

SERMON – 26/4/26

Introduction to the Letter of James

We are beginning a new series of sermons this morning, reading and studying our way right through the Letter of James until the summer holidays. Both Alex and I will be preaching on the same passages each week across the united parish so if it suits you to attend one of the other churches one Sunday you won't lose the thread of the series. In fact I would encourage you to do that. We will be swapping pulpits a couple of times ourselves over the next ten weeks – dates yet to be decided. Although he and I will not be colluding on the sermons we preach we *will* be doing some study together each week as we begin our preparation. Above all, it is our prayer that this will be a *practical* sermon series looking at a variety of issues raised in the Letter that address questions that face us all as we seek to live out our faith in Christ in daily life.

By way of background, briefly, the Letter of James stands slightly apart from other letters in the New Testament, most of which are written by the apostle Paul. Some in history have attempted to drive some kind of wedge between Paul and James although I don't think that stands up to much scrutiny. One matter that scholars have differing opinions on is the question of which James actually wrote this letter. There are four people called James named in the New Testament, although really only two of them would have been well-enough known to be able to sign the letter simply 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' without giving any further details of their status. One of these would have been James the fisherman disciple, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, one of the first to be called by Jesus on the shores of Galilee. The other would have been the Lord's own brother, James, who did not follow Him during His lifetime but came to faith after the resurrection and went on to lead the early church in Jerusalem. James the fisherman was martyred in 44AD, too early for this letter, while James the Lord's brother lived until 62AD. I am inclined to favour the latter as the author and we will probably touch on reasons for that in the course of the studies.

Three final things to say by way of introduction. Firstly that the letter is addressed to 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' which is generally understood to mean that James was primarily writing to Jewish Christians which accounts for some of the references in the letter to subjects that would not mean so much to Christians from a Gentile background. Secondly that some scholars argue for a date around AD60 for the writing of the letter while others favour an earlier date (about AD45) before the Council of Jerusalem and before questions about the extent to which Gentile Christians should be expected to follow the Law of Moses became a major controversy. I keep an open mind on that one. And finally, it's worth keeping an ear open for the many echoes there are in the Letter of James to the sayings of Jesus Himself, particularly as they are recounted for us in Matthew's Gospel.

Before we listen to the first section of the letter being read we're going to sing from Psalm 23 which would also have been sung by those who first heard these words read.

James 1:1-18

'Faith under Stress'

"You know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:3,4)

Which of us has not ever gone through hard times? Which of us has not at some point yelled out to God 'Why me?' How many of us have given serious thought to throwing in the towel and even giving up on God altogether? I don't know anyone who has sailed through life entirely untouched by struggles and there are few, if any, who do not at some point in their life face real tragedy. But there will be equally few who can join with strong conviction in what James says in these opening verses of his letter about 'considering it pure joy' when your faith is tested.

Our theme this morning is 'Faith under Stress' and I fully expect that this is a subject that will spark the interest of most of you, especially if you are going through trying times right now. In these studies I want to take some real-life stories to illustrate the

situations that are being addressed each week in the Letter and while I considered looking at the story of Job from the Old Testament that would have been too big and complex a one to explore in the time that we have so I have plumped for a little episode that Paul makes reference to in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. You can read about it in the penultimate chapter, (Chapter 12) where he alludes to a time in his life when God tested him 'to keep him from becoming conceited' as he puts it. He describes it like this: "I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (2 Cor.12:7-9) Now Paul doesn't give any details – he may be referring to an illness or disability (some have suggested it was his stutter or a tendency to depression); he may be describing a particular temptation he faced regularly that prevented him from living faithfully as a follower of Christ; he may even be referring to an individual who made his life difficult or whom he struggled to love as he should.

'Ask and it shall be given to you, said Jesus; seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you.' (Matt.7:7) Well, Paul tells us that he asked 'three times' and the answer he was given was perhaps not what he wanted, namely that in his weakness he would have to trust God and find satisfaction in the experience of God's grace he discovered in his human powerlessness rather than through what he might have hoped for in healing or transformation or deliverance. Paul writes to the Romans in words that very much echo what James says in our text this morning: "We know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character hope." (Romans 5:4)

Which takes us to how James explores that same thought in our passage this morning. He takes a number of different experiences that Christians of all kinds may go through that most people would consider to be negative but which James suggests may actually turn out to be positives if we allow them to lead us through the darkness of the valley and on towards Christian maturity and completeness, in the words of our text here, 'not

lacking anything.' Do you remember what we sang a few moments ago in one of the greatest hymns of faith of all time? 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want' - 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.' (Psalm 23:1)

If you are lacking wisdom, writes James, ask God and it will be given you, words that Matthew tells us came from the lips of Jesus Himself. James teaches that God gives to all generously and ungrudgingly. (v.5) Many years ago I came across a brilliant little phrase in a book about the Lord's Prayer by preacher and theologian Helmut Thielicke which described prayer as 'taking hold of God's willingness to give.' I've hung to that phrase many times in my prayers. Take hold of God's willingness to give. Whatever you feel you are lacking right now, even if it is the very faith to believe at all, reach out for God and see what is being held out to you, that God longs for you to have. If doubt is allowing yourself to bob around in the sea being blown wherever the storm or the tide may take you, then reach out for the One who is the anchor that you may find the security God wants you to enjoy.

Or maybe it is a lack of money that is causing you difficulties and bringing you low, but remember the number of times Jesus had challenging words to say to the rich. James echoes them here – the rich, he writes, will be 'brought low', they will 'disappear like a flower in the field', they will 'wither away' (vv.10-11) The wealthy trust in their bank balance or their investments while those who are poor are blessed because they have no choice but to trust in God. And guess who's going to come out best at the end of the day? Perhaps being brought low actually allows you to sing with Mary about the hungry being satisfied and the rich being sent away empty. Which of us is more likely to reach spiritual maturity and to lack nothing – the rich or the poor?

Or again, perhaps you are being assailed by temptation and struggling to keep to the straight and narrow way, wondering why you are being led down such a difficult road. James draws a very important distinction between testing and temptation. Temptation comes from the Evil One and from our own sinful desires. When desire is conceived it gives birth to sin and sin gives birth to death. (v.15) By contrast, God will not allow us to

be tested beyond our ability to endure but will also provide a way out so that we can endure it and will lead us on to receive the crown of life (v.12) In the Lord's Prayer we are shown the need to pray that we will not be led into temptation but that we will be delivered from evil. That battle is being waged to one degree or another within each one of us from day to day. If we don't recognise that it's probably because we have already been blown off course, but if you *are* conscious of the battle, then be assured of this, you are being led towards spiritual maturity and completeness.

I don't say any of this glibly. James is very honest about the kind of things that assail Christians and sometimes leave us deeply shaken and wondering why, if God is working all things together for good for those who love Him, you are facing such seemingly inexplicable trials. If you are going through a tough time for whatever reason – doubt, poverty, weakness, temptation, deception – you may well be in a very dark and uncomfortable place, wondering if you will ever make it through, perhaps even unable to see where God is in all of it, never mind how the Lord might possibly bring any good out of what is happening.

Your faith is under stress. It may be unpleasant but it is not unusual. However, the Good Shepherd promises you a place of renewal and refreshment, He promises to show you the right path, He promises to be with you and to comfort you in the darkest valley and He promises you a place at the Table in His house for ever. And so with the psalmist we can say by faith, 'I lack nothing.' Jesus says to you as He said to Paul: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

That's what James is teaching here: "You know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." And to lead us there, James is pointing resolutely towards the Jesus who said, 'Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.'