

GROUP BIBLE STUDY

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

PRAY: *our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.*

ASK: *in order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:*

1. Who is speaking?

Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.

2. Who is spoken to?

We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.

3. When is the Bible writer speaking?

In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live

under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.

4. What type of language is the writer using?

The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.

5. What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?

If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.

6. What is the context of the Bible passage?

Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the Bible passage within the whole of the Bible.

The Bible is indeed God’s inspired word – it is his revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand the Bible we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we “*correctly handle the word of truth*”. And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God’s word.

PLAN

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.

2. Think about what you don't understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.

3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.

A **Understanding.** The first type of question should be aimed at trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.

B **Significance.** Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.

C **Application.** Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

- Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.
- It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.
- As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.
- Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Let us not forget:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”
2 Timothy 3:16-17.

Introduction to the letter of James

There is a constant danger among professing Christians of knowing the truth but failing to put it into daily life. The letter of James insists that it is not sufficient merely to hear the word, we must practise it!

Before 1539 you would not have found this letter in any English Bible. Perhaps the main reason for this was the question of its authorship. What was true then was that the books most readily accepted into the New Testament were those which were clearly written by Apostles and had apostolic teaching as the basis of all that they were seeking to proclaim about the Christian faith. These principles and teachings had to be consistent with other teachings within the New Testament and would be regarded as Scripture by the Churches as a whole. It was not until Augustine in the 4th century AD at the Council of Carthage that the letter of James was accepted as part of the New Testament. Even during the Reformation, Martin Luther, the great reformer, said "I will not have it in my Bible . . . but do not intend thereby to forbid anyone to place and exalt it as he pleases, for there is many a good saying in it." Hardly a ringing endorsement! However, when John Calvin wrote his commentary he accepted it without question. Today, the book is still questioned by some people, who see a conflict between James' teaching and that of the Apostle Paul. The main area under debate is that of justification by faith. I hope that during our five studies, we will see that there is no inconsistency between their teaching.

The letter of James can be linked with 1 and 2 Peter, and of course with 1, 2, and 3 John. These are called general letters because they are not addressed to a particular church but rather to believers in general across the Mediterranean world and beyond.

What can be said about this letter?

Firstly, James is a very helpful and dynamic book. Secondly, the writer was a great hero of the faith for standing firm against errors that he was seeking to challenge. Thirdly, James' letter is

general in nature and so has application to us. Though the letter was written to a small group of believers, it was not restricted to a particular church or a particular place, but rather has good sound teaching to encourage both the believer and the life of the church.

The Author

It is believed that the author of this letter was the half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). This James is constantly referred to by his personal name (Galatians 2:9, 12; Jude 1, Acts 12:17, Acts 15:13 and Acts 21:18). Certainly, we find that the language of this echoes all the speeches recorded to us in the book of Acts, and without doubt his leadership of the Jerusalem Church would have given him a very prominent position across the Christian church during that first century. Finally, the authorship of James has been backed up by the solid tradition and understanding that the churches had from their earliest years that this letter is written by James, the half-brother of Jesus.

His Life

What do we know of this half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55)? It is believed that James moved with Jesus and the family to Capernaum (John 2:12). He, along with others, sought to interview Jesus (Matthew 12:46). It appears likely that he was full of doubts and unbelief only months before the crucifixion itself (John 7:5). Nevertheless he was one of the people who had a special post-resurrection appearance given to him by the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7). This may well have been the crucial factor which brought about his conversion and his firm belief that Jesus was indeed the Christ and the Lord. What we learn from Acts 1:14 is that he along with the other Apostles waited for the Spirit to come and that he was visited by Paul after his own conversion which had been brought about by his trip to Jerusalem. By the middle of the book of Acts (15:13) he was clearly the leader of the Council in Jerusalem and by then was playing a prominent role at the heart of the Christian church. We also know that by Acts 21:18 he was still the leader of the Church in Jerusalem when Paul made his last visit. This gives us a brief insight into James' life.

The Readers

As we look back to the 1st century, there are important lessons and information that we need if we are fully to appreciate the impact that this letter had not only on the 1st century church but also on the 21st century church. From James 1:1 we learn that the letter was written to the twelve tribes. This is a reference to Jews and especially to those who were dispersed abroad (in Palestine) because of the persecution of the Christian church in the middle of the 1st century AD, in particular the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1ff, Acts 11:19). James writes as the head of the church in Jerusalem, the mother church to all the other churches that were being established around the Roman Empire. He writes with authority, using strong imperatives to make his points. It is the most Jewish of all the New Testament letters and it is clear that these Jews are professing believers. We need to read the book bearing in mind that James is writing to Christian believers with a Jewish heritage and background.

The Theme

Clearly the driving force of James' letter is that faith must be alive and at work. James himself does not concentrate on the principles of faith but rather is concerned with the ethical demands of living the Christian life. I believe that the key verse that explains this point comes in 2:17 *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"*. It seems that amongst the Jews to whom he was writing, there was a divergence of opinion about faith and the actions of living out the Christian life. James is writing firmly to correct an error that had slipped into the church. We learn that there were Christians who were professing one thing but living another. This division certainly is alive and well and at work in the church today: it is still relevant to Christian believers.

