

Session One: Overview

James Chapter 1-5

In our first look at the Book of James, we will try to get an overall grasp of what he was trying to say, rather than try to work out the finer details. In the space below, record what your group thinks is / are the main point/s of each chapter as you read the book all the way through. It would be worthwhile to note any themes or concepts which crop up more than once, as well as any words which are used recurrently.

Read all of the Book of James

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Was there anything you weren't sure about as you read through James' letter? Make a note of something you would like to understand better about the book by the end of our studies on James.

Gospel OUT: Pursuing wholeness through trials (Study 2)

James 1:1-18¹

Read James 1:2-4

1. The three most important words in verse 2-4 are joy, perseverance and maturity. In your own words, what is the logical connection between these ideas? Construct your own brief sentence summarising this logic.

Our joy is not in trials per se but in what trials bring = perseverance through tough times, and maturity of character.

2. Where in your own life can you look back on difficult circumstances and realise that God used them to bring you closer to Christian wholeness?

3. List two or three of the most likely 'trials' that Christians in the West are likely to experience. How might each of these, if viewed rightly, lead to Christian wholeness?

Depression – trusting God in the darkness, especially when our mind doesn't allow any feelings of hope.

Finances – trusting that God will get us through even / especially when our finances are in a mess.

Read James 1:5-8

4. Is there a contradiction between the statement that God 'gives generously to all without finding fault' and the qualification that the double-minded person 'should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord? Why or why not?

It seems like there is, but simply put, the answer is no. God does give generously to all without finding fault means that it is the Lord's delight to offer wisdom to those who ask sincerely. He does not begrudge us His gift, even if we don't really deserve it. But if you take an each way bet, partly devoted to God, partly devoted to the world, you shouldn't expect to get anything from God.

5. Think of someone who is wise in the biblical sense of the term. What marks them out?

Read James 1:9-11

6. What do you think James means by the 'high position' of the poor believer'?

The poor believer has a high position in that he is a 'believer' – and as such is regenerated, justified, being sanctified and will be glorified. He or she is a child of God = an amazing

¹ These studies have been collated from John Dickson's Vital Signs: The wisdom of James and the life of faith (Aquila Press, 2006)

status. What we are in God is infinitely more valuable and 'esteemed' than what this world values.

7. How are you going in terms of embracing the perspective James urges concerning wealth, poverty, success and status? Is there anything you could do to bring your values into line with the Bible's 'upside down' thinking?

Read James 1:12-18

8. Our desires and temptations are not in themselves sinful; it's what we do with them that counts. Do you agree with this statement? Why / why not?

Sex, money, power are all good things (1 Timothy 4:4), but they can be abused and become sinful. All sin is turning good things into acts of rebellion against God and His plans for us.

9. We all have our weaknesses. Identify areas of your own life that could potentially lead you away from God and towards sin. What are some practical steps you could take to avoid these weaknesses and vulnerabilities damaging your relationship with God?

Gospel OUT: Walking the Word – part 1 (Study 3)

James 1:19-25²

Read James 1:19-21

What does James say in 1:19-21, and what is the reason for saying it? What might this look like in daily practice?

Read James 1:22-25

What does it mean to do the Word (vv. 22 & 25)? How is this not legalism?

How might you forget what you look like (v.24)? What does this mean?

“There is a celebrated story of a South American pastor, Carlos Ortez, who sensed that his large congregation was good at coming to church and hearing the Word, but was less enthusiastic about living it out in daily life. He decided on a radical solution.

After the conclusion of his sermon one Sunday he announced that the doors of the church would remain closed until further notice, until he heard that members of his congregation were living out the Word of God. He then bolted the doors and didn't open them again for weeks. Eventually, he heard back from the leaders of the church small groups that there was indeed a discernible change in people's lives. He placed an announcement in the local newspaper and church services resumed the following Sunday.”

The above story describes a fairly drastic course of action. How would you go about encouraging people to *do* the Word, not just study it?

Why do you think James describes the Word as the law that ‘gives freedom’? (v.25)

What parts of the Word do you struggle to do? How can you change? List some practical steps.

² These studies have been collated from John Dickson's *Vital Signs: The wisdom of James and the life of faith* (Aquila Press, 2006)

Gospel OUT: Words and Wisdom (James 3:1-18)

The only saying goes: "Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me."
Do you agree / disagree? Why?

Read James 3:1-18

What is our goal and is this possible? (3:2, see also 1:4)

Christians are perfect in status, but not in character. 1:4 talks of some of the process of our sanctification; 3:2 is only possible for us in heaven (cause we all stumble in many ways).

What does James 3:3-12 tell us about the nature and the effects of the following?

The power of the tongue (vv.3-6)

Horse

Ships

The tongue

→ Small things control big things.

The untamed tongue is an act of spiritual arson; it is fuelled by hell (v.6)

Gossip, negative innuendo, flattery, fault-finding, angry words, sharp words, irritable words
= all destructive words.

Controlling the tongue (vv.7-8)

We can tame everything else – but not the tongue

The doubleness of the tongue

Bless and curse; filthy and pure language – inconsistent, sinful – my brothers, these things ought not to be so!

Rhetorical question: Why is it so hard to tame our tongue? *Read Matthew 12:34* and discuss where our language stems from.

