

The Epistle of James

LESSON
ONE

Introduction to James Discussion Forum



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The Epistle of James

Lesson One: An Introduction to Joshua

Discussion Forum

With

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Question 1:

How significant is it that James introduces himself in his letter as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” rather than as Jesus’ brother?

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

I love the way that James opens his letter... He’s Jesus’ brother, but he introduces himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I think it’ll carry weight with the apostolic church for a couple of reasons. One, that is, he’s Jesus’ brother, and people could have probably seen the progression in his life where he goes from not even believing who Jesus is and being upset at his ministry to being willing to die for it and lose his life for it a little bit later, which he does. And he’s a leader in the church, but yet, he doesn’t focus on that status as a point of glorification, or to try to glorify himself. He identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He’s not putting himself above anybody else, but he’s uplifting Christ and recognizing that he’s more than just a human brother, but he’s the Lord and Savior of the world, of everyone. And so, it orders that relationship, with the first priority is a relationship with Christ as our Lord and then his brother.

Dr. Jimmy Agan

It’s pretty important that James is known as a brother of Jesus, a couple of things that that implies in the context of the early church. It’s a culture in which kinship relationships are very important, and so James’ testimony about Jesus and his teaching would carry weight in that kind of culture where kinship relationships weighed more than they might in the modern world. Another way in which this is important is that ... James had a reputation for being a man of piety and prayer, and so kind of an up-close study of the kind of impact that knowing Jesus has on someone’s life. In that way, you see also something of humility. And in a culture where kinship relationships mattered so much, it’s interesting that James doesn’t play that up as he opens the letter. He says simply, “I’m a servant of God and of the Lord

Jesus Christ.” He doesn’t take advantage of the fact that he’s Jesus’ brother. He doesn’t seem to be throwing his weight around, and in that regard, it seems that James probably learned a lesson very well from his brother Jesus. Jesus taught in Luke 8:21 that his mother and brothers were those who hear the word of God and do it. And certainly, if you read the book of James, you understand that this man learned that lesson — that hearing the word and doing it matters more — and it seems it mattered more to James, than identifying himself as the brother of Jesus.

Dr. Michael Kennison

When you look at the way James introduces himself in the book, “James, the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ,” you see nothing there of his brotherly relationship to the Lord Jesus. He, in fact, seems to avoid that connection. It does seem to me that there is a good reason for that. We read in John 7 that none of Jesus’ brothers believed in him during the course of his earthly ministry. None of them, including James, followed him. And James himself was not converted until the resurrection where Jesus appeared to him and apparently very quickly changed in heart. But all of this is completely eliminated from James’ introduction of himself. And nevertheless, he simply writes his name, assuming that all the world that received that letter would still know who he was. So, he didn’t put much stock in his human title himself. At the same time, it does seem to me that the early church paid attention to who he was because of how quickly he rose up through the ranks. He was recognized as a pillar of the Jerusalem church. When Peter was released from prison, he said, “Tell James and the brothers too that I’ve been released.” And so, we know that he was very early recognized as a leader. He was pretty clearly in leadership in Acts 15, when he helped to write that letter that went out to the entire church... Now, here’s what I think. I think, in spite of the fact that James had this pedigree, human pedigree, in our own experience when we think of one another, we don’t think of those things as commonly as we think of what we see in each other in terms of spiritual depth. So, James, who is known as a man of prayer, so that his knees were calloused from his prayer life, James who had a zeal for the law, James who cared for his parishioners, cared for the church with great passion, it seems to me that those spiritual qualities had much more to do with the church’s reception of his leadership than any human pedigree that we might name.

Question 2:

What kind of weight would James’ brotherly relationship with Jesus carry in the apostolic church?

Rev. David I. M. Lewis

I think it’s probably very likely that many people would have looked at James’ relationship with Jesus, that they were, I think, blood-brothers, half-brothers, that James was one of the four sons of Mary that she bore to her husband Joseph, that people would have thought that, well, this relationship is very unique, and it would have given this man a special prominence in the early church. And we know that

James ... was the leader of the Jerusalem church, it appears, after Peter and the other apostles began to extend their ministry from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and then eventually outside of Palestine. James was the guy who emerged, as the leader of that church, and it could well be it's because he was the brother of Jesus. However, what's really important, I think, for James, is not so much that brotherly relationship, because — this then should be interesting to you — is that James did not believe in Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry. So, in John 7, John, the author of the gospel, explicitly says, "For even his ... brothers did not believe in him." Later we see Mary and the brothers with the apostles in Acts 1, so they're with the Twelve. And so something happened from the time of Jesus' ministry until the beginnings of the church in Acts 1, and what that something appears to be is that Jesus, after his resurrection, revealed himself to his brother. This is revealed in 1 Corinthians 15 where Paul gives a catalog of the witnesses of the resurrection. He throws in this guy named James, who doesn't seem to be James, one of the two apostles. This is James... When Paul mentions James, usually it's James the brother of Jesus... I think James sees himself properly in relationship to Jesus, that post-resurrection, Jesus is his Lord, his Savior. I think this is the most important thing James would say about Jesus: is not, "We grew up together in the same house," but, "He died for me. He rose for me. And he called me to faith, and it's as a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ that I now address all of you other servants of the Lord Jesus Christ." And so, it could very well be that people in the church thought of James' relationship to Jesus as, you know, their familial relationship, as the thing that gave him authority, but James himself, I think, would very humbly say, "No, my authority comes from the fact that I too am one who have been called to faith in Jesus through the gospel, and it is as such a person, as your fellow believer, as someone, you know, charged by God to preach and teach the word, this is my unique authority that I come to you now. And so, James would say, "You don't have to listen to me because I'm the brother of Jesus. Listen to me because I, like you, am one who has been called to the gospel, and what I'm telling you is God's word, not the word of Jesus' half-brother."

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

So we tend to think that James' relationship with his brother — that James is the brother of Jesus — would be a really big deal because of that special familial relationship, but what we find actually in the New Testament is that, while that's mentioned, what James is really known for is his wisdom and his leadership abilities... That's what sets him apart, is that he has been appointed by Christ for this work, for this duty. And so, what James really is known for is particularly his wisdom and the way in which he is able to apply the teaching of Christ to the needs of the church at the present moment.

