

Storyteller

JAMES

THE LIFE OF FAITH

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THE STORYTELLER SERIES

God could've chosen to reveal Himself in any way that He desired, yet in His wisdom, He chose to reveal Himself in the context of a story. We come to know and understand this reality as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures and begin to see the entirety of Scripture as one interconnected story. By becoming familiar with the individual stories of Scripture, we train ourselves to see each as one part of God's big story.

Storyteller is a series of devotional and group Bible study experiences designed to take people through Scripture in a way that is beautiful, intuitive, and interactive. Each volume uses a book of the Bible or a portion of Scripture from within a book to examine a key theme. This theme guides the Bible study experience and gives readers handles to help understand and digest what they're reading.

At the end of each study, you should have a deeper understanding of God, His Word, the big themes of Scripture, the connectedness of God's story, and His work in your life.

Let's enter the story together.

ABOUT JAMES

AUTHOR

James is the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) and a leader in the Jerusalem church.

BACKGROUND

Though James led the Jerusalem church, the reference to “the twelve tribes dispersed abroad” (1:1) suggests the letter was written to Jewish Christians living outside of Israel. The reference to a meeting in 2:2 also suggests that his audience was Jewish Christians, since the word used in Greek is “synagogue.” References to their circumstances (e.g., oppression by wealthy landowners, 5:1–6) could refer to congregations anywhere in the Roman Empire. However, Semitic word order, quotations from the Septuagint, and the overall dependence of the epistle on the Jewish wisdom tradition suggest a specifically Jewish Christian audience.

DATE

James was likely written between AD 48 and 52.

PURPOSE

As a general epistle, James was addressed to a broad audience (Jewish Christians) rather than a specific audience (e.g., Christians at Ephesus only). James has an obvious concern to address internal and external difficulties being faced by Jewish Christian congregations. Externally, they were facing trials (1:2), particularly oppression of various sorts exerted by wealthy landowners. It does not appear that the oppression was religious in nature. Internally, it appears that dissension was caused by a lack of self-control (1:13–17), uncontrolled speech, and false teachings that led to a misunderstanding of true religion (1:19–27; 2:1–4; 3:1–8), favoritism toward the wealthy (2:1–13), and selfish ambition that led to murder and criticism (4:1–12). James addressed these issues primarily through the application of principles defined by the Old Testament wisdom tradition.¹

WHY STUDY JAMES?

The book of James is a wonderful companion piece to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. James has a strong ethical emphasis that is consistent with the moral teachings Jesus gave to His disciples. James also mirrors the sometimes harsh denunciations that Jesus spoke against religious hypocrisy. Like Jesus's teachings, the book of James is both a source of exhortation and comfort, reproof and encouragement. Finally, James is known for being extremely practical, yet it contains some of the most profound theological truths of the New Testament.

In James, we find practical wisdom for what it means to live the life of faith.²



OUTLINE OF JAMES

- I. Salutation (1:1)
- II. Surviving Trials and Temptation (1:2–18)
 - A. Facing Trials (1:2–12)
 - B. God and Temptation (1:13–15)
 - C. Demonstrate God’s Good Gifts (1:16–18)
- III. Authentic Religion (1:19–2:26)
 - A. Show Maturity of Character (1:19–21)
 - B. Put Faith into Action (1:22–27)
 - C. Shun Partiality and Favoritism (2:1–13)
 - D. Practice Good Works (2:14–26)
- IV. The Need for Wise Teachers (3:1–18)
 - A. Teachers and Control of the Tongue (3:1–12)
 - B. Teachers and Wisdom from Above (3:13–18)
- V. Peace with God and One Another (4:1–17)
 - A. Pride and Humility (4:1–12)
 - B. Our Will and God’s Will (4:13–17)
- VI. Discipline in the Christian Life (5:1–20)
 - A. The Hazards of Wealth (5:1–6)
 - B. Persevere under Trial (5:7–11)
 - C. Avoid Swearing (5:12)
 - D. Reach Out to God in Prayer (5:13–18)
 - E. Minister to the Wayward (5:19–20)³

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Each week follows a repeated rhythm to guide you in your study of James and was crafted with lots of white space and photographic imagery to facilitate a time of reflection on Scripture.

The week begins with an introduction to the themes of the week. Throughout each week, you'll find Scripture readings, devotions, and beautiful imagery to guide your time.



WEEK 2 DOERS OF THE WORD

JAMES 1:2-4

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes dispersed abroad.

DEVOTION

Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

DAY 1 TRIALS

"It's all going to work out."

Has someone ever used that platitude to try to comfort you in the middle of a frustrating situation? It may have even come from a well-meaning Christian. They were trying to be helpful and give you some hope, but their words felt flat because they were simply not true.

You still love your job. Your dad still passed away. Your friend still hasn't forgiven you. You still have cancer. And you have no answer as to why. If what others have told you isn't true, then what *is* James offers is a different path forward through frustration and pain. A different mindset, too.

When we experience various trials, what should we do to "finisher it a great joy?" How could James say that *God's* trials resemble to *ours*? A reminder of the brokenness of this world?

We lose perspective during trials, but James calls us to remember what we have deep down to be true. These setbacks are, in fact, a purifier of joy. This led to our maturity. Think about it this way: When a 6-year-old doesn't get to see their mom at the exact moment they want it, they throw a fit. But a 40-year-old handles that situation differently. Their attitude isn't dictated by their stomach, even though their experience *feels* like a 6-year-old does. Why? Because they've learned patience. Their experience and perspective allow them realize that another meal will come. Contentment and joy are developed through patience. The 6-year-old lacks maturity.

Because we are followers of Jesus, we have the opportunity to grow through our trials, which will lead to greater maturity and peace in joy.