We also know that the force of persecution breaking out in the Roman empire against Jewish believers brought about intense hostility against this young and fragile church. James is writing in a pagan world where Christians often stood out like bright stars on a dark night. Not only were they facing great difficulties and affliction from outside (5:1-6), but also they were facing conflict

from within (2:1-13). It is not surprising to find that some Christians were falling away into a superficial and formal religion, outwardly speaking of orthodox beliefs but in practice living selfish and ungodly lives (1:22-27). James writes this letter to scattered Jewish believers to drive home the point that true faith shows itself in practical godly living. He will deal with other issues such as the endurance of our faith under pressure, the dangers that riches can bring to believers and how they can be a discouragement to those who are poor. The letter will examine issues between the law and love, faith and works, as well as focussing once more on the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. The overall main thrust of the letter is that true, biblical faith will live itself out in action.

Throughout this series it will be wise for Home Group leaders to keep reminding members of their groups that salvation rests on the work of Christ, the benefits of which we receive by faith. However, if that faith is genuine, it will issue in particular ways of living before a watching world. Godly living is not the means to obtain salvation, rather it is evidence of having salvation from the hand of Christ.

Study 1 James 1:1-27

The testing of faith and the goodness of God

Greetings, v1

As pointed out in our introduction, James is believed to be the half-brother of our Lord Jesus. He lived for a considerable time in Jerusalem and was the leader of the church in that city. He described Christians as God's twelve tribes, scattered around the pagan world. This links back to the time when God's people were in Egypt and had been organised into twelve groups, descended from the twelve sons of Jacob (Exodus 1:1-7). The greeting that James uses at the start of his letter is a way of describing the whole company of God's redeemed people. Therefore, the letter is for all who belong to Christ.

Christians under pressure, vv2-5

Many Christians have the false idea that to have a living faith is to have a passport to a trouble-free life. Far from being the case, pressures come our way in a variety of ways during our lifetime. James seeks to encourage us to see that God uses these difficult times to make us stronger. When we are tested, it is important to face that testing with faith. Such an approach leads to perseverance (v3). This in turn leads the Christian to maturity (v4). There is no such thing as instant maturity. It is being tested, met with faith, that produces Christian character. It is this character that needs to be formed in each one of us. In v3, James reminds us of our lack of wisdom. Wisdom in the Bible refers not simply to knowledge, but also to having the ability to make right decisions, knowing what to do in every situation. All we need is to 'ask' (v5) and God himself will supply all that we need.

The human heart vv6-8

In these verses we see that James knows the human heart from beginning to end. Are we sincere in our desire to go forward with

God? We need to be aware of having 'one foot in the world'. We can often be caught in the cross-currents of life. We need to keep our eyes on God and be confident that he will give us the wisdom we need as we face each situation.

Rich and poor, vv9-11

Both poverty and wealth can blow us off course as Christians. How does this work out in practice? Poverty makes living difficult. Wealth on the other hand can be so attractive as to draw us away from God and towards the world. Whatever our social and economic position is, what matters most is our standing before God. The poor can delight in the great spiritual riches that belong to us in Christ (v9), the rich should never forget how short life is in this world (v10). We are constantly reminded, not only here in James but also in the Sermon on the Mount, that the Christian can have confidence in God because God's wisdom has shown us that real wealth is the wealth that belongs in heaven. The rich Christian can also continue to walk with God despite the snares and traps of this world, because God has shown him the real value of earthly things and how they will perish and decay (Matthew 6:19-24).

Seeing ourselves, vv12-27

The heart of the Christian faith is the need to put God and his will for us at the very centre of our faith and life. The earlier show that trials and difficulties in life can cause us to be double-minded and not whole-hearted in serving the Lord. It is not the outward trials, but rather the inward temptations that can drive us off track, as James clearly explains in vv13-15. We should never blame God when temptation comes our way for God allows the Devil to tempt us so that we may defeat the Devil through the Lord's strength. We see the source of this temptation set out for us in v14. We learn that sin begins with the thought and the desire that we can live without God and his ways. These thoughts and desires lead to sin and sin becomes a habit, until we get to the point of no return where spiritual death is inevitable. Just as the dead cannot return to life, so the sinner has no ability to break free from sin apart from the grace of God at work. James

gives us a very telling warning. Evil desire leads to sin, and in the end, this will lead to death!

In vv16-18 we have the wonderful truth that God is good and gives generously to us, above all he chooses to give spiritual birth to men and women in order that the cycle of desire, sin and death may be broken. All good things come from God's hand! He does not change (v17). Most wonderfully, as we see in v18, he chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that is to say through his created word, just as it was in the beginning of creation itself. In a real sense, there comes a moment in time when he says to every Christian "let this Christian have new life" and in so doing gives them life and power to live for him.

So far we have seen that there is corruption within us that causes us to sin and rebel and, if we are believers, we also see the effect and power of new spiritual life.