Dr. Peter Walker

James is always referred to in the book of Acts as the brother of the Lord, the Lord's brother. And it's fair to imagine this brotherly relationship which he had with Jesus would have been an important part of how people viewed James. I think it probably gave him some of the authority, which he did have. We know from later church tradition that after James died, and they were trying to find someone who'd be in

charge of the Jerusalem church, that they actually were still seeking for members of Jesus' wider natural family, if you like, and I think a man called Simon became the bishop, or the leading Christian, in the Jerusalem church. So, family obviously meant quite a bit to that first generation. "This was someone who was really part of Jesus' family. Let's have him as one of our authority figures in the Jerusalem church." So, I think it is an important part of James' authority. It's interesting, isn't it, that unlike the other apostles, this one, we know, was not actually a believer at the time when Jesus began his ministry. According to the Synoptic Gospels, he didn't believe in Jesus' message and then is converted, if you like, when he meets the risen Jesus, according to 1 Corinthians 15. So, when they were looking for a replacement apostle, when Judas departs the scene, they're looking for someone who's been, as it were, with Jesus from the beginning, and they don't include James or any other of the members of the family. So, that's interesting that at that stage, perhaps, he didn't quite qualify because, although he had been around from the beginning, he hadn't been a believer from the beginning. But I think after that was got through, I think soon it became a natural thing to ask him to be in charge of the Jerusalem church... And we see that from Galatians 2 when Paul visits and sees Peter, John and James there in Jerusalem, and James has now assumed third place in charge of the Jerusalem church. And I think that continues in the book of Acts.

Question 3:

Why is it important to know something about the Jewish background of James' audience when interpreting this letter?

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

Well, one of the things that's important with, really, every Bible book is knowing the audience, because it's very similar to listening to one end of a phone conversation — you can hear the one end, but then you kind of have to guess what's being said, or what's being asked — what questions are they answering in the book? And so ... it's helpful to know the Jewish background of James' audience. He opens up in the second part of verse 1 saying he's addressing the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, and so there are Jewish believers that are throughout. And as you read through the letter, you can see the references there to suffering, and so it's in the context of people that are going through suffering. And so, that makes more sense. Or, also, much of what James does is give imperatives — do this, do this — and there's not a lot so much of a background of the Old Testament, and that's probably because he's assuming that they're coming with the knowledge of the Old Testament already. And so, he feels like he can come with the imperatives because he's assuming they already have the indicatives, like, "This is what you do. This is how you live out this Jewish Christian faith now, that you have in the suffering context that you're in."

Dr. Jimmy Agan

If you really want to understand the book of James, it's very important to know that the first readers had grown up Jewish, and they had converted to Christianity. And so, that means that the first readers of this book would have been intimately familiar with the Old Testament characters that James mentions: Job, Elijah toward the end of the book, Abraham and Rahab in chapter 2. James' audience would have known the full story, the full context, all the background. So he just needs to briefly mention a story and can assume all kinds of knowledge, because his readers would have grown up knowing the Scriptures. The other thing we recognize is James really highlights the importance of caring for the poor and mercy toward those in need. Almsgiving and care for the poor was a tremendous emphasis in the Jewish community, so it makes perfect sense that James would be driving home that emphasis for his readers as well. Maybe the most important thing, though, is how staggering the claims that James makes about Jesus would be since he's writing to a Jewish audience. Some readers look at James and they say, "There's not enough Jesus in this book. He only mentions Jesus a couple of times." But if you think about the fact that his audience was Jewish, and he opens the letter by referring to himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ — there it is, Jesus is "Lord," and we mention him right in parallel with God — for a Jewish audience, that's blasphemy, unless it's a Jewish audience that's come to be convinced that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. And so then, James opens chapter 2 by referring to his readers as "believers in our Lord of glory, Jesus Christ." And again, that's going to strike a Jewish audience, a Jewish background, as blasphemous, unless in fact these are readers who had come to be convinced that Jesus is the exalted, resurrected, ascended Lord and the Son of David, the Messiah. And so, when we hear those references, even though they're brief, they are so weighty because we understand how risky they would be in a Jewish background and environment. So, James is really going out of his way to affirm what Christians believed about Jesus.

Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs

Well, the question of interpreting James by realizing the Jewish nature of his audience is kind of an interesting question, actually, because it's a circular thing. Strictly speaking, we know nothing about James' audience other than what he calls them and how he appeals to them; so the fact that he calls them "the tribes of the diaspora." Of course, that's a very Jewish thing to say. Literally, the tribes of the diaspora would be the Jewish peoples who have been scattered after the Babylonian exile. But most scholars think that James is using that kind of metaphorically, that these are the believers who have been scattered, perhaps even scattered as the result of the persecution that arose when another James, the son of Zebedee, was martyred in Acts 12. So, he uses Jewish language to talk about them. He appeals to the Old Testament frequently as he's teaching them and exhorting them. So, the fact that his audience is Jewish is something that we infer from the letter itself. I think it's reasonable. Most people agree. So then you go back, and you think, okay, this is an audience that knows the Old Testament, that believes it, and that hold that the Messiah Jesus is the one who fulfills all of those promises and all of those

institutions. And so, again, it's just, "Okay, put on my Old Testament ears, put on my Old Testament eyes as I'm reading the letter James."

