

Bible Notes – James 1

From earliest Christian times, the Letter of James was believed to have been written by 'James, the brother of the Lord' – that is, literally the brother or half-brother of Jesus. That thesis came in for a lot of criticism in the last two hundred years, but more recently has come somewhat back into fashion again. According to Acts and Galatians, this James was the leading figure in the early Church at Jerusalem, and was associated with a kind of Christianity which emphasised its Jewish character and was at first hesitant about the radical Pauline agenda of including the Gentiles without requiring circumcision and obedience to the Law.

The Letter of James could be seen as reflecting such concerns, as it emphasises the place of law and moral transformation in Christian discipleship. At one point, in 2:24, James even declares that 'a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' – which seems to fly in the face of central Pauline teaching, and all those sermons where you have heard that you cannot *earn* God's approval. For this reason, Martin Luther who started the Protestant Reformation with a trumpet blast of (what he considered to be) the Pauline preaching of grace, famously regarded James as 'an epistle of straw' and relegated it to the end of his translation of the New Testament in 1522. Even if the author had been one of Jesus' relatives, apparently he had little grasp of what Christianity was really about. Recently, however, (as we shall see when we get to Ch.2) scholars have been less convinced that there is actually much of a contradiction, if any, between what James and Paul had to say – *perhaps* different emphases, but certainly not fundamental opposition.

It is an odd experience reading James as, even more so than in some other biblical books, the writer seems to jump swiftly from one thought to the next and it is not always obvious why he jumped the way he did. Nevertheless, in Chapter 1 some key themes quickly emerge. The common theme in 1:2-12 is about the growth of a stable Christian character, the development of a kind of solid spiritual core which allows a person not to be buffeted around by every passing wind and wave of life. This kind of maturity, says James, is *difficult* – it comes through perseverance through temptation (a word covering pretty much every kind of trial in life: through the hostility of others towards the faith, through our own

susceptibility to certain sins, through the everyday sufferings of sickness and hardship). Christianity offers no guarantee that such things will not affect the Christian – quite the reverse. They are to be expected, endured, prayed through and even in a strange sense *welcomed* (2:2) because only through them is our character formed.

The clue to such character formation is not only perseverance, but also *prayer*: ‘if any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly...’ (1:5). What’s important here is the sense that good character is not something that one simply has, or which one can attain through perseverance and effort alone – it is something which is *given*. Though on the other hand, that giving will not happen to those who are not making an effort – we’re approaching the borderlands of that alleged dispute between Paul and James here. To risk over-simplification, it might be that the context of his debates required Paul to emphasise the gift whilst James’ context required him to emphasise the effort – but in a different context each could also have affirmed the other side of the equation.

Perhaps this is the clue to understanding what at first sight is the very difficult vv.6-7, where James says that if one prays whilst doubting it is no use – that doubters should never expect to receive anything from God. At the most obvious level, such teaching even if true would be pastorally disastrous – nearly all of us have doubts, and there is probably not much worse advice than telling someone who doubts not to: after all, especially if the doubt is of an intellectual nature, it is rather difficult simply to switch it off. But is that what James is saying? Maybe his meaning is something more like: God will give, but only if you are committed to what you’re asking for (in this context, the formation of wisdom or good character). Are you clear that this is what you *really* want, to be one of God’s people? Or are you actually still swirling around in a sea of unresolved possibilities, and praying not because you are wholeheartedly committed to growing deeper into God but more as if you’re trying a kind of magical trick to get out of whatever trouble you’re currently in? In this case, the opposite of the doubter is not so much the one who has no intellectual questions, but those who Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-11) called ‘the pure in heart’ – those whose direction in life is settled upon God and doing his will. Even if this is correct, one might wish though that James had added some recognition that this kind of settled direction is at least as much the *fruit* of prayer as its pre-requisite.

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