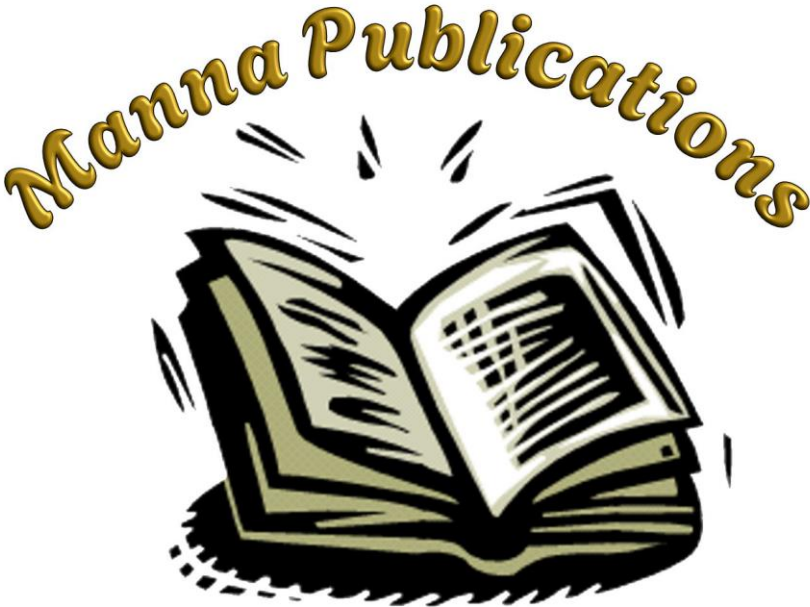




**THE LETTER OF
JAMES**

Faith and Ministry

**A Bible Teaching Commentary
for personal or group study
by Fred Morris**



JAMES

Chapters 1 to 5

THE LETTER OF JAMES: Chapters 1 to 5

- **Salvation, faith and good works**
- **How to control our tongues**
- **Serving God and serving others**

- **Warnings about seeking riches**
- **Patience in righteous suffering**
- **Praying in faith for others**

THIS BOOK explains the letter written by James to the early persecuted Jewish believers in Jesus Christ. They lived in Jerusalem and many were scattered among the nations. He gives guidance for today for Gentile and Jewish believers on how to remain strong in our faith as we follow our Lord and Saviour who is Israel's Messiah. He gives clear warnings about ungodly behaviour. He encourages faithful believers not to neglect God's ministry to others to do 'good works' in love as we wait for Christ's return.

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Talk about this: Where you see this, there are questions to prayerfully answer yourself or to discuss in a group study. They also help the reader to remember the Bible verses.



Think about this: Where you see this, the questions require more time for personal meditation.



Additional text boxes: Where you see these, the information gives extra teaching about life at the time the Bible passage was written and helps to apply the teaching for today.

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THE LETTER OF JAMES

INTRODUCTION

Five men have the name 'James' in the New Testament part of the Bible. Most scholars believe that the James who wrote this letter was one of the sons in Joseph and Mary's family. He was born after the Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus the Christ, whose Hebrew name is Yeshua the Messiah. The name of James is first in the list of the four half-brothers of Jesus. All the four sons of Joseph and Mary were born after Jesus: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55).

James became the leader of the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. His letter was written soon after AD 60 to all the Jews in Jerusalem and the world who believed in Jesus. At that time they were called 'followers of the Way' or 'believers and disciples of Jesus'.

James wrote his letter to comfort and advise the believers who were rejected or treated badly. From the beginning of his letter, James asked for patience and a strong faith to overcome the times of testing and persecution with joy and with good behaviour (James 1:2-4). This is the background to the whole letter.



The Jewish believers in Christ cared for by James

The scattered congregations of believers at the time of James were linked together under the power of the Holy Spirit which God established on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. This was the day when the disciples met together in an upper room for the Spirit to arrive as Jesus instructed (Acts 1:4). He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you. Then you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem" (1:8). This was the same day that Peter preached about Jesus the Christ to the thousands of Jews from all over the world in Jerusalem. 'Godly Jews from every country in the world were staying in Jerusalem' (2:5). This was the beginning of the New Testament congregations of believers in Jesus Christ:

- The devout Jews travelled home from Jerusalem back to their Jewish communities, sharing the amazing news preached by Peter on the day of Pentecost about Jesus the Jewish Messiah.
- In Jerusalem 'about 3000 people joined the believers that day' (2:41). They were mostly Jews.
- Later, Philip, then Peter and John, took the good news to Samaria (8:4-25). This began to fulfil the promise of Jesus, "You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria" (1:8).

The number of Jewish believers grew rapidly. Later still, Paul and other apostles took the Good News about Jesus to the Jews and non-Jews in other nations around the world making a further fulfilment of the promise of Jesus, "You will be My witnesses from one end of the Earth to the other" (1:8).

In addition to encouraging faith, James encourages the need to show others our faith in Jesus Christ through humble living and in the good things or works that we do. His letter reflects well the teachings of Jesus in Matthew Chapter 5:1-12. James became an elder of the congregations in Jerusalem after Holy Spirit power descended on the believers in an upper room (Acts 2:4).

The believers at the time of James were treated badly. They fled and were scattered to other countries. James stayed in Jerusalem and took care of the meetings of believers there. He spoke with authority. He wrote this letter to encourage them and those who had fled from the city. Wherever the Jewish believers went, they took the Good News of Jesus Christ their Messiah with them. They met in small groups in houses and the number of believers grew around the world.

