We do not know who the author of this epistle was (there are several persons named James in the New Testament), but many have believed it was James, the brother of Christ and the presiding elder in Jerusalem after Christ’s death. (See, for example, Acts 15:13, where that James presides over the Jerusalem conference called to deal with the Gentiles joining the early Church.)

What do we know about Jesus’s family’s relation to him prior to the crucifixion? (See, for example, John 7:1–5.)

When do you think James became a follower of Christ? Is 1 Corinthians 15:7 relevant? Does that verse suggest any reason that James might be more sympathetic to Paul than we sometimes assume?

James 1

*Verses 2–4:* The word translated *temptations* also has the meaning “trials.” (The Greek word can mean either, but *trials* seems to fit the context better here.) How can we count our trials as “complete joy”?

In verse 3 the word translated *patience* could also be translated *endurance*. How does the testing of our faith bring about endurance?
Verse 4 tells us that we should “let endurance [patience] take its complete [perfect] effect [work].” What does that mean? James explains that endurance will make us perfect, and he gives two synonyms for perfect: entire (or whole) and lacking nothing. This is the usual meaning of the word in the New Testament—not “without flaw” or “able to do anything” (two common modern interpretations of perfection). For example, James uses the same word here for perfection that is used in Matthew 5.48, and neither of them means “perfect,” in other words, “flawless.” Does this understanding of perfection make it easier to consider the possibility that we can be perfect in this life, even if we are not flawless?

Verses 5–7: What is the connection of verse 5 to those the precede it?

Notice the footnote that gives another translation for upbraideth. It can also be translated ungrudgingly. The Father gives to us generously (“liberally”) and ungrudgingly (“upbraideth not”). Is James creating an implicit contrast between the Father’s answers to prayers and our responses to those who are in need?

In verse 6 notice the footnote in the LDS edition, which tells us that wavering means “doubting.” Why can’t the doubter expect to receive anything from the Lord (verse 7)?

Verse 8: Is this verse the conclusion of the topic discussed in verses 5–7 or the beginning of a new topic? In either case, can you explain how it fits with the verses around it?

Why does James describe doubting as being “double minded”? Can you think of examples of what it means to be double-minded? What makes the double-minded per-
son unstable? Is Christ saying much the same as this verse when he says that we cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13; and 3 Nephi 13:24)?

Verses 12–15: As in verse 2, temptation in verse 12 means “trial” or “test” more than it does “temptation” as we usually understand it.

Those who become approved and who love the Lord will receive a crown of glory (verse 12). What does it mean to become approved? How do we do that? What is a crown of glory? Does this refer, for example, to a specific level in the kingdoms of the hereafter?

In verse 13, why does James warn us against saying that the Father is testing us? That seems to be a common way of speaking—what’s wrong with it? Is he warning against a particular kind of testing?

Is it helpful to remember that there is only one word in Greek for both “test” and “tempt”? Which meaning do you think James intends in verse 13?

How does he explain our trials of faith in verse 14? If this is an accurate way of describing our trials—if they are the result of our own lusts—what is Satan’s role in tempting or trying us?

Note that “drawn away” (verse 14) translates a verb used to describe how a hunter lures wild game out into the open, and that enticed translates a verb used to describe baiting fish or bird traps. Therefore, we might loosely translate this as “Every person is tempted when he is lured out by means of his own lusts and a trap for him is baited with them.”
The word translated *lust* (verse 14) includes what we would describe as lust as well as any other inordinate desire, so this is not just a description of how we are tempted and tried regarding sexual things (though those things are certainly included). See Romans 7:19–23 for a similar but more complicated description of this same point: we are tried by our own inordinate desires.

In verse 15 James uses the metaphor of procreation: we have lusts that conceive and give birth to sins; in turn, they conceive and give birth to death. (Here Paul’s discussion in Romans 5:14–21 and 6:3–11 is relevant.) Why do you think he uses that metaphor?

**Verses 21–24:** *Naughtiness* (verse 21) is too weak a translation for modern English readers; *evil* would be better.

See the note on *engrafted* in the LDS edition (verse 21).

