

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”

JAMES – Chapter One

BIBLE STUDY PRESENTATION @ SESSION #3

(In this and subsequent study sessions, three translations of the Holy Bible are used; they are identified as THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE [AMP], THE MESSAGE [MSG], and THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION [NRSV].)

JAMES 1:1 – [AMP] *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered abroad* [among the Gentiles in the dispersion]: **Greetings** (rejoice)!

- There were two great dispersions and to which of these groups this Epistle was directed is not known, but the two dispersions were:
 - 1) **The Eastern Dispersion** – The first dispersion had its origin about the time when the ten tribes of Israel (*often identified as “the northern kingdom”*) were carried away to Assyria, and in the time of the Babylonian captivity. In consequence of these events and of the fact that large numbers of the Jews went to Babylon, and other Eastern countries, for purposes of travel, trade, etc., there were many Jews living in the East in the times of the apostles.
 - 2) **The Western Dispersion** – This commenced about the time of Alexander the Great [356-323 B.C.], and was promoted by various causes. In 63 B.C., The Roman General and Statesman, Pompey, took Jerusalem captive and took tens of thousands of Jews back to Rome, where they were forced to work as slaves. Eventually, large numbers of Jews were found in Egypt and along the North African coast; also, in Asia Minor, in Greece proper, and in Rome.
- The phrase *“the twelve tribes”* was the common term by which the Jewish people were designated, and was used long after the ten tribes were carried away from the northern kingdom, leaving, in fact, only two of the twelve tribes in Palestine, known as the Kingdom of Judah (*also, sometimes spoken of as “the southern kingdom”*). Many have supposed that James here presumed to address them as *“Jews,”* and that the Epistle was sent to them as such. But, this opinion has no probability; because –
 - 1) If this had been the case, he would not have been likely to begin his Epistle by saying that he was *“a servant of Jesus Christ”* a name very odious to any Jew.
 - 2) If he had spoken of himself as a Christian, and had identified himself as a *“servant”* of Jesus (*the Messiah*), though still regarding them as Jews, it is incredible that he did not make a more distinct reference to the basic teachings of Christianity; that he advanced no arguments to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah; that he did not attempt to openly convert them to the Christian faith.
- Over time the phrase *“the twelve tribes”* became a kind of all-encompassing expression to denote the people of God (*i.e. the Church*).
- Clearly, James was addressing those who were scattered abroad due to various persecutions.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION: – James addresses his readers as the “12 tribes.” What are two other ways he addresses them in this first chapter? some hints ...

1) A term of affection: _____

2) A vision of what they should become: _____

+ MOVING FORWARD IN OUR STUDY OF THE TEXT +

A) TRUE RELIGION ENDURES TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS (James 1:2-18)

... with JOY and PATIENCE (vss. 2-4)

[AMP] ***²“Consider it wholly joyful, my brethren, whenever you are enveloped in or encounter trials of any sort or fall into various temptations. ³Be assured and understand that the trial and proving of your faith bring out endurance and steadfastness and patience. ⁴But let endurance and steadfastness and patience have full play and do a thorough work, so that you may be [people] perfectly and fully developed [with no defects], lacking in nothing.”***

[MSG] ***“Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.”***

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. The Greek word here translated “temptations” is PEIRASMOS; its sense of meaning is different from our usual understanding of the term. PEIRASMOS is trial or testing directed towards an end, and the end is that the person who is tested should emerge stronger and purer from that testing. The testing is not meant to make one weaker, but stronger. The Christian is like an athlete; the more rigorous the training the better fit becomes that athlete for victory!
2. If one meets testing in the right way, it will produce “steadfastness” and “patience” (HUPOMONE). Again, the translation of this word is too passive. It does not mean simply the ability to bear things; HUPOMONE is the ability to turn those things to greatness and glory.
3. Testing of your faith produces ‘patience’; this is not a new idea at all for Christians; remember that during centuries of persecution, many martyrs did not die grimly, they died singing!