How do we nourish this spiritual life and increasingly deal with the old life which still seems to have such an impact on the way we live? The answer comes in v19 and, though the answer is simple, it nevertheless is highly profound: it comes from hearing and obeying the word of God. We will not hear that word if we are doing all the talking and if we are harbouring anger in our lives (vv19-20). Just as a gardener needs to clear the ground in order that it may receive the seed, so we need (v21) to rid our lives of all that is wrong and come to the point where we receive and accept the word that is planted in us. To receive the word of God is to take into our lives a fresh spiritual dynamic which can bring us to maturity provided that we not only understand God's word but that we go on to obey it. There is no excuse for being a second-rate Christian and deceiving ourselves (v22).

James uses the illustration of someone who looks in a mirror and presumably finds that their appearance needs attention, but does nothing about it. The fact that he has looked in the mirror means that he is without excuse. So we, if we have read and understood God's word, are without excuse if we fail to obey it and fail to act upon it. In v25, James speaks of God's word as giving freedom. It frees us from the bondage of sinful desires and sinful living so

that we can be more like Christ, which is what God longs for us to be.

In vv26-7, we see that the outcome of all this is a certain kind of living. If our response to the word is genuine, it will be demonstrated by certain distinguishing marks in the way we live - a controlled tongue, a caring love for the helpless and a desire to turn away from all the world's defilements and enticements.

These are the marks of true religion which are further expounded in this letter.

Questions for Study 1

1. Why does it seem strange that we should "*consider it pure joy*" whenever we "*face trials of many kinds*" (v2)?
2. Under pressure, how is the faithful Christian (vv5-6) contrasted with the person described in vv6-8? Look at these opening verses (vv1-11) how do trials and temptations that we are currently facing, help us to be dependent on God?
3. How are temptations different from trials (1 Corinthians 10:13)?
4. How does James suggest that we grow as Christians and why is it so difficult to be good listeners (v19)?
5. What are the weeds and stones that can choke God's word and how can we keep weeds from growing (v21)? Why is there a tendency to listen to God's word but fail to follow it (v22-25)?
6. Why do we think that James would not be satisfied with good works apart from listening to and receiving God's word?

Study 2: James 2:1-26

Appearances are deceptive

There is a story told about Mahatma Gandhi, that during his early life he considered becoming a Christian and went to his local church one day to find out exactly how to do this Christian. However, when he entered the church, he found that it was made up of white people and the ushers at the door refused to show him to a seat. They told him in very plain words that he should go and worship with people of his own colour. Mahatma Gandhi turned round and left the building saying "if Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu!" This is a tragic story that illustrates the sin that James writes about here in the chapter before us today. Justice and mercy demand that everyone is treated equally and that means looking on the inside and not the outside. Immediately we are reminded of how God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16). That is the story of David being called to be king.

The chapter begins with these words "*My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism*". James is ever-practical. He wants to show and demonstrate that our faith must be revealed by our actions. This is a powerful encouragement to us as Christians in the 21st century. The letter is addressed to brothers and believers. In chapter 1, the letter focussed on Christians/believers who are finding that their faith is being tested and tried. Now the challenge is going out to believers so that our faith will be proved to be true. James is building on the very practical application that he used to close the end of chapter 1 (v27). In short, he is eager to remind believers that the religion they profess should be characterised by a concern for the underprivileged.

A repeated theme in this letter, clearly unpacked here, is that any comparison is always linked back to the Lord Jesus Christ, he is going to be our model. In this question of favoritism and the Lord Jesus Christ, what do we discover? Clearly we learn from his life that Jesus himself did not show favoritism.

A place in church , vv1-5

James now moves on to give us a very clear example (vv2-4). Imagine for a moment that we are in the church in Jerusalem. As we look around the congregation, we will notice that many of the people are very poor. (You will recall also how the Apostle Paul has constantly been trying to raise money to give to these people (2 Corinthians 8, 9). In v2 we discover that there is one man wearing fine clothes, even a gold ring. At once we can see where the temptation is coming from, that the poor people sitting in the impoverished church will look at this fine man coming in and evaluate him purely on external appearance. Of course, just as the man with wealth and possessions walks through the door, so comes some poor fellow dressed in clothes bought from a second hand shop and we are not even sure if he has had a bath! James has made his point very clearly - there is favouritism going on within the life of the church. We all know that there are advantages to be gained by befriending a wealthy newcomer, but the point is that we should look beyond the person's outward appearance and look at the heart, just as our Lord does. I guess that when we bring it up to date, many of us will often think "wouldn't it be wonderful if a footballer or a politician or someone rich and famous became a Christian? Think of the influence, think of the power, think of what we could achieve!" The Bible makes it plain. James makes it plain. It is favoritism and we need to cut it out.

People priorities, vv5-7

James now gives us a powerful encouragement and example. In it he will make three clear points.

1. Not showing favoritism reminds us how God works for we know in our hearts that God chooses poor people to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom. He reminds us that these people love him. So do not miss out on how God might indeed be wanting to enrich and enliven the church by the people he chooses to draw within his family. It is a timely reminder to consider that over 2 billion people in our world live in destitution and dreadful poverty.