20 JAMES

Timing of Faith 21

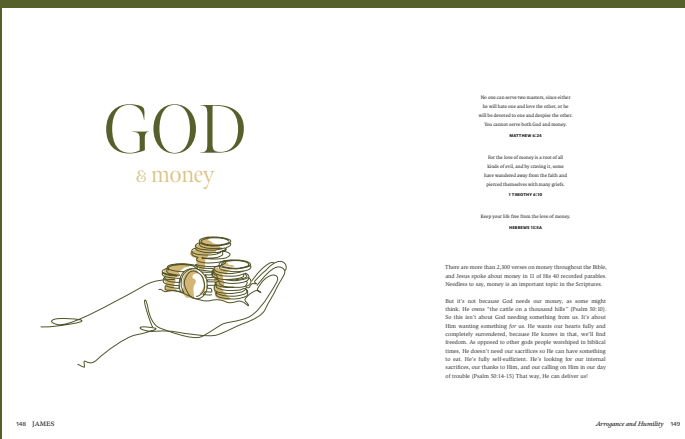
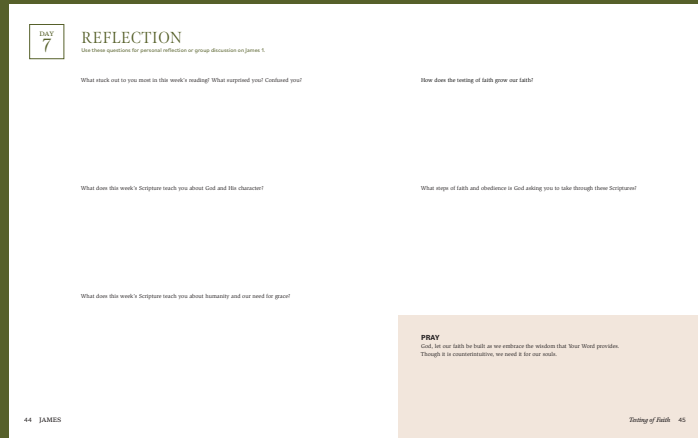
Each week includes five days of Scripture reading, along with a short, devotional thought and three questions to process what you've read.

The Scripture reading is printed out for you with plenty of space for you to take notes, circle, underline, and interact with the passage.



The sixth day contains no reading beyond a couple of verses to give you time to pause and listen to what God has said through the Scriptures this week. You may be tempted to skip this day altogether, but resist this temptation. Sit and be quiet with God—even if it's only for a few minutes.

The seventh day each week offers a list of open-ended questions that apply to any passage of Scripture. Use this day to reflect on your own or meet with a group to discuss what you've learned. Take intentional time to remember and reflect on what the story of James is teaching you.



Throughout each week of study, you will notice callout boxes or supplemental pages provided to give greater context and clarity to the Scripture you're reading. These features will help you connect the story of James to the bigger story of Scripture.

LEADING A GROUP

Each week of study contains a set of questions that can be used for small group meetings. These open-ended questions are meant to guide discussion of the week's Scripture passage. No matter the size of your group, here are some helpful tips for guiding discussion.

PREPARE

REVIEW the Scripture and your answers to the week's questions ahead of time.

PRAY over your group as well as the Scriptures you've been studying. Ask God's Spirit for help to lead the group deeper into God's truth and deeper in relationship with one another.

MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS

We live in a time when our attention is increasingly divided. Try to see your group time as a space and respite from the digital clutter—from scrolling, notifications, likes, and newsfeeds. Commit to one another to give focused time and attention to the discussion at hand and minimize outside distractions. Help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION

A good small group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE IS INCLUDED. Your goal is to foster a community where people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES. Even though you may be "leading" the group, try to see yourself as a participant steering the conversation rather than a teacher imparting information.

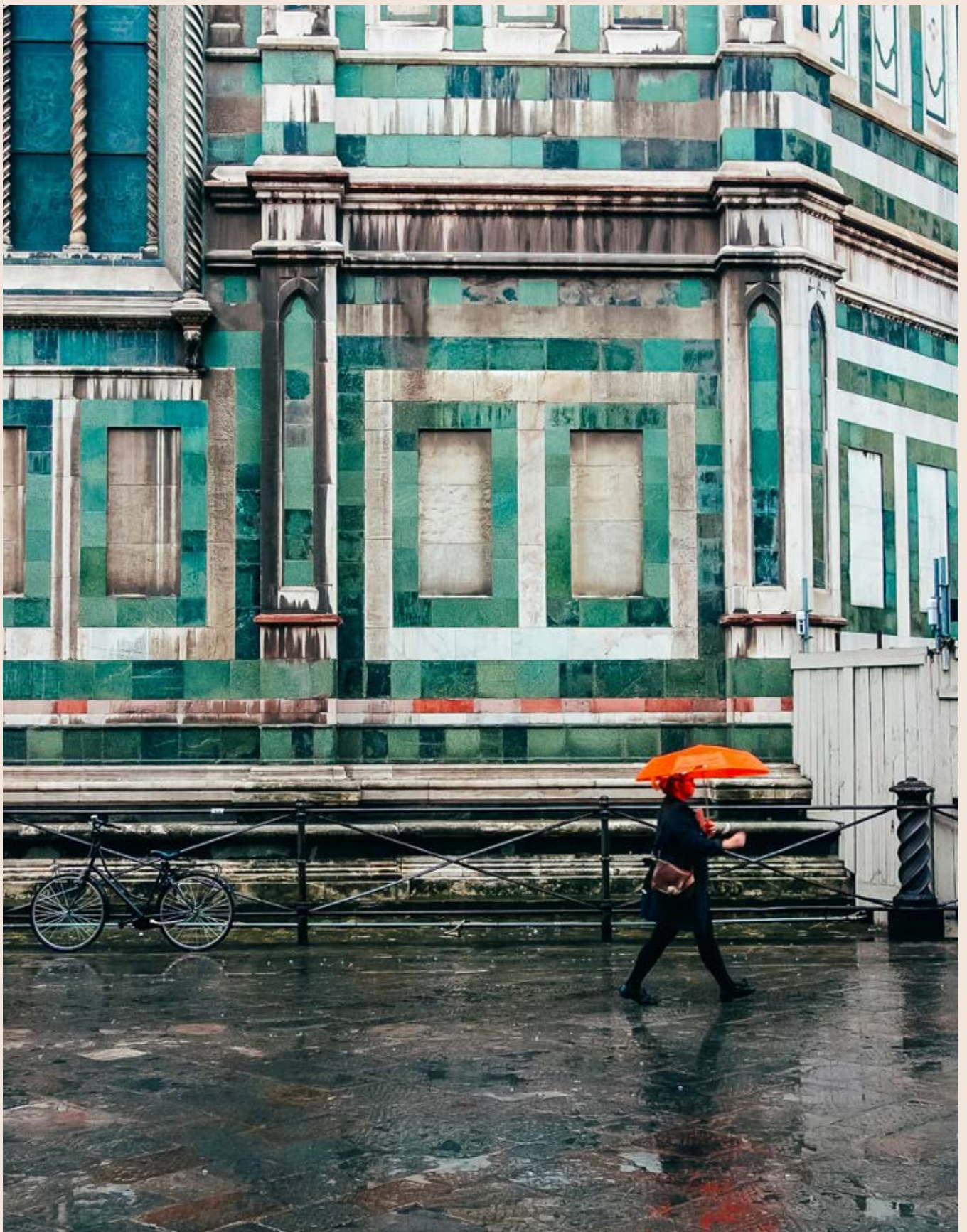
DON'T RUSH. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People may need time, and we should be glad to give it to them. Don't feel like you have to ask all the questions or stay away from questions that aren't included. Be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and to one another. Take your time.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking other people to share when they have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. Conversation stalls when people feel that you don't want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer. Engagement and affirmation keep the conversation going.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. The questions in this study are meant to steer the conversation back to God, His Word, and the work of the gospel in our lives. Opinions and experiences are valuable and can be helpful, but God is the center of the Bible, the center of our story, and should be the center of our discussion. Trust Him to lead the discussion. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