- a) see St. Paul in Romans 5:3 [NRSV] ***“We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.”***
- b) see also Matthew 5:11-12 [NRSV] ***“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”***
4. Unswerving constancy, will in the end, allow a person to be:
- a) **“Perfect” [TELEIOS]** toward a given end:
- A sacrificial animal was TELEIOS if it was fit to offer to God
 - A person is TELEIOS if he is full grown
 - A scholar is TELEIOS if he is truly learned and mature
- b) **“Complete” [HOLOKLEROS] in every part; without spot or blemishes**
- c) **“Deficient in nothing” [LEIPESTHAI]**
- LEIPESTHAI is sometimes used in describing the defeat of an army
 - Descriptive of the final giving up of a struggle
 - Descriptive of the failure to reach a standard that should have been reached
5. Note the use of terms **“brethren/brothers”** is indicative of the sexism of ancient biblical times; it is not meant to exclude females (then and/or now) from being proper recipients of James’ words, too!
6. James is talking here, in total, not only of choices, but of our attitudes and mindset with regard to the inevitable temptations we face in life.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION –

1) HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS VIEW TRIALS IN LIFE?

2) HOW CAN WE BE JOYFUL WHEN WE ARE TEMPTED?

7. WHAT IS THE VALUE OF DEVELOPING PATIENCE?

+ RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING OUR MAIN POINT ‘A’: “True religion endures trials and temptations...”)

... with WISDOM from GOD (vss. 5-8)

[AMP] 5**“If any of you is deficient in wisdom, let him ask of the giving God [Who gives] to everyone liberally and ungrudgingly, without reproaching or faultfinding, and it will be given him. 6Only it must be in faith that he asks with no wavering** (no hesitating, no doubting).

For the one who wavers (hesitates, doubts) **is like the billowing surge out at sea that is blown hither and thither and tossed by the wind.** ⁷**For truly, let not such a person imagine that he will receive anything** [he asks for] **from the Lord,** ⁸**[For being as he is] a man of two minds** (hesitating, dubious, irresolute), [he is] **unstable and unreliable and uncertain about everything** [he thinks, feels, decides].

[MSG] **“If you don’t know what you’re doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You’ll get his help, and won’t be condescended to when you ask for it. Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought. People who “worry their prayers” are like wind-whipped waves. Don’t think you’re going to get anything from the Master that way, adrift at sea, keeping all your options open.”**

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. In previous passage, readers are told that if testing experiences in life are used in right way, they will emerge from them with unswerving constancy – the basis of all virtues. But, the question arises, where can wisdom and understanding be found? The answer: in God!
2. If you lack wisdom, ask God for it in prayer
 - a) In James’ mind, wisdom is a practical thing; not a philosophical concept
 - b) God gives it to all liberally and without reproach; God’s absolute generosity...
 - In distinction to those who give only to gratify their own sense of vanity and power and/or to put the recipient in a position of never being allowed to forget the giver’s identity!
 - c) Wisdom is knowledge turned into action in the decisions and personal relationships of everyday life
3. You must ask for wisdom in faith, with no doubting; for he who doubts ...
 - a) Is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind
 - b) Should not suppose that he will receive anything in return from the Lord
 - c) Is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways

A BREAK for DISCUSSION -

- 1) WHAT SHOULD ONE WHO LACKS WISDOM DO?
- 2) TO WHOM MIGHT A “DOUBTER” BE COMPARED IN TODAY’S MODERN IDIOM?
- 3) WHAT CAN SUCH A PERSON EXPECT FROM THE LORD? WHY?
- 4) CAN YOU PROVIDE EXAMPLES OF “WORRYING PRAYER”?

+ RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING OUR MAIN POINT ‘A’: “True religion endures trials and temptations...”)

... with A PROPER PERSPECTIVE (vss. 9-11)

[AMP] **“Let the brother in humble circumstances glory in his elevation [as a Christian, called to the true riches and to be an heir of God], ¹⁰ and the rich [person ought to glory] **in being humbled** [by being shown his human frailty], **because like the flower of the grass he will pass away.** ¹¹**For the sun comes up with a scorching heat and parches the grass; its flower falls off and its beauty fades away. Even so will the rich man wither and die in the midst of his pursuits.”****

[MSG] ***“When down-and-outers get a break, cheer! And when the arrogant rich are brought down to size, cheer! Prosperity is as short-lived as a wildflower, so don’t ever count on it. You know that as soon as the sun rises, pouring down its scorching heat, the flower withers. Its petals wilt and, before you know it, that beautiful face is a barren stem. Well, that’s a picture of the “prosperous life.” At the very moment everyone is looking on in admiration, it fades away to nothing.”***

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

Christianity brings to every person what is most needed...

