

James and the meaning of faith

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Introduction

What a start – ‘*count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*’ How can we be expected to do that?

What does James mean when he says, ‘*What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?*’

In this study we will seek to bring clarity to these questions as we work through James’ letter to the twelve tribes scattered abroad.

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Chapter 1

The key to understanding

The implanted word

The letter of James is all about the effect of the implanted word.

James introduces this statement after talking about trials, which we will do in the next chapter. Here is what he says:

‘So then my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow (abundance) of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.’ 1:19-22

What then is this implanted word?

In the text ‘word’ is from the Greek ‘logos’ which is one of the names of Jesus, found in John 1:1-14 – *‘in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.’*

Look at Jesus the Word

When we recognize the fact that Jesus represents the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form, then we will understand that the meaning of ‘logos’ is ‘word in the sense of being all encompassing.’ In comparison to the Greek *rhema* (also translated word) which is an utterance or little phrase or saying.

The implanted word is ‘Christ in you the hope of glory.’ It is fulfilled by the Holy Spirit dwelling in our human spirit once we are born again.

Living and powerful

The writer advises us that the word is living and powerful when writing to the Hebrews:

‘The word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.’ 4:12

If we put the descriptions in columns we will see more clearly the full meaning of this statement:

Soulish

soul
joints = actions
thoughts

Spiritual

spirit
marrow
intents

Now we can see the soulish things are the actions and thoughts of the self – the flesh. Whereas those of the spirit represents true life.

By way of further explanation – the marrow is the place where the three constituent parts of the blood are manufactured in the body. The blood is then fed into the blood stream through ‘haversian’ canals at the back of the joints. The bible tells that life is in the blood. Joints are the actions of the flesh.

Thoughts come in many types, some good, some bad. We are urged to renew our minds taking every thought captive unto obedience to Jesus. 2 Corinthians 10:1-5

Whereas the intents of the born again human spirit, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are altogether good and righteous.

Save your souls

What does James mean when he says the implanted word is able to save our souls? He is not talking about the eternal salvation of the human spirit which takes place when we are born again and is guaranteed. He is talking about the deliverance from danger of the human soul - that is the mind, will and emotions. When we follow the Spirit, that is the implanted word, we will find rest for our souls.

We can also receive wisdom and knowledge to deliver us from physical and mental danger.

This is the salvation of our souls.

Jesus promised, *'take My yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls.'* Jesus 'yoke' is to do the will of the Father just as He did. When our lives are focused on doing that which the Father has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10) and living in a holy way, then we are in a position to enjoy the salvation of our souls by faith.

So here is the key to understanding James

His letter is all about living in accordance with the implanted word – that is the word of truth that is within us by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In that context we will follow James as he starts with trials and temptations.

Chapter 2

Trials

‘My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.’

What is a trial – Greek *pierasmos*? Trials are situations that will cause one’s faith, that is one’s trust in God, to be put to the test. They come in various ways. Jesus experience in the wilderness, when He was tempted by satan, came in three ways: 1 Physical need –hunger, a lust of the flesh; 2 the lust of power when He was shown all the kingdoms of the earth and 3 finally the pride of life – satan’s challenge ‘jump surely God will look after you.’

James sees these trials as opportunities. Certainly one’s faith, that is trust in God, will be tested – that is, examined, put to the proof, with the expectation of approval. (Greek *dokimazo*.)

Tribulation

We should not be surprised that in this world there is much tribulation - Jesus warned us that it would be so.

'These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.' John 16:33

As John points out, it is our faith, that is our trust in Jesus, that gives us this victory – the victory that overcomes the world. 1 John 5:4-5

Opportunities

It is no wonder then that James sees trials as opportunities. The victory is already ours through the implanted word.

However, James realizes that sometimes we lack the wisdom of how to bring the reality of the victory already won into our immediate experience. So he says, *'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given him. But ask in faith (that is trusting), with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let that man not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.'*

Reading that, one remembers Peter, the brave fisherman, who stepped out of the boat when Jesus called him. Peter walked on water – until he saw the circumstances, wind and waves, and doubted and began to sink. Jesus held out his hand and saved him.

Trials and temptations do not come from God.

In the context in which James is writing - that is in living a normal Christian life - trials and temptations do not come from God. The Lord is not sending us trials and temptations – it is very important to grasp this point.

If one thinks God is sending a trial or a temptation in order to teach us something, then who would dare pray against it? Or who would dare take authority over it?

No. James is emphatic:

‘Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.’ 1:17

Trials and temptations

The words come from the Greek *‘pierazo’* to try and *‘peiramos’* a trial.

Both words are variously translated trial or temptation.

