PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God’s Word reading through this week’s text, James 4:13–5:12. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Persevering faith is belief in the gospel put into action over the course of a lifetime.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Trusting in God’s goodness and obeying His Word lead to confidence in Him and patience, even in suffering.

MEDITATE

“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week’s lesson.

In 1798, European scientists exploring Australia encountered for the first time an animal we now call a platypus. They sent a pelt and a sketch back to Great Britain to report their new discovery. Looking at the description of this new animal, British scientists initially determined it was a hoax. The idea of a semi-aquatic egg-laying mammal made absolutely no sense to them. It defied all of the scientific classifications of animals
and their most basic distinguishing characteristics. The platypus has a bill and webbed feet like a duck, a tail like a beaver, and the body and fur of an otter. The males are venomous with sharp stingers on the heels of their feet. They hunt under water by paddling with their front webbed feet while steering with their back feet and beaverlike tail. They have folds of skin that cover their eyes and ears so water does not enter, allowing the platypus to stay submerged in water to find food at the bottom. Yet these animals live just as well on land. The webbing on their feet retracts and exposes nails so they can run on the ground and dig up dirt to build burrows. Though it is a mammal, the platypus lays eggs. This hodgepodge of different categories had scientists in the early 1800s completely stumped, but also intrigued.

If you ask someone, “What is faith?” you’ll get a host of different answers. Some insist that faith is a feeling. It’s not really understandable or easy to communicate, but it is deeply felt. The importance is to stay true to that feeling no matter what is going on around you. Others say faith is not a feeling. Faith is mental ascent to an idea or a belief regardless of how you feel about it. Some say faith is, by definition, irrational. In order to have faith, you have to hold to the absurd. If you hold to it tightly enough and resist mocking from the outside world, miracles will happen. Others suggest that faith is beholden to reason and is legitimized by it. You cannot have faith in something that is outside of the bounds of rationality. Those who hold this view defend or validate their faith by appealing to evidence or logical arguments.

Though we may wish James would just give us a clear-cut definition of faith, he offers us a description of what it looks like instead. For conceptual definitions, Paul’s epistles are the best resource. James, however, takes a different approach. He doesn’t contradict what Paul says; he just talks about the same thing from a different angle. Paul will tell you what faith is, James will tell you how it looks. The idea of a semi-aquatic egg-laying mammal may have seemed conceptually impossible to the scientists in Great Britain, but those who saw the animal in person witnessed its reality. Likewise, the best evidence for faith is not found in a definition (though definitions are helpful and important), but in the lives of those who are completely transformed by it.

Q: Think about movies you have seen or music you’ve heard. What definitions of faith do they present?

Q: When it comes to faith, do you tend to lean more on your feelings or your head? Are you worried your feelings will lead you away from faith, or do you think they can lead you to faith?

Q: Where do you think faith resides, in your head or in your heart?
UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. FAITH TRUSTS GOD (4:13–16)
2. FAITH OBEYS GOD (4:17)
3. FAITH IS CONFIDENT IN GOD (5:1–6)
4. FAITH IS PATIENT (5:7–12)

GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God’s Word says about this week’s particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week’s biblical truth.

FAITH TRUSTS GOD

JAMES 4:13-16

Q: Why does James say we should not be definitive in our planning?

There are many passages in the Bible designed to comfort and reassure believers. James's epistle is designed to kick up the dust in our lives to get us to take inventory of our hearts. He questions our assumptions, challenges our complacency, and gets us to reflect on what our lives indicate about the state of our hearts.

Every day we plan things. We talk about our immediate next steps and even chart our trajectory for years to come. We make projections about the outcomes of specific decisions and evaluate their value. Is there a problem with that? Doesn’t living a responsible life of stewardship require planning?

The problem James addresses is not with planning per se, but with the attitude and ideas that can be behind our planning. In verse 14, James reminds us that we really don’t know what the future holds. In all of our talking about our plans, we often forget that nothing about our lives is sure. No matter who you are, your life is just like every other life—a vapor.
The writer of Ecclesiastes makes this same point. “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:2–4). Reflecting on his life, the writer says, “I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees...So I become great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me...Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:4–6, 9, 11).

The writer recognizes that his life and the work of his hands should be thought of with a sober perspective. In light of eternity, our lives are small and temporary. What we achieve in life should not be our idol because it can be washed away at any moment. In the central climax of the book, the writer concludes that, in contrast to his own life and work, “whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him” (Ecclesiastes 3:14). What God establishes lasts. What He decrees is sure. His work will never fail.

This doesn’t mean that we give up on doing things and allow ourselves to be tossed around by the chaos and meaninglessness of life. On the contrary, when we understand who we are compared to who God is, we are free to pursue life without making it an idol. As the writer says, “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). So, we should plan and work and dream and enjoy things in this life, but we should do so with the perspective that only that which God does lasts forever.