KEEP CONNECTING

Spiritual growth occurs in the context of community. Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Your group will be more enjoyable the more you get to know one another through time spent outside of an official group meeting. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending. Reserve time each week to touch base with individual group members.



WEEK 1

TESTING
OF FAITH

TrialS teach us to be steadfast
and consistent in our faith.

When you hear the word “test,” it may conjure up memories of sweaty palms and an anxious mind as you sat in biology class in high school. Maybe you recall the pit you felt sinking in your stomach when you read that question on a math test you know you didn’t prepare for. Maybe you go straight to the moment your teacher said, “Pop quiz!” and you realized you were nowhere near ready for what was coming.

Test anxiety is real. Up to 60% of students experience test anxiety so severely that it hinders their performance.⁴

When James begins his letter with a test, many of us to revert back to our insecurities and anxieties. But this test is different: It’s open-book, open-note, and you’re free to engage with the God of the universe to answer the questions. You also don’t have to (and shouldn’t) take the test alone. It’s best understood, applied, and completed in healthy, authentic community. It’ll take the rest of your life to complete it, but as you work through it, you’ll find more joy than you could ever imagine.

Throughout life, you will experience trials and adversities that may feel like momentary setbacks, but they’re a part of the test. God allows them so that you can learn to be steadfast and unwavering in your faith.

As you face trials, remember: This is only a test. Your faith will grow as you take it.

JAMES 1:1-4

1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ:
To the twelve tribes dispersed abroad.

Greetings.

TRIALS AND MATURITY

² Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴ And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

DAY
1

TRIALS

“It’s all going to work out.”

Has someone ever used that platitude to try to comfort you in the middle of a frustrating situation? It may have even come from a well-meaning Christian. They were trying to be helpful and give you some hope, but their words fell flat because they were simply not true.