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

So, in a lot of New Testament books, it's really important to know the Jewish context, the circumstances surrounding the letter, the Roman context. You want as much information as possible about the background of the letter, because that helps you interpret it. If we had more information about what was going on at Corinth, we'd have a better handle on what Paul is telling the Corinthians in those two letters. That's the normal way we operate. But James is a slightly different kind of letter. It's actually written to a very broad audience, and it's not written to solve a particular theological problem. It's not written to address perhaps a heresy or a behavioral issue in one particular church. Rather, it's given to give instruction, general instruction relevant for all Christians — all Jewish Christians, all Gentile Christians — that they can use in their daily life to become mature, complete, perfect, lacking in nothing. That's what James is trying to do. So it's what we call — to talk about genre — it's what some have called a "secondary" letter. It's not written to solve an immediate situation or an immediate problem. So, when you consider that kind of letter, the context is important — knowing how Jews thought about this kind of thing, what was going on in these churches, what types of things they struggled with... So, the best thing that you can study to get a sense of what James is talking about is not so much historical background, but rather to look at the words of Jesus, to look at the teaching that Jesus offers in his context, to read and really appropriate the Old Testament, particularly Old Testament wisdom literature. And if you've done those two things, if you feel you've got a good beat on those two things, start pulling out various wisdom literature in the Second Temple period. Those are the kinds of contexts that are most important for the audience of James.

Question 4:

If we pray and ask God for wisdom, how can we be sure that the decisions we make will come from God's wisdom and not from ourselves?

Dr. Ryan O'Leary

So, if we pray and ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, and we want the assurance that it's from wisdom and not from ourselves, I think there's multiple things that we should consider and look at. Number one is, as we go forward, do we have Christ's peace in our heart? We're supposed to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Another thing I think we need to look at is, what is happening? How are we living in relationship to the Word of God? Are we honoring God's Word? Are we living in submission to God's Word? And another thing I think we need to look at is what are people seeing within the body of Christ? But there's a Proverb that says "there is wisdom in the counsel of multitudes," and so as we walk in fellowship of other Christians in the

church, they can speak into our lives, and they can help us tell whether or not it's truly from wisdom or came from ourselves.

Rev. C.S. Tang

I think when we ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, the Holy Spirit first of all would drive us to his Word and give us understanding on his Word. So, that's the first thing we must do, because we must not rely solely on the human heart, your inclination, your impulses because, you know, the heart is deep and can be deceptive. So, first of all, the Holy Spirit would drive us to his Word, for therein we find wisdom and gives us insight and understanding. And the Holy Spirit also dwells within his people, alright. When we ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom, he brings other believers, godly believers, into your life who would counsel you. Yet, ultimately, there is that inner conviction that goes with it, but I would make sure that it is not contradicted, definitely, by the Word of God and by the counsel of other believers.

Dr. Steve Harper

I think, in my prayer life, one of the biggest questions that I have is, when I receive an impression, an insight, a thought, some sense of guidance or counsel, how do I know it's from God? Oswald Chambers got me over the hump on this when he basically says that, if you are a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and if your heart is to do the will of God, so far as you understand it, then don't agonize over that feeling or that question. Don't become scrupulous, is what he says. I think of it as taking your pulse, you know, always wanting to make sure that you are counting. No, your heart just beats. It just beats. And, you know, you don't count your respiration — how many times did I breathe in the last minute? You just breathe. And so, Oswald Chambers, when it comes to, "How do we know?" really says, "Don't worry about that a lot." Don't become overly scrupulous in trying to figure it out because God uses the natural processes of your thought life. God created us with brains, and minds, and hearts. And so, God uses those things. They're not antithetical. In fact, they may be the landing places for God's revelation. And that helps, but it doesn't completely solve the problem because we can presume. Some very tragic things have happened in the church when people have said and done things thinking they were doing them under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, when we do come to those points, ordinary things, routine things — say a good word, do a kind deed — we don't need to wonder whether God is inspiring us to do that very much. It is just what we know we should be doing. But when it comes to more critical things, then I think it's very, very important that we take those things to Scripture. God is not going to ask us to say or do something that violates his written Word. Every now and then we read a tragic story in the newspaper about "God told me to kill my family," or something, just these bizarre acts of deranged people. And, when I read those, I think, you know, if that person had just squared that with Scripture, it would have never happened... In issues of my life where it's not so natural, not so routine, not so everyday, another thing is to submit it to the tradition... There is a treasure trove of wisdom in the tradition. Sometimes it's harder to find because it's not always indexed, and there's not a concordance, but it's not that hard to find either. If you really want to find it, it's there. And I tell the students, we need to be surrounded by that "great cloud of

witnesses” because they will speak words to us that will not only encourage us, but they’ll also create some limits and boundaries around our lives, and that’s very important. Then the third thing, I think, is just to sit down with another Christian friend, and say, “I have been thinking about this,” or “I have been bothered by this,” or “I have been wondering about...” “What do you think about this?” “How does this feel to you?” “Would you go in and talk to your boss about this if you were me? I mean, what would you do?” Because, in some ways, those two minds are better than one. If you get two people who sincerely desire the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, sometimes the best advice you get is just from another sister or brother who gives you a “yes,” or a “no,” or maybe a “not now.” And I think those are at least reasonable ways that we can receive impressions and act on those impressions with confidence.

Question 5: **What is wisdom literature?**

Dr. Richard E. Averbeck

Well, we know of the wisdom literature largely through the books like Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes... There’s also other places where we have wisdom sayings and so on, but that’s usually what we talk about, is those books. Wisdom literature is very interesting for its connection, actually, to creation theology in the Bible. Wisdom literature tells us a lot about what it means to live well in the world as God has created it, and it tells us about what it means to be a person who knows the God who created it as well. So, there’s a lot in the wisdom books that connect us to God, but God uses this kind of literature to help us realize that we need to live with this in this world in ways that correspond to the nature of the world. And so, that’s why there’s so much connection between creation concepts and the way the world works and the wisdom literature.

Dr. David Correa, translation

Wisdom literature, or those books that are known as wisdom books, are the books in the canon of Scripture that deal with the practical application of God’s law in daily life. That is to say, these books ... teach God’s people how to live in a practical manner in a fallen world. And also, those books — those books we call the Wisdom books — wrestle with difficult questions, questions about situations like suffering. These are situations that sometimes perplex us, situations that leave us confused, like at times when we see that life isn’t the way it should be, that life isn’t how someone expected it would be for a person who fears the Lord. They are books that help us reflect on suffering, on the injustices in life, for example, how the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. They are books that help us understand that without the Lord’s law, without God’s Word, without the Lord, without faith in our Lord, we really can’t make much sense out of life. A life that is lived in this world independently of God, a life that doesn’t consider God, a life that — like the book of Ecclesiastes says — is lived “under the sun,” only leads to futility. And these books

teach us precisely how we can live in a world in which things aren't always as they should be.