The new Jewish believers needed encouragement in the word of God. James used verses from their Old Testament scriptures to show how people must obey the Law of Moses (the Torah) but have faith in Jesus, God's promised Christ or Messiah (2:23; 4:6). Jesus taught from the Torah. His teachings in the New Testament scriptures were written and copied and distributed for teaching much later.



Bible reading: James Chapter 1

BROTHERS AND SISTERS GROWING IN FAITH

James called the scattered Jewish believers 'brothers'. They were his brothers and sisters in Christ. They had heard God's Good News of Jesus Christ preached many times. But they needed to live out this truth every day. We must show in our lives what we believe about Jesus Christ, even in difficult times. God speaks to others powerfully through our lives and through our witness when we glorify Jesus as His Son and our Saviour. James believed that others needed to see our faith in the way we live and worship.

Followers of Jesus live by faith. Faith bears fruit. The fruit is seen in our character. It is love, patience and goodness (Galatians 5:22-23). The good habits we have and the good works we do, come from faith. At first, we may not do them easily or quickly. But God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us live as Jesus lived and do as He did. This is part of the normal life of a follower of Jesus, even when suffering rejection by people who do not believe that He is the Son of God.

When we have true faith, we obey God's word. When we obey God's commands, our faith grows. When we are careless or do not listen to God's voice, we slip back. James wanted to encourage the scattered believers. They were persecuted and had less fellowship and less teaching and some had lost the joy they once knew.

James put his own name to this letter. He called himself a servant of God (James 1:1). He was a leader who cared about his people. He was a servant to the many new congregations who served his Saviour Jesus and his Father God as One. Although he was a half-brother of Jesus, he used the full name of Jesus: "the Lord Jesus Christ". He wrote his letter around 10 years after Jesus had finished His work on Earth. James knew that Jesus reigned in Heaven. Jesus is Lord of Heaven and Earth (Acts 17:24; Hebrews 1:3).

James wrote to believers who were mostly Jewish believers at that time, to "the 12 tribes [of Israel] that are scattered among the nations". However, James had all of God's people in mind. He clearly believed there was no difference between Jewish and non-Jewish believers. They were "brothers and sisters in Christ" (1:2). The apostle Paul, a devoted Jew, later believed this was true (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:19).



The letter of James: How to live by faith

James reminds his Jewish readers that faith in Jesus (Hebrew name Yeshua) releases in our lives the power, endurance and wisdom of Almighty God (Hebrew name Yahweh) (1:3-5). His teaching on 'living by faith' was important for Jewish believers then and for all Messianic Jews and Christian Gentiles now:

1. True faith is tested:
 - in times of troubles and temptations (1:2-18).
2. True faith changes us:
 - in hearing and obeying God's word (1:19);
 - in proving it really is a genuine faith (2:12, 17-18);
 - in showing itself in spiritual fruits (2:24-26);
 - in seeking wisdom from above (3:17).
3. True faith is blessed and blesses others:
 - it is patient and strong to the end (5:7);
 - it watches in hope for Jesus to come back (5:8);
 - it helps other believers in times of trouble and sickness (5:13-16);
 - it brings back those who have wandered away from the truth of God (5:19);
 - it reaches out to those who are lost in sin (5:20).

We must learn to show our faith in Jesus Christ through our actions and His Holy Spirit power, to the glory of God. We must expect God to test our faith to His glory even though we do not fully understand. We must expect to suffer as a follower of Jesus and believe that God will bless our actions and answer our prayers in His way and in His timing. God declares us righteous by our good works and actions and by our faith.

TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

James said they would suffer all kinds of trouble for their faith. "When you do, think of it as pure joy" (1:2). Can we be joyful when things are difficult? We can, because we know that difficulties make us more patient and faithful. Faith leads to inner peace and joy. Do we understand that winning trials and overcoming tests bring maturity of faith? It is not easy to be joyful at all times, but it is possible. We have the Holy Spirit power which gives joy... peace... patience... and much, much more.

When the lives of followers of Jesus become difficult "your faith will be put to the test" and your patience has a chance to grow (1:3). When God allows this to happen, your faith will develop through His grace and mercy. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He gives strength to go on and to keep going when troubles happen to us. We call this perseverance, the power to go on when we face difficulties.

None of us has this strength of ourselves. We receive it from God as we put our trust in Him. So, in these verses we see that faith in God:

- stands strong under trials (1:2-4);
- seeks God for wisdom (1:5-6);
- does not doubt God's care (1:6-8);
- is made humble by sorrow and loss (1:9-10);
- and wins a crown of glory (1:12).

The apostle John later wrote down these words from Jesus, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have. Then no-one will take your crown" (Revelation 3:11).

GROWING IN FAITH DURING TIMES OF TROUBLE

James said, "The strength to keep going [patience, KJV] must be allowed to finish its work. Then you will be all you should be [perfect, KJV]. You will have every strength you need" (1:4). He wanted his readers to know that when our faith is tested our spiritual strength will grow and we will become more complete.

When we accept Jesus to be our Saviour from sin, we are born again by God's Spirit (John 3:3-6). From that time, we may have more difficulties and more things may go wrong. To keep going forward is like the steps of a small child. Each believer must begin to learn to walk by faith. Jesus uses these things to strengthen our faith in Him. Therefore, "We live by believing [walking by faith, KJV]" Paul said (2 Corinthians 5:7).

It takes time to grow and become strong in our faith. We fail and fall down but get up again. We learn to say sorry to God and admit that we have done wrong (1 John 1:9). As we go on, we learn to trust the Holy Spirit to show us the wrong thoughts and actions and the right ones. "What you learned was the truth about Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21-24).

