



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Life is a bruising journey, isn't it?

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

James 1:12-27

I begin a series today from the Book of James. Over four Sundays, we will look at this significant epistle, about which there has been an element of controversy. The sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther, unhelpfully chose to describe James as “a right epistle of straw”, questioning whether it was worthy of a place alongside the writings of St Paul, such as Romans.

Luther went so far as to have James placed at the end of his Bible, without a page reference in the contents table. He may have changed his mind somewhat for later versions have page numbers. Why is it that someone of such spiritual and intellectual stature as Martin Luther questioned James' epistle?

- one reason appears to be the very strong emphasis upon 'works' alongside faith, especially when considered in the light of Ephesians 2:8
- there is the lack of reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- thirdly, there is the failure of the epistle to demonstrate a full account of the role of faith

I would want gently to dismiss such arguments against James for, as John Dickson in his commentary declared: “He does, however, offer one of the most compelling portraits of Christian living anywhere in the Bible. If that be true then it may well be that it has a closer affinity with the traditions of Jesus than all the other epistles.”

'Who is James?' is a good question. And the honest answer is - we cannot be absolutely certain. There are four James referred to in the New Testament:-

- James, the brother of John, son of Zebedee
- James, another apostle, son of Alpheus
- James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot)
- James, the brother of Jesus

From early days in the ancient church, the authorship of the letter was credited as being written by James, the brother of Jesus. He is the most natural candidate as author and I think argument for this is strong.

If so, we are blessed with the thought that here is someone who not only heard Jesus Christ teach, but also played with him, ate with him and, as David Field in his commentary suggests, “... may even have shared the same bedroom as children”.

In five short chapters, we have an epistle which leans heavily on the Sermon on the Mount and invites us to embrace a journey of faithful service.

A reason why James does not identify himself as the brother of Jesus may in itself be positive. James may well anticipate the criticism that would follow if he overplayed his relationship to Jesus. He gives Jesus his full titles. David Field suggests you may not hear the name of Jesus very often, but much of great importance is mentioned.



James addresses his letter to the “Twelve Tribes” who are scattered among the nations. His word ‘scattered’ is translated as ‘diaspora’ in Greek and is a technical term for Jewish life in New Testament times. The fact remains that the majority of Jews still live outside Israel.

So James uses a term that was very familiar to describe the situation that faced many Christian Jews. Both Jewish and Gentile members of the early church held dearly to the thought that they were the new community God had chosen, but were living like immigrants in a foreign land and holding firm to the prize that their citizenship was of the ‘new Jerusalem’.

James moves from relative obscurity in the gospels to a prominent role in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts 15 and 21 give us a clear understanding that he was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. The scattering of Christian Jews across the immediate known world came as a result of the death of Stephen by stoning, recorded for us in Acts 7.

There are a number of reasons why we might study James and for me a primary reason is to explore, to learn from and to examine the relationship between faith and works. James refers to faith on fourteen separate occasions and close to sixty times there are commands or calls to obedience. Here is a good case for exploring the link between this epistle and the Sermon on the Mount.

We remind ourselves of how James introduces his epistle:

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the Twelve Tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”

(James 1:1)

This down-to-earth epistle addresses some challenging issues and I begin by exploring the reality that life is difficult. James has been described as a realist in that, like a doctor, he goes immediately to the seat of the pain and with “firm fingers and few words, he wastes no time on small talk”.

The early Christians, to whom he addressed this correspondence, were going through difficult times. James understood this and addressed the issue.

As we face life’s trials, we ask ourselves how we are to address such situations. The larger question can be put in this way: “What do Christians do when life is a series of heavy trials?”

We are moving into difficult territory, but it is a familiar theme. How often, when people begin a conversation, do they say, “How are you?” The reply may be perfunctory in the form of “Fine, how are you?” But, frequently, when you look at their face and you know the reality is different.

I think this matter is of particular concern for Christians, but it really shouldn’t be – because even a brief excursion into the life and ministry of Jesus would suggest a rather different conclusion:-

- Jesus lived under the pressure of opposition
- He wept at a friend’s graveside
- He felt the deep pain of compassion as human need presented itself to him
- Jesus suffered the agony of Gethsemane
- He died in the torment of the cross



He frequently warned his followers that they would not escape rejection and suffering. Perhaps the most powerful word on this comes from Jesus: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:18-20)

Our text comes from James 1:2-3 –

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

This text goes on to demonstrate its truth in the way the community of faith and individual Christians have to face up to difficult circumstances.

James talks about trials “of many kinds”. This is helpful because it does not too clearly define such trials. As we live the Christian life, we must not be surprised to find ourselves buffeted by many pressures. Sometimes this is expected; at other times, we are taken completely by surprise.

Let me offer a number of suggestions about this ‘bruising journey’ that we share together in Christ:-

- bitterness may mark out our life
- blame is a familiar feature in our community
- blind indulgence has disastrous outcomes
- moreover, temptation is often an influence upon the course of our lives

Will Rogers remarked that there are two eras in American history: “The passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck.”

Another astute comment: “To err is human; to blame the divine is even more human.” How true that is!