James encourages us to take on this mindset. The directive he gives is not to cease planning, but to plan from the perspective of “if the Lord wills.” Regarding these verses, John Piper writes, “[It] not only matters that you have the right view of life when you make your plans—you are like a vapor—but it also matters that you have a right view of God as you make your plans. And that you give expression to this right view of God.” The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom, is when you have a correct view of who you are and who God is. Folly, boasting, and arrogance come when you view yourself too highly and God too lowly.

It is easy to try to take control of our own lives and direct our own outcomes. Again, while we are designed by God to work and grow in creation, we do so not from a posture of fear and control but from one of trust. Like we learned last week, we ought not forget that we have a good Father who cares for us. The future can be one of the scariest things we face as finite humans, and we like to make it a little less scary by planning things out. But while even our best plans can’t make the future less scary, trust in God’s goodness can.
Faith involves trusting in God and obeying His commands. In his famous work, *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard makes the point that some people trust God’s promises without caring too much about obeying His commands. Others, he says, obey God’s commands without trusting His promises. Neither is faith. We see this played out all the time in our lives. There are those who really claim the promises of God for themselves, but they aren’t seeking to live cross-shaped lives. Others believe they need to obey what God says, but their obedience isn’t motivated by joy and trust that He is good. It looks more like moralism or brute obedience. James teaches us that faith is a double-sided coin of trust and obedience. You cannot have one without the other.

Hebrews 11 describes faith in these terms. Abraham, the writer of Hebrews says, offered up Isaac because “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead” (Hebrews 11:19). His obedience was motivated by his trust that God keeps His promises and that His purposes cannot be thwarted. Death does not have the last word, and God does not withhold good from His children. With this conviction, Abraham marched up the mountain.

James says if we know the right thing to do and fail to do it, we sin. In Romans 14:23b, Paul says, “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” So, the opposite of faith is actually sin. This may seem odd, because we typically think the opposite of faith is doubt. But if you think about it in terms of faith involving both trust in God and obedience, it makes perfect sense. Faith isn’t just about what you think, it’s also about what you do. If you fail to do what God calls you to do in His Word, you are not faith-ing, you are sinning.
FAITH IS CONFIDENT IN GOD

:: JAMES 5:1–6

Q: What false beliefs does James call out in these verses?

Q: What corrupt practices does James call out?

While James kicks up dust and purposefully makes us uncomfortable throughout his letter, these verses carry the harshest tone.

Some commentators think verses 1–6 refer to unbelievers who are persecuting Christians. They suggest that the oppressors and the oppressed are not the rich and the poor as much as they are non-Christians and Christians. Others argue that these verses are part of the same letter, and that letter is addressed to the Church (James 1:1), and therefore James must be continuing his pattern of calling out corruption that has entered into the Church.

It is also important to note that James is not saying that riches themselves are bad. Paul says in 1 Timothy 6:10, it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil. In Matthew 19:24, Jesus says it is easier for a camel
to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God. The obstacle is not the riches themselves, but the love of riches that redirects our desires away from God and leads to corruption, oppression, and greed. Even those who are inside the Church still struggle with sin, and it becomes so easy to fall back into old patterns.

Notice the similarities between the language James uses in these verses with that of the writer of Ecclesiastes. The love of wealth is one of the most powerful false gods of our day. The lie it tells is that riches will make us happy, fulfilled, secure, and satisfied. But, as Tim Keller says, “If we look to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness that only God himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and break our hearts.” In contrast to God, idols never keep their promises. They never give us what they say they will. The outcome is never like they assure us it will be.

The idea in verse 1 is that the idolatrous rich should be the ones weeping and howling in the miseries that will come upon them. They may feel on top of the world right now, but their laughter will be short-lived. Their fancy toys will break, and their clothes will rot just like everything else. If nice things or padded bank accounts are all they have worked for in life, their existence is nothing but vanity. The irony is that those who worship the false god of wealth now will be in poverty for all of eternity.

Not only does the love of money make you eternally poor, it also makes you corrupt. Keller continues, “An idolatrous attachment can lead you to break any promise, rationalize any indiscretion, or betray any other allegiance in order to hold on to it. It may drive you to violate all good and proper boundaries. To practice idolatry is to be a slave.” Even those in the church who idolize money will hear the way they should treat their brothers and sisters during the Sunday sermon—or maybe even pontificate about it themselves—but Monday through Saturday they practice the opposite by gaining at the expense of others. James wants them to know that God sees seven days a week.

God heard the cries of the Israelites in their oppression, and He hears the cries of those who are taken advantage of today as well. Just as God powerfully delivered the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians, so God will deliver the oppressed today. To put things in perspective, James says that oppression, fraud, and unfair treatment by someone in a position of power is the same as murder in God’s eyes. In Matthew 5:21–22, Jesus expresses the same idea when He says that those who hate someone have murdered them in their hearts. If you put your confidence in riches, according to James, you can be confident that you will not be on the good side of God’s justice.

