4-7-24

James 1:1-4

The book of James is a unique book of the Bible. Make no mistake, it has theology; but it is also immensely practical. It gives the appearance of jumping from one thing to another with no overall theme or direction. However, as we go through this letter, we will see what James is primarily interested in: spiritual wholeness. James speaks of many different things that should be lived in the Christian life, all with the purpose of making us more like our Saviour Jesus.

Reading quickly through James can give the impression that he is advocating a salvation through works. Some have even dismissed this book saying that it is opposite the teachings of Jesus and Paul of salvation through faith alone. When we look more closely at this letter, we can see that this is not the case. James focuses on works, but they are the outcome of having true faith in Christ. Looking at the teachings of Jesus and Paul we can also see their call to works. Jesus Himself tells us that we must be working when He, the Master, returns.

To be clear; throughout the Bible, salvation is taught to be by faith alone and not by works. Even in the Old Testament with all its rules and laws, faith is what is necessary. We read that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Clear back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were ejected from paradise because they didn’t believe God.

The writer of this letter identifies himself as James. This is James, the half-brother of Jesus, the biological son of Joseph and Mary. Now in the New Testament, there are at least four men with the name of James. How do we know which one this is? Primarily because that is the witness of the early church. The writings that survive even from the first few centuries clam that this is James, the half-brother of Jesus.

Additionally, James is known in the book of Acts to be the leader of the Jerusalem church. There is a definite similarity between his speeches in Acts and this letter. It would also have to be someone of his reputation to write a letter with this type of authority. I bring these things up because in the last couple of centuries, there have been many who have brought objections to the idea that James wrote this letter. That is all just a part of the liberal attack on the Bible. Every objection can be and has been refuted. This letter came from the Holy Spirit and was written through James, the half-brother of our Lord.

James also identifies himself as, “*a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*”. Any Jew would consider himself to be a bond-servant, or slave, of God. But it was a radical statement for James to claim that he was a slave of his brother. Recall from the Gospel accounts that Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe in Him. In John chapter 7, we are told that Jesus’ brothers mocked Him and challenged Him to go up to Jerusalem to show what He could do. And in verse 5 it says: *For not even His brothers were believing in Him.* Furthermore, in Mark 3:21 we learn, ‘*When His own people heard of this, they went out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, “He has lost His senses.”*’ Jesus’ own family came after Him because they thought He had gone insane.

James had been a part of all this, and now, here He is, calling himself a slave of Jesus. He also calls Jesus “Lord”, and he calls Him “Christ”; which means that he now believes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. James now staked his life on his brother Jesus being the Christ and historical records show that James was stoned to death in AD 62 by the scribes and pharisees because he would not renounce his commitment to Jesus as the Christ.

This is more than just a lesson in history. This is an object lesson for us. We ought to be able to see ourselves in James. It we are currently a Christian, then we should be able to look back to a time in our lives before we believed in Jesus. The Bible lets us know that at that time, we were His enemies. If given the chance, we would mock Jesus; if not directly, then by the way we lived our lives. In our natural rebellious state, we would certainly not have accepted Him as Lord. We would not think that we even needed a Saviour, let alone confess Jesus as the Christ.

Now here’s the rub: if we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, then there should be a change in our life as radical as was in James. It may take time to develop, but it ought to be noticeable. There ought to be a change in our behaviour, in our thinking, in the way we approach every situation in life, and in the way we interact with other people. And in addition, these changes should not only take place, we should want them to take place.

People don’t particularly like change; so the desire to change is a good indication that you have truly accepted Jesus. As we have pointed out before, Jesus warned us to count the cost. Consider what it is going to cost you to become a follower of Jesus. He gave His life for you; He expects your life to be lived for Him. He bought you with the high price of His blood; he expects you to treat Him as your Lord and Master. Once you leave the stronghold of satan and become a citizen of heaven, you must no longer be conformed to the world and the world will hate you for it.

Now, what we receive is well worth the cost. The payoff is beyond our comprehension; we become coheirs with Jesus and His Dad is God. Jesus just wants us to know up front that following Him does have a price; it’s not a walk in the park and it doesn’t mean that everything is going to work out perfectly from then on. At least, not until we are with Him in heaven.

The radical change that takes place in our lives happens at a different rate for each of us. For James, it was very fast. He went from being hostile to Jesus to being the leader of the Jerusalem church in probably a couple of years – maybe sooner. We know that God blessed certain people in the early church to become elders and teachers in only a few months. These were special actions of the Holy Spirit and He is certainly able to do this. I think that in some cases He still does; people can be endowed with special gifts to comprehend the Gospel quickly and evangelize or teach.

For most of us, it is a much slower process, so don’t be discouraged. Either way, the process is called sanctification. Sanctification is a life long process of becoming more like Christ. The work of sanctification is done by the Holy Spirit, but we also have our responsibility. We give the Holy Spirit something to work with, so to speak. This comes through Bible reading and study, prayer, Christian fellowship, and worship; both corporately and privately. It involves living a certain kind of life which is what James is concerned with in this letter; working toward a spiritual wholeness.