2. James flags up to us how our discrimination works. He says some very interesting things about those who discriminate against the poor. "You have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?" v6. It seems that what is happening is that all too often we discriminate against the very people God wants to honour and all the time we spend buttering up the rich, we fail to realise that it is in fact these very people who are seeking to undermine the work that is going on for God in his church. Again, we need only think of our Lord Jesus Christ. It wasn't the poor people who dragged him into the court. It wasn't the poor people who would nail him to that cross. It was the rich, powerful and influential. We must be careful if we side with the rich and the powerful. We might just be finding ourselves on the side that is opposing God!

3. In v7 we find that the very people we are favouring are those who are slandering the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This teaches us to be aware of where as believers we stand in this whole matter. James is pointing out to us that we are part of God's kingdom and not part of God's world. In a sense we are a different people and we breathe a different air because we love the Lord Jesus. Recent headlines in the newspapers, time and again show how Christians have been put on the spot and persecuted by the society that lives and works around us (see Magazine March 2009).

The royal law, vv8-10

Amazingly, in v8 we move on to discover that we are to live under the royal law. This reminds us that we are part of God's kingdom and therefore need to listen to what God is saying to us. So, we ask "What does the royal law tell us?" It tells us that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. Who is our neighbour? Jesus himself answered the question when he told the story of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The amazing thing about the royal law is that the law will condemn those who break it but if we fulfil the law then we will find that it will liberate us.

Here is a timely reminder that we are not free to opt in or out of this royal law, rather it is to be the life-blood of the Christian. James is trying to remind us that as we seek to obey this royal law, we need to realise that it is not like a buffet. We can not pick and choose the bits to obey and ignore. We need to see that every law proceeds equally from the mind and character and the will of God. The law, in the life of the Christian, is not something that we can duck away from simply by saying that we are under grace. So, do not then see the law as some kind of ladder by which we can have access to heaven. No, the law of God is there to give us a pattern for life which God longs to see his people live out before him. He gives us the law because the law itself is a reflection of his own character and nature.

Finally in this section, James tells us that the Christian is subject to the judgement of the law. James quickly tells us three main things:

1. It is a judgement before which we have no excuse (v12).
2. We will be judged particularly in the matter of respect of persons - "judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful".
3. James concludes with a word of immense comfort. That in this judgement that will search us through and through, mercy triumphs over judgement (v13). It is comforting to know that we have been embraced by mercy and mercy will not let us go!

Issue of faith, vv14-26

Our passage moves on to vv14-26 where we explore the whole issue of faith. It is most important to note that not everything which is claimed as faith is in fact the genuine article. James gives us four examples, two spurious faiths and two genuine faiths. All these come out of the question that is posed in v14 "*what good is it my brothers if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?*" It seems for James that the answer is straightforward. Saving faith will result in practical obedience to God. As the chorus says, "Trust and obey for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus".

So then, faith that does not result in action cannot save us (v14b) and furthermore will harm us and weaken the witness of the church. In vv14-17 we are given the first example of spurious faith. The picture here is of a man who claims faith in God but is devoid of concern for men and women around him. This man is prepared to give good advice (v16) but will himself take no positive action. Just as the fruit of the tree tells us what kind of tree we are looking at, so the actions of a professing Christian tell us what kind of faith he has. Genuine faith is revealed by its reaction to human need.

The second example of faith is believers believing demons (vv18-20). It seems as if demons can have an orthodox faith. They can believe the right things and they tremble. But remember that it is true faith that brings peace with God and not trembling! James rightfully reminds us that true faith will issue in good actions, the evidence of the reality of faith is that it does something. So the bare testimony of a Christian will not do. Orthodox thinking is not enough, if faith is genuine there will be truth in terms of acts of kindness to fellow men and women and in terms of the peace that comes from God.

James now turns in vv21-24 to genuine faith. What he unveils before us is one of the great examples of faith in the Old Testament. It is an example of where someone believes the promises of God against all odds. Here we find Abraham is ready to offer up Isaac, who has been the fulfilment of all that God has promised. Why is he doing it? Because he is obedient to God's command. The faith that comes from Abraham here is a genuine faith (Genesis 15:6). It is a faith that will be tested and proved (Genesis 22:1) and it is a faith that will prove victorious (Genesis 22:12). The principle is set out in v24 "*You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone*".

The second example of real faith is that of Rahab in vv25-6. Rahab lived in Jericho when the Israelites came out of their wilderness wandering to enter the promised land. Rahab knew full well that God was with them and that God had given them the land. Her faith led her to give lodging to the Israelite spies. This she did at great personal risk to herself and her family: her faith

issued in personal and courageous action for the welfare of others. She fulfills the principle set out in this chapter.

These two examples of real genuine faith, a man and a woman, a Jew and a Gentile, show us that faith is for all types of people. For the man was a man of great sanctity and the woman of great uncleanness but each in turn gave evidence of the faith in their hearts by their practical action. We discover that true faith will show itself by obedience to the royal law of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, as well as loving your neighbour as yourself.

In this chapter, James has taught us that true faith holds nothing back from God and reaches out to needy men and women everywhere.

