

A BELIEF THAT BEHAVES - THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Study 1

Attitude to Temptation

Read

James 1 : 1 - 18

When you receive a letter, it is important to know who it is from. When you are writing a letter, the importance lies with the one to whom you write. Who is it from and to whom is it sent? These are the important questions. And yet you say, 'How simple!' Yes! But quite a large part of the New Testament consists of letters or 'epistles'. This is an interesting feature of these writings, because somehow letters have that warmer and more personal note about them. The Apostle Paul wrote a number of letters to various Christian Churches in different places. All were written to convey spiritual truths, or to correct certain errors, which Paul felt the readers needed. The same is true of Peter and John. They have added their correspondence to the New Testament upon which our Doctrines are built.

But we are going to study the letter written by James. You will notice that he describes himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. (**verse 1**) It is widely believed that he was the brother of the Lord Jesus. In **Matthew 13: 55** we find that he is mentioned and that he, along with other brothers, were well known where they lived. He had not always believed in Jesus. We are told in **John 7: 5** that among those that disbelieved were "**his brothers**". There must have been a crisis in James' life when he became convinced of the true identity of the Lord Jesus, and thereafter became a servant of God. So we have his letter, which conveys so many important truths.

Notice that he wrote to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad. Who were these people? It is generally understood that these were Christian Jews who had been scattered abroad by persecution, or other similar pressures, and were living outside their own land. We can keep this fact in mind as we work through the letter in our studies.

This is not the easiest New Testament book to study. You will notice that it is not always possible to analyse the chapter, because the themes are not clearly defined.

In this passage you will soon find that James tends to begin a subject and then leave it, only to return to it again later. He begins by referring to temptation or testing. (**verses 2 - 4**) Then he speaks of lacking wisdom, (**verses 5 - 8**); next, about the poor and the rich, (**verses 9 - 11**); then he returns again to temptation. (**verses 12 - 18**)

James wrote a letter that is essentially PRACTICAL. His language is often blunt, almost aggressive, but we can be in no doubt about what he means. He calls a spade a spade! Two things need to be said before considering this passage in more detail. When you are studying, make a list in your notebook of all those words which are words of

ACTION. When you have done this, prayerfully APPLY such words to your Christian life. It could be that they will challenge you, making you 'sit up and take notice!' It is interesting, as an extra study, to compare this Epistle with the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew chapters 5 - 7**.

TEMPTATIONS 1. Verses 1-3

James was writing to Christians who had experienced trials. They often suffered very much just because they were Christians. The first Epistle of Peter will tell you more about this, where Peter speaks of "**suffering as a Christian**". But these testings or trials referred to by James were not necessarily linked with sin, but with CIRCUMSTANCES. They should not be a cause for sadness, but for rejoicing. "**Count it all joy**," says James. Perhaps you think this is rather strange, but James had a reason for writing in this way. These trials were of value, because they tested the quality of faith in these Christians, and would eventually produce patience or endurance. You see, instead of faith being weakened, trials could bring a new dimension of strength. Instead of producing panic and unrest, they could produce calm, strong endurance, and eventually, all that was lacking in their Christian experience would be filled up. They would become perfect (mature), and entire (complete), lacking nothing. (**verse 4**)

This is important to remember in our Christian experience. Just as gold that is tried in the fire comes out refined and pure, so when Christians go through bitter trials, they often emerge more resolute and strong for God.

TEMPTATIONS 2. Verses 9 - 18

James returns again to this vital subject. For a rich man to be humbled by trials is an experience to be received with joy, James says. The arrogant rich will be like grass in the summer sun. He will "**fade away in his pursuits**". (**verse 11**) Then James goes deeper into the question of these testings. The GOAL to which endurance leads is a CROWN OF LIFE. (**verse 12**) To be a Christian can be a costly business in terms of trials. Yet God watches over His own who suffer, and the reward is a crown. This crown is promised to those whose love for the Lord is real enough to endure to the end.