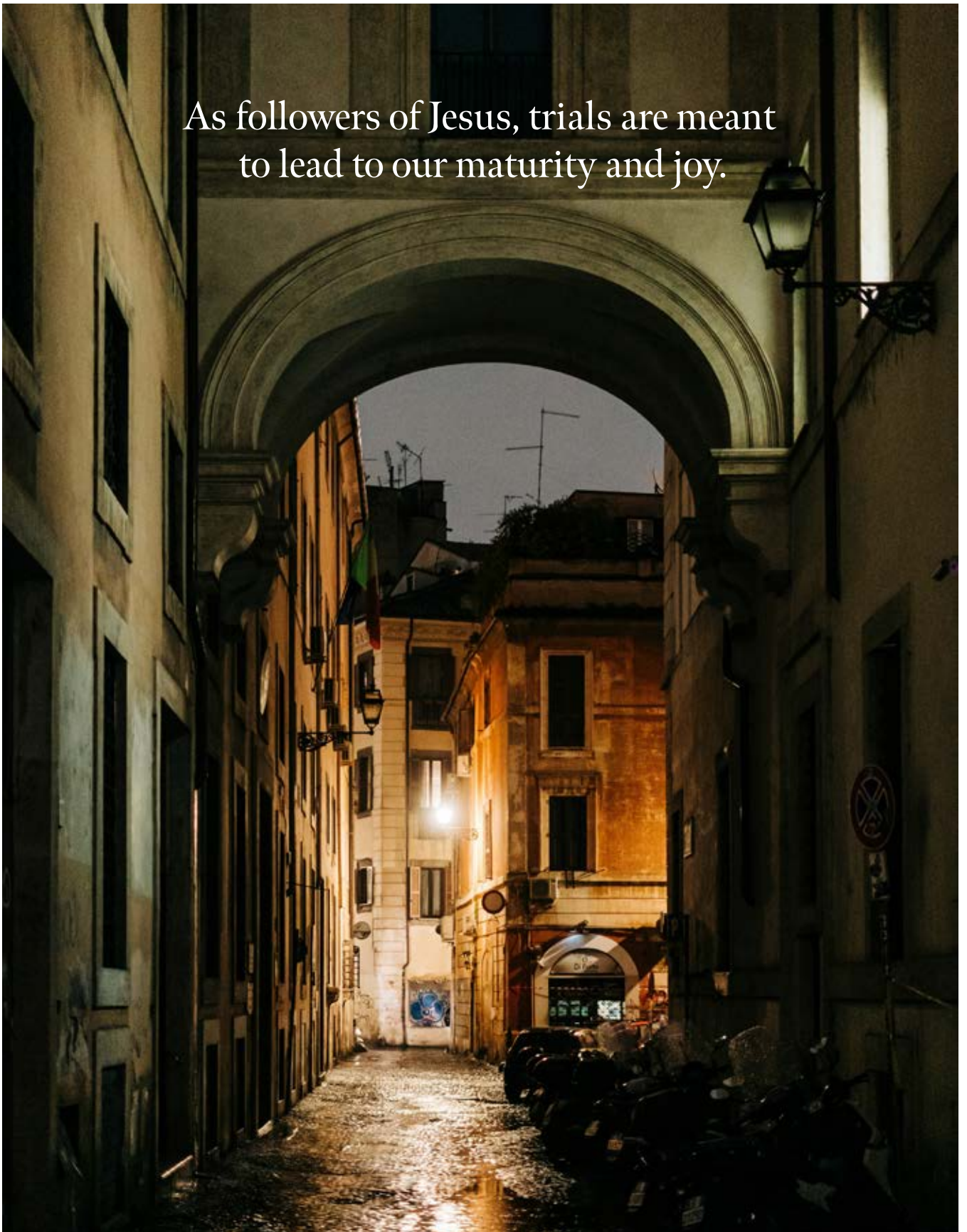
You still lost your job. Your dad still passed away. Your friend still hasn’t forgiven you. You still have cancer. And you have no answer as to why. If what others have told you isn’t true, then what is? James offers us a different path forward through frustration and pain. A different mindset: joy.

When we experience various trials, James exhorts us to “consider it a great joy.” How could James say this? Aren’t trials miserable by nature? A reminder of the brokenness of this world?

We lose perspective during trials, but James calls us to remember what we know deep down to be true: These setbacks are, in fact, a propeller of joy. Trials lead to our maturity. Think about it this way: When a 4-year-old doesn’t get to eat their meal at the exact moment they want it, they throw a fit. But a 40-year-old handles that situation differently. Their attitude isn’t dictated by their stomach, even though they experience hunger like a 4-year-old does. Why? Because they’ve learned patience. Their experience and perspective allow them realize that another meal will come. Contentment and joy are developed through patience. The 4-year-old lacks maturity.

Because we are followers of Jesus, we have the opportunity to grow through our trials, which will lead to greater maturity and result in joy.

As followers of Jesus, trials are meant
to lead to our maturity and joy.



REFLECTIONS

When have you experienced a trial in which you didn't feel any sense of joy?

Based on this passage, how can your mindset shift even if your circumstances remain the same?

What can you do this week to prepare your heart for a future trial?

JAMES 1:5-8

⁵ Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God — who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly — and it will be given to him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith without doubting. For the doubter is like the surging sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being double-minded and unstable in all his ways.

DAY
2

WISDOM

If you could ask God for anything, what would you request? More time? More money? Better relationships? To see a lost loved one again?

If you're in the middle of a difficult season, your requests probably sound different than normal. Instead of your daily rhythms of prayer and gratitude, your tone may be more desperate. You might ask God to supernaturally make it all go away. Maybe you're asking God to let you go back to how things were before _____ happened.

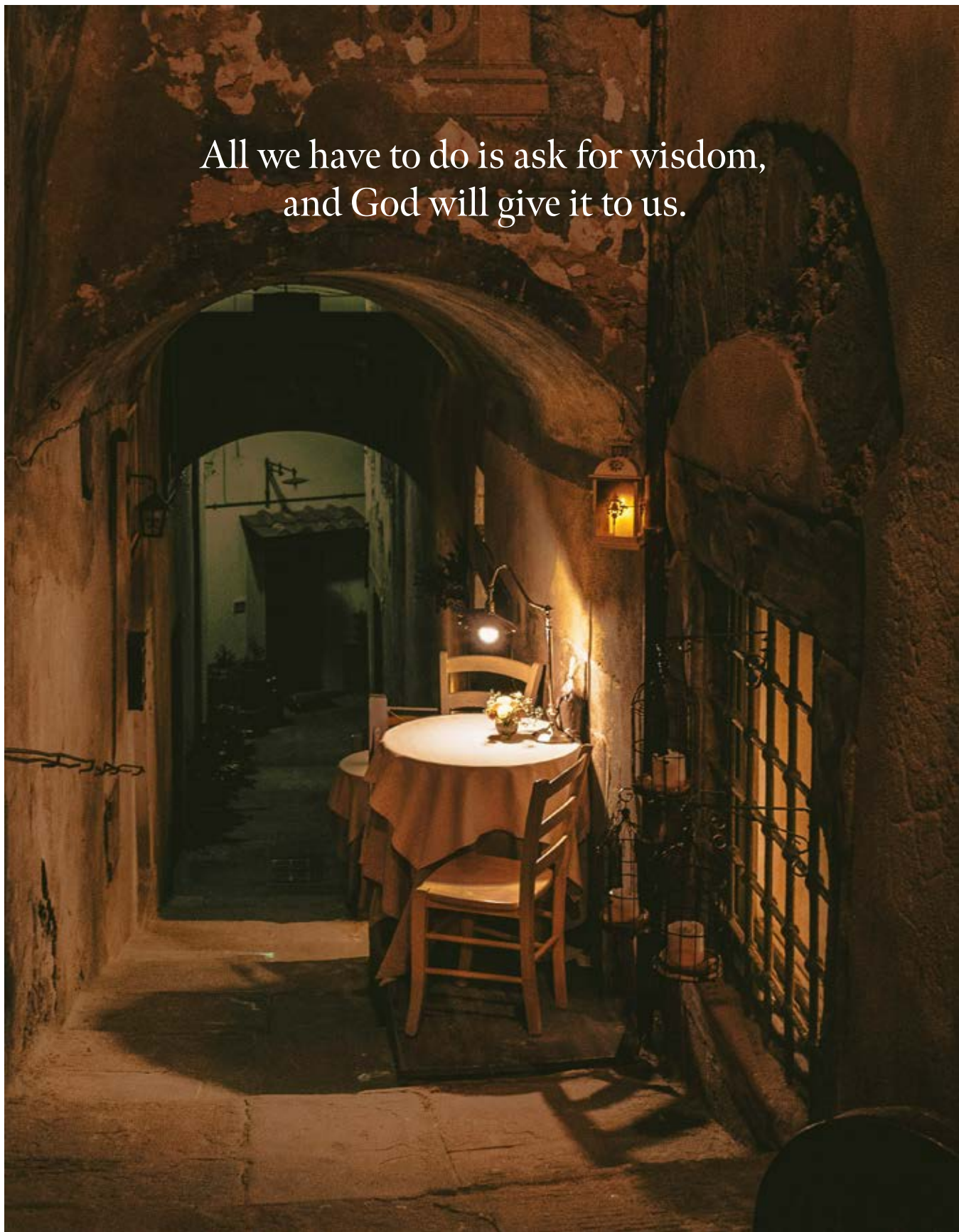
But what if it's unlikely that your situation will change? And even if it does, chances are, you'll soon find yourself in the middle of another no-win moment. This is just a part of life on earth. Job's friend Eliphaz captured the sentiment well: "Humans are born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). In other words, trouble is inevitable.