When we obey the words of Jesus, we grow stronger in our faith. As we obey, we fellowship with God Himself (1 John 1:3-4). This is very personal. However, we do not grow alone. We continue to grow even more when we meet with other followers of Jesus and share our faith and encourage each other.

God's plan for us is that we should grow to be mature believers in Christ. So, as parents care for their children, James cared for the scattered believers.

Every believer stumbles and falls. Satan's aim is to take us down. But God is never far away. He watches over us, just as Jesus watched over His disciples rowing a boat in a storm (Matthew 14:23-25). We are safe with Jesus as we ask God for help and wisdom. And He does not say 'no' to answer us. We love God because He first loved us. Therefore, "You will have everything you need" (James 1:4). Our love for God is because He first loved us!

ASKING GOD FOR WISDOM

"If any of you need wisdom, ask God for it. He will give it to you" (1:5). True wisdom comes from God. God is ready and quick to answer our call of faith. We must ask in love and trust in God "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30; Deuteronomy 6:5). Ask in the name of Jesus, "then the Son will bring glory to the Father" by answering our prayers (John 14:13). God gives generously to everyone without finding fault. He does not hold back from us any good thing we need (James 1:5; Romans 8:32).

We have to make many choices in life. When we make the right choice, we move forward in this life of faith. If we fail but then choose to do right, we become more mature in Christ. Our righteousness comes through a deepening faith. "The righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:22). How can we choose right? Ask God, your Father, James says. Children go to their father for help. Why would we not ask our Father in Heaven?

THE PERSON WHO DOUBTS AND THE PERSON WHO BELIEVES

James said, "When you ask, you must believe. You must not doubt. People who doubt are like waves of the sea. The wind blows and tosses them around" (1:6).

When we read God's promises, they overcome our doubts. We can then speak God's word against the enemy. It is our weapon against Satan. We submit ourselves to God's will for us. We can then resist Satan and he runs from us (4:7).

People who doubt "should not expect to receive anything from the Lord... A man like that cannot make up his mind" (1:7-8).

Did James mean for us to have the faith to be humble and glad even when we are poor or "in a low position in life"? Yes, he did (1:9-10). Many believers

in Christ are persecuted and lose everything. So, we cannot put our faith in riches. James said, "The rich person will fade away even as he goes about his business" (1:11).

In the midst of difficulties and losses, the faith, peace and contentment of believers shine out by trusting God for help. James said, "Blessed is the man who keeps on going when times are hard [endures temptation, KJV]" (1:12). In Heaven, his reward for being faithful waits for him. God promises a crown of life for men and women who love Him. Hold on to it! (1:12; Revelation 2:10; 3:11). Our reward is everlasting life with God our Father who saves us through Christ.

KNOWING AND DOING GOD'S WILL

"When you are tempted, you should not say, 'God is tempting me'" (James 1:13). To be tempted is not wrong. We are tested in many ways as was Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). It is only when we give in to temptation that we do wrong.

The world, our old nature, the devil, all tempt us. James warns, "Your own evil longings tempt you" (James 1:14). When your old ways are allowed to grow, they give birth to sin and spiritual death (1:15).

The world calls us to be selfish. Also, our old nature calls for unholy comforts and to enjoy what we used to do. Satan uses all his tricks to trap us. He uses our memories, minds and eyes to tempt us. When we fix our thoughts and eyes on Jesus, we have victory over Satan and his tricks (Hebrews 12:2). God's Holy Spirit power helps us in our weaknesses (Romans 12:2).

"Do not let anyone deceive you. Every good and perfect gift ... comes down from the Father... He does not change" (James 1:16-17). Give thanks and glory to God for the good things He brings. However, do not be tempted to misuse what He has created and provided in us and around us. In Christ, God has given us what we have and need to live a righteous life to His glory (Philippians 4:3). He will bless each fellowship of believers and our lives with the gifts we need to serve Him. Amen!

"God chose to give us new birth through the message of His truth, that we might be the first [fruit, KJV] and best of all He created" (James 1:18). Through the best first fruits of the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son, God chose to give us, also, a new birth. Our spirits have been born again by the ever-living Spirit of Christ. We were like candles that had never been lit. God chose to give us this second birth that we might be fulfilled in work and ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit. He planned this before our first birth.

Being born again, by the grace of God the Father, through the sacrifice of His Son, and through the working of the Holy Spirit, we may claim the promise in 1 John 3:9. "Those who are born again because of what God has done, will not keep on sinning." They will no longer be a slave to sin and fall short of God's glory.

Before we were born, God knew who would be a part of His family or Kingdom. He knew who would choose to believe in His Son. He knew the good works they would do. He then calls us and others at the right time to choose to follow Him by means of the preaching and reading of the Good News about Jesus. As the word of truth is taught, we hear it with our ears and with our hearts. We say, "Yes, that is true. I need to be saved from sin. I believe that Jesus died to save me." God has chosen us and called us into His Kingdom. We must choose to obey His calling.

LISTEN TO GOD'S VOICE AND BE BLESSED

James then gave the followers of Christ good advice. "My dear brothers and sisters, pay attention to what I say" (1:19). James lived in Jerusalem, far from most of them, but he felt as one of them in their sufferings. And he had words from God to give to them:

- "Be quick to listen"
- "Be slow to speak."
- "Be slow to get angry".

"A person's anger does not produce the life [righteousness, KJV] that God wants" (1:20). So welcome "the word that is planted in you that can save you" (1:21). Also, from verses 21 and 22:

- "Get rid of all that is... sinful all round us."
- "Accept the word of God planted in you. It can save you."
- "Do not just listen to the word... You must do what it says."

One of our greatest problems is we are often in a hurry. We do not slow down to listen to the Holy Spirit's voice. We are too busy talking and running our lives. The Holy Spirit uses God's word to show us what we are like. The Old Testament Law shows us what is wrong in our lives. That is why God told Joshua, "When you cross the Jordan [into the Promised Land] set up a memorial with stones and write on them the Law" (Deuteronomy 27:1-8). Paul says, "Do not be foolish but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5:17).

Jesus came not to end the Law but as the fulfilment or reason for God's Law. Through Christ, we see the "perfect Law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). Through God's mercy in Jesus, we are forgiven when we confess. Then if we keep His commandments, "you will be blessed in what you do" (1:25). Then James adds, "Control what you say" (1:26).

James ends Chapter 1 with loving and practical examples of a good life "pure and without fault" (1:27). "When widows and children who have no parents are in trouble, look after them." Also, "keep yourselves from being polluted by the world".

This is based on the Law of Moses given at Mount Sinai but it is much more than that! It is a greater law, a law of love, a more perfect law as Jesus taught in Matthew Chapter 5. God's Old Testament Torah Law is teaching and

instruction about good and evil. It is perfect. Yet we can never keep it perfectly and it condemns us by the sin it reveals and so brings spiritual death to us. However, whenever we fail we can pray in the name of Jesus to be forgiven (1 John 1:8-9). He enables us to perfectly fulfil the Law of Moses. Amen!

Paul learnt that because of what Christ has done, we are now under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our faith in Him has "set us free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).



Talk about this:

1. How and why should we ask God for greater wisdom (1:5)?
2. Describe the sources of temptation to sin (1:8, 13-16).
3. How can you know you have been born again (1:18)?
4. What good works show the love and approval of God (1:27)?



Think about this: Why does God allow us to be tempted? Think about what hinders you from believing.



Bible reading: James Chapter 2

DO NOT HAVE FAVOURITES AND DO NOT JUDGE OTHERS

When you care for others, do not have favourites, James said. "Treat everyone the same" (2:1). Why? Because we are all "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ".

All kinds of people came into their meetings. God brought them. So, James said, be fair to all: men and women, rich and poor, orphan and widow. All these people needed to hear the Good News of Jesus. The believers should not treat one better than another. God has chosen and called poor people to be rich in faith and they are welcome in the Kingdom of God (2:5). He has promised this to all who love Him.

In Christ, we are all on the same level. All of us are sinners. "No one measures up to God's glory" (Romans 3:23). We all come to the cross, guilty of sin and repent before a holy God. We are all forgiven and saved in the name of Christ. God welcomes us as His children. Therefore, in the followers of Jesus Christ there are no 'big people' and no 'little people'. God's promise is to all who love Him (2:5) and we sin when we fail to keep His holy Law as revealed by the Spirit of Christ.

As an example, James warned some of his readers for welcoming the rich and rejecting the poor (2:6). Some rich people had behaved badly. They spoke "evil things against the worthy name of Jesus" (2:7). So do right by remembering the 'royal law' in the Old Testament which says, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" (2:8; Leviticus 19:18). "You sin if you do not treat everyone the same" (2:9).

When you treat one person better than another, you are breaking this 'royal law', which is a law of love. "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (2:10). James warns that Christ's law gives freedom but "those who have not shown mercy will not receive mercy when they are judged." This is why he tells us to show love and mercy freely to all people and not judge some and show mercy to others (2:12-13).

FAITH MUST PRODUCE GOOD WORKS

Here, James turned to the subject of faith without good works. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but do not live as if they do?" (2:14). If we show no deeds of love and mercy, are we truly obeying God?

James then gives an example of faith without works of love. "Suppose a brother or sister has little food or few clothes. Suppose one of you says to them, 'Go. I hope everything turns out fine for you. Keep warm. Eat well.' And suppose you do nothing about what they really need. What good have you done?" (2:15-16).



Salvation, Faith and Good Works

In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul wrote that our salvation is not through the good works we can do. It is because of the grace and mercy of God that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul also said that we have been created to belong to Jesus and to do the good works God prepared long ago for us to do.

After our salvation through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, it is important to read the Bible together and then obey Him to do God's good works of grace and mercy.

Jesus told us to do these good works in love. "Love each other just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). This is why James tells us that having faith without doing good works is dead (James 2:17).

Saved sinners go to Heaven by accepting Jesus in their lives and His offer of eternal life. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Some people trust in good works alone to get them to Heaven. True believers know that only forgiveness through faith in Christ, who took all of our sin upon Himself to the cross, can save us in this world and the next. The Bible makes this very clear.

Jesus warned us to do our good works in secret (Matthew 6:4). He will reward everyone for what they have done (16:27). He confirms that, in Jesus Christ alone, "those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:29, NIV). This is why James believed that salvation was through faith in Christ to do good works.

His message to us is that faith must produce good works of good deeds. "If it does not cause us to do something [good], it is dead [works]" (2:17). We please God by obeying Him to show love for all men and women, so extending His Kingdom through divine wisdom.

The faith James wrote about is the sort of faith that changes us. Out of our changed hearts comes love. When we are saved by the grace of God, we care for others and our deeds prove that we are different. When we see others in need, we help them. "I will show you my faith by what I do" (2:18).