James gives us the source of these problems:

'Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when that desire has conceived it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived my beloved brethren.'

(For temptation you can equally read trial)

Our human thinking of 'good' can be problem

Outright ungodly lusts are obvious and James has more to say on some of that later. It is where there is the appearance of good we have to be more careful.

In Christian circles there is often pressure to be in 'full time' ministry – creating such a desire. Or there can be the desire for recognition, such as eldership. These things are not bad in themselves. In fact they are good, but they are for those God calls to fulfill them.

That is not everybody, neither is it our choice - it is His so let Him bring it about if He calls.

See Ephesians 2:10:

'For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.'

The normal position is to stay in the calling one was in when one was saved. As explained to the Corinthians by Paul, in his first letter, chapter 7.

James urges us not to be deceived by what could appear to be good, but is not prepared by God for us. Regretfully, many, many fall into this trap. The desire for full time church ministry and the desire for office are a snare that catches many, causing damage in the body of Christ. Don't go there unless God has specifically and clearly called you.

We are all called to full time service in whatever role God has prepared for us. There is no difference between spiritual and secular jobs in Christianity.

All works prepared beforehand by God, are by nature to be undertaken by faith - they are all spiritual.

Count it all joy

Trials are opportunities for us to overcome the world.

'For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith. Who is he that overcomes the world, but, he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.' 1 John 5:4-5

Chapter 3

Doers

James makes these statements:

‘But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.’

‘What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?’

(save is *sozo* which means to deliver from danger – it applies to the body, the soul, and the human spirit.)

‘Thus also faith, by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.’

What are these works?

They are actions taken by faith, in the power of the Spirit, as opposed to works undertaken by human wisdom.

How do we have this faith?

‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.’ Romans 10:17.

This is the *‘rhema’* word of God not the *logos*.

Jesus said, '*Man does not live by bread alone, but by every 'rhema' (word, utterance) that proceeds from the mouth of God.*' Matthew 4:4

So to be clear, faith as compared to trust, only comes from hearing God speak with a specific utterance for a specific purpose.

James tells us that if we ask God will respond liberally and without reproach.

Faith cannot be generated by human effort. No one can 'work up' faith. Faith does not come by 'standing on the word' – it comes by hearing the Lord speak.

Faith does not come from the logos, it comes from God's voice – the *rhema*.'

So, we have a specific situation. It is a trial, a temptation. We don't know how to deal with it so we ask God. He gives a specific answer. We either accept it and do what He says – that results in the type of work James is talking about - a work of faith. Or we reject it and God's word to us is snatched away.

How one hears God speak is beyond the scope of this booklet but is dealt with fully in the booklet, 'Hearing God Speak.'

The difference between faith and trust

We have seen that faith comes by hearing.

What about the scripture? One of the ways to build our trust in God is through bible study.

The more we learn about Him, His character and His desires for those who are His, the greater and greater will our trust in Him become.

Paul put it to Timothy like this:

'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is PROFITABLE for, doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction, in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.' 2 Timothy 3:16-17

It is our trust in the Lord that enables us to be doers of His word. We may not understand or want to do what He tells us to do, but we acknowledge that He knows best and we trust Him.

Note: Faith and trust.

Both come from the Greek *pistis*. In his 'Jewish New Testament' Stern translates *pistis* as trust most of the time - that gives a better understanding and leaves faith to be used when there is the active involvement of the voice of God – i.e. the *rhema* word.

Chapter 4

Liberty

Why is James making these statements? It is because of the perfect law of liberty.

Someone who hears only and does not do is likened to one observing his natural face in a mirror, goes away and immediately forgets what kind of man he was, He is seeing only the natural realm! Forgetting that he is a new creation in Christ.

‘But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.’

What is this liberty?

Jesus came to proclaim liberty to the captives - it was prophesied by Isaiah and confirmed by Jesus when He read from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue. Luke 4:18

‘Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.’
2 Corinthians 3:17.

Liberty is the complete freedom to do as one chooses. We have it because it is part of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

'Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.' John 8:36 Liberty!

However, we are urged to use our liberty wisely – wisely meaning, in the Spirit, not in the flesh!

Paul puts it like this: *'All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.'* 1 Corinthians 6:12

The Galatians we urged to *'stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made you free.'* (5:1) They were under pressure from Jews of the circumcision party to go back under law.

We don't have liberty when something is putting us into some sort of bondage – making us like a captive. Trials and temptations are trying to do just that.

James - advice about liberty.

James makes two statements about the use of our liberty. The first is about bridling the tongue – failure in this regard is self deception.

The second is about showing partiality – that is using human wisdom to prefer the one with fine clothes over the poor man whom you thereby dishonor.