Dr. John Oswalt

Wisdom literature in the ancient world is literature which is built upon what can be learned from experience. It is various kinds of reflection on experience. It is very commonly a part of the royal court. These are things that a young courtier needs to know not to get in trouble. But in general, it is the elder saying, "Here's what life tells us. Here's what works, and here's what doesn't work." So, that's wisdom literature in the ancient world. In the Bible, wisdom literature is found in three books: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. It also appears in several of the Psalms — Psalm 1, Psalm 37. But wisdom literature in the Bible is different from wisdom literature in the rest of the world because in the Bible the point is made that these things that are observed are not simply pragmatic — you do this because it works. The Bible is going to say it works because it is an expression of the character and nature of the God who designed the world. And that makes biblical wisdom literature rather different from wisdom literature elsewhere in the world.

Dr. Ryan O'Leary

The Scripture tells us that every good gift comes from God, and I think one of those things is wisdom. And so, wisdom literature is the material from the Bible that God has given us so that we can live a wise life, so that we can use his Word to live in a way that is pleasing to him.

Question 6:

What kind of influence did the wisdom literature of Second Temple Judaism (the period between the Israelites' return from exile in Babylon and the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70) have on the epistle of James?

Dr. Jeffrey A. Gibbs

The wisdom literature of the Second Temple period is kind of an important, kind of general background for the letter. It helps explain some of the stark contrasts that you see in the letter of James. For instance, this whole notion of the two ways with no middle ground — there's a way of life and a way of death. The Lord Jesus himself, of course, talks this way in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. And so, when you see James contrasting, for instance, the wisdom from above... It's very black and white. It's two paths — one leads to life; one leads to destruction. And depending on where you live in the world today and the culture in which you find yourself, this can sound very harsh or even unyielding, if I could say it that way. And yet it, simply, it reflects the Jewish way of talking. The Lord Jesus himself in his ministry talked this way. And it can help us kind of take seriously James' teaching without it sounding too harsh, if I could say it that way. But the fact of the matter is, there is death and there's life, and James is exhorting his readers to follow the way of life.

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

The wisdom literature in the Jewish Second Temple context clearly had a big influence on James. He's very clearly a part of that tradition... So when we think of a sage, of a wise teacher, we tend to think of somebody who's going up onto a mountaintop and, you know, a guru kind of, alone with his thoughts, learning about the nature of life, the universe and everything. That's not how the Jews in James' day tended to think about wisdom. Wisdom was something that you learned from a great teacher ... and it's clear that James considers himself a student of his ancestors, particularly the Old Testament and Jesus himself. So, when you consider the sage that James sat under, that sage was Christ himself. He sat at the feet of his Savior and really appropriated his words and applied them to a new context, the struggling Jewish-Gentile church of the first century.

Dr. Scott Redd

The wisdom literature of the Second Temple period had an incredible influence on the book of James. As a matter of fact, understanding how the wisdom tradition had developed since the exile is very helpful in understanding exactly why James goes the direction that he goes in his book. He's clearly interested in wisdom. He starts James 1:5: "If anyone desires wisdom, ask of the Lord and he gives it willingly; he gives it generously." This is also the presentation of the book of Proverbs. You see God as delivering wisdom to his people. He loves to share it with those who fear him. But of course, the fear of the Lord is the first thing. It's the foundation for Old Testament wisdom. And likewise for James, faith in the Lord is the basis. It's the foundation for true wisdom of God — "wisdom from above," as he calls it. We see a particular interest in the Second Temple wisdom tradition, a particular interest in drawing wisdom out of the Torah, out of the instruction of the Old Testament of Moses and the prophets. And you see James also take his discussion of wisdom in the same direction. He starts by saying, "Ask of God; he'll give it to you generously." But then he moves on into a discussion of God's Word. Then he says, if someone just reads God's Word, that person is not showing the wisdom of God unless the Word changes them, unless it has an effect on their life. And it's the same as we see in other Second Temple wisdom sages, for instance, the non-canonical book *Ben Sira*, where there's an incredible focus on the Torah as a foundation, as a wellspring, as a mine out of which wisdom can be drawn. And we see James, I think, having that same emphasis. God's Word is the ground. It's the wellspring out of which wisdom flows, but it has to have a transformative effect on your life. Someone who just knows wisdom, someone who's just building a sapiential or a theological inventory but not seeing actual change in their life, are not actually living out the kind of wisdom that the Lord calls his people to.

Question 7:

What is the relationship between wisdom and understanding?

Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

Well, we know from Scripture, again, that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord... So what is the wisdom? Well, the Holy Spirit will illuminate God's Word to us, to help us to make it clear as we study and as we read to make those things understandable to us. So, what is the importance of understanding? Well, I have to understand God's Word; that it has to be clear in my mind in order for me to apply it in my everyday life, but also to be able to apply it as we teach, as we preach, as we minister and disciple others. So, the connection of wisdom, one, is having that fear of God, understanding his revealed Word, and the understanding is, how do I apply it truthfully and honestly as God intended it to be, not how I want it to be, not how I understand it, but what was the original intent of the big "A," Author, God, and the little "a," author, the writers of Scripture?

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

There are many opinions and many ideas about the relationship between wisdom and understanding. Many times, the book of Proverbs makes parallels between understanding and wisdom. Theologians, in general, have followed what the book of Proverbs does, yet they've given more details to it. Understanding is to comprehend a certain piece of information, to know it. Same as when a teacher teaches something, and the student gets it. But this might be all there is to understanding, while wisdom extends far beyond this. This is what the book of Proverbs, or wisdom literature in general, focuses on. It's not enough to get accurate information about God, to know the law, to understand the commandment. Wisdom is to *live* the commandment. Wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is related to conduct and worldview in general. Wisdom creates this worldview and allows you to live according to this worldview. This is more profound, or we can say, superior, as it includes understanding too. You cannot live by wisdom, unless you have understanding. You need the understanding, but also you need what is more than just the understanding. You should have a worldview based on this understanding and live according to it.

