

DAY 1 - (week beginning Mon 20 Aug 2018)**Read - James 1:1**

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.” v 1

This week we begin a new 6-week series in which we will study the book of James. Before we dive into the book, it is useful to take consider a few general items.

Firstly, who is James? It is not abundantly clear from the letter itself which of the many James’s in the New Testament wrote this book. It was almost certainly not James the brother of John (the sons of Zebedee) as that James was the first one of the twelve to be martyred, and that happened before this book was written.

The common consensus is that this book was written by James, the brother of Jesus, mentioned in Mark 6:3. We know that this James became the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. This is the joy of the gospel, that an initial doubter [John 7:5] can become a leader in the church.

The other interesting aspect of the book of James is that it is an intensely practical book. James spends little, if any time, on the theology of the gospel, and almost all the time on the practical aspects of living the gospel.

This serves as a reminder to us that we shouldn’t get too caught up in theological speculation, if we aren’t spending at least as much time trying to live the gospel. This is the trap many academics fall into, and they then end up focused more on knowledge than life and faith. The gospel is life!

Prayer: Father help me to always look for life in Your word.

DAY 2**Read - James 1:1-8**

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” v 2

The letter of James was written to all the churches, and thus us too, at a time of great persecution of the church. James, like most of the disciples and many believers, was martyred in the first century for his beliefs.

The church was under attack and James seeks to reassure them. But note that James does not try to say that they have done anything wrong or need to have more faith to prevent these attacks.

Even Jesus made it quite clear there would be times when being a Christian would be very difficult: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” [John 16:33]

There are some Christians who seem to misunderstand this. They expect life to be only good to them and then when things go wrong for others, they say ‘you don’t have enough faith’, or ‘you must have done something wrong’. This is not what the Bible says or what Jesus said.

Jesus said we would have troubles in this world, and James says the same to those suffering in the first century. If we believe things should only go well, then troubles will throw us off course. But if we understand that this may happen, then we have a better chance of persevering.

Consider: How do you react to God when troubles come in your life?

DAY 3**Read - James 5:7-11**

“Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming.” v 7

James comes back to the issue of trials at the end of his letter. He highlights the need for patience. In chapter 1:12, James said: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

In modern terminology we would probably say that what James is urging is that we ‘hang in there’.

Somehow it is easier to handle difficult things when we are expecting them. It is easier to cope with an injection when we expect it, than it is to cope with a sudden sharp object piercing our skin unexpectedly. The pre-knowledge helps us to not react to the incident but rather to cope with how to handle it.

So it is easier to persevere or be patient in suffering when the actual incident does not throw us off balance – we are able to focus on how to get through this rather than spend all our time wondering why this has happened or what we have done to deserve it. Jesus made it clear these things will happen to us because we have chosen to follow Him, not because of what we have done.

The reality is that we live in a broken world and that broken world inflicts all kinds of suffering on many billions of people in the world. As a Christian we are not exempted from this, but we have a mighty Saviour and constant companion to see us through it.

Prayer: Jesus, thank You for Your presence with me at all times.

DAY 4**Read - 1 Peter 1:3-9**

“This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” v 5-6

Peter also talked about trials and suffering in his letters to the churches, as we see above.

But the key aspect of this passage for us today is that Peter makes it clear that the purpose of our following Jesus is not for the short term, but for the long term.

There is no question that Jesus makes a huge difference to our lives here on earth: giving us His love and grace to deal with the ugliness of our sin; His presence every day to guide and direct us into making good decisions; His community to help us through life in love; and providing meaning and purpose to life.

But all of this is nothing compared to the glory that awaits us when we eventually get to spend eternity with God. It is so easy to get caught up in the worries of this current life and forget that this is just the preamble to eternity, and our place there is secure!

Peter points out that these difficulties and suffering are now just ‘for a while’ but our life with God is for eternity. This absolute knowledge is what keeps and sustains us in our times of having to persevere for a while.

Prayer: Father thank You that I can fully trust in Your promise that I will live with You in everlasting life.

DAY 5**Read - Romans 5:1-11**

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” v 3-5

This passage from Romans is a great passage setting out the theology of salvation by faith. It summarises the essence of the gospel, but even in the midst of the gospel message, we see Paul mention sufferings.

Paul even goes so far as to say ‘we glory in our sufferings’. James said ‘consider it pure joy when you suffer’. Both of them highlighted that this is because suffering leads to growth.

There is no doubt that we grow more from the difficult times in our lives than we do from the good times. Our strength comes from perseverance through tough times – ‘suffering produces perseverance’.

And that perseverance then ‘produces character’. We become better people, stronger but also more empathetic to others. And when our character is strengthened we find hope – hope in the future with God, but also hope in the present.

We begin to know that we can withstand difficult times because we have done so in the past. We know that we can depend on God to be with us through His Holy Spirit, no matter what life can throw at us. We know our faithful God!

Prayer: Father, help me to build character and hope to help me though tough times.

DAY 6**Read - Psalm 46-1-3**

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.” v 1-3

The psalmist gives a wonderful summary of the life of perseverance, character and hope in the beginning of Psalm 46.

Firstly he knows that the source of all life and hope for Him is in God – His refuge and strength. He is also acutely aware that God is ever-present with him in the dark times.

He then has this amazing faith that can proclaim that even if the whole world and its foundations should be overthrown, he has nothing to fear because he knows his God.

In reading this, I get the feeling that this is not simply a vain boast of someone who does not know what he is talking about. This is the clear statement of faith and trust that comes from someone who has walked a hard journey and speaks from great experience.

We can all get to that point in our lives. It will not be easy and can only be learned by experience. It starts by not letting difficult times knock us off balance – because we realise that is simply the way life is.

It then grows by our perseverance through these troubles, hand-in-hand with God, to come out of the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ (Ps 23) with hope.

Prayer: Lord be always with me