James comment – ‘look it’s the rich who take you to court while God chooses the poor of this world to be rich in faith.’

The use of liberty

Conclusion – we are totally free in Christ. We can do whatsoever we like. But we are in the process of being made more and more Christlike, as the indwelling Spirit changes us from one degree of glory to another. 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Paul advises us that whilst we are totally at liberty – ‘*all things are lawful for me,*’ nevertheless not all things are helpful. We are members of Christ, joined to Him, so we use our free will to avoid unholy actions and to choose the ‘narrow way’ of holiness.

As this process progresses our actions should become more and more holy, fulfilling the command:

‘Be holy for I am holy.’ 1 Peter 1:16

We all stumble and fail in this regard – hopefully less and less as we mature. Jesus provides the continual remedy.

Just as He washed the disciples feet, because, in the normal course of life, they became dirty and dusty; so there is also a simple process of continual cleansing for us.

'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' 1 John 1:9.

Jesus told the disciples they were fundamentally clean – just wash off the dirt and dust of things picked up on the path through normal life.

So we are fundamentally clean, righteous - just wash off the things that have gone wrong by confession. Immediate full cleansing because we are fundamentally righteous.

Chapter 5

Stumbling teachers

At the beginning of the third chapter James makes the statement, *‘Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgement. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word he is a perfect man.’*

We can unpick what James means when we look at other scriptures to bring more understanding.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 14 verse 26, states that when you come together each of you has a psalm, a teaching, has a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. This is a church meeting bible style – everyone contributes - as led by the Spirit. It is now very rare to find a church or fellowship following the biblical model. Almost all follow the hymn, prayer, sermon, sandwich style, a human format. This accounts for the lack of inspiration of many church services and widespread weakness in Christians who have not learned to be led by the Spirit.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit everyone could bring a teaching in a meeting. (Not be a teacher.)

Then in 1 Corinthians 12 verses 1 to 11 Paul talks of various gifts given by the Spirit as He wills.

Paul advises Timothy to appoint elders in every place. One of the characteristics of those men to be appointed is that they can teach. Romans 12:7 lists teaching in the gifts of the Spirit.

Thirdly we find that there are specific appointments in the church as foundations -

‘God has appointed these in the church; first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracle workers, then (follow) gifts of helps, healings etc.’

Gifts to mankind

In Ephesians 4 we find a much misquoted passage.

‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and He gave gifts to men.’ He Himself gave some men apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists some as pastors and teachers.’

(Often quoted as the five fold ministry is misleading. The structure of the language would need to change to ‘and some as pastors and some as teachers’ to create 5 positions. As Jesus said to Peter, ‘feed My lambs, tend My sheep, feed My sheep.’ Teach with a pastoral heart. John 21)

Rather it is one office named as teacher in 1 Corinthians 12:28 – the teacher must have a pastoral heart.

The purpose is for the equipping of the saints. First there needs to be saints to be equipped, hence the evangelist, who is noticeably missing in the church appointments referred to above. Then the saints are to be equipped for works of service.

It is the role of the apostles, prophets and teachers (who are specifically required to have a pastoral heart), to equip the saints. There is no biblical role of pastor such as we see today. The biblical injunction is to appoint elders – older men to act as overseers (bishops), to watch over the fellowship / church.

By observation, the role created in many churches today, call it pastor, vicar, rector, minister – whatever, has diminished the body of Christ to the extent that for the most part attending a church meeting is to sing a bit, then sit quiet – no expectation that everyone will contribute as per the biblical model.

And so to teachers

Of course there are times dedicated for the teacher to bring forth, under the anointing of the Spirit, the wisdom that the Lord gives to him.

It is to these that James is addressing his comment. Once one is recognized by the body as a teacher, he then carries respect and responsibility. So much so that James warns of a stricter judgement.

James makes a comment, '*No spring yields both salt water and fresh.*' It applies to all but is particularly relevant to teachers.

Teachers can and should continually pray for more and more understanding of the truth. Unbiblical teaching can be damaging, especially if it comes from one recognized as a teacher.

Chapter 6

Pride or humility

James has much to say about taming the tongue. Comments such as:

The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.

The tongue is a little member yet boasts great things.

No man can tame the tongue, it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

It is a very important member of the body as, like the rudder of a ship, it determines the course of life.

The Holy Spirit can tame the tongue - as demonstrated by the gift of tongues. More and more, as the Spirit changes us from one degree of glory to another our tongues come under control.

Which leads us to consider the question of pride and humility.

The tongue expresses our strong desires. Wars and fights, lusts for the things of the world all come from within.

These things are manifestations of pride. James has, *'adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.'*

'God resists the proud. But gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.'