Question 8:

How does James tie together the themes of "true religion" and the "royal law"?

Dr. Thomas L. Keene

So, for James, the language of "true religion" that he introduces in chapter 1 and the language of "royal law" which he talks about in chapter 2, those coordinate, they correlate very well together. The first thing to understand is, what does he mean by royal law? In what respect is the law "royal"? There's a lot of debate on that. There's a lot of differences, but my take on it, and the take of many commentators, is when he

says “royal law,” what he’s getting at is that the law comes to us Christians through Christ, through Christ the King, Christ as king — he’s prophet, priest and king — and as king, one of the things he does is he gives us the law. That’s what he’s doing in the Sermon on the Mount, is he’s giving Christians instruction in how to live. He’s giving them a renewed, fulfilled law. Go back to James 1, and you find this language of true religion. James 1:26:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this:

And so here James gives us his definition of what true religion looks like. It is:

to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:26-27).

Now that to our ears that sounds maybe overly specific, but it’s actually exactly what Jesus says, and it’s actually the fulfilled version of what Moses says — “love God with all your heart, mind, soul, will, body, strength,” etc., and then, “love your neighbor as yourself.” James is just saying the exact same thing. He’s just reversing the order. Love orphans and widows, love your neighbor, particularly the weak neighbor among you, particularly the one who can’t help themselves, and then keep yourself unstained from the world — love God, love God above all else.

Dr. Michael Kennison

We ask the question, how does James tie together the themes of true religion and the royal law? ... It seems to me that James has on his mind Leviticus 19, where the King, the Lord God, the ruler of Israel, directs his people as to how they’re to be holy, and it shows up in its summary as, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But leading up to that, he speaks about care for the weak, for the oppressed, not showing partiality, not being an oppressor yourself and abusing those around you, but rather caring for those who are weak, watching out for those who are immigrants, those who are in danger. And so, if we see that in what we would call the “royal law” of Leviticus 19, and then we think James often quotes his brother in the flesh, the Lord Jesus Christ, who also tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it makes good sense to us that he would bring into his own requirements for his people, his call to true religion, that it would look very much the same way. And he speaks there about care for the orphan and the widow and then keeping yourself untainted from the world.

Dr. Dan McCartney

The connection between the royal law, which James mentions in 2:8, is actually very closely linked with the notion of the kingdom, which he actually mentions in 2:5, just three verses earlier. The word is actually the adjective form of the noun form of “kingdom.” So, we could say, instead of royal law, we could say, “kingdom law,” and it’s, therefore, closely related to the kingdom, which in 2:5 James says the poor will inherit... And the point is that the expectation of God’s restoration of righteousness

— the kingdom of God — is the basis and the grounding for this kingly, or royal, or kingship law that he speaks of. So, his identification of the law of God is specifically in the context of that kingdom expectation... Now, when he mentions the royal law, that's immediately followed by a quotation from Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus identified as the second great commandment: "love your neighbor as you love yourself" ... And some people think that that is specifically the royal law or the kingdom law... It's certainly the case that James' interest is in reflection of God's character in caring for neighbor and seeing the law from that perspective as fulfilled, as Paul says, in "love your neighbor as yourself." So, the royal law is an application of this kingdom law to love neighbor... So, that's very closely related to true religion that James identifies in 1:27 as reflecting the character of God, because God cares for widows and orphans, and people who are in the kingdom of God are called upon to behave and to act as God does. If God cares for the widows and orphans in their distress, then people who are claiming attachment to that kingdom — that is, those who claim to have true religion — must also concern themselves with care for the poor and particularly widows and orphans in their distress. Now, that's not the only thing that James mentions in 1:27. He also speaks about keeping oneself unspotted from the world. I don't think that means simply making sure that scandals don't stick to you or that you don't get associated with the wrong kind of people. That's not what he's talking about at all. He's saying don't be taken over by the kind of drives and intentions and goals that the world might present to you as what you ought to be doing with your life. Stay focused on what God does, and in particular what Jesus did when he was here.

Dr. Larry J. Waters

Many feel that the main theme of the book of James is true religion. In fact, James says this in 1:27. He says,

Pure and undefiled religion ... is ... to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:27, NASB).

This is also found in the Old Testament Scriptures throughout many of the Prophets, of course. So James, however, definitely pulls the perfect law, the law of liberty, and then finally the royal law all together in one book. It's just amazing how he does this. He sees the perfect law as referring to the moral and ethical teachings of Christianity that are based on the Old Testament moral law, probably the Ten Commandments. And he sees the perfect law, however, as brought into completion by the law of freedom or the law of liberty, which is found only in Jesus Christ. And so, you're able to take the perfect law, incorporate it into your life, and then live this liberty, live this law of freedom in Christ as the Holy Spirit works through your life to help you to live the life that you're supposed to live. We're no longer a slave to sin. We, as believers, are freed in Christ, and because we're freed in Christ and under the power of the Spirit, the Christian life becomes joyous freedom, something that we really enjoy doing. It's not a drudge for us to do it. It's not something where we're forced to do it, but it's something we do because it's joyous and happy to do it. Righteous living then

becomes evidenced in the royal law, and the royal law is, again, one of the most important things that we find in the book of James, because he reverts back to the Old Testament, ties it into the Gospels, and then explains it a little bit in his book. Because we go to Leviticus 19:18, and when we look at that passage it says, “love your neighbor as yourself,” and so he’s actually exemplifying this as the royal law... And so he brings these two together and saying again that the pure law, the perfect law, the law of liberty and the royal law, all work together to exemplify what Christ should be in our personal lives. And so, as believers, we’re admonished to live those righteous lives, and it’s exemplified in the royal law because it means that I, as a Christian, am loving others, and I’m exemplifying and showing that in everything that I do. True religion, then, is to love the Lord my God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my strength, and again, with all my mind, *and* to love my neighbor as myself.

Question 9:

What relevance do James’ instructions concerning the rich and the poor have in today’s global economy?