For those on the other side of the equation, these verses should bring a sense of comfort. God sees every act of injustice or unfair treatment, even within the Church. He hears every cry for help and has an incredible track record throughout the Bible of acting on behalf of the oppressed. He is actively at work to deliver, to bring justice, to expose sin, and to restore, especially in the Church. Jesus gave Himself up for the Church and has
a vested interest in purifying her. He promises to present her in splendor without spot or wrinkle, that she may be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25–27). God is after more than simply leveling the playing field and making everything fair. He is after restoring all things and making what is broken whole again. We can be confident in that work.

**Q:** In what way do the idols you are tempted to worship lead you to mistreat others?

**Q:** Has your faith ever been shaken by experiencing corruption or harm at the hand of a brother or sister in the Church? How do these verses encourage you?

---

**FAITH IS PATIENT**

:: **JAMES 5:7–12**

**Q:** What does patience look like according to these verses?

**Q:** What is the opposite of patience according to these verses?

---

Faith that trusts in God’s goodness and obeys His commands is marked by confidence in Him. It is also marked by supernatural patience. To talk about the nature of patience, James uses the example of a farmer. In an agricultural society, everyone’s livelihood is dependent on the weather. If it didn’t rain enough, the crop could dry up. If it rained too much, it would rot. Furthermore, farming is slow work. It involves preparing the soil before planting the seed and then tending to it as it grows over time. There is no instant gratification in farming. While there are good tools and techniques, there are also many things outside of the farmer’s control.

Living in a fast-paced, consumeristic, instant-gratification culture makes us think we have no time for farming. The name of the game is to beat time, not to wait patiently in it. We want to speed up production, not allow fruit to ripen in its due time. We’re all about the harvest, not the soil-tilling and weeding. We like outcomes
that are sure rather than unknown.

The example of the farmer teaches us that time is our friend, not our enemy. The days on earth before Jesus returns are not wasted years of waiting. God does His best work in and through time. He grows us into maturity in time just like the patient farmer waits for the fruit of the earth. Here again, we see echoes of the book of Ecclesiastes. “For everything there is a season,” the writer says, “and a time for every matter under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Time is not our enemy, and neither is suffering. In verses 9–11 James returns to the idea of remaining steadfast under trial. Again, the exhortation here is not to figure out a way to escape suffering, but to pray for endurance through it. How do we remain steadfast? By remembering the purposes of the Lord and holding fast to the truth that He is compassionate and merciful. Remaining steadfast in trial is another way we live out our faith, our trust in God’s goodness, and our obedience to His Word.

**Q:** Read the remainder of Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. What do you see in these verses about trusting God and obeying His Word?

**Q:** In light of everything we have discussed about faith, what insights do you have on James 5:12? How is letting your word be sincere but not presumptuous evidence of the way you view yourself and the way you view God?

**NEXT STEPS**

+ Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.

**Q:** Kierkegaard says you can tell if you are obeying God without trusting Him by looking at your prayer life. You can hold your nose and obey, but if you don’t trust someone you are typically reserved in how (much) you talk to them. Looking at your prayer life, do you obey God but struggle to talk to Him?
Q: How can you trust God with the things you don’t have control over in your life and honor Him with the things you do?

Q: What has God used in your life to teach you patience? We often like to tell stories of instant transformation, but can you share stories of how God has chosen to work through time in your life?

Q: Our society isn’t really ordered around the virtue of patience. What disciplines can you put in place to help you practice patience in your daily life?

Q: In what ways does this picture of faith look different from common ideas about what faith is?

PRAY

+ Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week’s focus.

• Father, thank You that You are trustworthy. Thank You that You make Your promises known to us and that You act according to them in our lives. Help me to trust in Your goodness alone and may that trust fuel my obedience.

• Holy Spirit, please bring to my attention evidence of distrust in my heart or disobedience in my life. Forgive me for putting my confidence in myself. Thank you for the gift of faith—for empowering me to both trust and obey God.

• Jesus, Your death on the cross is the greatest evidence of God’s trustworthiness and goodness. Help me to look at the cross whenever I am tempted to doubt those things. Help me rejoice in Your perfect obedience for my salvation.
JAMES 4:4 – 

*Adulterous people.* The Old Testament prophets frequently used this language about Israel at various points in her history when she was unfaithful to God. The idea here is that friendship (intimate association) with the world makes you unfaithful to God.

JAMES 4:13 – 

*Trade and make a profit.* While this plan does seem like good business sense, it is missing something fundamental. Without a deep awareness of God’s sovereignty and blessing, it is really informed by a secular view of the world rather than a Christian one.

JAMES 4:17 – 

*Fails to do it.* Knowing what you should do and failing to do it is commonly known as the sin of “omission” in contrast to the sin of “commission.”

JAMES 5:1 – 

*Weep and Howl.* This is prophetic language referring to those under judgment when the Lord returns (Isaiah 13:6; 15:3, Hosea 7:14; Amos 8:3).

“All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, “If the Lord Wills” by John Piper, Christ Centered Exposition (James), and Counterfeit Gods by Tim Keller.”