



Suffering and temptation

James 1 v 1-18 – Leaders version

For a one hour study, just do the starred * questions

Check in – with the group sitting in a semi-circle go round and ask everyone, including leaders, how they are and how they're feeling about studying the Bible today.

What does the passage say and mean?

90 minutes

*1. Read James 1 v 1 Who is writing this letter, how does he describe himself and who is he writing to?

James, who describes himself as 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ', is writing to 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations'. Explain that James is most likely to be Jesus' brother (see Mark 6 v 3) who did not have faith in Jesus until after his death and resurrection (John 7 v 5, 1 Cor 15 v 7), and became a leader of the NT church. The letter was probably written around AD50 (<20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection) to Jewish Christian believers ('the twelve tribes') who had scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution of Christians after the death of Stephen in Acts 8 v 1-3.

2. (You may like to give each person one reference to look up for this) Read James 1 v 2, 1v 16, 1 v 19, 2 v 1, 4 v 11, 5 v 7, 5 v 19. What does James call his readers and what does this tell us about their relationship?

NIV1984 and ESV 'brothers'. NIV2011 'brothers and sisters'. (The Gk word 'adelphoi' means 'brothers' or 'brothers and sisters'). James uses the term at least 12 times! This shows us that he feels a family relationship with his readers – he is not genetically related to most of them, but is so spiritually as they have the same Father in heaven.

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Christians are adopted into the family of God and so we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. How should this affect the way you think of, and treat, other Christians?

Watch out for misunderstandings of the nature of brotherhood (gangs) or transference from poor family relationships.

Read James 1 v 2-18 to the group.

3. Read James 1 v 2. What does this verse tell us about the situation the readers were in?

Their faith was being tested. They were facing trials (not necessarily in court, rather meaning that they were under persecution for their faith in Jesus).

*4. Read James 1 v 2-4. James tells his readers to consider persecution 'pure joy'. How can he make such a statement?

Allberry helpfully comments that James is not so much telling us how to feel, as how to think (2015, p13) and that 'it is what God can accomplish through suffering that is good, not the suffering itself' (p15). James is not saying that persecuted Christians are not suffering – by definition they are suffering. He's telling them to look beyond the present suffering and see that the testing of their faith produces perseverance – as they are stretched in their faith it grows, like a muscle. This process matures and completes them. God uses our suffering to help us mature in our faith. We can have joy in this, even as we have pain in suffering.

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How does faith in Jesus help you through times of suffering?

A personal question, not a theoretical one. Consider God's sovereignty (Romans 8 v 28), that God will never leave nor forsake us (Joshua 1 v 5), knowing that Jesus can give you the strength to cope with this (Philippians 4 v 13), hope in a better future (2 Cor 4 v 17), etc.

*5. Read James 1 v 12. How does James describe the person who stands the test of faith?

James is still referring to persecution for Christian faith. He describes the one who perseveres as blessed. They will receive the crown of (eternal) life.

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Are you suffering at the moment? Are you able to have joy in your suffering as your faith is stretched and as you grow in perseverance and mature as a Christian?

Don't just think about persecution for following Jesus; open the discussion to include any form of suffering. Participants don't need to identify the source of their suffering to join in the discussion.

***6. Read James 1 v 5-8.** What do you think 'wisdom from God' is and why is it a good thing to pray for?

Wisdom from God is not the same as knowledge or depth of understanding of long words. It's more to do with knowing God is directing your decisions and growing in understanding of / relationship with / obedience to him, which in turn helps us through the trials we have just been discussing. Spiritual wisdom is not automatic, it's a gift God gives us through his Holy Spirit. Wisdom is often felt to be lacking in the midst of suffering and James tells us that when we ask in faith for wisdom from God, he gives it generously. Wisdom helps us to understand and obey God's will and thus change to become more like Jesus and more mature in our faith.

NB v 6-7: Jesus makes a similar statement in Matthew 21 v 21-22. James is now talking about prayer in general. These verses can sound harsh / threatening since we all have a level of doubt and insecurity and our prayers are not always answered in the affirmative. James is saying that with divided loyalties, in this case looking to the world for answers while asking God for wisdom, we will receive nothing.