Our language (speech) is an overflow of our hearts – good heart, good words; bad heart, bad words etc

What does James 3:13-16 tell us about the source of our problem and its effects?

The source:

1. Our hearts (this is where bitter jealousy and selfish ambition come from) v14
2. Earthly, unspiritual, demonic – v15

The effects:

Disorder and every vile practice – v16

James 3:17-18 gives us the resolution to our problem of our tongue and our heart. What is the source of our resolution and what are its effects?

Source: Wisdom from above

Effects: all the words in verses 17-18 (which are very similar to the fruits of the Spirit)

If the answer to our problems is from above (verse 17), what can we do to access this help? (see James 1:5 and Hebrews 4:16)

Ask God for His wisdom

Pray

Application:

Is there someone in your life you find it difficult to speak with in a loving way? Why? What can you do to improve?

To what degree people describe you as having verse 17's qualities? What are your personal areas for improvement?

THE GOSPEL OUT: The Battle within (Read James 4:1-10)

There is a lot of battle language in James 4. What are the causes of these battle and what are their effects?

James 4:1-2a

Passions at war within us (coveting etc) → causes quarrels and fights

James 4:2b-3

Rejected prayers because they ask wrongly with the wrong motivation

James 4:4-6

We make ourselves enemies of God → we align ourselves with the motivations / purposes of the sinful, rebellious cultures around us.

How might we today make ourselves enemies of God?

Lots of ways – when we do things that aren't motivated by love for God or love for people; when we build our kingdom not God's; when we work so that we'd have status and significance, instead of working for God's fame and glory; when we work purely for earthly rewards not heavenly rewards; when we don't tame our tongues; when we neglect the poor, the least and the lost; when we are partial to those who can give us status in this world, and neglect those who offer us nothing...

What does James 4:7-10 say we must do in response? How would we go about doing this?

“May God grow us all in our allegiance to Him - submitting to Him, fleeing from Satan, mourning our sin, humbling ourselves, and receiving His empowering grace to live for Jesus and not the world.”

THE GOSPEL OUT: Facing the future (James 4:13 – 5:12)

Read James 4:13 – 5:12

What does James 4:13-17 tell us about planning for the future?

Make plans, but add verse 15 to your plans

Make plans - do things trust God and make sure you do the right thing because if you fail to do the right thing, it's sin (sins of omission)

James 5:1-6 starts with the horrifying words of *weep and wail for the misery coming upon you*. From the verses below, why might God through James say this?

1. 5:2-3 **Hoarding** – God didn't make gold to become rusted or clothes to be eaten by moths - holding on to things with tight fingers. The hoarders will have their flesh eaten by fire.
2. 5:4 **Dishonesty** – going after money for gain, stepping over others to get it.
3. 5:5 **Self-indulgence** – extravagant living while others suffer – the Lord condemns this.
4. 5:6 **Murderers** – condemning and murdering people who can't fight back.

How might we be tempted to do any of the above and put ourselves in God's firing line?

Our society encourages us to be consumers, not givers – and thus become hoarders, dishonest, self-indulgent, murderers (at least in our minds)

What is the call God makes on His people in 5:7-11? What are the reasons for heeding God's call and how do we do this?

Be patient then (v.7)

Until the Lord's coming – there will be an end to the disorder, pain and problems we face.

- The prosperous oppressors will be judged (v7 – the Lord's coming).
- We will be judged for what we do, think and say (v.8-9)
- The Lord is compassionate and merciful

This is where the gospel comes in – in God's compassion and mercy, He tells us that there is no refuge from God (in His wrath), but there is refuge in Him (Christ taking our place, dying for our sins, uniting us to Himself etc).

In light of the above, if you died (or Jesus came back) in 5 minutes:

- Where would you go?
- Would you save up as much money for your 'nest egg' as you do?
- Would you give more / less away?
- Would you grumble about church / family / friends / work, or would you do something to change the situation.
- Would you crumble under trial, or look forward with hope?
- Would you be more thoughtful with your words?

THE GOSPEL OUT: A Community of Grace (James 5:13-20)

James 5:13-20 is all about the church becoming a caring community of grace who proactively seeks each others good.

Read James 5:13-18

What is James' advice to people who are suffering?

v.13 – pray

v.14 – call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

v.16 – confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another

How might we practice this at 5:17?

Pray – corporate prayer

Pray – call the elders

Pray – for each other / confessing sin

Read James 5:19-20

What does it say about restoring a saint and why?

What: Christians wandering away – someone brings him/her back.

Why: save his/her soul from death; will cover a multitude of sins

Why do we struggle so much with this?

We might not know each other well enough; we might not notice them slipping away; we might think of ourselves as sinners who have no right to make a comment to other sinners; we might be shy etc.

How can we practice this at 5:17?

Hear the call from God through James; understand the danger people face when they wander away. Put in the following steps to be both approachable and helpful approachers.

How should we say what we say:

1. Firstly – if there is truth we **must** speak, it must be in love.
2. Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19).
3. Be specific: all aspects of life are of God's concern; deal with important issues – nothing is taboo, insignificant
4. Be humble: only God is perfect; avoid being 'a Log-eye'

5. Base your advice on the gospel – the last word should always be grace.

A Christian friend says to you, “You know, the letter of James is one part of the Bible I’ve never really studied.” In a sentence or two, how would you summarise the significance of this portion of God’s Word?