

James Chapter 1:1-12

Practical Christian Living: Coping with Trials

7th April, 2003

Reading – James 1

Introduction

As we start looking at this book of James it is worth asking the question, why bother with this particular epistle? The great reformer Martin Luther referred to it as a strawy epistle, an epistle of straw, partly because it referred to justification by works in a positive light. Luther's understanding of the way that Paul used that phrase was very different. So he couldn't understand why James had a place within the New Testament.

As we look at the book of James ourselves, we might, as we go through the various chapters, be thinking well there is very little reference to the person of Jesus Christ. How many times do we find the word Jesus or Christ in these five chapters? I don't know if anybody can give me a quick answer on that? Anybody want to give me a guess? One? Well, there is one in v 1, there is another one in C2, v1 but after that, although there are a few references to Lord, we will be quite hard pressed. So it is a bit of a disappointment isn't it, when we are used to Paul's letters with references to Jesus or being In Christ scattered all around the place, so there are more references probably to the Lord Jesus in one Pauline verse, if you choose the verse wisely, compared to the whole of the book of James.

And then it is just a series of jumbled up topics. We go from trials to temptations, to listening, to favouritism, to faith and deeds, to the tongue, to all sorts of different things. Some people suggest it was probably just James' sermon notes, various sorts of things that he jotted down in a sort of common place book that he happened to have. Somebody found it after he died and thought that it would be worth preserving, but there is really no point in trying to find a theme or anything, it's just all jumbled up.

And then it refers to '*the brother in humble circumstances...*', v9, and it just all seems rather remote from the prosperity of the western world at this time in our history and certainly the prosperity of a place like Sevenoaks. And so for all these various different reasons, we might well be tempted to think well, why are we bothering with the epistle of James?

Well, let's look a bit more deeply at why we should bother. Let's just take a couple of situations. We look at somebody who is at work. They have got an important contract that they are working on and they know it's going to take the best part of a week to do it. In order to reach the deadline they will need to work flat out on it. But on the Tuesday a letter comes through the post, closely followed by a phone call, of a new job offer somewhere else in the city and the next couple of days that person is in turmoil. There is work to do but also there are a lot of things that have got to be done and they are in two minds and they recognise that their commitment to work is

certainly half hearted. Or perhaps it is simply a job that needs doing in the garden one afternoon perhaps one weekend and while the gardening needs doing the rugby is on TV and, well it won't harm if I just sneak in and watch a bit of it. And again, it results in a rather half hearted commitment to the gardening, sneaking in just to find out what the latest score is that England has racked up against whatever team it is.

Those two little cameos show the result of being split between two things. You are wanting to focus on one thing and yet something else comes in and your attention is now divided. We would talk about a half-hearted commitment. James would talk not so much about a half-hearted commitment, a half-hearted Christianity but about a double-minded Christianity.

But whatever, it amounts to more or less the same thing. If you are focusing on two things, if you are double-minded, the end result is a half-hearted commitment. And that is exactly the danger of the church that James was writing to in these days. They said that they believed in certain things but then they were doing something else, they were double-minded. Look at C1 v8, '*this person is a double minded man, unstable in all he does...*', or look at C4 v8, '*come near to God and he will come near to you, wash your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded.*' These were the people who James had set his sights on. People who were focusing on two things that were pulling them in different directions, who were focusing on the Lord Jesus Christ but also focusing on the world and so were being pulled in two different directions and as a result it was leading to a half-hearted Christianity.

Look for example at C1 v22. James says to these people, '*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*'. You see these people were very good at coming to their meetings, perhaps on a Sunday night, on a Saturday night, perhaps they hadn't fully emerged from their Jewish backgrounds, they were Jewish Christians largely, as we will see. But there they were, they were attending their meeting, they were there listening, perhaps taking notes as God's word was being preached and yet on the other hand they were being pulled by the world and they were not doing what God's word was saying. They were pulled in two different directions, double-minded.

Or perhaps in C2 v14, '*What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?*'. Yes, when the equivalent of David Casio got up and said, 'right we're all going to recite the creed now', well they jumped up and they started reciting the creed. They showed their faith. But then in the office on Wednesday they did not show their Christian deeds, pulled in another direction, two minds.

Or in C3 v9, '*With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers this should not be*' And so they led their music group in AD44 with the latest songs as they praised God and yet on the Thursday they were slandering their neighbour or running down their superior at work.

Or C4 v4, '*You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an*

enemy of God.’. Though they profess love of God they were also demonstrating love of the world and what it offers.

You see as we just go through this book we can see very quickly that James is writing to people who are following Christ, yes they are Christians, but they are also trying to follow the world. They are showing two minds. They are double-minded and as a result they are half-hearted Christians. And I suppose when we put it like that, that is the reason why we need to be studying James. That is the reason why I need to be studying James. You see, James isn’t writing to a situation which is completely remote and completely irrelevant to us. He is writing directly to us today. He knows our hearts, he knows our minds, he knows the power and lure and pull of the world upon us, he knows what we are like on a Sunday, he also knows what we are like on a Monday and on a Friday and all the rest of it. He is writing to folk who are facing the reality of that pull of the world. He is writing to half-hearted Christians. I guess he is writing to many of us.

And why did James think it important enough to write? Well again, just on our very quick tour of James let’s go right to the very end, always a very good place to begin. C5 v19, and I think in a way he is summing up all that he is writing here in v19 and v20. *‘My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever should bring a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.’*. You see James sees them, all of them as those who are wandering away from the truth. They are wandering from the safe paths and, as it were they are on the mountainside and they are wandering away from the path. They are very near the edge of the cliff and it is a situation of some danger and James himself is wanting to pull them back and he is encouraging them also to pull each other back from the edge of the cliff.

Now they hadn’t wandered because they were no longer believing the truth. No they could say the creed, they knew why Jesus had died. They knew about the resurrection. They knew all these things and they gloried in them. No they believed the truth, they weren’t wandering away from that. But they were drifting away through a half-hearted commitment. It was their behaviour that was causing them to drift. And through our behaviour leading us it is very possible for us to make shipwreck of our faith. I guess that is the danger for some of us isn’t it?

I have only been here for seven months and I know that many of you have been very well taught from the scriptures over the years and I guess there would be very very few here who, as it were would be standing up and saying in a few months time no, I don’t believe in the resurrection, I don’t believe that Jesus is the only way to God. I don’t believe that I don’t believe that. That is probably unlikely for many many of us. But sadly it is possible for many of us to drift away through our behaviour and as a result, to drift a long long way from the Lord. And it is to such people that James is writing. He is wanting to haul us back because of our behaviour, back to the safe paths, the paths of whole-hearted Christianity. Not double-minded Christianity, not half-hearted Christianity but whole-hearted Christianity. And that is what the Lord is wanting to draw us back to this evening.

Background

Now just a brief word about the background before we plunge in. We read that as we go back to C1 v1 '*James the servant of God and to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:...*'. Now James probably was writing, I would suggest around about the mid '40s A.D. and it is one of the very very earliest of our New Testament epistles. We can see that, though not in our own version.

C2 v2, turn over the page you will see that it says '*Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes,...*'. Literally it actually says suppose a man comes in to your synagogue wearing a gold ring. You see these are Christian Jews and they are still meeting together to study God's word and they are meeting in the same sort of place, and they might have just kept calling it the same thing of synagogue in those very early days. Yes they are genuine Christians. Christian Jews, and they are almost certainly being led by James, the Lord's brother, who we read about in Acts C15 and Galations C2 who from fairly early on became the leader of the Jerusalem church. Now this Jerusalem church suffered much over the years and in Acts 8 we realise that it was scattered through persecution once Steven had been martyred. We read also in Acts C11 it was suffering much due to a period of famine and for various reasons many of the Christians were scattered around that whole region.

But James is a good pastor and as their leader, no doubt was keeping tabs on them and was writing to them trying to encourage them, and this letter comes out of that situation, to the 12 Tribes, to these genuine Jewish Christian folk, scattered among the nations because of persecution and hardship. He is writing to them to encourage them, to encourage them to whole-hearted Christianity. Now the presenting problem is that some of these Jewish Christians were facing great difficulties and trials, as mentioned in v2 and they needed encouragement. But as we have already said, like a good doctor, the author James looks underneath the presenting problem to discover the underlying cause. And so, he starts his letter by addressing this issue of trials and sufferings and we see here, as spelt out in v2-12, that all the time he is also wanting to address the main issue of whole-hearted Christianity, of wanting to drive them away from their double-mindedness. And so even as he opens up this issue of suffering and how a Christian should deal with suffering and trials, immediately he also deals with this question of whole-hearted Christianity.

