

JAMES 1.1-18: WHEN LIFE GETS TOUGH

[Chelmsford 19 July 2009]

Over the next six Sunday evenings we will be looking at the letter of James. It is therefore appropriate to begin the series by first looking at the letter in general.

“From James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ: Greetings to all God’s people scattered over all the world” (1.1).

Who was James?

The writer tells us nothing about himself – simply his name. This has provided us with a kind of puzzle – the kind of puzzle we often have at Christmas time when a present arrives with ‘*love from Mary*’ on the label. But which Mary is it? Cousin Mary – or the girl next door.

So who was James? The traditional answer is that the James who wrote this letter was James, the brother of Jesus. James, the brother of Jesus, had initially been a sceptic – he had not believed there was anything special about his brother Jesus during his brother’s life-time – but it would seem that he had been won over to belief by an appearance of the risen Lord Jesus. According to the early Christian creed found in 1 Cor 15.5-7, Jesus **“appeared to Peter and then to all 12 apostles. Then he appeared to more than 500 of his followers at once... Then he appeared to James”**.

The Book of Acts tells us that almost immediately James rose to a place of pre-eminence in the Jerusalem church – and by the time of the Jerusalem Council he was clearly its leader.

Josephus the Jewish historian tells us that James was martyred in AD 62.

We cannot prove the letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus. On the other hand, if it wasn’t this James, then who was it? [Supporting evidence is found in the Jewish-Christian cast of the letter; as also in the many echoes of the teaching of Jesus in the letter].

The writer could indeed have been James the brother of Jesus.

James describes himself as **“a servant of God and a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ”**. If James was indeed the brother of Jesus, then this description of himself as **“a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ”** is particularly telling.

For a long time James, his mother and his brothers, thought Jesus was out of his mind – they thought he was mad. But in the end the light dawned, the penny dropped; and James eventually confessed his brother to be the Lord and to be the Christ, i.e. the Messiah.

Here is the essence of Christian believing: a Christian is one who believes that as a result of his death and resurrection Jesus is Lord, Lord of all the world; a Christian is one who believes that in Jesus, the Messiah, all the purposes of God have been fulfilled. In this letter James says very little about Jesus – indeed, he only refers to Jesus twice: here and in 2.1. Unlike Paul’s letters, the letter of James has little theology – the emphasis is on practical wisdom, on how we live out the faith.

However, the ethics of James are clearly based on faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

Who were James' original readers?

According to the GNB, the letter of James was written to “**all God’s people scattered over all the earth**”. Literally he wrote: “**To the 12 tribes in the Dispersion**” (NRSV)

Who were these twelve tribes? There are three possibilities:

- This letter was addressed to the Jews of the Dispersion, i.e. to Jews who lived outside Palestine. There were many such Jews. Indeed, by the time of Jesus there were more Jews living outside Palestine than inside. Strabo, the great Greek geographer, wrote: “*It is hard to find a spot in the whole world which is not occupied and dominated by Jews*”. This made life so much easier for the first Christian preachers: for it meant that wherever they went, they already had a point of contact with people who believed in God.
- However, James was writing his letter not as a Jew, but as a Christian. Some have argued that we need to take this phrase, “**the 12 tribes in the Dispersion**”, as a metaphor for the Christian church, which had become the true heir of the Jewish faith (see Gal 6.16). Both the writer to the Hebrews (see 11.13 & 13.14) as also Peter (1 Pet 1.1,17; 2.11) wrote of Christians as not belonging to this world – they were “**strangers and pilgrims**” (NRSV), ‘exiles’ whose true home was in heaven, and for whom the earth was but a ‘foreign land’ (so Dibelius)
- So was this letter written to Jews – or to Christians? The most likely suggestion is that this letter was written to Jews, who had become Christians, and who were living outside of Palestine – perhaps in Syria and Asia Minor (i.e. present day Turkey).

“**Greetings**” writes James, “**to all God’s people scattered over all the earth**”.

“**Greetings**” – James begins his letter like any other letter of his day.

Unlike the Apostle Paul he doesn’t seek to inject a more spiritual tone to his letter – he doesn’t wish them “**grace and peace**” from God the Father & his Son the Lord Jesus Christ. In the words of one commentator: “*Here we learn something important about James. He prefers ordinary language to spiritual jargon... Though he was an outstanding Christian, he would have been far more at home in a bus than in a stained-glass window*” (David Field)

He was certainly down-to-earth!