James says that because God gives us every good thing (verse 17), we should put aside all sin and receive the gospel in humility (verse 21). Why is humility necessary to receiving the gospel?

How does James’s understanding of our reasons for repentance and obedience compare to Paul’s?

Compare what James says here about receiving the engrafted word to what Alma says in Alma 32. How are they similar? Are there any significant differences? If there are, what do those differences show us?

In what kinds of ways do we deceive ourselves about our works (verse 22)? Why is this kind of self-deception like
looking in a mirror (verses 23–24)? What is the point of James’s metaphor in verses 23–24?

**Verse 25:** In verses 23 and 24, James described looking at oneself in a mirror. Notice the contrast he creates here: rather than to ourselves in a mirror, we should look to the “perfect law of liberty.” What is the perfect law of liberty? Why is it a law of liberty? Is 2 Nephi 2:27 relevant?

How does the phrase “perfect law of liberty” contrast with the Pharisaic understanding of the Law?

In our own lives, do we think of the law as a law of liberty, or do we think of it as something more like the Pharisaic law, rules that we must obey in order to get a reward, rules that keep us from doing what we would like to do?

**Verses 26–27:** We commonly use the second of these verses as a proof text (to support something we are teaching, such as in a sacrament talk), but notice that it is intended as a contrast with verse 26: verse 26 describes those who think they are religious, while verse 27 describes those who really are. What does the contrast of these two verses do for the meaning of verse 27?

Why would having an unbridled tongue be a particularly apt description of the person who believes himself to be religious but isn’t? What does his tongue say that it ought not to say?

Why is care for orphans and widows a particularly apt description of the truly religious? How is it related to the teachings of the Old Testament? For example, see Deuteronomy 10:17–18, Isaiah 1:17, and Zechariah 7:10, among others.
What does it mean to be “unspotted from the world”? Compare Joseph Smith’s inspired revision.

We might think of verse 27 as the thesis statement of James’s letter. As you read the letter, ask how each part is related to that thesis. How, for example, is James 1:5 relevant to the fact that genuine faith issues in works? How are verses 2 and 3, which remind us that we must be patient in trials and persecution, relevant to that fact?

James 2

**Verses 1–4:** In James’s day a gold ring was not only a sign of wealth but also a sign of authority. How does the kind of discrimination that he describes in these verses mean that we are “judges of evil thoughts”?

**Verses 5–7:** How do these verses apply to us? Who are the poor that we despise today?

James says that the Saints give precedence and honor to the rich even though the rich oppress them. Do we ever do anything that is comparable?

**Verses 8–9:** What two ways of living is James contrasting here?

**Verse 10:** What does this mean? Why isn’t this a message of despair—what can give us hope in the face of such a message?

**Verses 14–20:** Is what James says here in conflict with what Paul taught, namely, that we are saved by faith rather than works? (Compare Romans 3:28 and 4:4–5.) If not, why not? How can these two things be reconciled?
What does verse 19 suggest about doctrinal disputes between us or between us and nonmembers? Why does James include what he says in verse 19 as part of talking about why works are necessary?

James 3

Verses 1–2: Against what is James warning? Masters translates a Greek word that means “teachers.” Does James think of himself as a teacher? If so, how do these warnings apply to him?

Why shouldn’t we all be teachers? Doesn’t Doctrine and Covenants 88:118 admonish us to teach one another? How do you reconcile those two passages of scripture?

Why might teachers receive harsher condemnation than others (verse 1)?

How is the first sentence of verse 2 related to verse 1?

How is it that the ability to be perfect in speech would make a person perfect overall (verse 2)?

The second half of verse 2 is a transition to verses 3–12. What has the warning to teachers to do with this discussion of the dangers of speech?

Verses 3–12: James’s example of the horse and the ship show how a small cause can have a great effect. Isn’t that a pessimistic thought in general: I can do something small that causes a huge disaster? Each of us has a tongue; we speak in some way or another. Why, then, isn’t verse 8 a particularly pessimistic verse?
**Verses 13–14:** How does this verse deal with the problem raised in verses 3–12?

