

THE RICHES OF FAITH

James 1:1-11

When we read the NT letters we often skip over the opening verses, but we shouldn't do that because they usually have much to tell us, and the Epistle of James is no exception. So as we study the beginning of this letter together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

As Giles explained to us last week, the James writing here is not James the apostle but James the half-brother of Jesus who became head of the Jerusalem church. I believe that the letter was most likely written early in church history, perhaps around 48 or 49 AD. It may well have been the first NT document to have been written. In his opening words James makes it clear that he's writing a letter to a number of recipients because he begins with the usual salutations. Let's look at verse 1:

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.” (verse 1)

As usual with ancient letters James begins by identifying himself as the sender and he then specifies the recipients and finally gives a greeting. At first sight it seems surprising that James doesn't identify himself as the brother of Jesus, but I think that's because it's not his physical relationship with Jesus that qualifies him to write this letter, it's his spiritual relationship to Jesus that matters and not his physical relationship. James simply calls himself a servant of God and Christ, he doesn't claim to be an apostle although Paul seems to have believed him to be an apostle (Galatians 1:19). Actually the title 'servant of God' is a very honourable one. In the OT it was used of such figures as Moses and David and so implies that James has the authority to exhort and criticise his readers as he's going to do in this letter. James refers to Christ as the 'Lord Jesus Christ'; as Giles explained last week, his attitude to Jesus has undergone a radical change since they grew up in the same household together, probably mainly due to the resurrection of Christ and indeed I think this change

of attitude is one good piece of good evidence for the historical reality of the resurrection.

Also we can note that James doesn't say much about the recipients of this letter or their situation, because that's information both James and his readers would have known. But, we need to know about their situation so that we can interpret what James is saying to them and work out how to apply it to our situation today. James says that his readers are his fellow Christian Jews, from the twelve tribes, now scattered amongst the nations and we'll return to that later.

After the opening most NT letters express appreciation for their readers in the form of a thanksgiving or offer a blessing to God for his abundant spiritual provision. But, James doesn't follow that pattern, he moves directly into exhortation. James has a number of topics he wants to raise with his readers and moves quite quickly from one to another. He begins by encouraging his readers to respond positively to their trials in verses 2 to 4; then exhorts them to ask in faith for wisdom in verses 5 to 8; finally at the end of our reading he comforts the poor and warns the rich in verses 9 to 11.

Let's begin by looking at verses 2-4:

“² Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (verses 2-4)

By beginning with trials James suggests that the tough times being faced by his readers were an important reason, perhaps his main reason for writing to them. James reminds his readers that God brings difficulties into believers' lives for a purpose, and that this purpose can be accomplished only if they respond in the right way to their problems. The issue of undeserved suffering is one of the most problematic issues in our Christian faith. James doesn't give a complete answer, but he is saying that the suffering of believers is always under the providential control of a God who wants only the best for his people.

In verse 2 the Greek word *peirasmos* translated ‘trials’ in our English Bibles can mean either an outward trial or testing or an inner trial or temptation. Here I think it’s clear that James is speaking of an outward trial or testing. In this verse, James isn’t suggesting that Christians facing trials will have no response other than joy, as if we were commanded to be masochists never to be saddened by difficulties. We’re not being commanded to deny that life often hurts. However, he is saying that trials should be an occasion for genuine rejoicing, and he goes on to explain why this should be so in verses 3 and 4. Here we need to remember that true Christian joy is not undiluted pleasure or happiness, but rather an inner peace and contentment. We don’t know all the trials that James’ readers were facing, but we can be sure that poverty was one of them, perhaps the prominent trial, because this letter is filled with references to poverty and wealth (e.g. 1:9-11; 2:1-7; 2:15-17; 4:13-5:11). In chapter 2 James makes it clear that religious persecution was one of the main causes of this poverty. But, James says that the trials were of ‘many kinds’ so he’s also including the many kinds of suffering that Christians undergo in this fallen world: sickness, loneliness, bereavement, disappointment and many more. The kinds of trials that we experience in our own lives.

In verse 3 James says that Christians can react to these trials with joy because we know that God uses trials to perfect our faith and make us stronger Christians. This view must have been widely held by early Christians because Paul and Peter both say much the same thing (Romans 5:3-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7). We need to recover this kind of thinking today and learn to enjoy the sweet fruit of bitter times. The Greek word *dokimion* translated here as testing is used in the OT to denote the refining of silver or gold and I think that’s James’ meaning here. He’s saying that our Christian faith and beliefs are being refined and purified through problems and difficulties. God’s heating us in the crucible of suffering so that impurities might be refined away and so that our faith might become pure and valuable before the Lord. James isn’t saying that the “testing of faith” here is to determine whether a person has faith or not; rather the testing is intended to

purify faith that already exists. James is also saying that trials will produce in us the quality of perseverance or endurance. Christians learn to remain faithful to God over the long haul only when they face difficulty.

But in verse 4 James says that this endurance is not the final goal of the testing, rather we need to allow endurance to do the work that God intends. I think the REB version of the Bible expresses this quite well: “Let endurance perfect its work in you that you may become perfected.” So, God is wanting us to become complete and mature Christians not lacking any quality or virtue which a Christian should have and which defines a Godly character. James is concerned for our spiritual integrity and wholeness.