Since trouble is a guarantee in our broken world, what we need is not a way "out" of our circumstances, but a way "through." We need to gain wisdom to navigate life's uncertainties. The good news is, wisdom is easier to find than we realize.

James reminds us in verse 5 that we only need to ask for wisdom, and God will give it to us. Sometimes what keeps us from gaining wisdom is not that it's elusive but that we are unwilling to ask God for it—out of doubt or stubbornness.

If you ask God for wisdom, He will give it to you "generously and ungrudgingly" (v. 5). Trouble will come, but God has everything we need to navigate through it. If we're willing to put our doubts aside, He is willing to give us the help we seek.

All we have to do is ask for wisdom,
and God will give it to us.



REFLECTIONS

When was the last time you found yourself in a situation you had no idea how to navigate?

Have you ever asked God for wisdom? How did He answer your request?

How does wisdom equip us and prepare us for when doubts arise?

CONNECTING THE STORY

In 1 Kings, Solomon found himself in over his head with his duties as king, and he didn't know what to do. God offered to grant anything he asked for, and after pondering, Solomon requested wisdom. "Give your servant a receptive heart to judge your people and to discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). And God granted his request. To this day, Solomon is known as the wisest man who ever lived.



Who is
JAMES?

There's some disagreement over who James was, but most agree that the author of this letter is the half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem Council, and a leader in the early church. James is identified as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, and Galatians 1:19. Though he was not a follower of Christ during his earthly ministry (John 7:3–5), a post-resurrection appearance convinced James that Jesus is indeed the Christ (Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 15:7). James later led the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9,12), exercising great influence there (Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9).

JESUS'S FAMILY: Our families have a unique vantage point to see inside our lives. Your family has seen you in all possible scenarios—family dinners, walking to school, playing games. They've done the normal activities of life with you. James saw Jesus up close and away from the crowds—and believed.

EARLY LEADER: As leader of the Jerusalem Council, James would've been a crucial voice in the church in Jerusalem that was continuing to wrestle with these new teachings of Jesus. You can see his Jewish influence and desire to influence Jews who were still struggling to believe that this Messiah had the key to life. Though it's technically an epistle, at times, James weaves poetic and wisdom literature into his writing. These would have been familiar literary forms for the Jewish Christians James was writing to, because they were familiar with the Hebrew Bible.

JAMES 1:9-11

⁹Let the brother of humble circumstances boast in his exaltation,
¹⁰but let the rich boast in his humiliation because he will pass away
like a flower of the field. ¹¹For the sun rises and, together with the
scorching wind, dries up the grass; its flower falls off, and its beautiful
appearance perishes. In the same way, the rich person will wither away
while pursuing his activities.

DAY
3

RICHES

The average person works 90,000 hours in their lifetime. Many toil away in an effort to make more money so they can obtain more: fancier cars, bigger houses, the next shiny thing. Others toil away to pass on wealth to the next generation. Yet according to research, that wealth is squandered 70% of the time, depleting from one generation to the next, and is completely gone by the third generation 90% of the time.⁵ In other words, by the time their grandchildren are grown, a grandparent's wealth will have dissipated.

It's easy to find ourselves caught in an endless cycle of discontentment, always wanting the next thing, and we keep running because we've accepted that desire for "more" as normal. The essence of the American dream is that we can have anything we want if we work hard enough, so we just keep working away for our endless wants. The problem is, our wants are temporary. They will pass away the next time something interests us.

James reminds us that we should fix our eyes not on what is temporary but what is eternal (similar to Paul's exhortation in 2 Corinthians 4:18). Nothing material lasts: The houses and cars and *stuff* will one day be gone. But the treasures of God's kingdom are eternal. Invest your time, talent, and treasures in people, not things. Invest in your relationship with God. Investing in people bears an eternal fruit that cannot be quantified in the same way we measure stuff.

