

GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION

MAY–AUGUST 2025

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Teachable moments

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Edited by Rachel Tranter and Olivia Warburton

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15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Helen Miller is head of research and professional development at Moorlands College and lectures on the College's MA and BA Applied Theology programmes. Helen and her husband Tim are involved in their local church in preaching and sung worship.

Helen Paynter is a Baptist minister in Bristol and serves as tutor in biblical studies at the Bristol Baptist College. She is the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence. She is the author of a number of articles and books, including, most recently, *Blessed are the Peacemakers*.

Johannes J. Knecht (PhD, University of St Andrews) is a lecturer in theology at WTC Theology and specialises in church history and systematic theology. His primary interests are patristics, Christology and trinitarian theology.

Tim Welch is the director of ministerial formation at Bristol Baptist College and tutor in practical theology. He lives in Cheltenham, where he also helps lead Hesters Way Baptist Church in his spare time.

Steve Walton is professor of New Testament at Trinity College, Bristol. He is a retired international volleyball referee and lives in Loughborough with his wife Ali, an Anglican minister, and their Border Terrier, Flora.

Victoria Omotoso is an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter and a visiting lecturer at Sarum College and London School of Theology. Victoria is a writer, speaker and preacher, and is also the curator of *The Shalom Collective*, an online space to encourage people through God's word.

Valerie Hobbs is a linguist at Sheffield University and author of *An Introduction to Religious Language* and *No Love in War: A story of Christian nationalism*. In her spare time, she enjoys writing about the Bible.

Miriam Bier Hinksman is a Church of England curate in the Canterbury diocese. She has written *Perhaps There Is Hope* (Bloomsbury, 2015) and *Reading Hosea: A beginner's guide* (Grove, 2023).

George Wieland is a research fellow at Carey Baptist College, New Zealand, where he formerly taught New Testament and Mission. Prior to that, he and his wife Jo were involved in church and community ministry in Brazil and the UK.

Tanya Marlow is a writer, speaker and occasional pastoral theology lecturer. She specialises in biblical narrative and honest theologies of disability and suffering. Her books include *Those Who Wait*, and you can download her first book for free at TanyaMarlow.com.

The editors write...



Welcome to this new edition of *Guidelines*! There is plenty of challenge and tough thinking on offer in this issue, so we hope that you will approach the readings and reflections ready for God to speak into your mind and heart.

We cover a lot of both the Old and New Testaments in this issue. In the New Testament, we start with 1 Corinthians, where we are confronted with Paul's forceful, firm, yet kind letter to a troubled church. Our recurring three-week series begins with Steve Walton, who reflects on Acts 1–9. Tim Welch takes us through the brief but challenging letter of James, that infamous 'gospel of straw'. Tim helps us to see the pithy wisdom teaching, as well as the breadth of sayings and everyday illustrations that prove accessible and memorable for any age and culture.

We tackle some difficult Old Testament books in this issue. Helen Paynter takes us through the book of Numbers, often maligned as boring or irrelevant, and shows us how it crackles with excitement and depth. Victoria Omotoso helps us examine the book of Lamentations. She argues that the book is a form of protest, as well as a tool for processing the messy emotions of grief, anger and ultimately hope. Finally, Miriam Bier Hinkman guides us through Hosea, another book dealing with complicated emotions and sensitive issues.

George Wieland uses the gospel of Luke to accompany him as he identifies 'teachable moments' for both the disciples and for us today. Tanya Marlow also spends time in the gospels looking specifically at the healing miracles from a disability perspective. Johannes J. Knecht looks at six female images for God in the Old Testament, and explores the fact that scripture applies both male and female creaturely pictures to elucidate something of the beauty of God.

Perhaps the most challenging reflections come from Valerie Hobbs, who examines the theme of war and peace as she exposes the absurdity of war and its roots in greed and arrogance. She highlights the grief and restlessness that all earthly empires inflict, in tension with the hope for peace and justice God offers us both today and in the life to come. This series is deliberately provocative – I wonder what God will say to you through it?

Blessings,

Rachel

Olivia

The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF Ministries
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family it is today.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.*

Helping to pay it forward

As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

'This very generous gift will be hugely appreciated, and truly bless each recipient... Bless you for your kindness.'

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If you've enjoyed and benefited from our resources, would you consider paying it forward to enable others to do so too?

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James: faith-works as God's new community



Tim Welch

The letter of James takes around 10–12 minutes to read in its entirety, and yet we are not to be fooled by the brevity. Here is a collection of pithy wisdom teaching, covering a breadth of sayings and everyday illustrations that prove accessible and memorable for any age and culture. However, the reception of this letter has been sharply contested over the centuries, including the most famous rebuttal by Martin Luther who regarded James as ‘an epistle of straw’. Herein exists the inherent tension within the letter, namely to what extent James’ concentration upon works is the antithesis of the apostle Paul’s major doctrinal emphasis on justification by faith (see 2:24). As we will note, several clues within the letter suggest that James assumes no separation between doctrine and praxis. Good deeds are the fruit of faith; hence these five chapters are regarded as the eminently practical outworking of true faith in God.

