

# James 1:9-11

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*Humility, the ability to see reality as it is, is the proper mindset for the believer, whether wealthy or poor.*

James now demonstrates that his admonition to rejoice in difficult circumstances applies to any sort of circumstance. Each station of life has its own set of challenges. Humility is a point of wisdom for James, which culminates later in the letter with his exhortation to, “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:10).

The biblical notion of humility is the willingness to see reality as it is. Moses is said to have been the most humble or meek man in all the earth (Numbers 12:3). Moses was a powerful leader, with great command. But he understood and played his role, serving the mission God gave him. Moses saw himself, and God, as they were. Jesus also called Himself meek and lowly. James will now cover a full spectrum of circumstances, and the corresponding attitude the believer should have in each.

First James discusses *humble circumstances*. In this context, the poor person is already humbled, or lowered, by his humiliation regarding his present financial circumstance. Poverty of any sort is a trial. Many trials are circumstantial in nature. So, in this case, the *brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position*. This provides a categorical example of how to rejoice even in difficult circumstances (James 1:2).

The poor *brother* must make a choice of perspective. The choice of perspective is to determine that *humble circumstances* are, in reality, an actual *high position* in the economy of God. The *brother of humble circumstances* can consider that he has the opportunity to trust God, because he has a diminished ability to trust earthly goods. Therefore, even though the *humble circumstances* would be considered bad by the standards of the world, through spiritual eyes the believer can see great opportunity to mature in faith, and rise to a *high position*.

The phrase *of humble circumstances* translates a single Greek word, the root of which is “tapinoo.” A form of this same Greek root is also found in Philippians 2:8:

“Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled (“tapinoo”) Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”  
(Philippians 2:80)

*Humble circumstances* limit our choices. For example, if we have no money, our power to act is limited. Jesus “humbled Himself,” putting Himself under the authority of His Father, and following in His Father’s will, even to death on the cross. It is reasonable to conclude that being in *humble circumstances* trains us to humble ourselves before God, as Jesus humbled Himself. There is a pattern of God taking His chosen instruments to the wilderness, a place of *humble circumstances*, as a time of preparation. This includes Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. We can

consider it a *high position* to be placed where we have the opportunity to learn the vital and impactful skill of humility/meekness. Jesus said it is the meek who will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

Next, James discusses the other end of the circumstantial spectrum: being *rich*. The wealthy person is told by the world that they have succeeded. They need no more. But the *rich man* is also to choose a perspective rooted in reality. The *rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away*. The perspective of the *rich man* is to choose to be humbled, or lowered, by recognizing the ultimate future of his financial circumstance: leaving it all behind. This word *humiliation* again has the Greek root “*tapinoo*.” By choosing this realistic view, even the *rich man* can avoid trusting in material goods that will fade away, and instead seek lasting treasure (Revelation 3:17-18).

Humility, at its essence, is taking God’s view of the matter. Or, said another way, humility is seeing reality for what it actually is. It is rooted in choosing a true perspective. This is a core aspect of wisdom, and this only comes from God, through the exercise of faith. No matter the circumstance, the believer is to see beyond it, and take it captive as an opportunity to mature in faith. This is true in difficulty, the valleys of life, as well as in material success, the mountains of life. It is by application also true for all points in between, the plains of life. While we cannot take any earthly wealth with us when we die, the benefits of a mature faith endure forever.

James is addressing those who belong to the same church (James 5:14) and offers a specific humble-mindset for the poor and the rich alike. The poor’s Christ-centered response to his circumstance is to look beyond the physical world and *glory in his high position*. The high position here likely includes both his *high* standing in Christ (see Ephesians 1:3-8; Hebrews 10:14) as well as his future *high* standing when God ultimately rights all wrongs by rewarding the faithful (James 1:5,12). James might have in mind the words of Jesus who said, “Blessed are the gentle (meek), for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

However, the rich man also has trials in life. Having great earthly possessions tempts us to trust in them, rather than in God. A true perspective is that all earthly possessions are fleeting. Wisdom is to enjoy such circumstances, without clinging to or putting our trust in them (1 Timothy 6:17). We can take all our acts and works of faith with us (1 Corinthians 3:11-17). But we cannot take any of our earthly material possessions with us after we die. It is self-evident that being impoverished in any respect is a trial. That James now goes on to explain more about the trial of being a *rich man* tells us that the trial of circumstantial prosperity is likely a greater test. It is more difficult to walk in faith when we have no perceived need imposed upon us by our circumstances.

Where the poor can take heart in the Lord, and choose to view their humble circumstances as a privilege and an extension of God’s blessing, the wealthy are called upon to take a posture of humility by accepting the coming end of their wealth. Just as with the poor, this also requires adopting an eternal perspective. In each case, the result is to live in reality, with a view toward eternity.

James paints a picture of the prosperity of a wealthy believer like a *flowering grass* which *will pass away*. A flower has a momentary glory, but in a brief time this glory disappears. Whether rich or poor, each one knows that *its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed*. The fact of this fleeting glory leads James to assert that, in the same way, *the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away*. The accomplishments and accolades of this life eventually pass out of memory, and even out of existence.

The conclusion for the *rich*, therefore, is to be humble about his own riches. The poor man is to choose a perspective that difficult circumstances are of great benefit to the maturity of his faith. The *rich man* is to choose a perspective that his material circumstances can become a hindrance to the maturing of his faith; he should glory in what is permanent, rather than in fleeting earthly prosperity.

The truth presented here should be known to James' Jewish readers because of other passages in the Old Testament wisdom literature:

“Do not weary yourself to gain wealth, cease from your consideration of it. When you set your eyes on it, it is gone. For wealth certainly makes itself wings. Like an eagle that flies toward the heavens.”

(Proverbs 23:4-5)

“Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands.”

(Ecclesiastes 5:15)

James is exhorting a wise perspective for the believer when it comes to one's material circumstances: Stay humble, glory in that if you are poor your future will be better. Stay humble, glory in that if you are wealthy, your future will not include your current material wealth.

It is finally noteworthy, that James's solution is focused on a humble-mindset, rather than a challenge to 'get wealthy' or 'get rid of your wealth'. The humble-mindset supersedes any material circumstance.

So far, James has addressed how to steward two of the three things we control as humans. Each human controls who or what they trust, what perspective or attitude they adopt, and what actions they take. As a first step, James wants us to get our perspective right, and trust that God's ways are for our best. Having laid this foundation, James will soon lead us toward putting our faith in action. James most likely contrasts the rich and the poor in verses 1:9-11 as an introduction for deeper concerns about favoritism (James 2:1-9) and the mistreatment of the poor by the rich (James 5:1-6).

We as humans take actions that are consistent with our perspective. Choosing a true perspective requires wisdom. Wisdom is rooted in faith. And effective faith is rooted in the true character of God. When we choose to believe that God actually has our best interest at heart, regardless of our circumstances, and rely upon Him and His ways, regardless of what the world tells us, then we have a solid foundation to gain the greatest fulfillment that life affords (James 1:12). This

gives us the foundation to choose a perspective that leads us to rejoice in any circumstance. It gives us a basis to see all circumstances as trials, and as opportunities to mature our faith, which leads to the greatest possible fulfillment from this life.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>9</sup> But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; <sup>10</sup> and the rich man *is to glory* in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.**