One very human characteristic is to want to go our own way. Even sometimes deciding what WE want to do and asking God's blessing!

This is the way of humility. Submit to God – seek to do the works He has prepared beforehand for each one to walk in. Ephesians 2:10.

Judgement is coming. There is no place for boasting and for self interest. Now is the time for a humble walk with the Lord in His purposes.

Chapter 7

Patience

‘My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.’

This is what James is saying – you won’t get an instant answer or instant result every time you have a situation which is trying you. But don’t lose confidence.

We don’t always know how to deal with a trial which is why James invites us to ask for wisdom. The Lord God knows the answer to every situation, so asking for wisdom is very sensible.

It is worth noting that Jesus only did what He saw His Father doing – in the case of giving sight to the blind that involved four different strategies.

On occasions the blind man was instructed to do something to bring about the healing – go wash in the Pool of Siloam for example. (John 9:7)

A mistake commonly made is to do something because it worked last time or because it worked for someone else. That is not being led by the Spirit. Humility acknowledges the need for the Lord to intervene on our behalf – His instructions being delivered to us by the Holy Spirit.

James gives another reason for exhorting patience, it is in reference to the coming of the Lord:

‘You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.’

Here he makes the comment *‘establish your hearts.’*

‘sterizo’ has the meaning of be resolute, stand firm, stabilize, establish.

We do this through ‘believing’ bible study. That is we have decided to accept and believe that the bible is the word God has breathed through the writers. So we accept it as absolutely right and without error or contradiction in the original manuscripts. We accept it as being good and profitable for us.

Now, believing the scripture, we seek the Holy Spirit for understanding as we study so that we get more and more knowledge of God and of His ways.

As we continue in diligent study we find our confidence grows and grows - having the effect of establishing our hearts.

‘Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.’

Hebrews 10:35-6

And so we count it all joy - we know for certain that Jesus has the answer. We pray and seek His wisdom. When He answers we have faith and *‘faith is the substance (like a title deed) of things hoped for, the evidence of things not yet being seen.’* Hebrews 11:1

Once we have the substance, the title deed, then the thing we hoped for will surely follow.

Jesus promise:

‘Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.’ Matthew 7:7-8

Ask and asking is in the present tense. He who is asking, he who is seeking, he who is knocking. It carries the flavor of a continuing process.

Chapter 8

The prayer of faith

‘Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins he will be forgiven.’

What is this prayer of faith? Well we know from Romans 10:17 that faith comes from hearing and hearing from the *rhema* word of God – that utterance, that instruction, that little phrase or saying He is speaking now. As the elders pray it is the expectation that one or more will receive a word of knowledge as to how to pray. Maybe there will be an action to be taken. Maybe there will need to be repentance. It will be made clear.

As we are expected to be led by the Holy Spirit we would normally pray first, calling the elders together if so instructed by the Spirit. However, there can be times when hearing the Lord evades us. Then call the elders together, let them pray and see the hand of God move on your behalf. Subjecting oneself to the elders when sick is a way of humility, given by God for our benefit.

Chapter 9

What does it mean sharing Christ's sufferings

The apostle Peter joins in with a similar command - *'Beloved do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.'* 1 Peter 4:12-13

Here is that message again – trials are to be met with joy and rejoicing.

Threefold trials

When we consider Christ's sufferings three things come to mind:

- 1 Jesus had to resist the temptations put before Him by satan. We experience the same and are advised by James and by Peter to resist the devil and he will flee.
- 2 The way of this world - the persecution of its inhabitants. Jesus was persecuted by the Jewish leaders.

3 Jesus had to deny His flesh culminating in crucifixion. We deny the lusts of the flesh because we can consider ourselves crucified with Him. Galatians 2:20

Our experience of 'fiery trials' will be likely to come from one or more of the same sources. Things like power, money, sexual gratification, control, spiritual domination, occult power and so on are extensive in the world and want to draw us under their control. We must resist these temptations of the flesh.

The world persecutes believers – it will probably get worse.

Our enemy will continue to try to draw us away from the truth – resist.

Count it all joy and rejoice. We have more than enough in Jesus to overcome on every level.

Chapter 10

Last word

James is urging us to exhibit works of faith. Without works, that is works from the Spirit, our faith is dead – that is dwelling in the realm of death.

It is the eternal purpose of God the Father that His manifold wisdom may be seen –

‘To make all to see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith (trust) in Him’ Ephesians 3:9-12

There it is. God’s eternal purpose is that we exhibit works of faith.

Creation itself is eagerly waiting for the revealing of the sons of God. Romans 8:19. Creation wants to witness works of faith!

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