Questions for Study 2

1. What kind of things make you favour one person more than another? Think about age, grace, social background, wealth.
2. Why is it easier to have faith when you are poor than when you are rich (note v5)? What will vv1-13 mean for us in Moulton in the 21st century?
3. Looking at the second half of the chapter, what would you say is the main theme that James is trying to impress upon his readers? Why do you think James has written to them about this? In what ways do we fail as Christians to show our faith by our actions?
4. Does James ever say that works without faith can save? What does this imply about faith?
5. Looking at vv21-23, how was Abraham's faith made complete by what he did (Genesis 15 and 22)? In the light of Abraham's story, put into your own words the relationship between faith and good works. How do we recognise genuine faith in ourselves and in others?
6. Finally, looking across the chapter as a whole, what makes you feel uncomfortable from what James has been sharing with us? What can we do about it?

Study 3: James 3:1-18

Words and wisdom

The bulk of this chapter is concerned with something very small but that has a great influence out of all proportion to its size, namely the tongue. Straight away in v1 James points out that the task of teaching, involving the use of the tongue, is not for everyone. Many of us, from time to time, think that we could do better than the preacher or the vicar or the curate or the lay reader or whoever we consider to be a teacher according to James. James warns us that we need to be aware that teaching is a great responsibility in the life of the church and not everybody can do it. What is more, not everybody should do it. James underlines this by reminding us that if a teacher reckons that he understands the Christian message, that person is in a position of enormous responsibility: he cannot plead ignorance when he himself fails to live up to God's standards.

Faith and actions

Affirming our faith by our actions is one thing, but do our words undermine both our actions and our faith? Words we speak have tremendous power to wound and to hurt, as well as to encourage and heal. We all know how damaging it can be to spread lies and gossip as well as how encouraging it can be to build someone up with praise and words of compassion. We need to remember that the same tongue that speaks lies can also be used to speak praise and worship our Father in heaven (v9).

It is salutary to remember that once words have come from our lips, they can never be drawn back. Words, which are spoken, can often inflict such damage that they can last a lifetime. James warns us that we should be careful about the words we say to one another. The words we speak should be truthful, helpful and said with kindness. I think it would be fair to say that at times we can all be guilty of gossip, unwanted speculation and cruel comments. Words that come from our lips can often come with mixed motives.

Tongue taming, vv2-12

In vv2-12 James speaks of the need to tame the tongue. All our conversations should avoid anything which is hurtful. We should never underestimate the power of our words. James gives two illustrations in vv2-4. These illustrations are to show us the way in which something so small can have an effect out of all proportion to its size. Sadly we abuse this gift of God by using words that can act as a spark to set on fire a whole community (vv5-6). In vv7-8, James reminds us that all kinds of animals have been tamed by man. However, we learn of the inability of man to tame his own tongue.

As we were reminded in Mark 9 during the Christianity Explored course, Jesus tells us that the real problem is our hearts: it is what comes from our tongues, the things we say, that reveals what is actually going on in our hearts. You and I on our own can never tame our tongues. However, there is hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit, for God is the one who can! God can change the human heart (2 Corinthians 5:17 *"therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*).

James now makes clear that there is a difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. As we go on to examine vv13-18 we see that wisdom and understanding from God will reveal themselves both in our personality and our actions (v13). James tells us here that godly wisdom is characterised by a whole list of qualities that can be summed up by a loving, sensitive concern for others, whoever they are (v17). In this section, James returns once more to the great theme of wisdom (look back at 1:5). We need to be aware that there is a devilish, worldly type of wisdom, which arises from envy and selfish ambition (v14). The results of this kind of wisdom are plain to see: disorder and evil (v16). By contrast, the wisdom that God gives is free from self-interest; it is a pattern of living, which reflects the nature of God himself. Truly wise people have a right sense of proportion, they are willing to humble themselves, to serve others, to think about others first and transparently, they are genuine people (v17).

A worldly-wise man on the other hand is genuinely driven by what he can get out of any particular situation or person. He may give generously to good causes, even to church building projects, but it can be in an ostentatious way, in the sure expectation that he will get something back. Surely we see this in the great spectacles of fundraising appearing on television. It can be very tempting for people to come to such an event with a large sum written on a large cheque, with their names and personalities emblazoned at the front. What they want is to be seen to be 'good'. But there is more to it than merely having your name up in lights. Such attitudes come eventually from our enemy (v15).

James makes it very plain that such wisdom does not come down from heaven but it is unspiritual, earthly, of the devil. Such actions will sow a seed, the seed of discord and disharmony and, of course, they will break the bonds of fellowship. Therefore, it is important as we reflect on this chapter, as we think about our own response to God and as we consider how we give both in our time, our talents and our resources, to look not just at our actions but also to our motives to ensure as far as we can that they may be based upon the pure understanding that comes only from God. Truly wise people have a wise sense of proportion and are ready to humble themselves; they are thoughtful to others and transparently genuine (v17).

If we are wise, we will live in peace and harmony, even in a mixed up world. We will seek to be peace-makers (v18).