1. **THANK GOD FOR TOUGH TIMES**

We used to have a sticker in our house which proclaimed: “*tough times make tough Christians*”. That’s the thrust of the opening verses of James.

“**My brothers and sisters, consider yourselves fortunate when all kinds of trials come your way, for you know that when your faith succeeds in facing such trials, the result is the ability to endure. Make sure that your endurance carries you all the way without failing, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing**” (1.2-4). Or as JB Phillips puts it in his superbly imaginative translation: “*When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, don’t resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become people [literally, ‘men’] of mature character with the right sort of independence*”.

What an amazing statement! When trouble comes your way, says James, think how lucky you are! Or in the words of the NEB/REB translation: “**Count yourselves supremely happy**”.

I guess that our first reaction is to dismiss such talk as religious clap-trap. When illness strikes, when we lose our job, when a child is in trouble, when in one way or another things go wrong in life, can we seriously “**consider [y]ourselves fortunate**”? ‘James, you can’t be serious!’ But before we dismiss James out of hand, look at his reasoning. According to James, trouble brings with it three distinct benefits:

i) trouble can make us tough

“**The result is the ability to endure**” (1.3). I.e. difficulties in life are all part of God’s toughening up process. These difficulties actually make us stronger, rather than weaker. If you are a gardener, you will know that when, at the right time, young plants are brought out of the green-house into the cold air, they find new strength. In the same way, tender Christians grow strong in their faith when they learn to face crises successfully. This is why we should be grateful when trouble comes our way. We become the stronger.

ii) trouble can help us grow-up

“**Make sure that your endurance carries you all the way without failing, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing**” (1.4).

The Arabs have a saying, ‘*All sunshine makes a desert*’. And that’s true of those who have only experienced life the sunny-side up. In my experience trouble-free people are for the most part shallow people. They tend to be very immature people. If you’ve got a problem, then the last person you need to go to is somebody who has lived life in some kind of cocoon. By contrast those who have gone through the fires of testing and have come out successfully the other side tend to be rich, deep people. In the words of James they are “**perfect**” people, in the sense of being mature, fully-grown-up people.

iii) trouble can make us better people

Such fully grown people, says James, are “**complete**”. The underlying Greek word for completeness (*holokleros*) was used of an animal fit to be offered up to God – it could have the meaning of ‘unblemished’. James seems to suggest that the trials of life can be used to knock off our imperfections – they can be used to excise our ‘warts’ - they can lead us to become holy people as well as wise people – people who are spiritually mature in every way.

Nobody likes difficulties. Certainly none of us would ever wish difficulties upon ourselves or indeed upon anyone else.

But rightly handled, difficulties in life can be productive – productive in terms of personal growth and spiritual development.

Precisely because trouble can be productive, there is ground for joy. In the words of one pastor (George Sulac): “*If one’s goal is to become mature in Christ, and if that is a goal far higher and more valuable than merely avoiding hardships, then indeed consider it joy when you meet the trials by which you attain that treasured goal*”.

2. LOOK TO GOD WHEN TROUBLE COMES

We cannot handle difficulties in our own strength – rather we need to look to God. This seems to be the link between the opening section of James on the trials of life and the next section which deals with prayer.

“But if any of you lack wisdom, you should pray to God, who will give it to you” (1.5). Or as JB Phillips puts it: “*And if in the process, any of you does not know how to meet any particular problem, he has only to ask God*”

“Wisdom” is God’s gift, which enables us to stand whatever the test may be. As one commentator puts it: “*Wisdom is the possession of the believer given by the Spirit, that enables him to see history from the divine perspective*” (Peter Davids).

If you don’t know how to face a particular problem, then turn to God and remember the following two things:

i) God always is generous

“God gives graciously and generously to all” (1.5b): i.e. God delights to give, God delights to answer prayer. The use of the present tense indicates that it is God’s nature to be constantly gracious and giving.

