

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. ² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. ⁶ But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. ⁹ Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. ¹⁰ But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business. ¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³ When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. ¹⁶ Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 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. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Now we’ve been through James in St Andrew’s before, perhaps when David Bedford was our minister ten years ago, and I cannot find the sermons on the website. However, I do recall bits were missed out. At Littlebourne we don’t miss out anything when we look at a Bible passage, so even the most controversial passages are looked at. As I’m starting us off, we will go through a few points we will know already.

It is generally established that James was the half brother of Jesus and it is also generally accepted that it was written around 34-35AD, which makes it a very early letter written when the early church was being scattered because of persecution after the stoning of Stephen, and before Peter’s revelation that the Gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. James humbly presents himself as a servant (*doulos* the Greek word is the same as the word for slave or bondservant) of God and Jesus. He doesn’t say he’s the brother of Jesus and the Jews reading the letter would know who he was anyway. Despite being such an early letter, it was touch and go whether this letter would make it into the New Testament. Eusebius (265-339 AD) had doubts about its authenticity as did Martin Luther who called it “an epistle of straw”! (But that was because some had used the references to works as opposed to faith to counter

Luther's own contention that we are all saved by grace, whereas the Church at the time was pretty clear that works would get you to heaven). The Eastern Orthodox church maintains it was not written by an apostle (James son of Zebedee and brother of John or James son of Alphaeus) but by the brother of Jesus. Jude was also a half-brother of Jesus and likewise he writes modestly that he is a bondservant of Jesus and brother of James. Whatever the theological arguments, Jerome (Jerome 347-420AD) translated it into Latin, so it was already accepted as part of the 27 books of the New Testament in the fourth century.

Now we've established who James is, we see he is writing to the twelve tribes of Israel, not the Gentiles. He is writing to Jewish Christians who had fled Israel. However, what he says applies to us as well as those Jewish converts. There are about 15 references to the Sermon on the Mount in this letter.

He starts off with Greetings, and he addresses the brethren in Christ. ² *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,* ³ *because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.* ⁴ *Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.* For most of us "joy" would not be the word we would use when facing many kinds of trials, let alone "pure joy" when faced with temptations and unavoidable situations hard to overcome. What does this mean? We will face difficulties, but we are to be overcomers and in the end will look back with satisfaction that we have endured hardships and are still glad we have Jesus at our side. Other translations say the testing of faith produces patience rather than perseverance. The Greek word *hupomone* means "remain under" or "abide" "endure" and the NIV says "perseverance". A disciple must keep on carrying on despite being loaded with cares, temptations and problems. We know from experience that our faith is tested when things aren't going the way they should. Being made redundant, finding it difficult to pay the bills, suffering illnesses and bereavements, being disappointed with unfairness of others who were trusted and abused that trust are all trials we face which can challenge our relationship with God if it leads to resentment and unforgiveness. Let's look at the Authorised version of these two verses which throw the same meaning in a different way by mentioning "perfect work" and being "perfect and entire":

² *My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;* ³ *knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.* ⁴ *But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.* Is being perfect the same as being mature? There is nuance here because none of us is going to be perfect and lacking nothing, but some of us will be mature, and hopefully know pretty much all we should know about discipleship. Patience and perseverance will have their reward. Isaiah 30:18 says *Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!* We have to be patient and persevere. *'Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of*

me. ¹² **Rejoice and be glad**, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12) Again reference to the Sermon on the Mount. Moving on -

⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.* What does Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount?

Matthew 7:7 *Ask, and it will be given to you.* We all need wisdom. It is one of the spiritual gifts Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12:8. Throwing in “without finding fault” shows how merciful God is in giving generously not taking into account past sins or our motivation to seek wisdom, because he knows what we will do with it. God gave Solomon more wisdom than he asked for, and he can give us more than we ask for or expect. Elsewhere Jesus says: *Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours* (Mark 11:24). That is the good news. The condition required to receive what we ask for, is to ask for what is wanted in prayer, under the guidance of Holy Spirit and without doubting.

⁶ *But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.* ⁷ *That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.* ⁸ *Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.* David Spires mentioned last Sunday that we should be expectant – which is believing we have received what we asked for in prayer. Not expecting God to do what we know he can do makes our prayers so much hot air and that lack of faith means God is unlikely to act upon our requests. The Greek uses the word *diphechos* “two-souled” for “double minded” – being someone who cannot decide whether to believe or not to believe, and who believes one thing one day and the opposite the next – or even worse believes two opposite views at the same time! That is instability and it is prevalent among people today who believe their feelings override facts and that facts that are inconvenient can be ignored. Their truth is not reality but whatever they want to believe – and doubtless today’s certainties will be forgotten tomorrow as new “certainties” arise based on feelings rather than reality. We know that God can do what is impossible and we know that faith can move mountains. Our certainty is Jesus who is alive and wants us to have faith in him. That hasn’t changed for 2,000 years. The next verses echo the Sermon on the Mount again. *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* (Matthew 5:5) and *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth* (Matt 6:19). So the humble are the ones who are blessed. Humility is often to be found in those who have been humiliated.