A. How We Should Respond To Suffering

So, quite a long introduction but let us now dive in and deal fairly quickly with these two main points that I have spelt out on our sheet.

So lets look first at how should we respond to suffering and trials v2-4 and then v12. Now the natural response, even as Christians, when we go through very difficult days, and I expect there will be very few of us who have not been touched by times of suffering, difficulty, is either to reject them as not being Gods will for us or to grumble and moan and complain about why God has let these things happen.

So for example, you are at work and there is a threatened redundancy and the immediate reaction is well, we must pray against it, and we will probably moan about it. And the Christian Jews who James was writing to were in exactly that same position as us. But the Christians, we are told by James, is to consider it pure joy

whenever you face trials of many kinds. Now what on earth does that mean? It sounds ludicrous doesn't it? So, when somebody breaks into your car and drives off with it, you are supposed to giggle with joy. Is that it? Is that what James is saying?

1 Purpose

Well let's look a bit more carefully. Let's look at the purpose of suffering according to James. Well he says whenever you face trials of many kinds you know that the testing of your faith, v3, '*develops perseverance*'. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. So, there is a clear progression here. The testing of faith is to lead to perseverance, which is to lead to strengthening, which is to lead to greater maturity. It is rather like the precious metal which is put through the fire to refine it in order to increase its value. Or it is the picture of the athlete who voluntarily submits herself or himself to periods of regular testing early morning runs or whatever it is, in order to strengthen muscles and fitness, in order to be a more complete athlete. And we need to recognise that God has a similar purpose in sending suffering and trials into the life of the Christian. To strengthen our faith and our hold on him. That is the purpose of suffering as far as James is concerned.

2 End result

But more than that there is an end result as well and if we drop down to v12 we will see that. '*Blessed is the man or woman who perseveres under trial, ...*' picking up the note of perseverance in v3, '*because when they have stood the test, they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those that love him.*'

So when we stand the test, and it is not just a momentary test, as we will need to show perseverance, so they will be tests that really take it out of us, tests that last a long time; when we have stood the test we will be awarded the crown of life, we will be with God forever in his kingdom.

I can remember when I was living in London and, just in my early days, working, and other friends, qualified, who left college the same time as me, were doing some very arduous accountancy exams. And it was a long long slog for them. Regular exams over a period of a number of years. It meant that they weren't able to go to that event because they had exams the following week and they weren't able to be involved in that commitment because they had special tuition on those particular nights, and all the rest of it. But at the end of that period, when they had slogged long and hard, I can remember my friend eventually getting through and qualifying as an accountant. He had shown perseverance through all those many trials and tests. At many points he would have said yes, I would rather have been doing that, I'd rather have done this, but the end result was the qualification.

And similarly, James is reminding us, when we go through periods of hardship and suffering, that we do need, as believers, to keep the long view in mind when we are suffering. There is a clear goal which God is preparing us for and he will use every available means to get us into shape for that great day. I notice in v12 the person '*will receive the crown of life...*' and almost certainly what James is referring to there is not a gold crown, the crown that you see on the coffin of Queen Elizabeth the Queen

Mother, but the crown in those days would have been a laurel crown, the crown that would have been given to the Olympic athlete on receiving the equivalent of the gold medal. It would be a mark of their achievement. And that is what James is promising. And so, when we see the purpose behind suffering, to strengthen our faith, to grant us maturity and completeness in our faith, when we see the end result, is to bring us all the way so that God can receive us into glory, well then we will start to see the value of suffering within God's permutation of all things.

3 Value

You see none of us will volunteer for suffering, but when it comes, which column are we going to put it in. An asset or is it a liability? Profit or loss? I guess sometimes for a firm, it can be a very hard decision. So for example, a firm delivers a very expensive product to a customer, but there is a long long delay for getting payment for it. And when the accountants try to reckon things up at the end of the year, what do they call it? Is it an asset, because it is going to generate some income, or is it a liability, they are just going to have to write off? And when suffering comes into our lives where do we put it? Well I guess we immediately put it in to the liability column. I don't like this. It hurts. I don't want this. But James is asking us to reconsider. No Angus, consider it, reckon it, account it, pure joy. Yes I know it hurts Angus, James is saying to me. But what is God trying to accomplish through it and what is the end result going to be? No Angus, put it in the profit, the asset column, because it is indeed a sign of the way that God is working within you to bring you to maturity and to that great day when he will receive you into glory.