Let’s move on the look at verses 5-8:

“**5** If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. **6** But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. **7** That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; **8** he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.” (verses 5-8)

After encouraging his readers to embrace trials for the potential they have to spur spiritual growth, James exhorts them to pray in undivided faith for the wisdom that a gracious God is anxious to give to those who ask. At first sight this seems unrelated to his teaching about trials and testing, but it’s worth noting that a number of Jewish sources suggest that wisdom is that quality needed if God’s people are going to endure trials with fortitude and godliness (see, e.g., Sirach 4:17). Other passages connect wisdom with perfection (see, for example, Wisdom of Solomon 9:6). Here we should see wisdom as that quality of heart and mind needed for the right conduct of our lives rather than as wisdom in a purely intellectual sense.

James’s exhortation to his readers to ask for *wisdom* echoes widespread OT and Jewish teaching, for example: “The LORD gives wisdom,” (Proverbs 2:6). Wisdom is the means by which the godly

can both discern and carry out the will of God and wisdom will therefore keep a person from immorality and enable him to be acceptable to the Lord. In verse 6 James goes on to say that we need to ask God with the right attitude, we need to believe and not doubt, we mustn't be the kind of believers who have a wavering and inconsistent attitude towards God. Here James isn't saying that our prayers will never be answered if we have even the smallest degree of doubt – after all even Abraham doubted God's promise on one occasion. In fact, some degree of doubt is probably inevitable in our present state of weakness. Rather, James wants us to understand that God responds to us only when our lives reflect a basic consistency of purpose and intent – when we possess spiritual integrity. We can't be the kind of people who seek God's wisdom one day and worldly wisdom the next.

In verses 7 and 8, James goes on to say that a person like that can't expect his prayers to be answered. Again I want to emphasise that here James is talking about a basic inconsistency in attitude and spirit rather than an occasional doubt or lapse. James is addressing the kind of spiritual schizophrenia that leads to continual thinking, speaking and acting in ways that contradict our claims to belong to God.

Let's move on again to look at the comments on poverty and wealth in verses 9-11:

“9 The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. **10** But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. **11** For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.” (verses 9-11)

Here, James is making a contrast between a brother, a Christian, in humble circumstances and another person, probably another Christian, who is rich. Since the contrast in this context is between “humble” and “rich”, James is clearly using these words to describe the believer's socioeconomic situation. Probably James is writing to Jewish believers in the diaspora who have been forced to leave

Jerusalem and establish new homes in Syria and northern Palestine. Most of them would be facing tough financial situations as well as social dislocation and even persecution. It sounds just like the situation of Christian believers in the Middle East and many other parts of the world today doesn't it. Of course a few of them would have been wealthy.

James wants poor Christians to look beyond their "worldly" situation and *take pride* in their *high position*. Here, I'm sure he has in mind the exhortation from Jeremiah:

"This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NIV)

Poor Christians can take pride in their "high position" or exalted status with God. We need to look beyond the world's evaluation and see things through God's eyes. If the rich person is also a Christian, which is what I personally believe – although we can't be completely certain, then James is saying that this person should not boast about his material wealth but take pride in identifying with poor persecuted Christians – a matter of humiliation in the eyes of the world.

At the end of our reading James again backs up his warning to the rich person with a reminder of the temporary nature of all human wealth and status. The annual death of vegetation provides a natural metaphor for this purpose and here James is probably drawing on the well known words of Isaiah:

" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands for ever." (Isaiah 40:6-8 NIV)

James isn't saying that wealthy Christians can't enter into eternal life, but he is saying that their material wealth and status will pass away.

What James is saying here is that Christians must always evaluate themselves by spiritual standards and not by material standards. Maintaining such a perspective in a world that so constantly and insistently confronts us with a very different standard of measurement is not easy. But if the church is to be the kind of “countercultural” society that Jesus intended it to be, establishing and spreading around such a perspective is essential.

Looking at our reading this morning as a whole, it may well be that James wants us to see poverty and wealth as one of the greatest tests for Christians. I think he’s also concerned that as Christians we must display a consistent and whole hearted spirituality that avoids the “double-minded” attitude typical of too many who claim to be followers of Christ. Money and the things that money can buy, as James well knows, are a tremendously powerful lure to compromise one’s wholehearted commitment to the Lord. Jesus had more to say about money and wealth than almost any other subject and as he warned us:

“No-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24 NIV)

In conclusion then, let’s just quickly summarise what we’ve learnt this morning. Firstly, let us all resolve to persevere through the trials which come our way and which we must endure maintaining our Christian joy in and through them and allowing God to refine us and perfect us. Secondly, let us all ask God for His wisdom, the wisdom which will enable us to discern and carry out God’s will, praying to Him in a wholehearted and sincere manner always maintaining our spiritual integrity. Finally, let us all make sure that we put our values not in the temporary material things of this world which will not last and which cannot bring permanent benefit, but rather let us put our values and wholehearted commitment in the enduring values of our Christian faith which enable us to enter into eternal life with the Father as his beloved children. What does this world have to offer which could compare with that.