1. If you are a poor person, exult in your new sense of value
 - In the early church there were no class distinctions; a slave might be minister of the congregation; his earthly master, just a humble member
 - The poor person learns that he/she really matters in the world
 - He/she also matters to God
2. The rich person gains a new sense of humiliation
 - The great peril of riches is that they tend to give a false sense of security

- Many a rich person feels that if he/she has adequate material resources, they are able to cope with anything; able to 'buy' themselves out of any negative or unpleasant situation
3. A vivid picture is drawn of the uncertainty of life
- riches can vanish, almost instantaneously, like the field flowers in Palestine's desert conditions

A BREAK for DISCUSSION -

- 1. WHAT IS THE LESSON FOR US FROM vss. 9-11? HOW CAN A MODERN PERSON WHO IS POOR BE PROUD? ... AND ONE WHO IS RICH BE HUMBLE?**
- 2. CAN YOU DRAW OTHER ANALOGIES TO WHAT THE RICH PERSON IS LIKE IN HIS/HER PURSUITS?**
- 3. WHAT REAL CONNECTIONS DO YOU FIND TO CONTEMPORARY LIFE SITUATIONS?**

+ RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING OUR MAIN POINT 'A': "True religion endures trials and temptations...")

... **with AN UNDERSTANDING OF TEMPTATION (vss. 12-15)**

[AMP] ¹²"**Blessed** (happy, to be envied) **is the man who is patient under trial and stands up under temptation, for when he has stood the test and been approved, he will receive [the victor's] crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.** ¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, I am tempted from God; for God is incapable of being tempted by [what is] evil and He Himself tempts no one. ¹⁴But every person is tempted when he is drawn away, enticed and baited by his own evil desire (lust, passions). ¹⁵Then the evil desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully matured, brings forth death."

[MSG] *"Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more. Don't let anyone under pressure to give in to evil say, 'god is trying to trip me up.' God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one's way. The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own lust. Lust gets pregnant, and has a baby: sin! Sin grows up to adulthood, and becomes a real killer."*

FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:

1. Vs. 12 brings up the topic of trials and temptations, first encountered in vss. 2-4. The types of temptations and trials we face are either self-imposed or brought about by others.
 - a) They can be in the form of persecutions by others for our faith;
 - b) Trials of our own circumstances in this life such as poverty, sickness or disease;
 - c) Temptations to sin against God by thinking, saying, or doing things, that are contrary to God's Will and Word;
 - d) Or, simply choosing to please ourselves rather than the God who created us and loves us.

2. The person who endures temptations and tests will be blessed
 - a) For that person will receive the crown of life [in Greek: **STEPHANOS**] when he/she is "proven." In the ancient world, the crown had at least 4 great associations:
 - **Crown** of flowers worn at times of joy (*i.e. weddings, feasts*)
 - **Crown** indicative of royalty
 - **Crown** of laurel leaves – a prize awarded the victor in athletic games
 - **Crown** as a mark of honor and dignity (*as example see Proverbs 1:8-9 – "Hear my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching; for they are a fair garland for your head, and pendants for your neck."*)
 - b) We don't need to choose between these multiple meanings of "crown." They are all included in the Lord's promise to those who love Him

3. Key to understanding this passage is the Jewish belief – *also a doctrinal error to which sometimes we are prone* – that temptations come from God; certain Rabbis argued that since God created everything, he must have created the tendency to evil. But, James insists - -
 - a) God cannot be tempted by evil
 - b) God does not tempt anyone

4. From the beginning of time it has been human instinct to blame others for sin. The Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is a classic example of this phenomenon: "*Don't blame me, blame someone else – circumstances – environment - _____.*"