Some believers say, "You have faith [but] I do good works" (2:18). James says, "Faith without good works is useless" (2:20). And good works without faith in God through Christ does not lead to eternal life. He believed that good people are unwise if their faith does not lead to good works. Therefore, salvation is through faith alone and is for the purpose of doing good works of love.

James said, "Our father Abraham offered his son Isaac on the altar. He was right with God because of what he did... Abraham believed [and obeyed] God... His faith made him right with God" (2:21-23; Genesis 15:6). God sees faith as righteousness. James also made it clear "that a person is considered right with God by what they do. It does not happen only because they believe" (2:24). True belief results in trust, obedience and good works. James therefore believed that a person is not made righteous by faith alone.

James gave Rahab the prostitute as a further example of eternal salvation through faith and good works (2:25). He repeated, "Faith without good deeds is dead" (2:26).



Talk about this:

1. What happens if we do not treat everyone the same (2:1-10)?
2. What does James say about people who talk a lot about their faith in God but do little to help others (2:14-26)?
3. What does Paul say about people who do only good works and expect to go to Heaven (Ephesians 2:8-10)?



Think about this: Do you like someone more if they are rich than if they are poor? What do works of faith mean for you and your church fellowship? Does your faith lead you to do good works that glorify God?



Bible reading: James Chapter 3

LIVING RIGHTEOUS LIVES THROUGH SELF-CONTROL

James warned that we should not try to teach others if we do not live holy lives ourselves. "Those of us who teach will be held more accountable" (3:1). "We all stumble [offend, KJV] in many ways" for we are not perfect (3:2). As believers and followers of Christ, our natural desires are our greatest enemy. Satan uses them to try to stop us from the important ministry of Christ in our lives:



Leadership in the New Testament congregations

At the time of James and for some years later, the believers studied the truth of God from the Old Testament Scriptures without the benefit of the New Testament writings. It was important that all New Testament teaching was inspired by the Holy Spirit and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit not the control of men. In the first century after Christ, James then Paul appointed leaders (Ephesians 4:11) who were:

- firstly, **evangelists** or **preachers** of the Good News of Jesus the Christ;
- secondly, **prophets** gifted in prophecy or divine knowledge;
- thirdly, **pastors** or **teachers** of the truth of God.

Each time the believers met, they knew they were all part of the body of Christ on Earth. Every member was needed for doing good works of caring for others to help with poverty, persecution and other needs. This was the responsibility of the whole fellowship, and not left to a few administrators.

- **living** a holy and useful and righteous life;
- **witnessing** the Good News of salvation through Christ;
- **teaching** others the truth of God in the Old and New Testaments;
- **using** the spiritual gifts we have under the power of the Holy Spirit;
- **obeying** the need for self-control over what we say and do.

Only perfect people "are able to keep their bodies under control" (3:2). This is particularly true for our tongues. We more easily control other things, James said. We put a bit in the mouth of a horse to steer it and we steer big ships using a very small rudder (3:3-4).

However, self-control is difficult. We cannot have self-control without God's help. So, God sent His Spirit into our hearts through faith in Jesus. Only He can produce fruitful lives and one part of that fruit is self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). With Jesus at work in us through the Spirit, we can share His love and authority with others unhindered.

Many say they are believers in Christ or Christians, but we do not see much fruit in their lives. There are times when we do not see peace, or patience, or self-control. In the morning, they do not get out of bed to pray. Or they do not keep their promises. Or they do not get to work on time. Or they might treat their family or husbands or wives badly.

WHEN OUR TONGUES ARE UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

The horse's bit and the ship's rudder are small but they do a big job. James reminds us, "The tongue is a small part of a person's body. But it talks big! Think about how a small spark can set a big forest on fire. The tongue is also a fire" (3:5-6). It can do a lot of good but it can also do a lot of harm. It makes great boasts. It can pollute the whole person. Satan sees how weak our control over our tongue is and tries to use our tongue to do his evil work.

The tongue speaks words which can start wars. Words can hurt family and friends. They can be angry or cruel, or discourage others. They can force people to do anything, good or bad, even murder. "People have tamed all kinds of animals... but no-one can tame the tongue. It is an evil thing that never rests. It is full of deadly poison" (3:7-8). We must protect loved ones around us who are made in the image of God from the ungodly wisdom of today's world. For example, we must protect life in the womb and those who are dying.

A tongue under God's control is a tamed tongue. No one can control their words all the time. We try. Our mothers may tell us not to use bad words and we promise to do better. But James said that out of the same mouth that gives praises to God come curses to people, "even though [they] have been created to be like God [in His image]" (3:9-10).

Our words are a measure of how much self-control we have over ourselves. They show what our heart is really like. By a man's words you can know what he is thinking.

Jesus said, "Out of your hearts come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed... envy, saying bad things about other people... and foolishness" (Mark 7:21-23). So, the tongue speaks out what is in our hearts.

James said, "My brothers and sisters, it should not be this way. Can fresh water and salt water flow out of the same spring?" (James 3:10-12).

James wrote his letter mainly to those who were still growing in their faith in Jesus, their Messiah. He knew that God would give them grace and power to change. God will help all of us to change. He is able to change what you say. Cry out to Him for help. Change may come slowly. But we will grow more like Jesus as we know Him better (2 Peter 3:18).

"Guard my mouth, O Lord" King David prayed. "Keep watch over the door of my lips" (Psalm 141:3). David knew that the words spoken by his tongue could make trouble for himself and also not honour God his Creator. Aim to show that you have true faith in God by the way you control your tongue.

The man with true faith in God:

- does not say bad things about his brother or sister in Christ (Exodus 20:16).
- does not say things that are untrue (Ephesians 4:15, 25).
- does not teach false things about God (2 Timothy 2:15).