James calls us to live in the kingdom Jesus proclaimed (Matthew 5:3-10), where we are more than the sum of our wants. We are blessed as we divest ourselves of what culture tells us we should want and invest in God and people.

James reminds us that we should
fix our eyes not on what is
temporary but what is eternal.



REFLECTIONS

Describe the situation of the person who should boast, according to James 1:9-10.

What parts of your life feel worth boasting about?

How does this kind of boasting cultivate contentment?

JAMES 1:12-15

¹² Blessed is the one who endures trials, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

¹³ No one undergoing a trial should say, "I am being tempted by God," since God is not tempted by evil, and he himself doesn't tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. ¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

DAY
4

ENDURANCE

We all want blessing. Whether people follow Jesus or not, blessing is something we all desire. But do we have the right idea of what it means to be blessed? How does our idea of blessing line up with James? A quick glance at social media reveals that society's understanding of a "blessed" life is quite different than James's perspective.

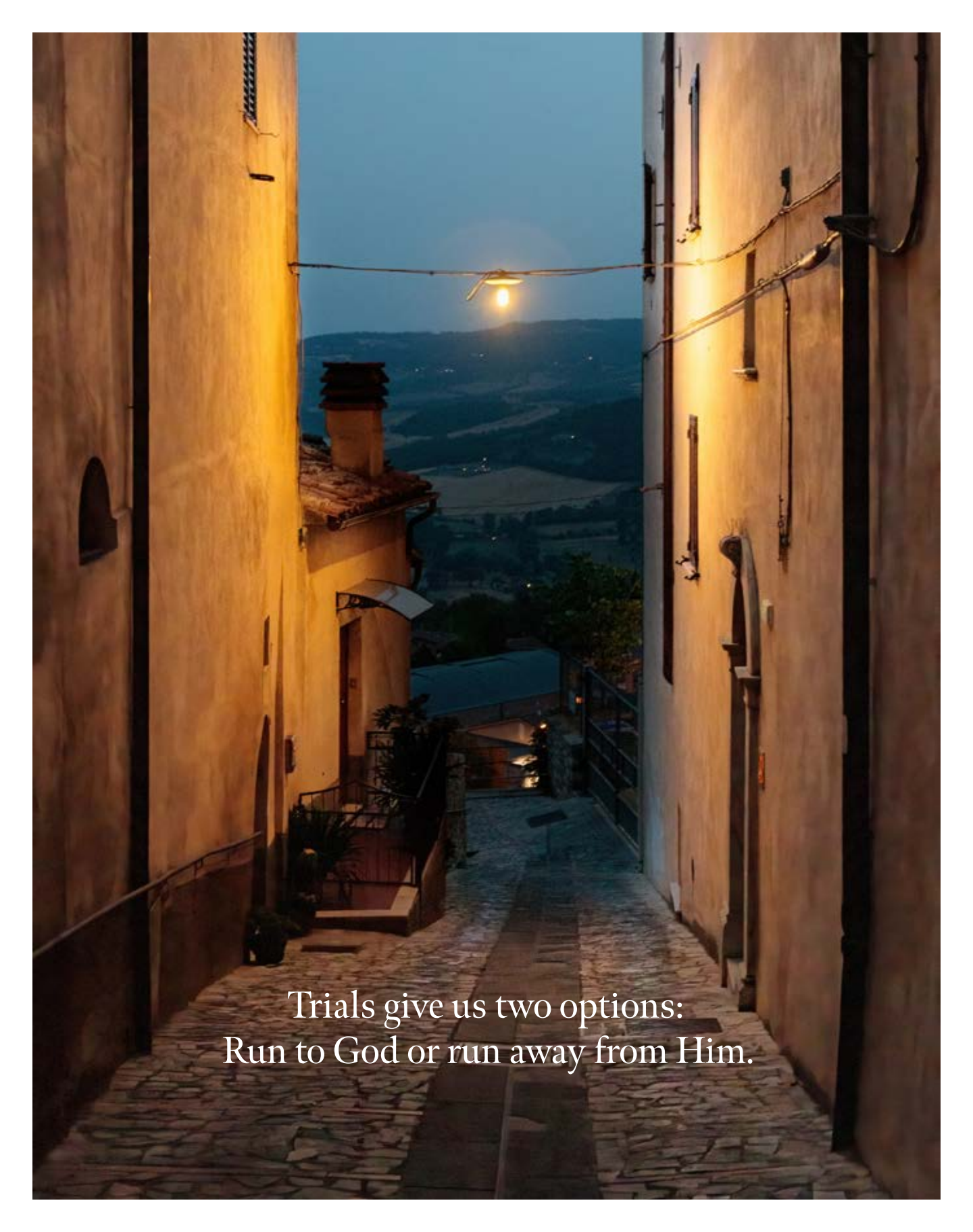
"Blessed is the one who endures trials." Not, "Blessed is the one who avoids trials"—or "gets rich on trials" or "never experiences trials." James calls us blessed when we endure difficulties. So how do we endure? Like an athlete, our endurance grows through daily practice. Practicing faithful forward motion in the face of trials strengthens spiritual muscles, leading to exponential blessing.

Too often, we turn our efforts to pursuing a way that feels less painful rather than enduring through trials. We think that running after our own will leads to relief and fresh life. But unless we have aligned our life to God's will, we will run out of steam in our own trials.

Trials give us two options: Run *to* God or run *away* from Him. One leads to life (v. 12). One leads to death (v. 15).

We run away from God when we blame Him for our temptations and when we give in to them. Though this feels validating in the moment—having someone to blame or a sin to soothe—it ultimately leads us to death. In the middle of a trial, though, it doesn't always feel so clean-cut. Blaming God or feeding our desires feels like the most natural response. But many times, what feels right in the moment is the wrong way to go. Sometimes what's wrong can feel like the right way to step.

Instead of running away from God, run towards Him. Persevere by continuing to run the race ahead of you. Allow God to soothe your soul as you read the Bible, faithfully pray, and pursue community. These might not feel like the most natural steps, but over time, they build up the kind of endurance James says will be produced in us.

