
Prayers

To God

We praise you and bless You, Holy and majestic Lord. You stand above all the cultures, institutions, governments and organisations of the world with the authority of the only One who can make all things happen according to Your own will and purpose. We place our trust in You because You alone can make good things happen out of all we experience from day to day. All glory be to You! **ALLELUIA!**

For myself

Give thanks to God for the support you receive from those you love and from your friends. Pray for those who consistently support you.

For others

Weekly theme: the environment

Trees play their part in the cleanliness and gaseous balance of the air we breathe. Give thanks to God for the way that His creation, especially trees, works to support all forms of life.

Meditation

I go out to do my daily work;
With the radiance of this day's light
Glowing on my every move:
The Creator knows my doing.

I thank Him for this opportunity;
He has selected me for a task
And in its doing I am fulfilled:
The Creator knows my being.

I focus to dispel my wandering;
The motivation of His presence
Directs my mind and rules this work:
The Creator knows my thinking.

I serve the only God for all my life;

His wisdom ever goes before
And all my graft is for His glory;
The Creator knows my working.

Bible Passage

James 1:1-4

¹ From James,

a servant both of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ;

Greetings to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.

² Think of it as gladness, my brothers, whenever you face all kinds of trials, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Moreover, let perseverance do its work so that you may be whole and complete, lacking nothing.

Review

The letter of James is one of the treasures of Scripture, because it provides us with a different, yet entirely complementary perspective on Christian faith to that provided by the letters of Paul. James writes forthrightly of the relationship between faith in Jesus and what a person does, which is the 'evidence' of that faith. James is acutely aware that if God's people lose sight of what it means to be obedient to their God and to Jesus Himself, then their faith '*is barren*' (2:20).

This is what James teaches throughout the letter, not to take anything away from the importance of pure faith in Jesus Christ, but in order to ensure that God's people are committed to doing His work in the world. At one point, he puts this rather sharply, and says, '*faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead*' (2:17). This famously aroused the suspicion of the great reformer Martin Luther, who disagreed with Scripture at this point because he felt James belittled faith! He called James' letter an '*epistle of straw*'! In his time, it was of course essential for Luther to declare the unique importance of faith, but later generations of Christians have warmed to the forthright manner in which James describes the proper connection between Christian faith and action. Indeed, the whole letter has much more to teach than provide fuel for theological arguments about the nature of salvation!

At the beginning, James describes himself as '*a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*' (1:1). The phrase '*the Lord Jesus Christ*' is common to the New Testament and used frequently by Paul, Peter and other letter writers (see Romans 1:4, 5:11, 1 Cor 1,3 etc.). The phrase '*servant of God*' is however different. In the New Testament, only Titus and John use it, albeit rarely (Titus 1:1, Revelation 15:3, only), and in the Old Testament, it used exclusively of Moses, who is acclaimed in the later history of Israel as '*the servant of God*' (2 Chron 24:9, Nehemiah 9:29). So who might use such a term, comparing his role in writing to God's people as like that of the great Moses?

The question of the identity of James has been long debated. The name was common enough, but this James certainly appears to be one of the great leaders of the early church.

Was he perhaps one of the disciples? There are two possible candidates. The twelve disciples contained the two brothers, James and John (Matt 4:21 etc.), but the writer of this letter could not be this James because early on in the life of the church, Luke records that he was martyred. Speaking of Herod, he says, '*he had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword*' (Acts 12:2).

The only other possible James is James the brother of Jesus. There are occasional references to this James within Scripture (Matt 13:55, Acts 12:17, 15:13, Gal 1:19,2:9, 2:12 and possibly Matt 27:56, Mark 16:1), and he was an enigmatic yet powerful figure in the life of the Early Church. Certainly, but the time of the great Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13f.), James had risen to prominence alongside Peter as a key leader within the Jerusalem church. It is likely that this letter was written if not by him, then with his authority, and expressing his personal thoughts and concerns.

Now before Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans in 70AD, the Jerusalem church had a duty of care to the rest of the growing community of believers. It was the 'mother' church responsible for making proclamations about the nature of the Gospel (see Acts 15). The letter of James certainly reflects this picture. James begins by claiming the authority of a leader akin to that of Moses, when he says that he is a '*servant of God*', and he identifies with the other apostles of the church by calling himself a servant '*of the Lord Jesus Christ*' (1:1).