5. James strongly opposes that view. To him what is responsible for sin is a person's own evil desire; therefore:
 - a. One is tempted when drawn away by one's own circumstances and is enticed
 - b. When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and,
 - c. Sin, when full-grown, brings forth death

A BREAK for DISCUSSION -

- 1) JAMES TELLS US THAT SOME WHO ARE TEMPTED WILL RECEIVE A “CROWN OF LIFE.” WHERE ELSE DOES THE BIBLE TALK ABOUT A CROWN OF LIFE?
- 2) WHAT SHOULD NO ONE SAY WHEN THEY ARE TEMPTED?
- 3) THEN, HOW IS ONE TEMPTED?

+ RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING OUR MAIN POINT ‘A’: “True religion endures trials and temptations...”)

... with AN AWARENESS OF THE FATHER’S GOODNESS (vss. 16-18)

[AMP] ¹⁶“Do not be misled, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect (free, large, full) gift is from above; it comes down from the Father of all [that gives] light, in [the shining of] Whom there can be no variation [rising or setting] or shadow cast by His turning [as in an eclipse]. ¹⁸And it was of His own [free] will that He gave us birth [as sons] by [His] Word of Truth, so that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures [a sample of what He created to be consecrated to Himself].

[MSG] *“So, my very dear friends, don’t get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of his creatures.”*

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. James advances a true view of the unchangeable goodness of God
 - a) Don’t be deceived by others
 - b) Every good and perfect gift is from above
 - c) Coming down from the Father of lights
 - d) With whom there is no variation of light or shadow of turning
 - James makes interesting use of the variation in the length of day/night
 - Variation of the brilliance at different times of the moon/stars
 - Variability is characteristic of all things created
 - e) The Jew’s traditional Morning Prayer says: *“Blessed be the Lord God who hath formed the lights.”* The lights may change, but the God who created them never changes!

2. Of His own Will, God brought humans forth
 - a) By the Word of Truth
 - b) That we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures
 - In the ancient world, it was law that all first-fruits were sacred to God
 - They were offered to him in grateful sacrifice because they belonged to him
 - We are re-born by the Gospel, we become the property of God, even as did the first-fruits of the harvest!

A BREAK for DISCUSSION

1. IN MODERN TERMS, WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND “FIRST-FRUIT” TO MEAN?

=====

+ MOVING ON+

- A NEW SUBSECTION IN OUR STUDY OF THE TEXT -

B) TRUE RELIGION CONSISTS OF DOING, NOT JUST HEARING (James 1:19-27)

...ONE SHOULD BE SWIFT TO HEAR (vss. 19-20)

[AMP] ¹⁹“Understand [this], my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear [a ready listener], slow to speak, slow to take offense and to get angry. ²⁰For man’s anger does not promote the righteousness God [wishes and requires.]”

[MSG] *“Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God’s righteousness doesn’t grow from human anger.”*

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. When to be quick and when to be slow –
 - Zeno – ancient Greek philosopher (3-4th century B.C.-founder of Stoicism) famously wrote: **“We have two ears but only one mouth, that we may hear more and speak less!”**
 - Some words from the *“Sayings of the Jewish Fathers”* – **“There are four characteristics in scholars (1) Quick to hear and quick to forget it; his gain is cancelled by his loss. (2) Slow to hear and slow to forget; his loss is cancelled by his gain. (3) Quick to hear and slow to forget; he is wise! (4) Slow to hear and quick to forget; this is an evil lot.”**
 - Reacting to God’s Word first demands listening!

2. James additional advice is that humans should be slow to anger
 - James is probably reacting to some who believed that in the religious establishment there was a place for heated rebuke
 - Teachers may be tempted to the point of wrath over a backward and lazy student; but it is proven that any teacher will accomplish more by speaking words of encouragement!
 - Parents are sometimes tempted to the point of physical wrath, but this often causes more stubbornness in a child.
 - Even Preachers are sometimes tempted to anger; however, when words or gestures question a preacher's love for his/her people, the whole message falls into jeopardy!

A BREAK for DISCUSSION -

1) WHAT CAN WE DO, AS PERSONS, TO BECOME "FASTER" HEARERS and "SLOWER" SPEAKERS?