SEEKING GOD'S WISDOM, NOT THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD

James said that you are wise if you live a righteous life and do good deeds without pride (3:13). False teachers came into the early congregations and they talked a lot about worldly wisdom. However, "wisdom like this does not come from Heaven. It belongs to the Earth and does not come from the Holy Spirit. It comes from the devil" (3:15).

Satan offered this sort of wisdom to Eve. "This fruit will make you wise, like God," he said to Eve. We know what Satan meant: "Disobey God. Be independent of God. It will not matter. You will have your own wisdom and be like God." But that was a lie (Genesis 3:5).

God says, "Be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). "The wisdom that comes from Heaven is pure... It also loves peace. It thinks about others. It obeys. It is full of mercy and good fruit. It is fair [without arguing, KJV]. It does not pretend to be what it is not" (James 3:17).

God's wisdom brings peace, love for others, obedience, mercy, 'fruit', fairness and honesty. These are the qualities of Jesus that James saw in the life of his half-brother whom he knew better than the disciples.

You will know God's wisdom when He speaks it to your heart. "Those who make [God's] peace should plant it like a seed. If they do, it will harvest a crop of right [righteous] living" (3:18).

Under the control of the Holy Spirit, the tongue speaks and sows seeds of peace. Is the tongue changed? No, the person's heart is changed. Then the whole body comes under the control of God's Spirit.

This is the only way to have peace in our homes, congregations and in our nation. We must have the peace of God's Spirit in our hearts first, enjoying peace with God. We will then produce a "crop of right living" that yields a harvest of righteousness.



Talk about this:

1. Why must we be careful what we say if we are teachers (3:1, 6)?
2. What does James warn us about our tongues (3:8-10)?
3. What will life be like if we do not first listen to wisdom from Heaven (3:15-16)?
4. What is true wisdom like (3:17-18)?



Think about this: Why is it difficult for us to give up the things of this world? How can we promote peace? Can you be a peacemaker without Christ in your life?



Bible reading: James Chapter 4

GIVE YOUR LIFE TO OBEYING GOD

James knew that his readers had received the Good News of Jesus Christ. But some of them had been tempted by things of this world. "Why do you fight and argue among yourselves?" James asked (4:1). His own answer was:

- Your sinful desires battle within you.
- You want something you do not have.
- You argue and fight for what others have.
- You even think about murder to get what you want.

James wanted his readers to control their fantasies and passions and not copy bad people. His best solution for this was through prayer. "You do not have what you want because you do not ask God. When you do ask, you do not receive it, because you ask for the wrong reason. You want to spend your money on your sinful pleasures" (4:2-3). They asked for what they wanted, not what they needed nor what God wanted them to have. In the same way, our own motives are often wrong.

James also wrote, "You are not faithful to God. Do you not know that to be a friend of the world is to hate God? So anyone who chooses to be a friend of [the ways of] the world becomes an enemy of God" (4:4). Through prayer, God will show you the real problem is yourself!

God loves and cares about His children. He knows what we need. He will not give us things just to satisfy personal and selfish desires. His Spirit that lives in us also watches over us to lead us away from sin and towards holy living. Jesus came to give us a fuller life: "Freely we receive so freely we bless others" (Matthew 10:8).

However, If we love His world around us, we must be careful not reject God its Creator. We are bound to Him as in a marriage and He is a jealous God. James then wrote these words from the Old Testament Scriptures: "God opposes those who are proud but He gives grace to those who are humble" (4:6; Proverbs 3:34). It is true to say that God gives more and more grace if we are willing to receive it. It is God's nature to give. It is our nature to hold back. Our old nature is stubborn, disobedient and selfish.

OPPOSE SATAN AND ALLOW GOD TO REIGN

"So, obey God", James said. "Stand up to [resist, KJV] the devil, and he will run away from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you" (James 4:7-8). Do not give Satan a chance. Trust God to take care of you. "Those who are born again because of what God has done [through Christ] will not keep on sinning" (1 John 3:9). By opposing the devil in the name of Jesus, we can have victory over him and those who seek to do evil.

James wanted all believers to see God as Lord and King. He wanted them to allow God to reign in their lives, to receive His grace and strength. He wanted them to turn away from the sins of this world. We must leave our old ways (Ephesians 4:22-27). God will help us, but we must "make up our minds" and be willing to do our part. Also, "Make your hearts pure" (James 4:8).

God wants us to be lifted up in our spirits. He wants us to be full of joy, walking in the freedom of His Spirit promised by Jesus our Saviour (Philippians 4:4). But we should be full of sorrow, crying and weeping when we disobey God and sin (James 4:9). "Bow down to the Lord. And He will lift you up" to live a useful life (4:9-10). Avoid the shame caused by sinning.

James then warned, "My brothers and sisters, do not speak [evil] against one another... Who are you to judge your neighbour?" (4:11-12).

Paul said, "Judge yourselves so that you are not found guilty" (1 Corinthians 11:31). James reminded his readers, "There is only one lawgiver and judge. He is the God who is able to save life or destroy it" (4:12).

DO NOT BOAST ABOUT WHAT YOU WILL DO TOMORROW

James said, "Now listen: you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, and spend a year there. We will buy and sell and make money.' You do not even know what will happen tomorrow!" James laughs at people who talk like this. Their lives are similar to "a mist that appears for a little while then disappears" (4:13-14). But that is how people behave when they do not put God's Kingdom first in their lives.