But he goes on to offer greetings to his readers as '*the twelve tribes scattered among the nations*' (1:1). Just as Moses led the twelve tribes in Old Testament times, the leaders of the church believed they were doing the same for the '*twelve tribes*' of the 'New' covenant. This phrase is not unique to James, it is used by Jesus (Matt 19:28 and Luke 22:30), Paul (Acts 26:7) and also John (Revelation 21:12). Just like the Jewish people, the new 'twelve tribes' of God were scattered across the whole known world, which was the Roman Empire of their day. This is important for our understanding of James, because we will find that throughout, he is careful to explain the difference between the Old and the New people of God, between Judaism and discipleship in Christ (e.g. 1:22-27).

As we read, we will discover strong connections between the teachings of Jesus and the themes of this letter. We should not be surprised, for James he was indeed Jesus' brother and the son of Mary, it is not surprising that he should remember and hold fast to his teaching. There was not always a good relationship between Jesus and his family, but the Gospels all record that His family were close by during his ministry (e.g. Matt 13:55)!

At the beginning of his letter, James appeals to his readers to remain faithful in the midst of '*all kinds of trials*' (1:2), that is, in all the problems of being a faithful Christian in the first century AD. He goes on to encourage them to believe that through such sufferings, perseverance will build up the character '*so that you may be whole and complete*' (1:3,4). This point is similar to that made by Paul who says '*we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope ...*' (Romans 5:3,4). However, both passages develop Jesus' earliest teachings, for after gathering the disciples together, he said these famous words; '*blessed are those who are persecuted ... for theirs is the Kingdom of God ... rejoice and be glad ... You are the salt of the earth ...*' (Matt 5:10-13). So at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus encouraged his disciples to face real life and the ever present possibility of suffering, before teaching them about the fulness of Christian character (Matt 5-7). It is not surprising that this theme is echoed in most of the great letter writers of the New Testament.

Clearly, James' concern at the outset is the sustenance of Christian faith and character. He knew perhaps more than we do today, that true faith is tested in the furnace of the fires of real life and all its sufferings. He was also aware that Christians would have to suffer even to death for their faith. His teachings encourage the faithful to persevere gloriously for the sake

of Christ and His Kingdom. From tomorrow, we will learn much more about the connections between the letter of James and the teachings of Jesus.

Discipleship

Application

The challenge of true faith

This is a challenge to Christians today who like to think that the life of faith today is intended to be good, happy and generally 'all right', and that if anything is troublesome or amiss, then something is wrong with a person's faith. Jesus' teaching and that of his brother James indicate that the reverse is true! If we experience no trials or temptations, then we should ask some big questions about faith!

How many times have you heard a person say that they gave up church when life became hard? We may have great sympathy for those who experience trouble, but if their reaction has been to reject the people God has made as His own, the church, did they really have a mature faith to begin with? We must ask the question. \\\

Being honest about discipleship

However, we must ask the question of ourselves before we can ask it of others, for in order to resist the temptation to abandon our faith and the church when trouble comes, we must be fully aware that we should expect such troubles. The Gospel warns us that doing what is right will create opposition; a fact we can easily verify, and with Christ at our side we can overcome troubles, forge ahead, learn from our difficulties and grow in faith and maturity.

It remains a great sadness that people are led to believe that they have become Christians without facing these elementary facts of life and the Christian faith. This should be the normal Christian experience for us all.

Ideas for what to do

- Over a period of time, look up a number of different passages which talk about suffering – Matt 5:11,12; Romans 5:1-5; Ephesians 3:13; 2 Tim 1:8 etc. Discuss with a friend the 'trials' you experience, and see whether they feel the same after you have talked about them!
- Write a prayer that asks Jesus to help you in time of need, and keep it in a diary. Do not get it out only when you are in need, make sure you read it when life is going well, because this will help you gain a good balance in your understanding of faith and life.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Imagine what it must be like for someone (James) to address his brother (Jesus) and 'Lord', and 'Christ'. What qualities of faith are needed to do this?
2. Do Christians generally know about how persecution can effect them from what they are taught in church from the pulpit? If not why not?
3. Discuss ways in which you feel that you have grown through the trials of life. How can we best encourage those who are having trouble at the moment?

Final Prayer

Praise You, Lord God, for Your Light is life to me, and by Your Light in Jesus Christ I am saved and delivered from sin. Fill me even now with Your Light, so that I may live for You and help to bring Light into this world of darkness. I ask this in the Name of Jesus, the Light of the World. AMEN