“God is never mean. When he fills my cup, it overflows (Ps 23). He does not pour with one eye on the bottle. Nor does he stop when the glass is full” (David Fields)

Perhaps James had in mind the words of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount: **“Bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will your Father give good things to those who ask him”** (Matt 7.11)

God will give you the necessary wisdom to cope

ii) God only gives to those who ask

“If any of you lack wisdom, you should pray to God”.

What’s more, when we ask, we need to ask in faith: **“But when you pray, you must believe and not doubt at all”**.

I.e. to receive we must be sure of the power of God to give, as also the desire of God to give. As Jesus himself once said: **“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer”**.

At this point we need to make a distinction between ‘faith in God’ and faith in the force of our own believing. James is not advocating the kind of thinking popularly known as ‘name it and claim it’ philosophy – where the emphasis is upon us and our material needs. James has in mind faith in the grace of God – faith to believe that in the midst of difficulties God will be there to help.

James goes on to use a series of images to describe people without faith

- They are **“like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind”** – or to use a slightly different image, the persona without faith is blown around like a beach ball, which has been kicked into the sea by accident
- They are **“unable to make up their minds”** – they are a walking civil war in which trust and distrust of God wage a continual battle
- They are **“undecided in all they do”** – they are like a drunk staggering from one side of the road to another

When trouble strikes, pray to God, believing that he not only hears our prayers, but answers prayer too. He may not deliver you from the trouble, but he will enable you to cope with the trouble. In the words of Ps 46: **“God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not be afraid”** (1-2)

2. DON’T BLAME GOD WHEN TROUBLE COMES

After a brief excursus in which James deals with financial troubles, James returns to the general theme of the troubles and difficulties of life:

“Happy are those who remain faithful under trials, because when they succeed in passing such a test, they will receive as their reward the life which God has promised to those who love him” (1.12)

However dark life may appear to be, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

In the words of Paul to Timothy: **“Now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day – and not only to me, but to all those who wait with love for him to appear”** (2 Tim 4.8).

Yes, a day is coming when God will put everything right.

But in the meantime we need to **“remain faithful”** in our troubles.

We must keep faith with God. Life is like a marathon: the main thing is to complete the course, and not drop out

What’s more, however tough life becomes, we must never blame our troubles on God.

James says: **“If people are tempted by such trials, they must not say, ‘This temptation comes from God’. For God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one”** (1.13).

Yes, I know that when we say the Lord’s Prayer we pray: “lead us not into temptation” – but that is a mistranslation: Jesus said we should pray **“save us from the time of trial”** or as one paraphrase puts it, *“do not bring us to a testing which is beyond our power to withstand”*.

There is all the difference in the world between tempting and testing. It has been said: “*The object of testing a plane or a car is to improve it. The object of tempting a person is to destroy him*” (David Fields). God may test our faith, but he never tempts us to give up the faith James goes on to give three reasons why God never tempts:

i) God always gives good gifts

“Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God” (1.17).

“God never sends letter-bombs in gift-wrappers” (David Field). It is God’s nature to want to bless his children

ii) God’s love never changes

“Every good gift....comes down from God, the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change or cause darkness by turning” (1.17)

The heavenly lights are the sun, moon and the stars. In his morning prayers every Jew used to say: “*Blessed be the Lord God who has formed the lights*” This God who has set the sun, moon & stars in their systems is a God who can be relied upon. Nothing ever comes from him that is not good.

iii) God is a loving Father

“By his own will he brought us into being through the word of truth, so that we should have first place among all his creatures” (1.18). The “word of truth” is the good news of Jesus, the message of the Gospel. Through the preaching of the Gospel we have been born into the family of God. What’s more we have a special place in his family. We are his special possession.

As such, it is unthinkable that God should want to do the dirty on us So don’t blame God when trouble comes.

If we fail to stand the test, we actually have only ourselves to blame: **“People are tempted when they are drawn away and trapped by their own evil desires. Then their evil desires conceive and give birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”** (1.14,15).

Yes, when trouble comes, it is natural to want to blame others. If we have been unjustly treated, we may be tempted to hit back, or at the very least to gossip, to criticise, to act in an unloving manner. But to do so is to sin.

James encourages us to instead to turn to God, and seek his resources. And above all, to recognise the good which can come even when life has been unfair. Yes, there are times when it is difficult to see that God is at work. But even so, we are called to be men and women of faith, to be faithful, and to look for the positives which trouble brings.