Jesus said, "Put God's Kingdom first... then all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow... Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:33). James said, "You should say, 'If it pleases the Lord, we will live and do this or that'" (4:15). If we boast about what we are going to do tomorrow without seeking God, James says it is sinful (4:16).

God has a special path for each of us to walk and He will show it to us as we wait on Him and find His way for us. Then we follow as His Spirit leads us in the right way.

"Suppose someone knows the good deeds they should do. But suppose they do not do them. By not doing these good deeds, this too is sinful" (4:17). It is important for believers to trust and obey the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. Our days on Earth are short. If we can do good we should do it. Turn away from anything that destroys God's peace within.



Talk about this:

1. What causes arguments (4:1)? What is the correct thing to do (4:2)? Why do we still fail sometimes to get things right (4:3)?
2. What can be wrong with being 'a friend of the world' (4:4-5)?
3. What can we do to avoid doing wrong (4:7)?
4. When do we know that God is near us (4:8)?
5. Why is it better at times to cry instead of laugh (4:9-10)?
6. What should we remember when we try to judge others (4:12)?
7. What should we say when we try to plan ahead (4:15)?
8. What should we do when we know what is right (4:17)?



Think about this: Do you look for God's will in everything you do?



Bible reading: James Chapter 5

A WARNING TO RICH PEOPLE

James warned rich people they must show mercy to the poor. "They will soon be weeping and suffering (5:1) because their riches will rot away and be worthless" (5:2). He knew that if believers put their trust in these things and not in God, they cannot be part of God's Kingdom.

James was angry because rich men often cheated to get more money. He accused them of "storing up riches in these last days" (5:3). "The cries of the [poor] harvest workers have reached the ears of the Lord" (5:4). "You have lived an easy life on Earth. You have given yourselves everything you wanted. You have made yourselves fat like cattle that will soon be butchered. Some have judged and murdered people who are not guilty. And they were not even opposing you." (5:5-6). We must not be like them.

BE PATIENT AND KIND WHILE WAITING FOR THE LORD

"Brothers and sisters, be patient, until the Lord comes. See how the faithful farmer waits... and how patient he is... You, too, must be patient and stand firm... the Lord will soon come back" (5:7-8). It is clear that James and the other leaders believed Jesus would soon come again. An angel had told them, "He will come back in the same way you saw Him go" (Acts 1:11).

No-one knows when Jesus will return, but at that time all wrongs will be put right. Jesus Christ will bring justice on Earth.

While we wait for His return, we must prepare others to be ready. James said we must not argue with other believers. "If you do, you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!" This is why he said, "Brothers and sisters, do not find fault with each other. If you do, you will be judged" (5:9). We must do only what is pleasing to God.

Matthew 7:1-5 warns us to be careful not to criticise others because we are often guilty of the same wrong actions. Matthew tells us what to do if it is necessary to judge another person in the congregation (Matthew 18:15-17).

In a world of pain and loss, we must look to God and wait like the faithful farmers. Farmers have so many things that hinder them. So, they must be patient. The insects and the birds come and eat their crops. Sometimes there is not enough good weather for a harvest. James also said, "Brothers and sisters, think about the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. They are an example of how to be patient when you suffer" (5:10). He encourages us to be examples of faith in the midst of suffering.

The believers also knew about Job, a man who was patient in the suffering that God allowed. He did not give up (5:11). He lost all his family and all his belongings but he still trusted in God. And the Lord blessed him for his faith, repentance and obedience (Job 42:2, 6, 10). God allowed terrible things to happen to Job, to test him and to teach him and to bless him. So James

reminded his readers of the true and blessed nature of God. He confirms, "The Lord is full of tender mercy and loving concern." James knew the Lord Jesus in person and the words He taught from the Old Testament Scriptures. "The people who do not give up are blessed."

We cannot always see God's plan in the events of life. Life is very puzzling. It is a mystery. But God has a perfect plan to save us through the suffering and resurrection of His Son. We call it 'the mystery of Christ' whose suffering and resurrection we share.

So, James encourages us:

- to continue faithfully to follow Christ;
- to stand firm when trouble comes;
- to trust in God's plan of salvation.

God allows hard times to happen. He also sends punishment when His people disobey Him (Deuteronomy 27 and 28). He also allows temptations planned by Satan. When we have problems and temptations allowed by God, they make us stronger in our faith if we trust and obey Him. Then He will use us to help others, in the same way we have received help from God (2 Corinthians 1:4).

This is why James said, "People who do not give up are blessed [happy, KJV]" (James 5:11). Jesus Christ suffered much and was also tempted by Satan. God allowed this but also encouraged Him many times. This was so that the world would be blessed by faith in Him after His victory over sin and death.



Incorrect behaviour as we wait upon the Lord

Believers will not fear on the day of God's judgment if they "stand firm" (5:8). But it will mean loss for those who are:

- keeping goods for themselves instead of sharing them (5:2-3; Acts 2:44-45).
- not patiently watching for Christ's coming (5:7).
- grumbling and arguing instead of serving each other (5:9).
- no longer praying and praising the Lord (5:13).

HOW TO MAKE A PROMISE

James then added, "My brothers and sisters, do not take an oath when you make a promise. Do not call on Heaven or Earth or anything else to support what you say. Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'. If you do not do this, you will be judged" (5:12). James did not want believers to use the name of God or anything in Heaven or on Earth to add to the promises we make. Make and keep your promises but do not add to them. James quoted these same words from Jesus (Matthew 5:33-37). He wants us to take these words of Jesus seriously and behave in the way God has planned for us.

