



## **"The Book of James: Putting Faith into Action"**

**Sunday, January 9 5 PM**

### **Session 1: The Challenge of Faith & the Snares of the World (James 1:1-18)**

#### **Authorship, Date, and Audience**

The letter of James in the New Testament is believed to have been written by James "the Just", the half-brother of Jesus. (This is not the same as the James the disciple!) James was an influential leader in the early Christian Church, choosing to do most of his ministry in the Jerusalem Church. As half-brother of Jesus, James did not initially believe Jesus was the promised Messiah (as reported in John 7:5), but is believed to have changed his views after Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15:7) In the early church, James was held in as high esteem as Peter and Paul. He played a key role in the Jerusalem Council in 50 AD, which was an early debate as to whether non-Jews had to adopt Jewish practices in order to be considered Christians – ultimately ruling against it.

The letter written by James is believed to have been written around 49 or 50 AD, prior to the Jerusalem Council. The letter is believed to have been written after Paul and Barnabas missionary work in Antioch, dated around the same time.

James addresses the letter to the "twelve tribes scattered among the nations". This designation most likely refers to a group of Jewish Christians who were dispersed among throughout the Mediterranean region. This group of believers is commonly referred to as the Diaspora. These believers were facing heavy persecution and extreme financial hardships. The letter seems to be intended for the poorer of the "dispersed", while also the wealthier non-Jewish counterparts, as he challenges both to care for one another during these difficult situations.

## **Opening Questions...**

The letter of James deals with the “practical” side of faith, which means trusting God even in difficult times and crises. As we think about recent difficult times or struggles in our lives...

- 1. How would you describe your general attitude during this time?**
- 2. What does your response to the situation reveal about your view of God?**

## **Opening Prayer**

Father, open our hearts as we encounter your Word this evening. As we reflect on the words of James penned so many years ago, may their wisdom and insight speak fresh and new to us this night. Empower us with your presence. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

### ***Session 1: The Challenge of Faith and the Snares of the World (James 1:1-18)***

*James 1:1* – The opening verse of James reveals the author and the intended audience of the letter. Depending on the date and authorship, the audience could refer to the Jewish Christians who were currently living outside Jerusalem in Palestine, forced from the city because of persecution. If a later date is considered, the audience could refer to all Christians, including Gentile Christians, who were far away from their homeland. This is why the message still speaks to us today, intended for all Christians – whether scattered from their homes or not – who may be walking through difficult times. James is writing as a concerned leader, to encourage them in their faith during this difficult time.

*James 1:2-8* – The key word in this section of James’ letter – and really his entire letter – is “understanding”. Of all the New Testament writings, the letter of James closely follows the wisdom writings of the Old Testament. God’s revelation to his followers of how to approach the world, specifically in difficult times, begins with understanding. In the first twenty-seven verses of James’ letter, he uses some term of knowing (reckon/calculate/consider) seventeen times. In the remaining eighty-one verses, a term of “understanding” is used only seven times. From the beginning, understanding is key and then he lays out how our faith should follow into action.

Notice that James does not say “if” you face trials, but “when” you face trials of many kinds. He understands that all believers will face times in their life

when they will struggle. During this time, we are not to pretend to be “happy”, but instead have a positive outlook on life – “consider it pure joy”. These times of trial are teaching moments in our lives. We learn perseverance. Christians cannot fully understand their depth of character until we see how we react under pressure. Can we be kind to others when they treat us unfairly? James is reminding these early Christians – and all believers – that we do not walk through these times alone. Be patient. God is there. He is working on and through us. He stays close and helps us grow.

During these times of struggle, seeking out “wisdom/knowledge” from God is the key. He provides the ability to make wise decisions during difficult circumstances. James is not just speaking to the individual believer, but to the community’s faith as well. Wisdom means practical discernment. For the individual and the community, it begins with respect to God, leads to right living, and results in increased ability to tell right from wrong. God is willing to give it, but if our motives are self-centered and not God-centered, we will be sure to miss it.

James uses the powerful imagery of the waves at sea to drive this point of doubt home. Remember, he is writing to the dispersed believers across Palestine, many of which might be living in coastal villages and towns. We can capture this imagery in our minds from our personal ventures to the North Carolina coast. One word that describe waves are restless, subject to the forces of wind, gravity, and the tide. Doubt leaves us as restless as the waves. If we ask in faith and trust that He will grant us the wisdom that we need, He will provide. We will be standing on solid ground!

### **Follow Up Questions...**

- 1. Why does God want his followers to ask for his help without doubting?**
- 2. When has patience had a positive effect on you and your life as the result of the testing of your faith?**
- 3. When have you experienced receiving wisdom that you asked for?**

*James 1:9-12* – For the believers in first century Palestine (and us today), James begins to “reorder” the world through the eyes of God. Order is not based on who has and who does not have. Instead, order is based on our relationship with God. Ultimately, James ends in verse 12 by stating that the future for those who have

endured testing because of their love for God will receive the reward that is life, a life with Him. This should be our ultimate desire as a believer in God.

How we see the rich person and the poor person in light of this may be a little more difficult. In verse 9, when James says the “believers/brothers in humble circumstances”, he is referring to a person who is without status or wealth. These individuals are often overlooked in society. However, in the eyes of God, those in “humble circumstances” are clearly seen, and they hold a high position. James is speaking hope to the poor. They can exult in both in their present status and their future hope.

What about the rich? This is where great debate has taken place in regards to James’ letter. Is James referring to the “rich” that are included in the community of believers or an outsider? If James is referring to an outsider who is oppressing and causing suffering to the community, then James’ words here are ironic. People like this boast, even though God’s reversal of status in the end will destroy them like the blossom on a plant. However, if the “rich” is a part of the community, James may be giving a warning to those who are living according to the world’s values, and not God’s. These individuals will be humbled for giving in to the testing of wealth and placing reliance on it.

James is not making an exhortation in the opening words of his letter, but stating basic principles concerning the human condition before God. If wealth, power, and status mean nothing to God, why do we as humans attribute so much importance to them and so much honor to those who possess it? Do material possessions give you goals and serve as your only reason for living? If they were gone, what would be left? What lies in our heart – not what is in our bank account – is what matters to God and endures for eternity.

### **Follow Up Question...**

#### **1. How does wealth and possessions affect your relationship with God?**

*James 1:13-18* – If God is so intimately involved in our lives and human destiny, can God be blamed for human failure? This is a powerful question that James seeks to answer for the early Christian community, but I think needs to be heard by all believers today. James begins to answer this question in verse thirteen by first removing God from the realm of evil entirely. God neither is tested by evil nor tests anyone with evil. If James just left the answer to this question at this, it

would be insufficient and inconclusive. James uses verses fourteen through eighteen to provide the proper understanding of the roots of temptation and of God's relationship to humans.

One important designation to understand here is the difference between "testing" and "tempting". The Greek word used by James is *peirazo*, which is tempting, instead of *peirasmos*, which means, "testing." James is not talking about things that happen or befall people from the outside, but the results of their own inner/sinful desires. Desire – understood not as legitimate wanting but as disordered passion – is being addressed. Temptation comes from evil desires inside of us, not from God. It begins with an evil thought and becomes sin when we dwell on the thought and allow it to become an action. Like a snowball rolling down a hill, sin grows more destructive in our lives the more we let it have its way. God does not "tempt", trying to seduce them into sin. Satan does this. James describes this path in terms of conception, birth, and ultimately death. We can resist the temptation to sin by turning to God for strength and choosing to obey His Word.

In contrast to temptation and sin, God is defined in terms of complete and generous goodness. He is associated with light, instead of darkness. Stability rather than change and alteration. With the giving of gifts rather than the grasping nature of desire. James' words in verse 17 were recognized by early Christian leaders as one of the noblest theological statements about God in the New Testament. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." These words are still recited in the Eastern Orthodox tradition at the conclusion of the *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*.

First century Christians were the first to recognize Jesus Christ as the Promised Messiah. James' reference to these believers – he being one of them and those he was writing to as being a part as well – as the "firstfruits of all he created", was a call to their role in the world. A sacrifice of faith and works to God's creation.

### **Follow Up Questions...**

- 1. The two snares James discusses in this passage – wealth and temptation – often go hand in hand. Have you experienced times in your life when these two "snares" worked together to cause you trouble?**

**2. When God speaks, things happen. Things happen to us. Things happen in us. Like a medicine that goes down deep inside, healing our inner hurts and motivations, the Word of God changes us into different individuals. How have you experienced the Word of God working healing and change in you?**

**Closing Questions to Reflect on this Week...**

**How do you usually respond to life’s difficulties and struggles? How have you seen God bring good into your life through these times of trial? How can you grow closer to God through the trials you are facing right now?**

**Closing Prayer**

Father, we come to you just as we are, struggling to cope with the trials of life. We are grateful that you never turn your back on us. You promise to give us wisdom and strength we need to face each day. Father, when we confront temptation – whether internal or external – we pray that you would give us the strength to resist it. Thank you for your promise that if we do what is right, we can know that eventually truth, justice, and goodness will prevail. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

\*\*\*\*\*

**The Book of James: Putting Faith into Action**  
**Session 2 - “The Word that Goes to Work” (James 1:19-27)**  
**Sunday, January 16      5 PM      Facebook Live**

\*\*\*\*\*