Questions for Study 3

1. What examples come to your minds of religious teachers whose lives people judge more strictly than others? Why were they judged more harshly (note v1 carefully)?
2. James compares the tongue to a bit and a rudder in vv3-4. Why do you think the tongue has such control over our lives? How does it get us into trouble? How can we use the tongue to worship and praise God?
3. From this chapter what do we learn about the way in which a tongue can poison people and the relationships that we have? Are there important lessons for us to learn about the damage the tongue can do and how ultimately we can see it controlled by God (Galatians 5:22-25)?
4. In vv9-12, James uses a series of analogies from nature (springs, trees, vines). How do they highlight the inconsistencies of the tongue?
5. Looking now at vv13ff, what are the respective characteristics of earthly and heavenly wisdom? In what ways do you see these displayed in your own experience?
6. Unity amongst God's people has proved elusive ever since the disciples first fought over who would be the greatest (Luke 10). What lessons does this chapter teach us so as to ensure that we avoid pulling one another down and seeking rather to build one another up?

Study 4: James 4:1-17

Christian consistency

When we look at this chapter, we are faced very clearly with many aspects of our every-day life that we are only too painfully aware of. It is good that we should allow the Bible to be a mirror held before us. The Bible, or God's word, shows us what we are really like, it provides room for us to find real forgiveness if we take on board what it says and realise that the way we have lived has been wrong, because God has provided his grace by his Spirit to enable us to live for Christ in the future. The chapter will powerfully press home to us that to accept the standards of the world is to be God's enemy. Being a Christian may not be easy, popular or even socially acceptable in our day and age. We discover in the opening section that James' words may have upset many of the early Christians to whom he was writing (vv1-10). It is almost certain that many of them thought that the way they were living was ok! Today his words can be just as disturbing for exactly the same reason. The standards of the world we live in are corrupt, devious and dishonest.

In vv1-3 he speaks to us of mixed motives: we only need to look at the television news any night of the week to realise how much the world needs peacemakers (3:18). James explains what is at the root of some of the quarrels and fights which we know about in our world. Sadly, some of the attitudes spill over into the life of the church and into individual Christians. Even our own prayer life can be affected (v3). The good news is that we do have a generous God, but selfish prayer will always get a "no" for an answer!

We live in a day and age that believes that anything is ok so long as it feels good and we are not found out. Sin is either paraded as desirable - "it is naughty but nice!" - or by some is simply shrugged off as being inevitable. Even when we Christians pray, as we have already seen, we can fall into the trap of trying to manipulate God by the way we pray, mainly praying for ourselves, which really is a reflection of the world. We discover

here that God's way is different. We must pray in the right spirit, in full submission to God's will for our lives. For God's grace is far stronger than anything the world can throw at us.

In vv4-6, James points out the contrast between friendship with the world and friendship with God. It seems that we have a choice that has to be made. Will we decide to line up with those who have no time for God, only to discover that God has no time for us? The 'world' in v4 refers to those who leave God out of their reckoning and out of their way of life. By way of contrast, we see that Abraham was a friend of God (2:23), and we too have to make a choice of being ready and willing to submit ourselves to God (v7). There can be no doubt that there is much within us that will pull us in the direction of the world's values and lifestyle. We need God's help and strength if we are to keep pure and to live humbly before him. We must pray in a right spirit, in full submission to God's will for our lives. For God's grace is far stronger than anything the world can ever throw at us.

Our own desires, whether bodily or emotional, do not have to take control (vv5-6) and we do not have to give in to temptation. Jesus never promised us that following him would be easy nor did he say that we would be immune from finding times of pain or suffering, and tears may indeed flow. But God does promise that, as we submit to him, as we lay our lives on his altar, he will himself lift us up (v10).

In vv7-10 we are encouraged to let God be the ruler of our lives. We are in a spiritual battle and must be determined in our resistance to the Devil and be ready humbly to accept God's rule in the way we should live. Notice the promises which we have in these verses. God will come near to us, he will lift us up. In vv11-12, we are encouraged to let God be the judge. How easy it is for us to pass judgement on other Christians and other people. God alone knows all the facts, he alone is the one who has a true perspective on our lives and on the life of the world. This cannot mean that we are not to be discerning as we encounter different people and different situations. Of course, as Christians we are to discern the way that is right from the way that is wrong in any particular situation. But there is a danger lurking here for us: we do not slander one another (v11), thus making ourselves in some

way superior to others. We need to be constantly reminded that God is the law-giver and God will be the one who will judge all life.

In the closing section (vv13-17) we are warned not to boast of the future as if we were masters of our own fate. In reality, we cannot be sure about tomorrow, let alone the years that may or may not lie ahead. Our lives can suddenly disappear like mist (v14). Our first concern must be to submit ourselves to the Lord, for him to order our future according to his will and not ours. The focus for the Christian is to seek to ensure that day we are doing the Lord's will and living in his presence. If we do that then surely we can trust God for the future.

This passage has been a helpful reminder that we must condemn the sin but not condemn the sinner: this is the Christian way.

