

The Letter of St James

A Better Way of Living

Session Six: Answers/ Comments Overall Review and Impressions

This letter is full of Jesus' own teaching, but James reinforces it with his own teaching on prayer.

1. In 1:5 James teaches us to *"ask God"*, in other words to pray. He says pray for wisdom, which we observed in Session Three, is the knowledge and understanding of God. But in 1:6-7 he warns us that **prayer minus faith produces nothing**, *"When you pray you must believe and not doubt."* In 4:2 we read, *"You want something but don't get it."* I think we are meant to link that to prayer and to reinforce our understanding, that prayer minus faith produces nothing. Verse 3 goes on to say that even if we do believe, but ask with the wrong motive, we will not receive what we ask. So **prayer plus faith, but minus surrender to God's will produce nothing.**

This teaching on prayer comes together in 5:16 where we learn that **prayer plus faith plus surrender to His will be "powerful and effective"**. But 5-13-18 is all about prayer and praise. In verse 13 James is implying, that whatever our frame of mind, from acute anxiety to radiant happiness, we should pray and praise God. He highlights times of sickness in verses 14-16. We should include in this not just physical ailments, but mental, emotional or spiritual weakness, remember 1 Peter 3:12, with the quotation from Psalm 34:15, *"The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous. His ears attend to their prayer."*

2. For the Jews, Elijah represented the prophets in the way Moses represented the Law, so he commanded great respect and was an impressive example of a righteous man, whose prayer was powerful and effective, 5:17. In 1 Kings 18:30-31, Elijah repaired the ruined altar of the Lord with twelve stones, which represented the twelve tribes of Israel. In the opening to his letter James addresses **"the twelve tribes scattered"**, he is rebuilding them up together again: reminding them that as Christians they are united in the Lord.

But then James says in the next verse, *"Elijah was a man just like us"*. How could an ordinary person be like the greatest prophet? The answer I think lies in Elijah's moment of weakness, when in great despondency he gave up and ran away (1 Kings 19:1-9). However, he ran to God and laid all his woes at God's feet (1 Kings 19:10 and 14). God responded by giving him new work to do on his behalf and ended by reassuring him that he was not alone, there were plenty of people loyal to God (1 Kings 19:15-18).

By naming Elijah, James not only has an example of a powerful, righteous man, who tried to reunite people into a community worshipping God, but also someone who had weaknesses. Those weaknesses pave the way for the final two verses.

3. The letter ends in an abrupt way, quite unlike the usual personal messages and blessing or praise to Christ, which we find in other letters. But following on from Elijah, James perhaps wants to inspire his readers with the reminder, that even the great Elijah, a man of incredible faith, had his moment of weakness, but turned to God, confessed his emptiness and absence of motivation and God refilled him. It may have been that some of these scattered Christians were feeling a bit like Elijah did. It is likely James was writing about fifteen years after the resurrection. There must have been tremendous excitement when people first heard the Gospel. After Pentecost, pilgrims returned

from Jerusalem to all parts of the Empire and shared the news, forming isolated groups of early Christians. Later some might have seen an itinerant Christian preacher occasionally, but many might not. Life was hard, they were now outside the synagogue and Jewish social circle and persecution was on the rise. James wants to remind them, that even the best of people needed to turn to God for help and guidance in the difficult moments of their lives. Also they really needed to know that they were not alone, that there were Christians like them "*scattered among the nations*" (1:1) plus the strong Church in Jerusalem. They also needed the encouragement of having the Gospel reinforced and hearing Jesus' teaching again. James is reminding them that God has work for them to do in his name. He knows there has been some backsliding, but they can help each other to return to the way and the truth (5:19-20) and to persevere in growing their faith, then they will become "mature and complete." (1:4) Note that he says "*if one of you should wander from the truth...*" he is not confrontational in this final few words as he has been earlier in the letter. He does finish with a gentle message. At the same time he is urging them to put their faith to work, by helping others.

On the other hand perhaps this isn't how he ended the letter at all. Perhaps the ending has been lost, or the last paragraphs have been transposed. Do verses 7-11 make a better ending, with verses 12-20 put after verse 6? Whatever he intended, a blessing at the end would have been nice.

4. My overall impression of the letter is that it provides great comfort and encouragement. It seems to throw up something new to think about each time I read it. Somehow having Jesus' teaching presented in different words, widens understanding and opportunities for applying what is being taught. It is a practical letter, which shows us to use our faith and what we have learnt, in our behaviour towards others, but especially in our relationship with God.
5. There are number of beautiful verses in this letter. Here is a reminder of some highlighted in our Wednesday Worship talks:

1:17 "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

1:22 "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."

3:17 " But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

4:6a "But he gives us more grace."

4:8 "Come near to God and he will come near to you."

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July 2020

P.S. Rev Stephen has suggested: Letter title: Faith in Action

Film title: A String of Pearls

Key verse: Become doers of the word (James 1:22)