

James 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] James chapter 1. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion. Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind, for that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, I am being tempted by God. For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness, and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, and goes away, and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. There are four Jameses mentioned in the New Testament. James the son of

Alpheus, James the father of Judas, not Iscariot, James the son of Zebedee and the brother of John, who is martyred earlier on in chapter 12 of Acts, and James the brother of Jesus and leader in the early church. Most likely, the author of the book of James is the brother of Jesus. The inclusion of the book in the canon and its authority likely depended upon the authority of the figure that it was associated with, and early testimony consistently points in the direction of the brother of Jesus.

It's a very Jewish book, it's written in a Jewish context, and seemingly to a Jewish audience. When we read it, we should notice a lot of similarities with Jesus' own teaching. Even without explicit allusions, we should notice many parallels with the Sermon on the Mount, for instance.

Chapter 1 opens with James, or rather Jacob, writing to the 12 tribes. James is our anglicised form of the Hellenised form of the name Jacob. The 12 tribes didn't really exist in the same manner at this point. In many ways, they had merged into each other, and they are referred to more generally as the Jews. They are scattered among the nations, and he writes to them, presumably from Jerusalem.

[4 : 17] Are they scattered as those dwelling among the nations, as those who had left Israel and Judah through the exile? Are they scattered through persecution of the early church? Or are they scattered in a more general spiritual sense as aliens and strangers in the world? It's not entirely clear. I would lean towards seeing it as Jews that lived among the nations, with a special consideration to the Jewish Christians who had left Jerusalem and now lived in various places among the Gentiles.

After a brief but typical greeting, James moves into the content of his letter. James can play with words in moving his letter forward. Here, greetings is followed by a charge concerning joy, a related term.

He calls for them to show joy in trials, as such trials test faith in a way that leads to growth towards maturity. Trials have a purpose and a positive intended outcome by the Lord. They aren't meaningless. James probably has in mind here more general trials, not just the explicit tribulation and trial that comes upon the church at the appointed time. Trials should produce a steadfastness and fortitude that enables us to stand up to challenge. As we respond faithfully to trials, we become perfect and complete. We become mature, having all that we need.

The goal of trials should be our maturity, that we should grow beyond various areas of lack. One of the most significant of these forms of lack might be our need for wisdom. The book of James picks up a number of wisdom themes from the Old Testament and also in the New. In scripture, wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. It involves insight into God's will for our lives and at its very heart is the practical skill in the art of living well. If we are to be complete and mature, we will need this sort of thing. God is a generous giver to those who ask good gifts from him and wisdom is a primary example of such a gift. In Matthew chapter 7 verses 7 to 11, Jesus speaks about God's giving.

Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father who is in heaven? Give good things to those who ask him. God does not just give generously.

[6 : 51] He also gives without reproach. He is not a giver who constantly accuses the recipients of his gifts and makes them feel guilty about receiving them. He is glad to give and he does so freely. We should consequently approach him confidently, knowing that he wants to give his good gifts to us. God more specifically responds to requests given by confident faith. The danger here is of being fickle and lacking determination and confidence in our approach to God. In the Gospels, there are several examples of people having to persist in requests before they are given the healing or the exorcism or the deliverance that they are looking for. Those without faith give up before they receive a positive answer. And however he might seem to be discouraging at first, he wants to give healing. He wants to give deliverance.

But faith has to break through. The person who doubts is unstable and double-minded. He is a man who does not love the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He is fickle and unreliable. It is the wholehearted pursuit of the Lord that is promised a blessing, not those who half-heartedly do so or those who hedge their bets. If we truly seek him, he will gladly be found by us. James calls for the lowly brother to boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation. There is a sort of a transvaluation of values as some have called it here. Judgment is about to come and while they may seem fortunate to those around, those who are deeply invested in the riches of this age will suffer great loss.

As Jesus argues in Luke chapter 6 verses 20 to 25, And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. There is a form of testing to occur that will come for some with poverty and oppression. With others it will involve the loss of former wealth and status. And wealth can also produce a sort of double-mindedness, which James has just warned about.

Matthew chapter 6 verses 19 to 21. The divided heart, more often than not, is split between the things of this world, between the things that our treasures and our lives and our energies are invested in in this present age, and those things which belong to the age to come, to those things that are of God. Many people say that they want wisdom, but they are not prepared to pay the potential cost of the loss of wealth and status.

[10 : 12] Learning to recognise what true riches are, and the fleeting character of earthly wealth, will enable believers to sit much more easily to material conditions, whether they are rich or poor.

James is here alluding to the message of the gospel coming in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 5 to 8. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, Cry. And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. The coming of the word of the Lord throws things into sharp relief. We begin to see where true treasures lie, treasures that might cause us to sell everything that we have in order to obtain them, and where things we once most greatly valued are of little and only transitory value.

Those who are steadfast are promised a reward from God, the crown of life itself. This is similar to what is promised in Revelation chapter 2 verse 10. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. God's testing is given with the intent of proving us, so that we will stand the test and be strong and mature. God may bring us into situations of testing, but he always does so with the purpose of proving and strengthening our faith, not of causing us to fall into sin. God himself is not susceptible to the desire to sin, and he does not encourage this in human beings. Rather, sinful desires arise from our own fallen natures, and those sinful desires give birth to sin, which then matures into death.

Evil desire giving birth to sin, which matures into death, is a comparison to a child being born and growing up. James wants us to see the longer term outcomes of sin. Like the wisdom literature more generally, James wants us to see how sin first begins, and then how it grows and how it moves into maturity. God, far from being the source of temptation, is the unchanging fount of every good gift. He is the father of lights, of the heavenly bodies. But even the heavenly bodies are changeable in ways that he is not.

God is not fickle. God is not changeable. He brought us forth as firstfruits of his new creation in Christ by his word. And we can take confidence in this. If God does not change, then his purpose in calling us and bringing us to birth by his word has not changed. The theme of guarding the tongue and one's spirit is very prominent in the wisdom literature, especially in the book of Proverbs. Uncontrolled spirits that erupt in anger do not produce behaviour that is pleasing to God and characteristic of those in right relationship with him. God brought us into our renewed spiritual existence by his word.

[13 : 12] We must put aside old filthy clothing, as it were, and receive the implanted word in its place. The word is the mainspring of our new life, and we must receive it meekly. This is a continual process.

It's not merely a once-off event. The danger that James recognises is of hearing only and not being changed by the word that we have received. Jesus has warned against the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is compared to a mirror. It reveals our character so that we might amend our character and be transformed by it. The law of liberty is associated with the gospel, with the implanted word that can save our souls. However, it is also associated with the law, with the Torah.

The implanted word here might be the law written on the heart, no longer the external tablets of stone, but a word within that transforms the heart by the spirit. This leads to a transformed relationship with the word on the page. When we read the word of the law now, it should appear to us as liberating, not merely as something that is bringing us into condemnation, judgment, and bondage.

True religion of this kind is manifested in the person's mastery of their tongue and their spirit, their concern for the weak and the oppressed, of whom orphans and widows are particularly singled out, and their moral integrity and holiness, keeping themselves unstained from the world.

The world is a place of moral pollution, and we must be careful how we engage with it. A question to consider, how might we experience the law of God as the law of liberty that James speaks of here?