A narrow, cobblestone alleyway in a village at dusk. The walls are a warm, yellowish-tan color, illuminated by a single streetlight hanging from a wire. The alleyway leads down a hillside, with a view of a valley and distant hills in the background. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall atmosphere is peaceful and contemplative.

Trials give us two options:
Run to God or run away from Him.

REFLECTIONS

Write about a time when you walked through a “trial” like this passage talks about. What were you thinking and feeling in the middle of it?

If you could have counseled yourself with the insight of this Scripture, how would you have encouraged yourself?

Memorize James 1:12 this week. As you do, ask God to give you the opportunity to apply it to your life or help someone else apply it to theirs.

JAMES 1:19-21

HEARING AND DOING THE WORD

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, ²⁰ for human anger does not accomplish God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

DAY
5

LISTENING

Anger can be effective. Think about how a child responds when their parents yell. What about an employee whose boss snaps? Maybe you remember being yelled at by a teacher in school. Loud, dominating voices provoke an immediate response. Speaking out in anger yields quick behavioral change.

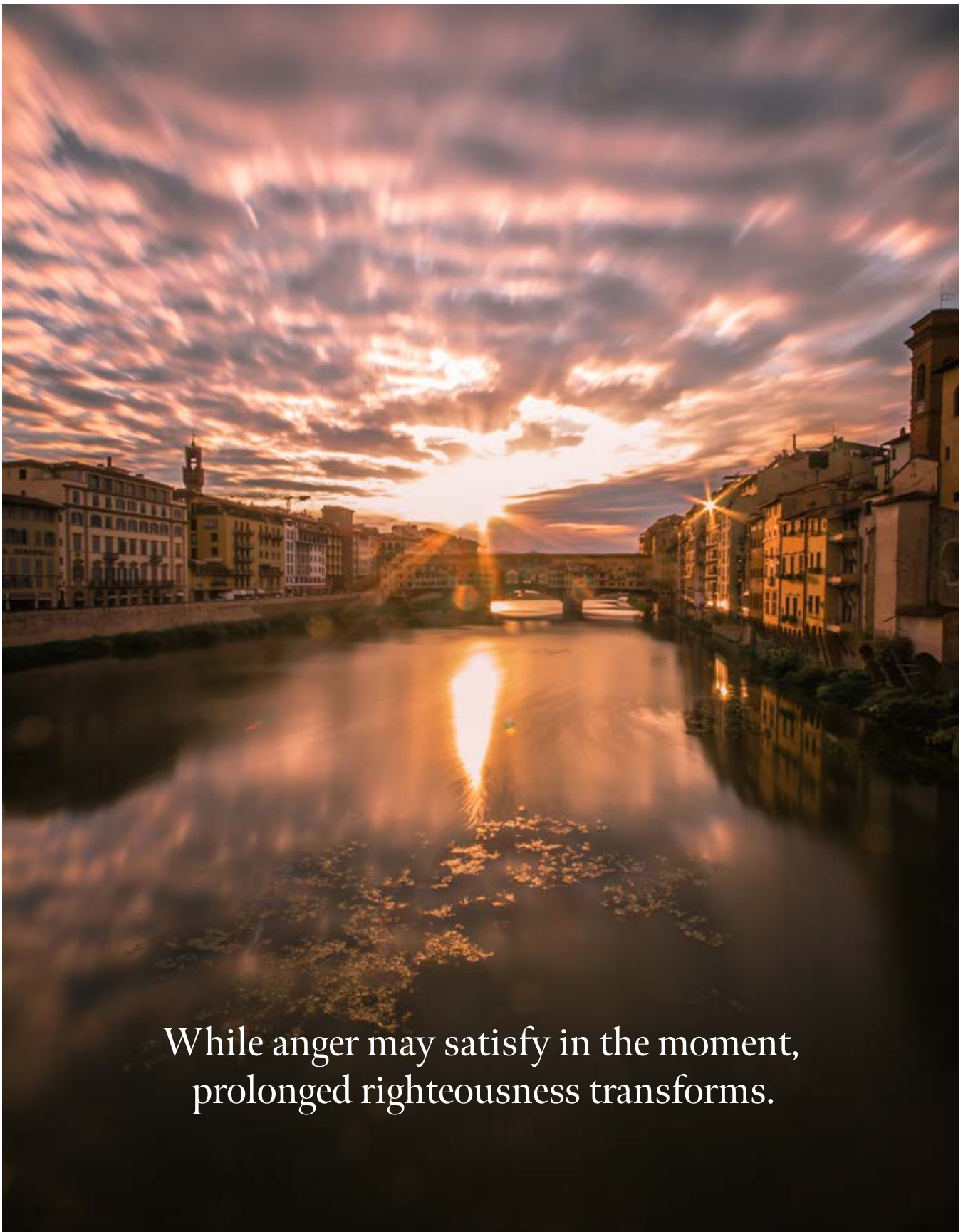
But it doesn't last. Speaking with anger, especially from a position of authority, creates a temporary sense of fear in the receiving party and a temporary sense of control in the offending party. Anger may accomplish the immediate goal of behavior change, but it leaves a wake of hurt that lasts far beyond a clean room or an on-time expense report.

James offers another choice for more positive impact: listening.

Ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus is quoted as saying, "We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we talk." Slowing down to listen gives us the opportunity to gain understanding and empathy. As empathy increases with our understanding of the other side of the story, anger diffuses. When we see someone and their situation more clearly, we can more effectively communicate and affect meaningful change.

However, as with many aspects of obedience, this is difficult. We may feel like anger is something we can't help. But James tells us that we can rid ourselves of anger and all other unhelpful and unrighteous behavior through dwelling on the implanted word, which is able to save our souls (v. 21). While anger may satisfy in the moment, prolonged righteousness transforms.