But what about the SOURCE of temptation? Here is something which is vital for a correct understanding of trials. God NEVER tempts man, nor can He be tempted with evil. This means that if we are tempted with SINFUL DESIRES, we can be sure that Satan is appealing with SIN to our SINFUL NATURES. If we give way, it can only do us harm. A Christian's life is always marred when he or she has yielded to sinful desires. But God is NOT responsible for this. Notice **verses 17 - 18**, God is presented as a great and good Father who gives only good gifts. There is no variation - no shifting of positions with Him. He is CONSTANT. So we can be sure that He will never tempt us to fall. One great writer put it this way, "*Satan tempts us to bring out the bad; God tests us to bring out the good.*"

How can we best deal with such trials? Look at **verses 5-8**. It seems that, for these things, there are two vital weapons needed. WISDOM is required to understand the way. This wisdom can be found from God, who is always ready to give **"liberally"**. But this wisdom only comes through ASKING, and asking in unwavering FAITH. So, when trials come our way and threaten to swamp our joy and trust in God, we can pray for understanding. Wisdom will be given - a wisdom which makes us STABLE and STRONG. Trials, instead of DESTROYING us will then DEEPEN us in our love for God.

Study 2

Applying the Word

Read

James 1 : 18-27

In this study we shall be considering something that James says about the SCRIPTURES. You must always keep in mind that when New Testament writers speak about the 'Word' or the 'Scriptures', they refer to writings of the Old Testament. For instance, when Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15: 3**, **"that the Lord Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures"** he meant that the Old Testament Scriptures set the scene for this great work. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Scriptures when He died for our sins. When the early Christians met together, they read from the Old Testament. It was amazing how much they found in them to lead them to Christ.

It has been estimated that James refers, or alludes to about 21 books from the Old Testament. Someone has described him as a great 'Bible man'. When he speaks of **"the Word"** he knows what he is talking about. He is personally experiencing the good of those things which he encourages others to do. Do you know your Bible? If you want to be able to talk to others about God's Word, you must really know it for yourself. This involves careful reading every day. If you are a young believer in Christ, you must decide how much place the Word is going to have in your life. It is good when you can say, like David, **"Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You"**. (Psalm 119: 11)

1. THE WORD OF TRUTH. Verse 18 tells us something wonderful about the power of God's Word. It is the living power through which God makes us His. Notice the expression **"brought us forth"**. What does it mean? It takes us back to the words of Jesus in **John 3 : 7**. **"You must be born again"**. Through God's Word of truth our lives are recreated - made new. This is just what Peter says in his first letter. **Chapter 1: 23** says that **"we are born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word of God"**. By God's own will we are given life through believing the Word.

2. THE IMPLANTED WORD. (verse 21) To have new life from the Word means living a different kind of life. **Verses 19 - 21** indicate something of the difference expected of us. Three things in **verse 19** are interesting. Ears must be **"swift to hear"** - always ready to listen. Tongues must be held in check - guarded in speech. We shall learn more about this in a later lesson. Behaviour then, must be marked by self-control. These are important points in Christian behaviour. Thirdly, there must always be a willingness to put away those things that are wrong if we are to know what true life in Christ is all about. But this is not everything. James tells us here that we must receive the WORD into our lives with meekness. This is important. It is not enough just to be born again - to have new life through the Word. We must also let the Word sustain the life that we

have received. To get rid of those wrong things in our lives, we must submit to the teaching which we find in the Bible, the Word of God.

3. THE ACTIVE WORD. Now James' teaching becomes very practical. He uses the illustration of the mirror. By the way, it is an interesting study in this letter to list the similes - the different things used to illustrate that which is taught. For example: **1: 6 "wave of the sea"**; **1: 10, "flower of the field"**. Just see how many you can find, and consider of course what they mean. So James begins to speak about a man who looks into a mirror and then foolishly goes away and forgets what he looks like. Can you imagine it? It is possible? Yet, if we are hearers of the Word and not doers of it, then we are just as foolish as he. We read, but fail to APPLY its teaching. The Word of God is like a mirror. In a very telling way it often shows us what we are. **Hebrews 4: 12-13** likens the Word to a sharp two-edged sword. It penetrates right into the deepest part of man's being and shows him what he is. Make sure that when you read your Bible, you allow it to CHALLENGE your life. If it does this, you can be sure it will CHANGE it for the better.