Questions for Study 4

1. What does James say is the source of quarrels (vv1-2)? In what ways have you experienced this at first hand?
2. Why is it that we often fail to ask God for what we want (v3)? Also, seek now to unpack this by giving some examples of right and wrong motives in prayer, again looking to v3.
3. In vv7 and 10, James gives us several suggestions for humbling ourselves before God. How does each of these suggestions contribute to a humble spirit in the believer?
4. If today you knew that this would be the last day of your life and that you were going to die tomorrow, how would your attitude to life in the next 24 hours change?
5. Why does James say that we should not slander or speak against a Christian brother or sister (vv11-12)?
6. How would you describe the two attitudes towards the future found in the closing section of this chapter, vv13-17?

Study 5: James 5:1-20

Prosperity, perseverance and prayer

Why does the last runner in a marathon race continue to run that race when there is no hope of winning? The runner understands that the race is not just about crossing the finishing line first. The last runner in the race understands that every person who crosses the finishing line, regardless of his or her position in the race, is a winner through endurance. The race is about building endurance under stress. You may not be the first to cross the finish line, but you can finish well.

Finishing well is what the book of James is all about. God is not concerned about what place we are in when we cross the finishing line, rather he is concerned about how well we finish the race. In this final chapter, we will see that endurance, patience and prayer are dominant themes that we will come to explore together.

The idea of endurance comes up time and again throughout this letter. In this chapter, we see three ways in which endurance will link all aspects of this chapter together.

1. *Endurance and prosperity vv1-6*

We all know that we live in an age which is 'get rich quick'. It is a temptation that is put before us every day and especially on Wednesdays and Saturdays when the National Lottery is trying to offer us a jet-set lifestyle. This kind of thinking is all around us and is offered as a solution to the problems that we face, the anxieties that confront us. What is God's verdict? As Christians, we need to think about what God would say to us in this day and age as we seek to endure and as those around us seem to prosper and to flourish without any reference to God.

James has focused on the rich several times in this letter (1:9-11; 2:6, 7, 15-16; 4:2, 13). Now in these opening verses of chapter 5, James once more focuses on those who are rich. This time he has three concerns. Firstly, that our possessions in this life will

rot away. Secondly, he understands human nature that can produce selfishness. Thirdly, the way we use our prosperity may be sinful! The key factor is our attitude to our wealth.

Now we need to know straightaway that it is not sinful to be wealthy. Abraham was a very rich man. Job would become the Bill Gates of his generation, and Jesus's body was placed in a wealthy man's tomb. We need to see that wealth in and of itself is not sinful. In these verses, James helps us to evaluate our reaction to wealth.

I came across this frightening statistic: annually 2.1 million people die in the USA, of which 1.5 million die due to diet abuse. While this is a shocking statistic, we need to remember that in other parts of the world, people are dying from malnutrition! The issue is plain: in the Western world, people are dying from over-indulgence (too much fat, salt and alcohol); in the developing world, people are dying because of a lack of food.

James wants to encourage us to think again about our possessions, to help us realise that they are not going to last. He wants us to understand that they are not as valuable as we think. He shows us the attitude of employers who are financially stingy towards those who work for them, while at the same time lining their own pockets. Some treat people like disposable objects, the same people who have been created in the image of God, who are loved and valued.

The principle thrust of James is that there is judgement: those who abuse their wealth and power are going to be punished on that judgement. As Christians, do not be seduced by thinking that prosperity is an end in itself. It would be interesting to reflect on this issue: is our prosperity in this life a testimony that will speak about our priorities of how we have lived? We need to realise that the world around us says "Get all you can!" The Bible says "Give all you can!" James is encouraging us to be generous not in a romantic way but in a way which will be costly, as we see in the death of Jesus and it is essential for a Christian to endure to the end, to look at all our possessions in the light of Christ and his love.

2. **Endurance and the promise vv7-12**

I was talking recently with someone and the conversation turned to the issue of waiting. We both agreed that this is one of the hardest things to endure. We can all be impatient. When we look into people's eyes, we can sometimes see that sense of impatience and wonder if we are impatient with them.

James now flags up the promise of Jesus's coming in these verses. He says "*Be patient, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm. Because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door!*" This day is the day of our Lord's return. With 2,000 years having passed since these words were spoken, we are also probably wondering, "Is he really coming?" The greatest thing we can discover is that the Bible tells us that we have an end in view. As Christians we do not believe that history is somehow merely going round in endless circles. We do not believe that history is meaningless! We know that history is not a chain of meaningless events colliding with one another. Rather we know that it is unfolding to a divine purpose and that God is working his purposes out, bringing everything to conform to his will. Even with this knowledge, we are impatient.

Next James contrasts our impatience with the recurring seasons of the countryside. It is a good illustration because the farmer, as we know in only recent days, has a hard and difficult job. There must be a temptation not to endure and not to be patient! Their action leads them to buy seed, animal feed and fertiliser long before they make any money from selling their crop. So we learn that, unless they endure a period of waiting, they fail to realise their crops.

And so it is with us. James tells us that the end, the Lord's return, is in sight. Our labour in this world is but for a short time compared with eternity. Until that time, we have a promise of Christ's return. James reminds us that the Lord has promised to sustain us, as we labour patiently and faithfully for him.

