



Lesson 1

Greetings (verse 1)

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

James describes himself as a ‘servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ’. Being a servant - or slave - was not always a pleasant experience. The servant had little in life for himself, neither possessions nor time. The master owned the servant who had to obey him in every way. By describing himself as a servant James was humbly acknowledging that Jesus was far greater than him, and that he owed everything to him. True disciples decide to serve Jesus in every aspect of their lives, trying to do the will of God. They find what this is by reading the Bible and praying about it. They regard their lives as gifts from God – not their own.

The Testing of Your Faith (verses 2-4)

“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.”

The believers who first read this letter were having a very difficult time, which was really testing their faith. It is not a natural reaction to be happy when you are tested. James tells us that this testing can benefit a sincere believer. It can lead to steadfastness (this word is translated ‘patience’ in some versions) – the ability to endure and cope with suffering.

This in turn helps to make a believer ‘perfect’, which is exactly what Jesus asked of us.

“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

We shall find that James often quotes the words and ideas of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s gospel.

It is an amazing fact that Jesus learned obedience by suffering:

“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

So even if we are faithful disciples we may have difficult times in our lives. Perhaps we too will suffer for our beliefs or have other problems. When these things happen to us we can look to the example of Jesus and know that God will be with us as He was with Jesus, whatever happens to us His comfort and support is there.

Asking for Wisdom (Verses 5-8)

“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.”

One way in which God helps is by giving us the wisdom to understand why we are being tested. So James says that we are to ask for such wisdom. We must also trust God – we should not ask but then doubt. Later in his letter James has more to say about prayers and the way we should say them, but here he is emphasising the importance of faith. Notice the similarity with words of Jesus himself:

“And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.” (Matthew 21:21-22).

Quite clearly we cannot just ask God for whatever we want, expecting to get it. We need proper faith in order to ask in a correct way. This means we need to know what we can ask for – what does God want us to pray for – otherwise we cannot confidently ask in prayer.



Rich and Poor People (Verses 9-11)

“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.”

James makes his first comments about the rich and the poor. Jews often believed that a rich man must be righteous for God to have blessed him with his riches. But everyone is equal in relation to the gospel. The rich man dies just as the poor man dies. However much money he has, a man leaves it behind when he dies. Jesus told a parable about a man who was intent on getting more and more riches (Luke 12: 13-21). At the end Jesus said:

“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:21).

Notice how similar the ideas are – maybe James was guided to think of this parable of Jesus when he was writing these words.

Being equal in relation to the gospel means that the rich man is humbled, realizing that he is helpless and hopeless without God. The poor man already knows that he is helpless, but he can feel uplifted by faith and the hope of salvation. Without the gospel we all perish like the grass in the field. We are not important. We should not even aim to have a prominent position. Jesus said:

“Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:10-12).

Being Steadfast (verse 12)

“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.”

James says that we should be concentrating on remaining steadfast – dedicated - because this is the way to gain the ‘crown of life’. This is an everlasting reward which cannot be destroyed. Jesus cannot die ever again, and he is waiting in heaven to come back to give eternal life to the faithful. No-one can stop this happening: it is promised by God Himself.

Being Tempted (Verses 13-16)

“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.”

James then talks about temptations. Temptations are different from testings because temptations encourage us to do bad things. If we give in to temptations then we sin and this is why we die. God allows us to be tested, and if we are faithful gives us wisdom to cope and uses testing to develop our characters. He never, ever, tempts us to do wicked things. So James warns the readers not to accuse God of tempting them. He describes the process which leads to sin. It starts with a bad thought which we allow to develop into an action. We can only blame ourselves.

Good Gifts from God (Verses 17-18)

“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.”



James then describes what God does do for us – He gives us good things in life, even when we are being tested. He has also taught us His way so that we can become his children. This is what God does for those who believe in Him and His salvation through Jesus. Also, God’s character never changes. He is always faithful, truthful and fair. We can always rely on Him to keep His promises.

Hearing and Doing the Word (Verses 19-25)

“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.”

James shows how great God is, and how kind. When we understand this we should respond to Him. First of all we have no right to be angry about our situation or with the way people treat us, and certainly we should try as hard as we can not to angry and look for revenge on those who hurt us. Instead we should concentrate on God’s word, which can save us; without it we would not know what God wants us to do. So we should treasure its message.

We need to listen. James has more to say about talking, but here he reminds us that we need always to remember what sort of people we really are, and not just to forget and carry on in the same old way. If we look in a mirror we don’t immediately forget what we look like – that would be silly. There would be no point in looking in the mirror. It is equally silly to look into the perfect word of God and to ignore what it says about us. We are often more keen to talk than to listen, and that is not wise.

True Religion (Verses 26-27)

“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.”

Finally in this section James warns about the harm we can do by what we say. The true signs of religion are not what a man says but what he does. A true Christian will look after the poor and needy and try very hard to avoid sinning.



Lesson 1 Questions

Name _____
Address _____
_____ Reference Number _____
Tutor's Name _____

Answers to most questions can be found in the lessons or Bible passages given. Please write your answers on this question paper and send them to your tutor.

1. Find the names of other people who described themselves as servants of Jesus (look at the start of other letters in the New Testament).
2. What does James say about the benefits of Christians being tested?
3. How does he say we should try to cope with this testing?
4. How many people in the Bible can you think of who were ill-treated for trying to obey God?
5. Read Acts 5:40-42. How did these Christians suffer? What was their attitude to it?
6. Whom does James blame for our sins? Is it an evil angel?
7. Does God always stop unpleasant things happening to us? Why?
8. How do you think you could try to stop the process of sinning described in verses 14 and 15?
9. Think of something that is a temptation to you. How can the words of James help you to overcome this? (Do not describe the actual temptation – that is personal to you.)
10. What is the most important thing you have learnt from this chapter?