4. THE EFFECTIVE WORD. This is the final point with regard to the Word of God. Notice especially the description of the Word in **verse 25 - "the LAW OF LIBERTY"**. This makes us feel that the Bible is truly a Charter for Freedom. If it becomes effective in our lives, we shall be free from all those evil things which spoil us. **"Looks into the perfect law of liberty"**. This is great! Many people today feel that the Bible is so out-dated that it has no practical value for everyday life. Yet nothing is farther from the truth. We not only learn about ourselves but, looking into the Word, we learn about God and the Lord Jesus and about the kind of life that is possible through knowing Him. Thus James says, **"that man will be blessed in what he does."** (verse 25) It is a matter of putting things into practice. This is where the Bible is, in a way, like a Cookery Book. It gives us the RECIPE for enjoyable, satisfying living. But like making a cake or a pudding, the recipe has to be used before we can prove its worth. Many Christians will tell us with conviction, that the more they put God's Word into practice, the more wonderful it becomes.

We have learned four vital facts about God's Word. Not just academic things, but intensely practical qualities. Be sure that you MAKE THE BIBLE WORK in your life!

Study 3

Accepting One Another

Read

James 2: 1-13

This is a most interesting passage to study, for it seems to have special relevance for today. We hear a lot about 'discrimination' of various kinds. People talk about 'racial discrimination', and this is especially rife in some towns and cities. The colour of a man's skin marks him out and divides him from others. Then we hear about 'class distinction'. Here, there is a strict line drawn between different social classes of people which leaves some very much 'out in the cold'. Probably the most talked about today is 'sex discrimination', where, for example, a woman is denied certain opportunities or benefits which are available to a man in the same circumstances. So we could go on! It is good to come to a letter such as James' and to note the solid, common sense ideas that he gives in the light of such

problems. They are, of course, given in the context of Christian living and are vitally important.

Notice that James speaks in RESPECT OF PERSONS. He is putting this against the quality of the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. It is most apt that He is "**the Lord of Glory**". (**verse 1**) James is obviously using this title of our Lord with this situation in mind. There is no one higher in status or position than the Lord, and the faith that these Christians hold is in Him. The consistent teaching of the New Testament is, that with God there is no partiality, see **Acts 10: 34**. All peoples are alike in His sight. If we keep this in mind it will make the example of 'class distinction' that James gives us appear in its true light.

James gives us a picture of a synagogue meeting. This was quite a common occurrence. Whenever Jews were scattered abroad they established synagogues. The synagogue was their local gathering centre and it is obvious that Christians met there as well. Thus, in James's story, two people enter the synagogue. The one is a well-dressed man with a gold ring on his finger. He is stamped with the marks of affluence and well-being. The master of the synagogue leads the wealthy man to a high seat, but the poor man is taken to the lower part of the synagogue. James seeks to show that this action is the result of mistaken judgment. They are judges with evil thoughts. Someone has called this master of the synagogue, 'the short-sighted usher'.

Where is the mistaken judgment? The rich are taken to task by James in **2: 1-4**. They are the oppressors who take advantage of the poor. In **verses 6-7** of our chapter he shows how evil the rich men often are. They dishonour the poor and drag them off to the magistrates. They also blaspheme the holy name by which they are called - the name of Christ. But notice **verse 5**. Here is their greatest mistake. The man that was given the lowest place in the synagogue is chosen by God. "**He has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith**". The contrast is evident; they are possessors of a greater wealth than the rich men of this world - they are heirs of the kingdom promised to them that love Him. If you read Luke's Gospel you will find this principle illustrated many times. The Lord Jesus was the friend of the poor, and He condemned their oppressors who were rich.

