

**Youth Culture Lesson**  
**Finding Teachable Moments in Culture**  
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**We Shall Overcome**

James Derham: From Slave to Doctor

By Paul Asay

**What Happened:**

In order to make good on our promise and follow God's calling for us, many of us have to overcome some serious obstacles; but none of us probably has overcome the same sorts of obstacles James Derham faced.

Derham was born in Philadelphia in 1757—as a slave. It was a time when people of African descent were considered subhuman by most well-to-do whites. Even some Christians turned to the Bible to justify racism and the institution of slavery, alleging that blacks were descendants of Ham, Noah's son whom Noah cursed.

Derham, even at a very young age, proved these stereotypes wrong to everyone with whom he came in contact. Owned by a series of doctors during his childhood, he impressed them all with his intelligence; they took the time to teach the boy how to read and write. His third owner taught him something about medicine when Derham was a teen.

The doctor died during the American Revolution; Derham fell into the hands of a British officer, who put him to work healing his soldiers. When the war ended, he began serving a Scottish physician named Dr. Robert Love, who taught him everything he knew about medicine.

Derham bought his freedom by age 26 and set up shop in New Orleans, where he treated people of all races. He could speak to his patients in English, French or Spanish, and his work treating diphtheria earned the notice of Dr. Benjamin Rush (now known as the father of American Medicine). He was so impressed with the man that he invited Derham to move to Philadelphia.

So he did, in 1788—31 years after he had been born in the city as a slave. He practiced in Philadelphia for several years, becoming an expert in throat ailments, before returning to New Orleans to help fight a horrific outbreak of yellow fever. He disappeared in 1802.

**Talk About It:**

February is Black History Month, a time when many students are learning about the contributions African Americans made to our society. Sometimes in the midst of all the facts and figures learned in class, we forget these inspirational figures provided something we can learn today.

Derham was born a slave—certainly not an auspicious beginning for any would-be doctor. Who else do you know who overcame serious adversity to become successful? What obstacles have you overcome?

Few of us are successful all by ourselves, and Derham is no exception. He was helped by people who believed in his ability. Have you had people in your life who have encouraged you? Taught you? Believed in your skills and talents? Who? Have you had the opportunity to encourage someone else?

When you study black history—or history in general—who inspires you? What lessons can we learn from the past? If you could meet somebody who lived before you were born, with whom would you most like to talk?

**What the Bible Says:**

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14).

“For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:19-21).