Trials, temptations and bruising make up the way of the discipleship

Facing challenging times is a normal part of life and Christian people aren’t exempt from such experiences.

When I consider my own ministry in relation to suffering, I become aware of how indiscriminate suffering and trials can be. I have seen this on countless occasions:-

- I recall when I led a large church in the UK there were four families where family members had been victims of fatal car accidents. I felt the welter of pain every time I spoke about suffering.
- I have seen that pain as I have accompanied someone to hear the news that they hoped they wouldn’t receive about their own health.
- I have many times sat with people who have had to endure disappointment in their personal family situation. It could be the breakdown of a marriage or a young person having failed exams.

The hard truth for us in this text is that God presents himself in the midst of such perplexing circumstances:

- there is a seamless transition away from the positive to the negative



The Greek noun which is translated 'trial' in verse 2 and 12 of the first chapter comes from the same root as the verb translated 'tempt' which we meet in verses 13 and 14.

It is sad that we don't have one word in our English language to cover both these concepts, because they are the same thing – that is they make the same point, though we view them from different angles.

Life can become very challenging when we least expect it – and a situation of calm can soon become very stormy.

- in the sombre context of struggle, God's amazing love shines through brightly

One writer offers the thought that God's love is totally dependable. James anticipates that we might smile at the end of verse 17, where God is said to be One "... who does not change like shifting shadows." When you need them most, the sun and the moon can be obscured by cloud.

God's dealings with us are not shifty in any way. He never disappears behind the clouds and his love can shine through in the most difficult of circumstances.

In his commentary on James, Kent Hughes concluded, "Evil cannot prompt even the slightest appealing tug in the heart of God."

- these are opportunities to test our faith

One of life's trials may, in turn, become God's opportunity to test our faith. We road test cars – and small electrical devices are likewise tested to improve their performance. In difficult times, we too are tested and this will make us stronger.

In such situations, we remind ourselves that God is generous and he can be entirely depended upon. This brings us to a place of real and lasting confidence.

We must take evasive action, but it must not be hasty.

James identifies two areas where Christians are particularly prone to fail - and he also adds a third area which presents itself:-

- the danger of the hasty word

This is a different point than later, when James speaks about the tongue. I suspect this is much more related to the thought of 'biting back'.

We hear the power that is carried as James reminds us, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." (1:19-20)

In his book To Understand Each Other, the Christian psychologist, Paul Tournier, said, "Listen to the conversations of our world, between nations as well as between couples. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf."



The hasty word often arises as a result of not listening to the other person or failing to consider the situation at hand.

- the danger of the hasty temper

If we are to be able to demonstrate the truth of this matter, then we shall need:-

- to work hard in our discipleship
- to limit our exposure to unhelpful influences
- to be saturated in the ways of God's word

Ultimately anger closes our mind to God's truth and it is most likely to erupt when our egos are bruised. "I am hurt" or "My opinions are not being acknowledged."

- the challenge of injustice

There are some injustices that will cause within us a response that has been described as "righteous indignation". How can we speak out against injustice and yet, at the same time, not become hasty?

When injustice occurs, as it frequently does, there is a difference in our anger because we are concerned about the hurt of others, rather than our own. Selfish anger never helps anyone.

Genuine Christianity refuses to allow our bruising to damage us

Under this particular point, I want to draw your thought to a verse that I believe describes the entire theme of the Book of James – "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (1:22)

The older versions of our Bible have what is probably a more helpful translation, where we are called to be "doers of the word".

- the mirror is helpful to all of us

How many of us remember entering a 'hall of mirrors'? James uses the mirror in a most interesting way. He suggests people get up in the morning, look in the mirror and then forget what they look like.

David Field, in *Discovering James*, told of how "the authorities of one American city even suggested that big mirrors should be put up on advertising hoardings, so that pedestrians could see themselves as others saw them and, as a result of the shock, would pull themselves together and put on a confident smile for the rest of the day."

I suppose they imagined this would boost civic morale. The message is much clearer – for someone who sees his or her reflection and forgets it quickly is like one who listens to God's word and does nothing about what they hear. In other words, it makes no practical difference.

- being bruised is an enormous challenge to some Christians



There are many Christians who have struggled with the fact that we often suffer, despite our allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is an important moment in people's lives when they:-

- move beyond being defined by fairness
 - recognise the importance of forgiveness
 - embrace the fact that God can sustain us in such situations
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- coming to terms with these difficult themes can be the making of our Christian lives

We are not called to seal ourselves off from the world in some kind of protected compound. Christians have to face the challenge of living in the real world, but with the total assurance that his presence makes all the difference.

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and Christian thinker, was helpful in saying, "The human race in the course of time has taken the liberty of softening and softening Christianity until at last we have contrived to make it exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament."

Our text talks about "whenever you face trials", which leaves little room for uncertainty. We are urged to be joyful not "if" but "when" we face trials.

Trials, difficulties and problems can rob us of our joy, but we can keep our heads held high because we rejoice through the power that can emerge as a result of facing up to a challenge. Christian joy is a deep-seated sense of wellbeing and has been known to embrace sorrow, tears, anger and pain. We often view joy as though it were an experience or an emotion, when in fact it is 'a decision'.