HOW TO PRAY

James then goes on to talk about the importance of prayer, praise, confession and righteous living. "Are any of you in trouble?" James asked. "Then you should pray" (5:13). God answers prayer. "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). "Ask," Jesus said, "and it will be given to you..." (Matthew 7:7) if it is to His will.

James also said, "Are any of you happy? Then sing songs of praise." Also, "Are any of you ill? Then that person should send for the elders to pray over them. Ask them to anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord Jesus" (5:14).

Prayer is our weapon against Satan. Prayer moves mountains of trouble out of the way. In prayer we meet with God. "Do not worry about anything. Instead, tell God about everything. Ask and pray. Give thanks to Him" (Philippians 4:6).

James believed that "the prayer offered by those who have faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will heal you. And if you have sinned, you will be forgiven" (James 5:15). This means sick in body, mind or spirit. Sin can make us sick. We can be sick through worry and sick with a disease or injury. Some people are also sick in their



minds. God can heal all kinds of sickness. Ask God to help you to be powerful in prayer for healing for yourself and others and for your nation in the name of Jesus. He is the fulfillment of Psalm 103:3-4: "He forgives my sins and heals my diseases and saves my life from going down into the grave."

James taught his readers (5:16):

- to repent by admitting to and confessing to others that you have sinned;
- to pray for each other so that they might be healed;
- to believe the life and prayer of a good, righteous, person is powerful and through God's mercy makes things happen.

Any sin will hinder our journey of faith. Both sin and unbelief make prayer difficult. The prayer of faith is offered in the name of Jesus after our sins have been forgiven. We can then pray with other believers and leave the results in

His loving hands. The prayers of godly people are powerful when Christ is glorified and make a real difference (5:16).

To pray for the sick is a normal part of the work. James reminded his readers, "Elijah was just like us" (5:17). The prophet Elijah was a godly man. He was in touch with God. He was led by God to pray for miracles that were part of God's plan at that time. God used Elijah to do many wonderful things (5:17-18). James wanted his readers to expect miracles through Christ as in the time of Elijah.

Elisha was the next prophet after Elijah and he told the king what to do to overcome the enemies of Israel (2 Kings 13:14-19). But the king lacked enthusiasm and faith so the enemies were not totally destroyed at that time. God uses people like Elijah and Elisha today to warn us with divine guidance. Such people bring words of knowledge from God to the people within and outside their congregations. This encourages the preaching of the Good News of salvation through Christ. God also uses such people to heal others through prayers offered in the name of His Son our Saviour.

WHAT TO DO IF SOMEONE WANDERS AWAY FROM THE TRUTH

Finally, James wrote down words of advice and encouragement. "My brothers and sisters, suppose one of you should wander away from the truth. Then here is what I want you to remember. Whoever stops a sinner from going the wrong way will save them from death. God will wipe away many sins by forgiving them" (5:19-20). James knew that only by repentance can our sins be forgiven. He therefore wants us to encourage people to repent. James ended his letter with these important words.

James knew that some believers were not helping people who were going the wrong way in life. Did they not care about those who fell back into sin? We must be patient with them and love them with God's love. We must remember that it does not matter how great or how many their sins. If they say sorry and mean it, God will make them whole again. He does this by accepting the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient punishment for sin. It is sufficient for their sin and our sin. He is God's Son and our Saviour and their Saviour, too.

Yes, these final words from James are important for us all to remember. If we follow this advice from James, it will bring blessing for others and for ourselves, to the glory of God. It will help others to reduce the guilt and shame of disobeying God and ignoring the sacrifice of Jesus. Share with them the love that God has for all of us who repent. In this way God adds to the number of believers.



Talk about this:

1. Why does James warn rich people to live godly lives (5:4-6)? What does he say will happen to them if they fail (5:1-3)?
2. How should we live while waiting for the Lord to return (5:7-8)?

3. What examples of patience does James give (5:9-11)?
4. What words of Jesus does James want us to take seriously (5:12)?
5. How, when and why should we pray (5:13-15)? Why does James add faith to prayer?
6. Discuss the importance of prayer by the church elders (5:14) and our own prayers with other believers who are close to us (5:16).
7. What final ministry did James want us to remember to do (5:20)? Can these words be a blessing as well as a warning?



Think about this: How are patience, prayer and faith at work in your life? Do you remember the final words of James when you pray in faith for yourself, your relatives, your neighbours and friends, other believers and non-believers? Do you trust God to fulfil His purpose in your life and in the lives of others? Are you aware that we are living in the final days before Christ returns? Are you preparing yourself and others for this?

CONCLUSIONS

Today, the writings of James give millions of Christians and Jewish believers all over the world much Bible truth to talk about and think about. This includes the importance of doing the 'good works' that God has called us to do as followers of Jesus. Our salvation by Almighty God through faith in Jesus Christ alone must lead us to live a loving life of faith in Him and a loving life of ministry to others.

James was martyred in Jerusalem for his faith in Jesus Christ and then the Romans destroyed the city in the year AD 70. Before that, he led the scattered congregations for around 30 years, giving them much wise guidance from the Old Testament Scriptures to understand the teachings of Jesus, Israel's Messiah. His final request to his readers was to love and help believers who go the wrong way in life in the hope of eternal salvation from eternal death and for the extension of the Kingdom of God. He includes the need to prepare for Christ's return to Jerusalem.

Paul warned Timothy of dangerous times to come in 'the last days'. He describes in 2 Timothy 3:1-7 the many bad things that will happen. We are called to stand firm in upholding Bible truth and salvation through Christ alone and to prepare our friends and families for His return.

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