Receiving the implanted Word of God facilitates the patience we need to create space to listen to others.



While anger may satisfy in the moment,
prolonged righteousness transforms.

REFLECTIONS

According to this passage, how do we fight “human anger” (James 1:20)?

What does it look like to be angry and not sin (see Ephesians 4:26)?

Who might you give permission to keep you in check and hold you accountable as you seek the Spirit of God and "rid [yourself] of moral filth" (James 1:21)?

INSIGHT

The word translated “implanted” in our English Bibles is only used in James 1:21. It means something that is inborn or natural. When we become a Christian and are born again, the Word is born in us and becomes natural to who we are. We simply receive it.

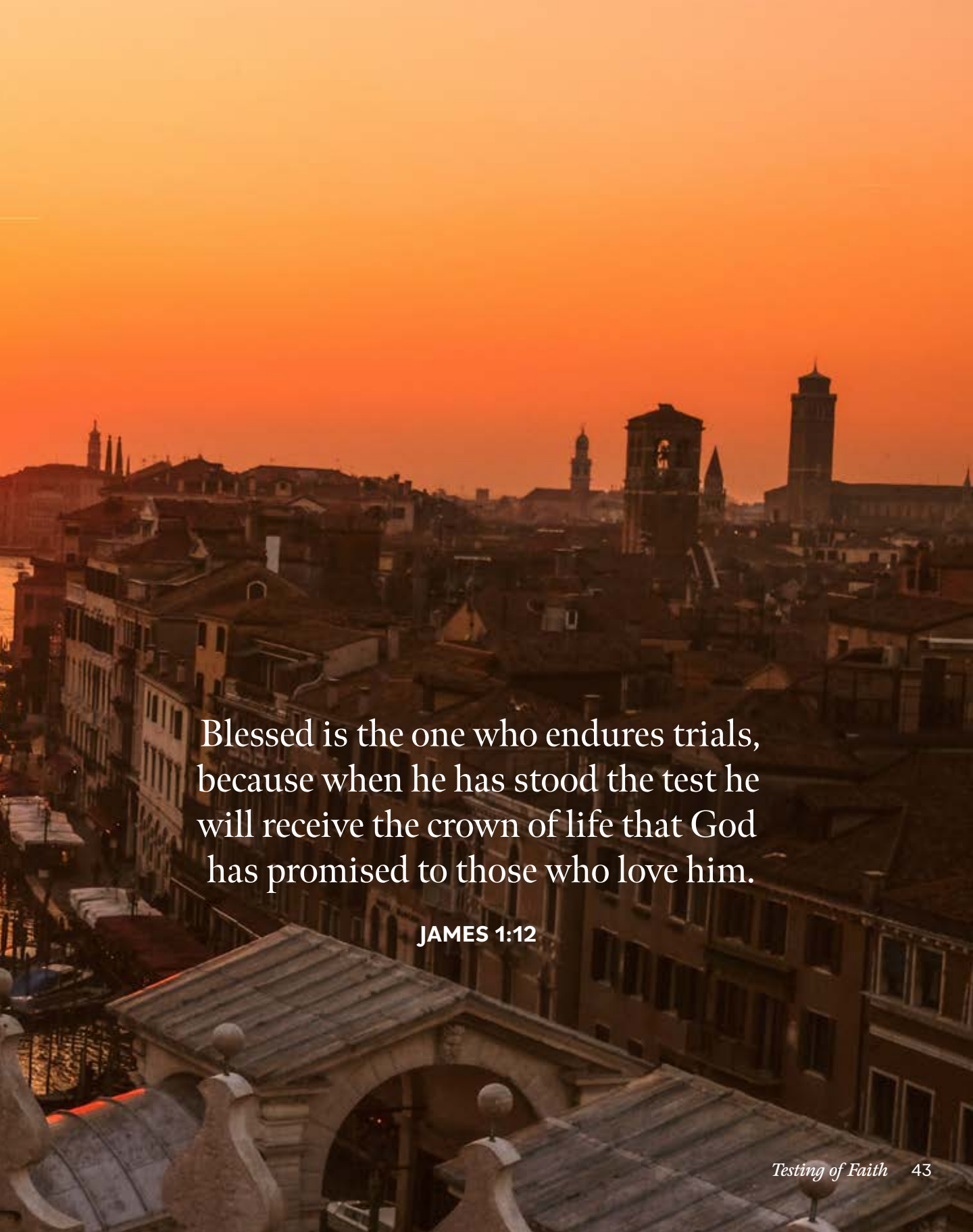
DAY

6

PAUSE & LISTEN

Spend some time reflecting over the week's reading.





Blessed is the one who endures trials,
because when he has stood the test he
will receive the crown of life that God
has promised to those who love him.

JAMES 1:12

DAY
7

REFLECTION

Use these questions for personal reflection or group discussion on James 1.

What stuck out to you most in this week's reading? What surprised you? Confused you?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about God and His character?

What does this week's Scripture teach you about humanity and our need for grace?

How does the testing of faith grow our faith?

What steps of faith and obedience is God asking you to take through these Scriptures?

PRAY

God, let our faith be built as we embrace the wisdom that Your Word provides. Though it is counterintuitive, we need it for our souls.

A reliable source

The 12 apostles enjoyed three years with Jesus, getting to know Him more intimately than any other of His disciples. But there was one man who had spent a lifetime with Him—James, his half-brother. Most scholars agree that he is the author of James.



So who better to offer practical advice on Christian living than the one who had seen it firsthand for decades?

Although James has just five chapters, they are each filled with precious insights for believers to mine and treasure. The letter is educational, convicting, and inspiring, often at the same time. Few other books of the Bible offer such concise guidance on living out our Christian beliefs.

This six-session Bible study is designed to help you:

- Become a doer of the Word and not merely a hearer
- Learn to bridle your tongue and use your words for building others up
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