We need to pause here and think about this. Does the Bible take an unbalanced view of riches? Do we have to be literally poor before we find God's favour? We can answer 'No!' to both these questions. Where the condemnation comes in, especially in James, is against the wrong use of wealth and the position it brings. The point of the argument here is that, if we show preference to the wealthy, despising the poor, we are guilty of slighting one whom God has chosen. More than that, this poor man may have wealth that earth has not dreamed of. He can be "**rich in faith**" and an heir of the kingdom of God, with all its riches.

James now takes us to the LAW. Notice that he calls it the **ROYAL LAW**. (**verse 8**) This commandment is the second of the ten commandments, and governs relationships between ourselves and our neighbours. We should love them as we do ourselves. There is some very straight speaking here. "**If you show partiality, you commit sin**", (**verse 9**) and to break one commandment is to be guilty of all! How important this is then! It could be that at some time or other we have all been guilty of despising someone

whom God loves. Much sadness and sorrow is caused by such sin. We can, by such behaviour, easily stumble or offend a brother or sister for whom Christ died. It is well to remember that there is no respect of persons - no 'snobbery' of any kind with God. We can conclude our study by a brief look at **verses 12 - 13**. We have the STANDARD of judgment set before us. It is the LAW OF LIBERTY. Keeping the law will never save us; only faith in Christ can possibly do that. But we need to govern our relationships by the standards that God sets in His law. PRIDE, in any form, is hateful to God. It is for us to speak and act in the light of these standards.

Then again, we have the MEASURES of judgment illustrated. To be unmerciful is to merit a judgment that is without mercy. In other words - and this takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount - "**Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them.**" (**Matthew 7: 12**) It may be that this hits us all pretty hard. In our self-centredness we often overlook the needs of those who are less favoured than ourselves. A tragic mistake!

Yet mercy 'glorieth over', or, is greater than, judgment. This is a great way to end this section. The 'quality of mercy' is such that it is large enough to take in all the shortcomings of those with whom we have to do. Where would any of us be had it not been for the MERCY OF GOD?

Study 4

Action and Faith

James 2: 14-26

We come to another practical point in James' letter. It concerns the matter of the value of faith as it is associated with works or actions. We have to be very careful that we understand exactly what is said here. Martin Luther once called the Epistle of James an 'Epistle of straw', and the reason why he did this was because of the teaching in this passage. Luther was a great Christian and we owe a lot to the part that he played in the Reformation. He based his great doctrines of the Reformation on the truth that "**the just shall live by faith**". Justification by faith was his great watchword. (see **Romans 5: 1**) We have to remember that he was opposing the teaching that man must work for his salvation - that salvation could be obtained through his own merits. Luther taught fearlessly that only by faith in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus, could men become righteous and find salvation. To him this was everything. We can be thankful today for the courage of the Reformers.

James asks the question, "**What does it profit, my brothers, if someone SAYS he has faith, but does not have works? Can faith save him?**" (**verse 14**) Let us say straight away that there is no doubt at all that faith in Christ IS enough to save anyone. Whatever we say in this lesson will not deny that very wonderful fact. It is well to say here, that never will one part of Scripture contradict another. The Bible is ONE BOOK and is consistent in every part. It is another aspect of Christian teaching that the Apostle is dealing with here.

The situation viewed here is of someone who SAYS he has faith, yet he is lacking in the area of actions. Perhaps we can say that he has a faith, or form of belief, which is merely ACADEMIC, merely head-knowledge. It is not linked

with ACTION. It is a 'say-so' faith.

Look first at the ENQUIRY that James makes. Can such a faith save? The writer here begins to probe beneath the surface. He gives an example of someone who approaches with a need. **"A brother or sister is naked and destitute."** To suggest to such people that they must be warmed and filled, without giving them the wherewithal to satisfy their need, is useless. This is clear reasoning. So, says James, is faith without works. It is dead and alone. It has no practical value; it is useless. We look into the example and begin to see what James is getting at.

