2-4 today, give God praise for the way He's been glorified in a difficult test or trial you've endured.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for forgiving me when I've failed. Help me to make wiser choices in the future so if I ever face the same situation again, I can respond in a way that brings glory to Your name. Help me to grow and become mature and complete so my true colors reflect You. Amen.