That said, James’ letter provides far more than individualistic challenges for personal discipleship. James hits key issues that involve following Jesus together, as God’s new community. In our readings we will consider the discipleship implications of contextual socio-economic inequalities wherever the church exists. Therein James urges readers to live out their faith brightly and counterculturally, with a practical wisdom that is from above (1:5, 3:17). Consequently, the personal and corporate goal is a maturing process whereby we may ‘be complete and whole, lacking in nothing’ (1:4). In this regard, surely James and Paul would agree!

While James restricts mention of the Spirit to one verse (4:5), the meaning of which is unclear, we can safely assume that the Holy Spirit’s help is assumed to help Christians live out the implications of this brief epistle. For the real challenge with James is not the interpretation of the text, but the actual *doing*!

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV. Author references are to works in the ‘further reading list’ on page 54.

1 Joy in trials

James 1

James dives straight in. He is first and foremost ‘a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (v. 1). Whatever other ministry credentials James might have added, perhaps as brother of Jesus or the leader of the church in Jerusalem as some reckon, the all-important status for James is that primarily he is a servant of God. For writer and readers, this same posture as God’s willing and obedient slaves is to be emulated.

Such servanthood is also pertinent to the main thrust of chapter 1, that discipleship must be worked out in real-life contexts where troubles are to be expected as the norm. This has prompted some scholars (such as Moo, p. 25) to assume the letter should be dated in the mid-40s or 50s of the first century, when Jewish Christians were suffering regular famine, heightened injustices and increasing political hostility and danger. While pressing troubles will resonate with many contemporary global readers of James, it forces the question whether our own discipleship curricula assumes ‘various trials’ and includes the advice from James to ‘consider it all joy’ when responding to such painful realities.

Generally, we don’t go seeking out trials, but soon enough tough challenges are likely to come our way. It’s not a case of *if*, but *when*. Here, James links suffering to the process of maturity in the life of a believer, which opens deep mysteries of lived theology. How we respond to painful trials is, in James’ estimation, an opportunity to flex our faith-muscles by persevering. After all, pain is the gift no one wants, yet in God’s economy a secret supply of divine resources is promised: the generous gift of God’s wisdom (v. 5) and the assurance of God’s final crowning commendation (v. 12). The caveat James includes here, that we are to believe and not doubt (v. 6), has caused much consternation if it assumes an absolute and resolute belief. Thankfully, the context of chapter 1 recognises our human propensity to listen and then to quickly forget God’s word. But as servants of God, we must listen, ask God for wisdom and then hold our nerve, as this should lead to action and maturity.

2 The 'partiality' faith test

James 2

Favouritism is a subtle temptation with insidious power. I remember the dynamic when an internationally known celebrity walked into our church and joined us for a few months. The buzz, the quiet whispers – 'look who is sitting over there', 'see their diamond ring' and the question 'why are their sunglasses kept on throughout the service?'. A few rows away sat another person, desperately poor, struggling to emerge from addiction and finding their way selling newspapers on the high street. As a church, whether we liked it or not, we were being presented with the James 2 'partiality' test, concerning what we really believe about others; and what is going on, motivationally, within ourselves.

James makes the contrast between 'pure' religion evidenced by practical mercy to widows and orphans (1:26–27), and the sinful discrimination of showing favouritism to the wealthy (vv. 1–13). God's bias is always to the poor and lowly, demonstrated supremely in Christ's incarnational poverty and the kingdom requirement to be 'poor in the world' (v. 5). Such theological truths are to have a bearing on Christian practice. Consequently, the impact of saving faith must be reflected in the new kingdom life as God's new community.

So this chapter acts as mirror and spotlight to penetrate the depths of our human heart. While celebrating the salvific nature of faith in Christ and the deliverance from the law that gives freedom (v. 12), James forces readers to conduct a self-examination to check there is not a gap between faith and works. In view of the examples James uses, it seems appropriate to check that discrimination and prejudice are not lurking deep behind our verbal statements of faith. He helpfully reminds us that salvation is not just a privatised spiritual or religious experience; rather, the implications are also to be corporate and holistic, involving clothes, hunger, shelter and meeting the needs of others (v. 16). How practical and how like Jesus (Matthew 25:34–45)!

With no dichotomy between a proclamatory and social gospel, the proof of true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ must always result in faith-works. With Old Testament examples of Abraham and Rahab to boot, James nails his point: 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' (v. 24).