7. Read James 1 v 9-11. What attitude do you think this means poor and rich Christians should have?

Let the group try to work it out and then explain that this is probably what it means:

All believers are in the same boat – we are all saved by faith alone in Christ alone and should take pride in the gospel. The poor believer is in uncomfortable circumstances in life, but as a Christian they know they are forgiven and have a place in heaven and they can take comfort from / pride in this 'high position'.

The rich Christian is comfortable in life but without Christ they are spiritually bankrupt. Putting all their trust in Christ is humiliating and they can take pride in this 'low position'.

Questions 8-10 are **SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS**. You need to write them on flip-chart sheets for the group to work on in pairs.

***8. SDL Read James 1 v 13-15.** What is temptation and where does it come from?

Temptation is a desire to do something that you know is wrong, or not do something that you know you should. You can only be tempted to do bad – by definition you cannot be tempted to do good! (Make sure you separate the temptation from the deed in the minds of your group). Temptation can come from your own desire or from the devil, but never from God.

***9. SDL** Why is temptation so tempting?

Because we are sinners.

***10. SDL** James tells us that 'God cannot be tempted by evil', v 13. This inability to be tempted is an aspect of his unchanging character. Why is it so important?

Write their answers on the flip-chart (as long as they're correct / correct enough). Include:

- *It shows us that 'sin holds no attraction to him... He is utterly pure.' (Allberry 2015, p34)*

- *If God could be tempted to go against his own holiness and sin he would no longer be the Holy God – it would be a self-destructive event*
- *It would mean that Satan had influence over God i.e. was more powerful than God – again, a self-destructive event*
- *It means that God is unchanging in his promises and won't change his mind about anything he has said. Therefore we know he is trustworthy*
- *It means that God will never tempt us to sin*

***11. Read v15 again. What is the connection between sin and death?**

Sin leads to death. We know this from Genesis 3 v 16-17, Romans 6 v 23 etc. Sin makes God so angry that he has to punish it, he cannot leave it ignored. The ultimate punishment is spiritual death, separation from the holy God. Take the opportunity to explain the gospel – that Jesus, God with skin on, died in the place of repentant sinners to pay the price for their death, and rose to life again because he had conquered death. When we repent of our sins and trust in Jesus' death in our place, we know that our sin is paid for and that we are forgiven. This means that we have eternal life.

***12. Verse 15 tells us that death is only 2 steps away from desire. At what point in this sequence of events do we conquer sin? (see 2 Corinthians 10 v 5)**

We need to defeat the temptation, not the sin. As a Christian, we know that we are forgiven for past, present and future sins, however, this does not give us permission to sin. 2 Cor 10 v 5 tells us to 'take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ' – this is talking about dealing with temptation before it becomes the sinful act. We can only defeat a temptation by taking the thought captive and making it obedient to Christ – by measuring our desire by Christ's desire for us and seeing whether it matches up or not. It's worth pointing out that the devil may tempt you, but he can't make you sin. Only you can do that...

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Are you struggling with temptation? How can 2 Corinthians 10 v 5 help you to overcome this?

Before anyone discloses their temptations, make sure the group know that if they breach security rules you are obliged to pass on what they have disclosed.

13. Read James 1 v 16-18. James concludes the section by reminding us that God gives us good things and is unchanging. Why do you think he needs to remind us of this? (i.e. what is it about humans that makes us need to be reminded that God is good and unchanging?)

One of Satan's greatest lies (tempting us to believe something that the Bible says is not true) is that God is

not good or that God has changed. James is cautioning us against being deceived about this.

When we want to do something that God says is wrong, Satan gets in there and tells us that God is not good. When we are suffering, Satan whispers that God is not good. When our prayer is not answered immediately or in the affirmative, he's there with the same lie.

When we don't want to deal with the consequences of the fact that God is angry about sin, Satan whispers that that was what God was like in the OT; he's not like that anymore... When we are overcome with guilt, Satan whispers that, actually, God is not as forgiving as the Bible makes out and he can't relieve us of the burden of our sin after all. When we want to follow culture, not Scripture, Satan whispers that things have changed and God doesn't mind about that issue any more; Scripture is out of date.

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Do you need to be reminded that God gives us good things or that he is unchanging? How will remembering this help you this week?

14. In James 1 v 18, we read that God 'chose to give us birth through the word of truth'.

What does this mean and how would you explain it to someone on the wing?

James has talked about desire giving birth to sin and sin giving birth to death. Now he draws our attention to our new birth in Christ through the word of truth. A chance to explain the word of truth, the gospel!

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