Dr. Michael Kennison

Well, we’ve got to be interested in James’ instruction concerning the rich and the poor today, not just in the first century, but our global economy as it stands today must have application. And so, we need to think about that. James, as he’s speaking in the fifth chapter about the rich, sounds like one of the Old Testament prophets, maybe especially Amos, and certainly he’s affected by the outcry of the prophets against the rich who oppress the poor. At the same time, we need to recognize that in chapter 1, when he’s speaking to both the rich and the poor, he speaks to them as believers and gives them instruction on how to live in a godly fashion, whether they are rich or poor. So, we know simply being rich does not mean that you’re evil. Simply being poor does not mean that you’re righteous. It has to do with the brotherly relationship, how you use that condition, one way or the other. You can be righteous, or you could be a sinner in either state. So, we think about our situation today and ask the question, how would we apply this to ourselves? ... And so, James is forcing us to ask the question, maybe wealth is relative, but what about position? Does my position now put someone else whom I am to love at a disadvantage, where I overlook them, I neglect them, I don’t offer them the same opportunities that I do? And I think we’re learning ... that James is speaking to us about that problem. My children are teaching me that fair trade practice is important because the very countries that we visit with the gospel are oftentimes affected by little fads and trends that occur in this country, where we build up an interest in a certain kind of coffee or a certain product, and a smaller economy invests all of its effort and all of its resources in developing that product, and then we pull the rug out from under them by allowing that product to fall into disuse and to turn to something else. And we’re finding that James has effect on that issue too, that we really do need to think more broadly, how are we affecting

other cultures and other economies by the carelessness with which we throw out a product and pick up another? And so, James has great relevance to us today.

Dr. Greg Perry

It's really remarkable how quickly cities are growing in the world. We already have several cities that are called "megacities" — more than ten million people. It's estimated by 2050 that 66% of the world's population will live in cities. And yet, one of the things that's happening in cities is that we're seeing that the poor are starting to live along the edges, not only in places like Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, but also in the United States, where once the inner city was a concentration of the poor, now we're seeing the poor diffused to the city's edges. James really comes to talk about the importance of Christian witness in terms of our relationship to the poor and what the gospel has to say about the relations between the rich and poor. We see him warning against showing partiality to the rich in chapter 2, and then he even sort of talks as a prophet, challenging the rich in chapter 5. He says that, their wages, they've been withholding wages from the poor to protect themselves... In chapter 5, in particular, we see James talking in terms of lots that's happening in his world in terms of the Roman patronage system, where the wealthy and those with authority and positions of power would use their possessions and use their position to protect themselves, and also to create a dependency for those that they were supporting with their money. And so, James says, "You're withholding wages from those who work for you, and your silver and your gold is corroding, and it's crying out against you." And there we see James sort of echoing the prophet Isaiah and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament to say that's not the way that the righteous are to use their wealth. In the biblical context, in terms of our covenant relationships with one another, the rich are to use their wealth in order to share with the poor and to cultivate interdependent relationships, not dependent relationships, to cultivate dignity, mutual respect as mutual image bearers of God. And so, we're to live out a different way of life, a different script, a different story, not the Roman patronage system and not the way we use our wealth today to protect our positions of power, but covenantal interdependency.

Dr. Larry J. Waters

James devotes chapters 2 and 5 to the responsibility of the wealthy, or the rich, or the material-blessed Christian, as well as to the rich unbeliever. As a matter of fact, some have actually argued that the word "rich" that is used, especially in chapter 5, refers to unbelievers and not to believers. In chapter 2, we have "Mr. Goldfinger" that comes in with all of the nice clothing and the gold on his fingers, and then we have the man that follows him — and "Mr. Dirty-clothes" would be the idea there — and so they give preference to the rich man and they put the poor man in the back of the church. This really upsets James. He doesn't like this. But we might be talking about a wealthy Christian there that is given prominence, and he shouldn't be given that. But on the other hand, when we run across this word "rich," he's really talking to those who are unbelievers. He's trying to really hit them with the responsibility of coming to Christ. As a matter of fact, in James 5:5 he says,

You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter (James 5:5, NASB)

— a day of judgment. And so James here admonishes the wealthy, especially if he's a believer, not to show partiality or to expect partiality, but instead to show his love, and again going back to the royal law idea that is developed so well in James, is that he's trying to say, use your wealth in giving in a loving way. Now, oftentimes, those who have wealth — and I think James was hitting this very strongly — is that their tendency is to give money, and that's supposed to be all they have a responsibility to do. But it's really giving your time, your effort, your strength, all that you are to helping somebody else and getting into a relationship with those who are in need. And so, he is trying to get the believing wealthy to do that. The application, I think, is very clear. We who are wealthy... And by the way, most of us in the developed world are wealthy. I have been overseas enough to know that probably 95% of the world is poor in relation to those of us who are in a developed country. And so, we have that responsibility to invest in the poor, not just, again, to invest our wealth, not just to invest our money, but to invest our lives and ourselves and building a relationship with those who are in need. And it's not just poor for the sake of poor, but poor who are truly in need. Certainly, we should help the poor generally, but specifically to the poor believer so that the gospel of Christ might be propagated throughout the entire area where the particular poor are located... We have a biblical mandate to help others in genuine need, and that means not only giving of our material wealth but also the giving of ourselves in love and in care and in building a relationship with those that are in genuine need.

Question 10:

Why did James place such a high value on “the tongue” as an indicator of a person’s spiritual state?

Dr. Scott Redd

James placed a high value on the tongue as an indicator of a person's spiritual state, and in doing so he draws a theme that's a major theme, not only in wisdom literature but also in the teaching of Jesus. If you go back and look at Proverbs 18, for instance, the tongue is depicted as not only giving life but also giving death. The words of the wise sage are a food for those who receive them faithfully. And so, words are more than just merely human expressions, but they actually have force, they have power. They not only express what is within the person's heart, but they also nourish those who hear it, or conversely, they wound those. They are a danger to those if they're not valuable, if they're not good words, if they're not faithful and wise words. Jesus, likewise, says that the things outside of the body do not defile it, and therefore, he's making commentary on the holiness code of the Old Testament. But rather, he says what's much more important is what comes from within the body out, those are the words of a person. It's actually the words of a person that defile them, the false

teaching, but not the things outside of the body — it's in Matthew 15 where he has that discussion. So, James is drawing off of this theme, and he's likewise saying the tongue has power. The tongue can give life, but the tongue can also bring death. It can also draw people away from God. It's like a rudder that steers a boat, and even though it's a small thing, it can steer a great ship to change course.