3 Oral care

James 3

The human tongue in an adult typically weighs around 50–60 grams. Visually, the tongue is not attractive to look at; yet this diminutive muscular organ in the mouth has the gigantic potential either for extensive good or for vast damage. With parallels found in the wisdom teaching of Proverbs, both ‘death and life are in the power of the tongue’ (Proverbs 18:21). Our words will ultimately reflect whether our wisdom is ‘from above’ or ‘earthly, unspiritual, devilish’ (James 3:15).

Here James starts this section with a sharp warning for any of us who are teachers or aspiring teachers (v. 1), probably aiming this missile at church leaders and teachers. Thereafter, he broadens out his challenge to all disciples of Jesus. After all, everyone faces similar struggles to tame and control their tongue. Although it is uncomfortable to dwell on the explicit reference to the responsibility teachers have for guarding their words more carefully, we note the pivotal role we each have. Whether we are leading churches, preaching, at home, teaching discipleship groups, leading children, running youth and family ministries, teaching in theological education or any other sector for that matter, our opportunity to influence others through our word output is massive. A contemporary application of James’ point also challenges our use of social media, as online influencers or simply posting comments and opinions to those who follow us. James soberly reminds all that we will ‘face stricter judgement’ (v. 1).

Then, like a preacher using three illustrations, James ratchets up the challenge, showing how small things can have proportionately greater impact: think about the horse’s bit, the ship’s rudder and the spark that ignites a forest fire (vv. 3–6). Each example requires careful handling and control, otherwise the impact can be devastating. Similarly with the use of our tongue, which according to James is untameable (v. 7).

James thankfully includes realism that we all ‘make many mistakes’ (v. 2) with our words. He also amplifies Jesus’ point, that ‘what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles’ (Matthew 15:18). So, when reading James 3:10–18, think about how the doctor asks us to stick out our tongue to assess our inner health. Let’s seek true wisdom from God to enhance our spiritual health, with less duplicity of speech and more wise words of peace and righteousness.

4 War and peace

James 4:1–12

Having just accentuated the virtues of peacemaking at the end of chapter 3, James then asks the rhetorical question: where do conflicts and disputes originate (v. 1)? The reality of divisive church life in the first century was like the fragmented relationships in our contemporary church scene. So the militarist language James uses is striking and forceful (vv. 1–5), exploring the central issue about what constitutes the root causes for such bitter divisions among Christians.

While the typical human response in any conflict will often blame the other party, James places the fault squarely with us personally and the ‘cravings’ and self-desires that war within each of us (v. 1). Like a doctor’s diagnosis, there is both bad news and good news to report here. The bad news is the problem hidden in the private realm of our inner attitudes, that if we harbour selfish and sinful attitudes to others, we are deemed guilty of murder. Jesus said the same in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:21–25). Alongside this stark diagnosis there is, however, a trace of good news which reminds readers that a supply of God’s grace remains readily available within each conflict. Things could be solved by prayer, yet ‘you do not have because you do not ask’ (v. 2).

Here, James takes us back to our human predicament, that we so easily ask God with wrong or mixed motives, which have more to do with satisfying our agenda than God’s reconciling purposes. Rather than regarding God as akin to a divine slot-machine, the encouragement here is for us to eliminate any spiritual adultery or double-mindedness (vv. 4, 8). While this section prompts honest self-inspection to ascertain if our inner desires are truly being brought openly to God, the pledge of ‘all the more grace’ (v. 6) offers tremendous hope and encouragement as the antidote to our human predicament.

In a battle zone there’s no room for complacency or compromise. Similarly, the instructions in verses 7–12 add further encouragement that humility before God and others is not a passive spirituality; rather, it demands decisive action. Here, several explicit steps are listed for our attentive response, significantly centred around us taking the first step to ‘draw near to God, and he will draw near to you’ (v. 8). This seems an appropriate place for us to start today.

5 Wise wealth and time management

James 4:13—5:6

Planning is not negative or sinful. That said, the next topic on James' list of discipleship wisdom confronts the way followers of Jesus are prone to conduct business with flawed priorities. This links to the earlier stark warning, that 'friendship with the world is enmity with God' (4:4). James bluntly reminds readers of the insidious sin of presumption that can frame a day, month or year (v. 13) if we think we are in control of our own destiny. Although such planning may seem wise, if our plans fail to include God's perspective, we are exposed here as self-confident and self-deceptive. I remember a colleague regularly challenging us, 'Why do we as Christians so often live as functional atheists?', with a split between the sacred and secular spheres of our lives.