Well is that all, just pious clap trap? Is it all just unreal? Do we just want to shout to James and say, it's just not like that James? Or actually, when we think about it, do we recognise that James is actually telling us the truth here. Because isn't it the testimony of many, perhaps many gathered here that those times of suffering, times of great pain that you and I would have going through in our lives, yes they have actually been the times when God has been working away, moulding away, strengthening our faith. That has been the case hasn't it? Those have been the times when our testimony has been that we felt closest to the Lord. Those have been the times that we have treasured amidst the pains. Those have been the times when we have appreciated most the gift of God's family around us and the gift of eternity before us. Yes James is telling us the truth here and although if you have been in some ways fortunate enough not to go through times of great trial and stress in your life so far, when suffering comes, as it comes to all of us in greater or lesser measure, don't just throw it into the liability column. Look at James C1 again. Start thinking it through. What is the Lord trying to teach you through these times? How is it that he is trying to mould your life so that you will be mature, not lacking anything?

B What Do We Need In Coping With Suffering

1 God's Wisdom

Well let's move on to our last point. v5-11. Well what do we need in order to cope with suffering and trials? Well, very simply we need God's wisdom. You see if somebody else looks at our suffering, they quickly say that it obviously means that

God isn't helping you, God doesn't love you at all and so they dismiss it. And we will also look at things like that as well, unless we have God's wisdom, which is why it is so vital for us to pray for God's wisdom when we go through times of great difficulty and stress. We need God's wisdom.

In fact our main difficulty is that we don't see things from God's angle or from his perspective. So for example, you take your child to the dentist, you know that it is going to hurt but you are quite content to do that. Just imagine the conversation with your child and the child is saying, mum, dad you know it's going to hurt me. And you say oh yes it's going to really hurt. But why are you doing this, why are you letting this strange man hurt me? Well actually you see things from a very different angle. You know that it is the route to healing, sorry no pun intended.

I think of friends, they were going off skiing and they were met by another mutual friend in the resort. It was very low down and it was pouring with rain and these friends thought this is awful, we come all the way from England, weather's terrible, and now we get here and it's chucking it down with rain. This is terrible. But our other friend was very upbeat. He said this is great, it's great that it is raining. Well why? Well he knew that although it was raining in the valley it was snowing on the hills. He could see things from a different perspective.

And when we go through suffering we do need that different perspective, we need God's wisdom. And that is indeed what is promised here. V5 *'If any of you lacks wisdom...'* especially when you are going through suffering, and perhaps there are many in here even tonight, and you are going through times of trial and you feel that you do lack wisdom well, do turn to God, he gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. We need God's viewpoint, we need his wisdom, we need to know how to view suffering, how to view setbacks and indeed, if we just drop down to v9-11 we have a worked example, showing how we are to look at things with God's wisdom.

2 God's Willingness to Give

You see what does the world say about riches and poverty. In the world's eyes a poor person is of very little value, perhaps of no consequence. Whereas a rich person, well they are very very important, they are of great stature, a person of great significance. The world's wisdom is based on the amount of their bank balance. And of course, if the Christian falls into financial difficulties and adopts the world's wisdom well of course it will lead to much complaining and grumbling to God. But look at God's wisdom. Well the brother in humble circumstances? Well they ought to take pride in their high position. Their high position? Well, they are much loved by the Lord and they will receive a crown of life at the end of their life and be welcomed into heaven for all eternity. They will be given all the great riches of the Lord Jesus Christ that have already been promised to them through the cross and resurrection. Yes they have a high position. That is God's wisdom.

And the rich person? v10 and 11, the one who is rich well they should take pride in their low position because yes, they have got riches, for how many years? Five years, ten years, thirty years, fifty years? How long will Bill Gates have all his millions and

billions of dollars for? Well, for a period, but then *'he will pass away like a wild flower, for the sun rises to a scorching heat and withers the plant. Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed in the same way the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business...'* And, unless Bill Gates is a Christian, that is an exact description of what is going to happen to him. You see God's wisdom is based on the reality of our mortality and of the immortality of the believer. Whereas the world's wisdom is completely based on what it can see and touch and feel now for these short years of our existence. Now we need God's wisdom when we go through times of suffering, times of trial, whether it is financial trials or whether bodily trials or whatever.

And wonderfully, we are told that God will give this wisdom, v5 *'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously...'* He is going to give us that wisdom. He delights to give generously, he delights to open eyes to see and focus.