⁹ *Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position.* ¹⁰ *But the rich should take pride in their humiliation – since they will pass away like a wild flower.* ¹¹ *For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.*

Jesus says in Luke 14:8-11 ⁸ *“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.* ⁹ *If so, the*

host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. ¹¹ For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." The other passage that relates to this is the parable of the rich man and his barns - Luke 12:16-21 And he told them this parable: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." ¹⁸ 'Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" ²⁰ 'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" ²¹ 'This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.'

Moving on. ¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. This comes straight from Matt 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We've already mentioned the next two verses 11 and 12 of Matthew 5 – which is where the Beatitudes may be found. In the Greek the same word is used for "trials" and "temptations". To us this seems odd, because we perceive trials as things done to us which are unavoidable, and temptations things we could do, but also avoid doing. However, when under trial or persecution, there are choices to be made, and making the correct choice will enable the crown of life to be awarded to those who love the Lord.

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. If we are tested it is to make us more Christlike, but blaming God is out of the question. Our own desires tempt us to sin. Other people can lead us astray but even then, allowing ourselves to be led astray is a result of our own desires. Each of us has a conscience and we know right from wrong. The voice of the tempter always says: "did God really say that?" when we know he did say that! Another way is to say to ourselves "this isn't so bad as it isn't really harming anyone else" when it will harm ourselves, harm our relationship with God and usually harm others who do the same as what we mistakenly think is harmless. Being enticed is often likened to taking the bait and not realising there is a hook inside and a fisherman at the end of a line waiting to reel in an unsuspecting fish, tempted by a morsel that seems harmless. We've all heard of the slippery slope, where one thing leads to another worse than the first thing. Abortion and euthanasia are two

examples of where people believed they have good intentions but in the end hundreds of thousands, if not millions of the unwanted unborn children and the unwanted old folk are murdered. The road to hell is paved with good intentions – the earliest reference to this is from the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus 21:11, "The way of sinners is made plain with stones, but at the end thereof is the pit of hell." John Wesley used it in a sermon in 1741 "'Hell is paved,' saith one, 'with good intentions.'". Verse 15 *¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.* So many so-called good ideas intended to relieve suffering, or make life easier or produce a better distribution of resources using methods which are not in the Bible, inevitably end with results that harm society. One thing leads to another and so on and so forth, and if the first desire was sinful, the results will be bad, and repetition will make it worse. But praise God we have a redeemer, who will forgive when we repent after realising we're on the wrong path. Praise God we have Holy Spirit and the Word to guide us and prompt us when tempted again. When tempted, declare "Jesus is Lord" and ask yourself, "what would Jesus do?"

To end verses 16 to 18: *¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. 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. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.* Good gifts come from God and God's ways are unchanging. We know what He wants his children to do because He has revealed Himself in Jesus and His Word. Do not be deceived by any theology that seeks to change the Word of God. In today's society, just in Greek society 2,000 years, people do things and did things that the Jews and Christians would consider sinful. Just because the non-believers' culture or morals are different from those of a disciple of Jesus, doesn't mean that sinful behaviour can be approved of as no longer being sinful. For example: "White lies" are lies. They may cover up accountability or an awkward situation, but when found out make matters worse rather than better. Honesty is always the best policy when asked about something. Silence may be golden sometimes, while **not** speaking out can result in others being in blissful ignorance resulting in foolish decision making.

One commentator says: In the previous verses James told us what the lust of man brings forth: sin and death. Here he tells us what the **will** of the good God brings: salvation to us, as a **kind of firstfruits of His creatures**. James may refer to his own generation of believers when he calls them **firstfruits**, especially as being mainly written to Christians from a Jewish background. The fact that these Christians from a Jewish background are firstfruits (**Deuteronomy 26:1-4**) shows that James expected a subsequent and greater harvest of Christians from a Gentile background. And so it came to pass! The church grew and was persecuted but triumphed, so from small beginnings, the church now numbers hundreds of millions, if not a couple of thousand millions. Again when tempted, say "Jesus is Lord" which focuses our mind on Jesus, and ask yourself "what would Jesus do?". Let's pray