Herein lies an uncomfortable challenge, that making plans for our careers, promotions, housing, schooling, church, ministry – or whatever – should all be held lightly with the perspective that our life is like a 'mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes' (v. 14). While taking diary bookings and making commitments for months or a year ahead may boost self-identity and a need to be needed, James is on hand with two vital words that must always be remembered: *God willing!* ('if the Lord wishes', v. 15). This recognises our ultimate dependence when planning is always to be framed with humility, as we defer our agendas to God's will and purposes.

As a teenager, I remember how two letters were often uttered at the end of the church notices: 'D. V.' At the time I thought this was weird, and it was never explained; but later I discovered it was code for the Latin, *Deo Volente*, meaning 'God willing'. The intention was a right and proper recognition to comply with James' instructions that 'if the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that' (v. 15). Just dropping the letters 'D. V.' in at the end of sentences implied 'D. V.' operated like a superstitious version of crossing your fingers or saying, 'Touch wood.' Instead, James here urges a much higher view of God from the outset, that truly embodies the wisdom Jesus taught about how to make plans and view wealth management for the genuine benefit of others in the cause of justice (5:1–6; and see Luke 12:16–21).

6 Patient, prayerful perseverance

James 5:7–20

These final and densely arranged verses of James' letter are directed to many Christians who were the recipients of the injustices against workers and harvesters just referenced (5:4). Like symmetrical bookends, James returns to his theme of fortifying God's people when experiencing trials of many kinds (1:2–3), with the clarion call for persevering patiently, even though they were suffering dreadfully (v. 10). In context, these are references to brutal realities experienced in everyday life, with no end in sight. Here James calls for a worldview that is possible only with the eyes of faith, namely, to await the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 7–9) and to persevere in believing prayer (vv. 13–18).

This forces us to ask personal and searching questions of our own faith and discipleship, especially if or when we go through prolonged periods of personal suffering. James obviously decided some examples would bolster the case, so let's briefly consider the illustrations given for our personal application and eschatological hope:

- 1 The farmer – who is waiting for 'the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains' (v. 7). As we endure trials, what fruit might God be cultivating in us and through us?
- 2 The Old Testament prophets – 'who spoke in the name of the Lord' (v. 10). Here's a challenge to remember those who have gone before us, who remained faithful to the end, while leaving final outcomes to God.
- 3 Job – famous for his patience in the face of devastating loss and affliction (v. 11). Job's honest struggles and questions eventually culminated in his final statement of faith: 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you' (Job 42:5).

Job's example prompts James to challenge our use of words when going through trials, in a variety of contexts. These link the control of our tongue (3:1–12) with unequivocally truthful speech (v. 12), praying, singing (v. 13), confessing (v. 16) and expressing concern that goes after anyone who wanders from the truth (v. 19–20). Significantly, all these examples involve the impact of our personal speech within the relational life of our Christian community. That's how faith is to be worked out as God's new community.

Guidelines

The baseline for James' short letter suggests it is written by someone who has spent considerable time with Jesus, fully absorbing the teaching of the sermon on the mount (Matthew 5–7). As we have noted, James' direct punchy style relates to 'ordinary' experiences of everyday life, where personal theology and formation occurs. He makes the default assumption that recipients will face troubles; such are the realities of following Jesus then or now. The question is whether trials and suffering become stumbling blocks or stepping stones for growth and maturity of our faith.

Therein is a further angle in James' letter, that personal discipleship is never privatised solely for selfish gain. Our faith and holiness should always impact others with community benefit. Even the practicalities of our diary planning, using our assets and how we deal with conflict are to be translated into actions that benefit others, particularly the most vulnerable (1:27).

So, let's use this letter to enable a personal and practical spiritual health-check. In view of James' letter, reflect on the following aspects of your life and faith development:

- Draw three dials to depict the dashboard of your life – and indicate where you would gauge your recent (a) patience, (b) perseverance and (c) anger levels.
- Conduct a 'tongue' inspection – think about the quality of your words, and how you are speaking of others, privately and in public, for good or ill.
- Look at your diary and bank statements – where do they show your agenda blending with God's will and kingdom purposes?
- Think about prayers offered in faith (5:15) – how daring is your prayer life?

James reassures us that 'if any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you' (1:5). This enables the faith-works of God's new community.

FURTHER READING

J. Ayodeji Adewuya, *An African Commentary on the Letter of James: Global readings* (Cascade, Wipf and Stock, 2023).

Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Eerdmans, Apollos, 2000).

Alec Motyer, *The Message of James: The tests of faith* (IVP, 1985).

A unique Bible reading resource offering in-depth study notes written by a diverse contributor team, *Guidelines* is the perfect tool to help you interpret and apply the biblical text confidently in your context. Each issue covers four months and is structured in weekly units, broken into six sections, with an introduction giving context and a final application section.

'I find **Guidelines** so helpful, full of insight and depth. The challenges are also helpful, and looking outside the box of a particular stance is so refreshing.'

'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'



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