I remember once as an RSPB member going to an RSBP site and there was a warden there and it was his great delight to bring people who were going into the hide to look at the birds, to a particular telescope and to point out where the golden eagle was. It was in the Lake District just two years ago. And that was his great delight, opening peoples' eyes to the great treasures that were there. And God gives generously. He delights to open eyes.

Although in fact this verse could actually mean something very slightly different and I'll share it with you because I think it does have value. Some commentators say it could mean simply that God gives single-mindedly without finding fault. In other words, he is not distracted by other things when you are asking. You know how it is, perhaps you have chatted to me just before one of our meetings starts and you are involved in conversation and you suddenly notice that Angus is listening and yet his eyes are wandering because he is also trying to catch somebody else, he is distracted. Well, I shouldn't do that but sometimes that is the reality of the situation. But God's not like that. As some commentators point out, it should be translated, God listens single-mindedly. He is not going to be distracted when you are in the middle of your trials and you are screaming God, why is it happening to me? And you are crying out for wisdom. He will give you his undivided attention.

3 But Are We Serious In Wanting It?

And yet there is a condition, and with this we end on v6-8. We need to ask ourselves, are we serious about following God's wisdom? You see *'...when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed about by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man unstable in all he does.'* We are to believe not doubt. What does that mean? Now to believe here doesn't mean that we have got to somehow work ourselves up to it. No, lets look at the doubter, the doubter in v6 is the same person who is the double-minded man in v8. And who is this person? Well, the doubter is not somebody who has got particular theological hang-ups. The doubter, the double-minded person, is the person who listens to God's wisdom but actually, when it comes to it, follows the world's wisdom.

So for example, in an illness the doctor prescribes a particular treatment but you chat it over with some friends and they are very worried with what the doctor might have decided. And so you follow your friends' advice and so of course you don't get any benefit from the doctor's wisdom. Or you are lost on the hill side in the fog and you come across somebody who gives you some very wise advice, points you in the right direction. You go along a bit further you come across another group of folk who say oh no that's a very dangerous path I would go the other way. And because there are more of them you listen to them and so you don't get the benefit of the original person's wisdom.

And James says it can be the same in the sense of our relationship with the Lord. We are going through times of difficulty and trial. We listen to what God's word says but then we follow what others in the office say. What others at home say. And as a result, v7, well we won't receive anything from the Lord if, having consulted Him, we ignore what He has said. And James gives us a powerful picture of waves at sea, v7.

Yesterday we paid a visit to a friend in Chichester. We went down to the sea and it was quite windy, the waves going in all different directions. That is the picture of the double-minded person. One moment going this way, one moment going the other way. Listening to God's word but following the advice of somebody else. And a doubter is simply somebody who is pulled both ways. Who wants to have a foot in both camps. They want to find out what God says, but when it comes to it, they go with the crowd.

Now James says if you are going to be like that you just won't get any benefit from God's wisdom. No the right way is to be a believer, which in the context is a single-minded person. The whole-hearted person. The person who shows whole-hearted commitment to receiving and acting on God's word. And they follow God's word, they follow God's wisdom. And as they do that they will gain the benefits of finding maturity and completeness and the crown of life at the end.

I think double-mindedness is probably an extremely common phenomenon, perhaps in all our lives, but a very debilitating one. A foot in both camps? Double vision? Well ultimately, it is not something that can be sustained forever and ultimately we have to choose. Indeed the Lord Jesus spoke about this in Matthew C6. He talks in a slightly different context of saying no-one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. But we constantly try to prove him wrong. We constantly try to have a foot in both camps. And James, following Jesus, is simply calling us to decide. And God in his wisdom actually often sends us trials and difficulties precisely to make up our minds. Which camp am I in? Which way am I going?

On the west coast line, going up to Carlisle which was a familiar journey in past years, some of the trains went straight on to Glasgow but would divide just after Carlisle, some going up to Edinburgh some, part of the train going to Glasgow. And decision time came. Which part are you going to be in? And so all the announcements were made many times just to make sure people were really in the right compartment, to make sure that they were going to go to the right destination. And as we travel, yes many of us, we've got our foot in both camps, and the trials come to persuade us which destination do we want to end up in? Where do we really

want to go? Well lets make sure we are prepared not just to listen to God's word, we can be very good at that, and you have been very patient tonight, but let's make sure we are also people who are going to obey God's word through the week. Let us not be those who are known for being double-minded but for those who are whole hearted. Amen.