+ RETURNING TO THE BIBLICAL TEXT +

(CONTINUING OUR MAIN POINT 'B': "True religion consists of doing, not just hearing...")

...SHOULD NOT BE HEARERS ONLY, BUT DOERS (vss. 21-27)

[AMP] ²¹"So get rid of all uncleanness and the rampant outgrowth of wickedness, and in a humble (gentle, modest) spirit receive and welcome the Word which implanted and rooted [in your hearts] contains the power to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the Word [obey the message], and not merely listeners to it, betraying yourselves [into deception by reasoning contrary to the Truth]. ²³For if anyone only listens to the Word without obeying it and being a doer of it, he is like a man who looks carefully at his [own] natural face in a mirror; ²⁴For he thoughtfully observes himself, and then goes off and promptly forgets what he was like. ²⁵But he who looks carefully into the faultless law, the [law] of liberty, and is faithful to it and perseveres in looking into it, being not a heedless listener who forgets but an active doer [who obeys], he shall be blessed in his doing (his life of obedience). ²⁶If anyone thinks himself to be religious (piously observant of the external duties of his faith) and does not bridle his tongue but deludes his own heart, this person's religious service is worthless (futile, barren). ²⁷External religious worship [religion as it is expressed in outward acts] that is pure and unblemished in the sight of God the Father is this: to visit and help and care for the orphans and widows in their affliction and need, and to keep oneself unspotted and uncontaminated from the world."

[MSG] ***“So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life. Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don’t act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like. But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God – the free life! – even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action. Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”***

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. What to lay aside; and, what to receive
 - a) Lay aside all filthiness (Greek = **RUPARIA**, *the filth which soils clothing*) and overflow of wickedness
 - b) Receive with meekness the implanted word (Greek = **EMPHOTOS** *innate as opposed to being acquired*), which is able to save your soul

2. Be doers of the Word, not hearers only
 - a) Otherwise you deceive yourselves
 - b) You are like a man who after looking in a mirror soon forget what he looked like

3. One who look into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it ...
 - a) Is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work (*a reminder that what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the marketplace*)
 - b) Will be blessed by what he/she does

4. Your religion is useless
 - a) If you think you’re religious, but do not bridle your tongue
 - b) You deceive only your own heart

5. Pure and undefiled **religion** (Greek = **THRESKEIA**, *which really means ‘worship’*) before God and the Father is this ...
 - a) To visit orphans and widows in their trouble, to keep oneself unspotted from the world
 - b) Historically, humans have tried to make ritual and liturgy a substitute for sacrifice and service
 - c) See **Micah 6:6-8** and **Zechariah 7:6-10**, for some O.T. insights on this issue

SOME FINAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS -

- 1) WHAT DOES JAMES REALLY DESIRE OF HIS "BELOVED BRETHREN"?**
- 2) WHY SHOULD ONE BE "SLOW TO WRATH"?**
- 3) WHAT NEEDS TO BE "LAID ASIDE"?**
- 4) WHAT NEEDS TO "BE RECEIVED"? WHY?**
- 5) HOW IS THE LAW OF CHRIST DESCRIBED IN vs. 25?**
- 6) IF ONE CLAIMS TO BE RELIGIOUS, WHAT MUST HE/SHE DO? WHAT IF HE/SHE FAILS TO DO THAT?**
- 7) HOW DOES A PERSON KEEP "UNSPOTTED FROM THE WORLD" IN TODAY'S 21st CENTURY TIMES?**
- 8) STUDY THE FOLLOWING PSALM VERSES; IN EACH CASE FILL IN THE CONCEPTS AND WHOM IS BEING SPOKEN OF/TO WITH THESE REFERENCES. DO YOU SEE ANY PATTERNS? -**

PSALM 5:9

PSALM 10:7

PSALM 50:19

PSALM 52:4

PSALM 109:2

PSALM 120:2-3

9) NOW STUDY THESE PSALM VERSES, WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SUGGESTED USES OF OUR TONGUES?

PSALM 35:28

PSALM 37:30

PSALM 39:1

PSALM 51:14

PSALM 71:24

PSALM 119:172