You may say "What about the difficulties and problems?" The easiest thing to do in the midst of difficulties and problems is to start grumbling to each other. Discouragement often encourages grumbling. Hard times often result in envy of those who have more fortunate circumstances than we do. Envy leaves us bitter and discouraged. Grumbling usually results in slandering others. James has already given us a lesson in the misuse of the tongue (3:2-12). If we start grumbling, God will judge us, so the lesson for us in this section is that believers are to patiently wait for the Lord's return. Until that day comes, let our yes be "Yes!" and our no "No!"

3. **Endurance and prayer vv13-20**

We can have little doubt as we cast our minds back over these studies in James that we see the endurance of the believer as a key work that God wants to do within us. James realises that if we turn to God in prayer, this will strengthen us to endure whatever may come to us in this life. James wants us to live consistent lives as we seek to endure in this world. He concludes his letter by focussing on four aspects about prayer that will help us endure.

1. He encourages us to pray in all circumstances (v13). In this verse, by the use of the words 'trouble' and 'happiness' we see that James tries to cover many different situations that we will encounter every day. At both extremes we are encouraged to pray, yet how sad it is to report that often prayer is neglected. We can panic in one set of circumstances and become complacent in another, but God has made us and sent Christ to this world and he wants us to pray. I wonder, what would be the evidence in our lives this week if we were men and women of prayer?

2. We move to the question of praying for those who are weak (vv14-15). These are some of the trickiest verses in the whole of the letter. In most of the translations that you will have in front of you, the word will be 'sick'. I would like to suggest that this is not, in fact, the best translation. Rather than the word 'sick', I think the word should be 'weak'. As Christians, we rejoice in that God created us, loves us and sustains us. In creating us, we have our bodies' defence mechanisms: an

immune system as well as the healing process. God did indeed do a first class job! When we are weak, whether physically, spiritually or mentally we should always pray. Occasionally people get the wrong idea here. They do not want to be prayed for unless they are seriously ill, but God longs for his people to be praying for one another at all times and in all situations and of course we have to use our God-given abilities so as to avail ourselves of all the treatments and support that we can have in whatever situation or circumstance we find.

Let me say a brief word about these tricky verses. In praying for those who are weak, we need to bear in mind two key factors: namely obedience and faith. Here the commands are very simple: *'let him sing, let him pray, let him call for the elders (Church leaders)*. The point of anointing is that the prayer for the person who is weak and needs strengthening is the function of the whole church and not a special gift in ministry restricted to just one person but to the whole church. If you think about these verses, we need to remember also that, even if a person is helped, it may only be for a time because, in the end, we will need to trust Christ if we are to see him in glory.

3. Praying for each other (v16). We must not let our prayer time be too narrow, so that we only pray for ourselves, or too wide and we only pray "God bless the whole wide world!" If we restrict our prayers only to emergency needs, then we are failing to give each other the ongoing support that we will need. James is encouraging us to pray regularly for ourselves, for the helpless, for the wider church, and also to give thanks to God for all the good things that have come from his hand. Also, we will find a remarkable statement to encourage us to confess when we have fallen short and done something wrong. The promise here is of restoration, renewed fellowship and powerful prayer. Of course, this depends on a proper use of the tongue (see chapter 3).

4. Prayer for big things (v17-20). Here James uses Elijah to illustrate his point. Elijah was a man of God who knew what it meant to endure in hard times. If we are to learn from Elijah, then we must pray earnestly, we must pray specifically, we must pray believingly, because he took a risk as he stood before King Ahab. He prayed understanding God's will and with God's honour

in view. We see here in Elijah a man who put his faith in God to be at work.

Let us realise as we close these studies in James' letter that there is nothing that God cannot do: from a natural miracle to the conversion of a non-Christian, everything is within his compass. We should not be surprised that James wants to put our faith to work. It is God who brings the person to their senses, opens their eyes, but God wants to involve you and me in his work! So let us pray for big things, for instance for those who do not know Christ.

Let us conclude. It is no accident that James opened his letter by admonishing us to be patient and faithful and to endure. It is no co-incidence that as he closes the book he is on the same theme again! It is knowing that we are involved in the plan of God that is larger than life which brings excitement and joy into our lives and helps us to cope with those difficult times that many of us are passing through. Here in James 5, he encourages us humbly to see God's wisdom through faithful, patient endurance as we seek God in prayer, wanting to do his will.

Questions for Study 5

1. James opens in vv1-6 with a focus on those who are condemned by God's word. Who is he referring to? What sorts of difficulties come upon those who are the focus of God's word here (vv1-3)?
2. In vv3-6 we discover that God is angry. With whom is he angry and why?
3. What are Christians to do in response to the times when they are under oppression (vv7-12)? List three examples that James provides to encourage us so as to have patience in these times (vv7-11).
4. What does James encourage us as believers to do when we are suffering? When we are cheerful? When we are feeling weak and down (vv13-14)? Why are these remedies seen as being helpful?
5. What will help those who are weak, who will raise them up (v15)? What if one who is weak has committed a particular sin (v15)? James uses the illustration of Elijah. Why is Elijah such a good illustration and example to us (1 Kings 16-21)? What happens when one turns a sinner from the error of his ways (vv19-20)?