Dr. Imad Shehadeh, translation

The question James raised about the tongue has such a high value in a person's life. In fact, James starts chapter 3 specifically with the teachers. Teachers naturally use their tongue. But more than just teachers' use of the tongue, there is also the normal, daily use of the tongue. We are responsible, whether we are formal teachers or simply teaching in our conversations with others — such as parents with their children or friends:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1).

There is a huge responsibility on us for what we say:

For we all stumble in many ways (James 3:2).

And we have to be careful. He's highlighting the responsibility to be careful for what we say. Then, he gives us three pictures to illustrate the influence and the power of the tongue on life and society. The first example is the picture of horses:

If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well (James 3:3).

We can direct a big horse just with this small bit. The point is that we can control a big body with this small piece. This is one. The second picture is for large and great ships:

[T]hough they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder (James 3:4) ...

at the back of the ship. Once again, a small piece controls a big object. Then the third picture:

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! (James 3:5)

So also, a fire starts with a small flame and can become a huge fire blowing through a forest or an entire city. The same thing happens with the tongue. It has great influence. That is why James continues by saying:

And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness...

I mean, the words are very strong:

The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body ...

In other words, if I do not control my tongue, it could stain my life:

setting on fire the entire course of life ...

affecting everything around me. We all know this from human history, from heads of state:

and set on fire by hell (James 3:6).

Wherever there is an uncontrollable tongue, there is an evil movement from hell! That is why James places a high value on our human responsibility to control our tongues.

Dr. Peter Walker

James 3 is an extended accusation of the tongue as being a really bad part, if you like, of the Christian life. Why is he wanting to tame the tongue so much? Well, I wonder if it's partly because of the influence of Jesus, again, who taught so much that it's what comes from within us, which is actually what defiles us. You remember that teaching in Mark 7 where Jesus said it's not what comes from outside which defiles a person; it's what comes up from within. And so, the tongue is, if you like, the gateway to our interior, what's going on inside my character, myself right now. And our words express what's inside. And Jesus had spoken so much about, you know, fruit trees, making sure that the fruit matches what the tree is meant to be. And, as I say, James is picking up on this idea that our own interior life, if there's poison, if there's darkness inside, where it's going to come out through the tongue. And so, I think it's the influence of Jesus. But another reason perhaps why he focuses on the tongue is, sadly, he's probably already experienced, in the early Christian communities, the damage that the tongue can do, whether it's just gossip from people or people being rude about their leaders, or being negative about the Gentiles coming into the church. Whatever it is, people can do an incredible amount of damage with the tongue. He says, you know, this small thing can cause just havoc, you know. It can cause like a great fire to be emblazoned. I think that probably, sadly, it's because the early Christian community was no better at using the tongue than you and I are, and he'd seen the damage it can create. I think finally, perhaps he's just very aware of the role of teachers and what a responsibility we who teach or preach do have in the Christian church, and we can do incredible damage if we're teaching things which are untrue doctrinally, but also incredible damage if we are saying, coming out with all the right things, but we're doing it in the wrong manner, without a loving heart. You know, Paul warned about not having love in our hearts, and if you're teaching truth but in an unloving spirit, it's our tongue, if you like, that reveals it. There was a great preacher in the seventeenth century who said, "You can undo a whole sermon by just one careless word later in the week." And I think we need to be very careful how we use our tongues.

Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams

Chapter 3 of James is powerful in terms of it speaking about the power and the influence of the tongue, and there are some amazing analogies here. The example of the rudder of a boat being small but being able to guide the whole ship — it's a great analogy. And I believe he does that because the tongue is a real indicator of what's in the heart, that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." And I love what he says here. It's very challenging. In verse 9, of chapter 3:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be (James 3:9-10, NIV).

And it's amazing how deep that is, because he's rooting that command about the tongue in us being image bearers of God, that when we curse someone else, it doesn't make sense to praise God and then curse a person that's made in the image of God. Those things are inconsistent, and it reveals a heart that has a problem with God, if I'm cursing someone that's made in that image. And so, the tongue is maybe the greatest indicator of what's really going on in our heart, because it doesn't come from nowhere. What comes out of our mouths comes from within. It's just a question of whether we want it to or not.

Question 11:

How should we best understand what James calls the "prayer of faith" in James 5:15?

Dr. Dan Doriani

James 5, James says something that's widely disputed, and it comes from verse 15. The context is somebody who's sick, and they call on the elders to pray over them, and then it says this. It says,

And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed [any] sins, he will be forgiven (James 5:15).

And on it goes. So, what is the prayer of faith that will raise up the sick person? And in some circles it goes like this: Somebody's sick, they're very sick — not a little cold, but they're really sick — and so it's major, and they call the elders of the church, the godly, the caregivers, the shepherds of the church to exercise their function and to care for this person by praying for God to heal. And then it says, "the prayer of faith ... will raise him up." And some people say, "Well, you see, the quality of the faith of the pray-ers determines what will happen." So, if someone doesn't get better when they're being prayed over and they're sick, then it's because you didn't have enough faith, which of course, makes faith into more of a subjective