Let us look at three further examples which take us along in our enquiry. Faith in One God, is an article of belief. Everyone believes this - even the devils, those who are associated with the world of evil, have to believe this. But what kind of faith is it? 'Of no practical value', says James in **verse 20**. Then what about Abraham? He was the man who was known for his faith. Where did his faith take him? It took him to the extent of offering Isaac, his son, on the altar at God's command. In other words, his faith was justified by his actions. One more example is given. Rahab, the harlot, hears of the exploits of Israel as she listens to the spies. Somehow she believed that God was with that nation. She proved her faith by sending the spies away in safety. Again, faith was justified by actions. In a very telling way, James gathers his facts.

What EVIDENCE do we have from this enquiry? The only way that the value of faith can be judged is by its expression in good works. It is validated by its actions. If we take first the experience of Abraham, we are told that he believed God. It seems that the whole object of his call and his experience of God, was to give evidence of his faith. He trusted God, yet how do we know that this trust was of any value? We look at his actions and we see that by these he PROVED the reality of his faith. He did not waver. Without works, his faith would have been dead - it would have had no practical meaning at all. James goes even further than this. In **verse 22** he says that **"faith was working together with his works, and by works his faith was made perfect"**. So, the evidence is gathered to show that faith is enough for salvation, yet not enough in itself to give the full picture of what life should be. Faith should be justified, or proved outwardly, by that which it produces.

Let us now finish our study by looking at what the EXPERIENCE of this really means. It means that faith in a Christian life has to have a POSITIVE TESTIMONY. Someone has translated **verse 20** in this way, **"Faith that does not result in good deeds is not real faith."** It is a 'say-so' faith - all talking and no doing! Are you like this? The best way to show your friends and neighbours that your faith is real, is to let them see that it works. Notice again **verse 22** - James is saying very clearly that in Abraham's case, faith and actions went together, or as it has been put, **"You see that faith is spurring him on to do good works"**. Thus faith became perfected. We can put this in various ways. By works, faith reached its goal, or became full-grown, or was completed by deeds. This is a vitally important lesson for you to learn. Practical James spells it out for us very clearly, **"as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (verse 26)** - faith is dead without actions!

There is nothing worse than profession without reality. With our faith, there must be ACTION. FAITH must be seen to WORK!

Questions

Study 1 ATTITUDE TO TEMPTATION

1. To whom did James write this epistle, and who were these people?
2. Give three examples from the first chapter which speak of positive ACTION.
3. Why were the trials, of which James speaks, of value to the people to whom he wrote?
4. a) What is the difference between Satan's temptations and God's testings?
b) What do we read of in this chapter which comes to us **'from above'**?
5. How can we deal with trials in our Christian lives?

Study 2 APPLYING THE WORD

1. What did Paul mean when he said that Christ died for our sins **"according to the Scriptures"**?
2. Why is it so important to know the Bible for ourselves?
3. Why is it necessary for us to be willing to put away those things in our lives that are wrong?
4. Why is the Word of God like a mirror?
5. How can we make God's Word effective in our lives?

Study 3 ACCEPTING ONE ANOTHER

1. What does it mean to call the Lord Jesus the **"Lord of Glory"**?
2. Why was the "short-sighted usher" so mistaken in his judgment?
3. How could the poor man, who was despised, be rich in the sight of God?
4. Why is 'respect of persons', sin in God's sight?
5. Show how one statement from the Sermon on the Mount is illustrated in this chapter?

Study 4 ACTION AND FAITH

1. Why is faith in Christ sufficient in itself to save us?
2. In the first illustration in **James 2: 14 - 26**, what is wrong with the faith spoken of?
3. How do we know that Abraham's faith was real?
4. Faith in a Christian's life has to have a positive testimony. How can this be true in your life?
5. Why is it so necessary to show the proof of our faith by our actions?