In King James English the word *conversation* meant “behavior.” Insert the latter into the verse and reread it. What is James’s answer to the fact that our tongues speak both evil and good?

What does it mean to “lie . . . against the truth”? Does that mean anything different from “lie” alone?

Why would people “lie . . . against the truth” (verse 14) if they had bitter jealous and selfish ambition in their hearts (“bitter envying and strife” in the King James Version)?

The Greek text at the end of verse 14 might be translated “boast and lie against the truth”; the coordination of boasting and lying isn’t as obvious in the King James Version. What would it mean to boast against the truth?

**Verses 15–16:** What wisdom is James referring to in verse 15? Has he mentioned in the earlier verses some kind of wisdom that we should avoid?

*Strife* is a good translation in verse 16, but another translation is *selfishness* or *selfish ambition*. Do those other translations change the meaning of the verse?

**Verses 17–18:** With what does the “wisdom that is from above” contrast in verse 17?

Another translation of the word translated *pure* is *holy*. How might that change your understanding of versed 17?

What does it mean for wisdom to be peaceable? Gentle? What does it mean for wisdom to be “easy to be entreated,”
in other words, obedient? Aren’t these and the other adjectives in verse 17 strange ways to describe something like wisdom? We usually use them to describe a person. What do they mean when they describe wisdom?

Can you explain what verse 18 means?

James 4

Verses 1–5: According to James, what explains the so-called wars that occur among the members of the Church (verse 1)? Among the members of a family?

If lust—in other words, our desire for pleasure (verse 1)—causes strife among us, what will be its cure?

How does James say we try to get what we want (verse 2)? (“You kill, and desire to have” could also be translated “you kill and are fanatics.”) Does he literally mean that those he is speaking to commit murder? If not, how is he using that image?

Erasmus (1466–1536, an early translator of the Bible) suggested that the Greek word for “you murder” in verse 2 (phoneuete) was a copying error and that the correct word was one for “you are jealous” (pthoneite). If Erasmus is right, how does that change the meaning of verse 2?

What does he mean when he says “ye have not, because ye ask not” (verse 2)?

What way does he say we should go about getting those things? Suppose we say, “I’ve tried that way of getting what I want, and it didn’t work.” What is James’s reply (verse 3)?
How does he explain the failure of our prayers (verse 2)?
Why does he use adultery as a symbol for all evil desire (verse 4)? (The Old Testament equation of adultery with idolatry may be to the point here.)

What is friendship with the world?
It isn’t clear what scripture James is quoting in verse 5; perhaps it is one we no longer have.

How are verses 1–5 related to James 1:27?

**Verses 6–8:** In verse 6 James quotes from the Greek version of Proverbs 3:34. What does it mean to say that the Father gives grace to the humble?

Is there a difference between submitting to God and resisting the devil, or are these two ways of saying the same thing (verse 7)? How do we submit to the Father?

How do we draw nigh to God (verse 8)?

What does it mean to cleanse our hands? How do we do it?

What does it mean to purify our hearts? How do we do that?

Is there a difference between cleansing our hands and purifying our hearts? Notice that according to James, verse 8 gives us a solution to the problem of doubting (compare 1:6–8): cleanliness of hand and purity of heart. How do they overcome our doubts?

**Verses 9–10:** Why is James advising them to mourn (verse 9)?
It doesn’t make any sense for this to be a general admonition, since the gospel brings peace and happiness. What are the particular circumstances in which he might admonish them to mourn?
What does it mean to be humble in the sight of the Lord (verse 10)? What is genuine humility? What does it mean to be lifted up?

**Verses 11–12:** Is there a connection between the admonitions in verses 7–10 and verse 11, or is verse 11 simply one more admonition in a list?

How could it be that if we speak evil of another member of the Church, if we slander that person, then we are not only judging (literally condemning) that member, but we are also speaking evil of and judging (condemning) the law (verse 11)? How does making ourselves a judge over our brothers and sisters make us also a judge over the law itself?

According to verse 12, how is my judgment of another person an act of impiety?