reality than objective reality, we could say. There is such a thing as strong faith and weak faith, but we're fundamentally misconstruing things if we say faith looks inward to the qualities of the believing self. Actually, faith looks upward to the object of our faith and his power... So, I think the main idea is that you pray and say, "We believe God can heal you, and we're asking you, Lord, to heal this person right now." Now, of course, the next line is, "And the prayer of faith" will raise the sick person up. I don't have time to go into it, but James, like many New Testament authors, is comfortable with ambiguity, so "raise him up" is resurrection language. Could it be that that person will be raised from their sickbed? Yes. Could it be they'll be raised up on the last day at the resurrection of the just when we all are restored to our bodies? Yes. So they both work. But I think it would be a major mistake to say that God heals through prayers based on the quality of the faith. Over the years, I have prayed over dozens of people who are sick, and any number of them have gotten better including some immediately, instantaneously, dramatically. But in a way, the happiest of them all is a time when I prayed over my own daughter, a number of years ago by now. And she had a lot of allergies at birth and had a ferocious, angry, blistering, hot, pink rash basically from her neck to her ankles. So, her face looked great and her palms of her hands and the soles of her feet, and the rest of her was just a massive, angry, blistering rash, and she would just tear at her flesh every time we would change her or give her a bath. She would scream. It was awful. During those same days, I was praying regularly over people in the church that I attended and, you know, some were getting better, and others weren't. And I was the leader of the ministry because I'd spoken on it, and people were kind of looking to me, along with others, of course — we were praying together — and so I thought, you know, I'm the one leading this ministry, surely my prayers are enough. I was praying privately for months, and for some strange reason didn't find it possible to go to my... You know, it's just a rash, and we're praying for her, so why should we call the elders for a rash? It was actually a life-dominating rash, and we finally did decide to call the elders and pray over her. And I would have to say, I've never been lower in all my life when I prepared to pray about anything, let alone healing, than I was that day. I was just crushed, defeated, dark, but obeying. You know, we've gathered elders for others; we're going to do it for my child. And a couple hours later I heard weeping, soft tears, upstairs, I thought. I was reading a book downstairs, and I walked to the bottom of the stairs and said, "Is somebody crying upstairs?" to my wife and three children at the time, and I didn't hear an answer. So, I sort of walk up the stairs, and I saw my wife in the bathroom at the top of the stairs, and she was shedding tears of joy, and she was giving our daughter a bath, and she said, "She's playing in her bathtub. For the first time in her life, she's playing in her bathtub." And her skin went from 98% blistering, angry rash to a little spot on her back and a little spot on one leg. I mean, in 2 hours her skin became 98% pure. And, you know, God answered our prayer that day, even though I was not full of faith. And I know my wife and I had prayed over her so many times. So we didn't have robust faith, that's not why God chose to heal our child that day. God chose to give us a sovereign gift. And that's who he is. He gives gifts apart from the quality of how we're doing it, apart from the vicissitudes of how we feel and how robust our faith seems to us on any given day. God is gracious.

Dr. Michael Kennison

How are we to understand what James calls the “prayer of faith”? . . . What causes consternation in that passage is that there’s no qualification given, that it simply is the case that God will save him, meaning in a physical way he will, in the parallel, be raised up physically. And so, it does sound, doesn’t it, that we’re being given a promise that, as that prayer is prayed, every person who prays it will be healed of physical ailment. The difficulty with that is that even Paul was not healed from his “thorn in the flesh,” though he prayed, and we would expect that he prayed in faith, three times, asking God to deliver him. When I was young, I attended a service, a gathering of believers, where there happened to be a crippled man in the midst of the crowd, and among other things, their attention turned to him and they began to pray that God would in fact raise him up, and I think in accordance with this verse. And they went on in their prayer for some 10 or 15 minutes, and when nothing happened, one man stood up and actually accused him that he failed to be healed because of his lack of faith and was castigated for that lack of faith. Is that the right approach, when we think of a verse like this that James means to be an encouragement? Well, I do think that we are to take it seriously, that we are to believe that God heals, and that we’re to believe that he answers prayer. We’re also reminded that God is sovereign and that even in Paul’s case, as in many other cases, what God determines to be best for us is not always rescue. It’s not always rescue from the brokenness of the world. You think of the number of people who have suffered affliction, and in their testimony before the Lord Jesus Christ have had tremendous impact on the church. We can understand why God might choose not to heal every person but to allow the affliction to work on us in a spiritual sense. And so, what we’re thinking in a thing like this is that, since God himself is the one who gives faith, if it is not his desire that a person should be fully healed, then he doesn’t give the faith necessary for the healing either. And so, we can take this without qualification, and yet, recognize that there are many times that God chooses not to heal us physically, but to finally heal us in the new heavens and the new earth.

Dr. Dan McCartney

In James 5:15, where he speaks about praying in faith, or the “prayer of faith,” which can help a person become well and even be saved, that is actually closely related to the faith that is mentioned in 1:6-8, which speaks about a person asking for wisdom in faith, not doubting, because if he doubts, he’s double-minded. In other words, James — actually, this is a good point to underscore the fact that James actually is not the book about works — James is driven by a concern with faith. In fact, he mentions faith in chapter 1, and in chapter 2, and in chapter 5, and certainly aspects of faith in even 3 and 4. So, James is actually driven by a concern for faith, but he’s also, for that reason, concerned that it be genuine faith. At any rate, the concern with the prayer for faith is not thinking that somehow if you can just notch your faith up to a certain level to convince yourself that God will really give you this, that then God will actually give it to you. That’s not what James has in mind at all. . . . What James is really talking about with faith is a faith that is driven by undivided loyalty. That is, he’s not two-souled. There’s a word that James uses there in chapter 1 that speaks of the man without faith as of “divided mind.” And the point is, a person who sits on the

fence, who isn't willing to commit strongly and completely to God as his Savior, is somebody who is unstable, James says. That's the kind of unbelief that James is concerned to avoid. So, the prayer of faith is the prayer that is committed. What that means as well, though, is that it's a prayer that is willing to submit to whatever God's answer is. That's not "name it and claim it," as though you can somehow get God to do what you want him to by screwing your faith up, but rather, a prayer that is acknowledging God's sovereignty and his goodness and his intent to save or rescue people, as he says in chapter 5 there, that God will raise him up ultimately at the last day in the resurrection. We all know that Christians do in fact get sick and die, no matter how strong their faith — that's not the point. The point is that God ultimately rescues in eternity people who really trust in him and have undivided loyalty to him.

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