James writes his letter: *To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*. “The twelve tribes” is a way of referring to the Jews or Israel. This is also a letter written to those who have accepted Jesus as the Christ; in other words, Christian Jews. So this letter is not to the whole Jewish community. James is writing a pastoral letter to the Jerusalem church that has been dispersed over a large area.

Recall Acts chapter 7 where the deacon Stephan is put to death by stoning. In the first verse of chapter 8 it says, “*And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles*.” Again, following Jesus isn’t necessarily easy, but God’s purpose is served: because of this, the Gospel spread.

Those who had to leave Jerusalem faced many difficulties. They had to find new homes and new employment; this could often be difficult due to them being Christians. That is why James speaks so much in his letter about poverty and suffering. As head of the Jerusalem church, James would have been a pastor. He is doing what he can now to help his flock who are scattered and suffering. He encourages them but at the same time doesn’t coddle them; if they need exhortation, he gives it.

Although this letter was originally written to Jews dispersed throughout the land, it still applies to us. We are part of the new Israel in Christ. The Jews are still God’s chosen people, but in Christ we are spiritual children of Abraham. Our true citizenship is in heaven, but we are currently dispersed throughout the nations. We need the guidance and comfort that James offers.

In verse 2 James jumps right into the subject of Christian suffering. This is a difficult subject with difficult questions. James doesn’t try to explain God’s reasoning for suffering so much as he tells us what to do and what to expect from it. Basically, we know from the Bible that suffering is the result of sin; it is due to the presence of evil in the world. Could God put a stop to sin and evil and suffering in the world? Yes, and one day He will. But until then He has His purpose for allowing it to remain and it is up to us to trust Him.

So, James tells the Christians who have been forced out of their homes and face persecution, “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.*” This sounds difficult; that’s because it is. This is contrary to the world and our natural reaction to problems and suffering. But this is coming from James, whom Paul refers to as an apostle. It is in the Bible, which is the word of God, so it is true. And the Apostles Paul and Peter say much the same thing in some of their letters.

A few things to consider in this verse. One is that the Greek word translated brethren includes both men and women; so this is directed at both brothers and sisters in Christ.

James uses the phase “various trials” or perhaps “trials of many kinds”. This language is all-inclusive of suffering. Many times in the Bible, suffering refers to persecution due to our association with Christ; and that is certainly included in the trials James is speaking of. But it also included everything else: financial hardship, sickness, loss of loved ones, any type of suffering. And that is good news; all of our suffering is beneficial to us if our focus is on Christ.

Now the hard part; *consider it all joy*. Or perhaps it might say “*consider it pure joy*”. There is a nuance here: it means a complete joy, a joy we don’t put conditions on; it does not mean nothing but joy. So we are to experience other appropriate emotions. For example: if a loved one turns away from us due to our being a Christian, we will certainly feel sadness and will have to process that. At the same time, we are to consider it joy because our persecution for Christ’s sake will be rewarded. If we lose a loved one to death, we must grieve and deal with that loss, we are not called to be stoic; still, joy can be ours knowing that it will cause some benefit for us and bring glory to God.

Perhaps an easier way to think of having joy is to rejoice. We can decide to rejoice even when we are feeling grief or loneliness or sadness or despair. To rejoice is to praise and worship God; it is to thank Him for His goodness. And He is worthy of all these things regardless of what is happening in our life. Remember that the feeling of joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit and we open ourselves to receiving that gift by rejoicing in God.

It is important to realize that we are not thanking God for the trial itself; we are thanking Him for the goodness He will bring out of it. And next, James goes into that goodness. Trials have a way of testing our faith. Our first thought is usually something along the lines of “Why are You letting this happen to me?” But our next thought ought to be that God is perfect and He loves me and He has a higher purpose for allowing this to happen; so I will trust Him in this situation and praise Him for His goodness. I know; much easier said than done. But He has given us the Holy Spirit who helps us in these things.

And faith, in some ways, works like our muscles; the more we work it the stronger it gets. So as our faith is tested we gain endurance or perseverance. So what is the point? Well, who throughout all history has had perfect faith? There is only one person and that is Jesus. And who are we as Christians trying to be like? Jesus.

So the increasing of our faith, the forming of endurance and perseverance, is essential to our becoming like Christ. Recall that Jesus said to count the cost; and this is part of the cost. But it is eternally worth it.

Prayer

Merciful Lord Jesus, You are well aware of all the difficulties we face in this life; all the sadness, the sickness, even the simple frustration each day brings. Yet You demonstrate that You are sovereign Lord by causing all these things to build up Your people and make them more like You. Thank you that as we face these things You give us strength and guidance.

Help us Lord God to come more quickly to the decision to rejoice in You when difficult times come. It is so against our nature; our sinful tendances have to be overcome. But it is our desire to be like our blessed Saviour; we rejoice that You know exactly what to do in our lives to conform us to Christ.

Holy Spirit, it is such a blessing that You indwell us when we turn to Jesus; You are a priceless gift. Please help us to turn more quickly to rejoicing when we face trials. We know that our God is always good and He always deserves praise and is the only One who deserves worship. So now we do offer that worship and praise;

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen