

STUDIES ON THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

The epistle of James is not dated. Some date it fairly late, and see it as a correction of those who misunderstood Paul's emphasis on free grace to be a denial of the need for works. But Paul raises this issue in a number of places e.g. in Galatians 5-6 (probably his earliest epistle) and in Romans 6. Others date the epistle quite early. Any date given is only a guess.

The author is surely not James, one of the Twelve and the brother of John. This James was executed in Acts 12:1-2. Nor is it likely to have been James, the son of Alphaeus, who was also one of the Twelve - although both Calvin and Thomas Manton favoured this view. It is more likely to have been James, the Lord's brother, mentioned in Matthew 13:55; 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19, and Acts 15. He became a key figure in the early Church - hence Jude 1. Yet before Jesus' death and resurrection, this James was not a believer (see John 7:5).

Martin Luther saw no structure in the epistle, and regarded it as chaotic. It is true that there is not the tight doctrine and application pattern that we find in Paul's epistles, and that it is somewhat like the book of Proverbs. But there is a rough structure present. The epistle echoes the Sermon on the Mount in many places, and there are over fifty imperatives in the 108 verses of the work.

In a rash moment, Martin Luther saw James as contradicting Paul, and wanted to light his fire with this 'right strawy epistle', as he called it. But we shall see that Scripture interprets Scripture.

Joy in Trials (1:1-8)

1. How does James introduce himself? (1:1; cf. Tit.1:1) Why does he not call himself the Lord's brother (assuming he was the Lord's brother)? Can we serve two masters? To whom did he write? Is this figurative or literal? _____

James Adamson and Robert Johnstone think that the twelve tribes are literally Jews, but it is surely a way of referring to the Church (cf. Phil.3:3; 1 Pet.1:1).

2. How should the Christian respond to trials? (1:2; Luke 6:22f) Does James mean that we should experience undiluted pleasure at troubles? What does he mean? _____

3. What does the Christian know about the testing of faith? (1:3) From verses 3-

4, what two things do trials produce? _____

Augustine: 'The fire which makes gold shine makes chaff smoke.'

4. What does endurance result in? (1:4; cf. Rom.5:3-4; Eph.4:13) _____

5. What should we do if we lack wisdom? (1:5; Prov.8:11) What assurance are we given? (note Luke 11:13; Eph.3:20; 1 Kings 3:13) _____

John Bunyan: 'He giveth without twitting'.

Douglas Moo says this is a general statement, but Calvin refers it quite specifically to 'wisdom when going through trials'.

James was known as 'Camel knees' because he prayed so often. He refers again to prayer in James 4:2-3 and 5:14-18.

6. What is the essential condition of prayer? (1:6) How certain is faith? How is the doubting man described? What must we not doubt? What about the view in some Pentecostal circles that unless we know something is God's will, we have no business praying for it? _____

This was one of Luther's favourite verses from his not so favourite book.

7. Can a doubting man expect to get anything from the Lord? (1:7) What is doubted here? (note Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings 5 and Christ in Matthew 26:39)

8. How does James describe a man 'with soul divided between faith and the world' (to use J. H. Ropes' words)? (1:8; this does not refer to the situation in Rom.7:18 but to situations like those in 1 Kings 18:21; 2 Kings 17:33; Ps.12:1-2)

John Bunyan wrote of Mr Facing-Both-Ways.

Augustine's famous prayer before his conversion: 'Lord, grant me chastity and

continence, but not yet' (*Confessions*, VII, 17).

To give a modern example, it is useless for Fred to pray whether he should marry Shirley if Shirley is not a Christian. God has already spoken on that issue.

Rich and Poor (1:9-11)

1. What should the Christian in humble circumstances do? (1:9) Why? _____

2. What should rich Christians do? (1:10) Why should they do this? (cf. 1 Cor.7:31) _____

James Adamson: 'In the Mediterranean region the spring is brilliant but very brief.'

3. Of what does James remind the rich? (1:11) How does the notion of eternity change our outlook on life? (note the change that comes over the Psalmist in Psalm 73 when he thinks on these things) _____

James Adamson says that James is only referring to the worldly rich, but this may not be so.

The scorching south-east wind in Palestine in spring is notorious for withering plant life.

John Blanchard tells of a rich unbeliever who said of a poor believer: 'When I die, I shall leave my riches. When he dies he will go to his.'

The song, *If I were a rich Man*, from *Fiddler on the Roof* has the lines:

Would it wreck some vast eternal plan, / If I were a wealthy man?

That is the way we tend to look at life.

Endurance Through Temptations (1:12-21)

1. What sort of happiness is granted to the one who, to cite James Adamson, 'with constancy endures trying assaults of evil'? (1:12) What promise is given? To whom? _____

James may be giving the gist of Scripture, or, if Adamson is correct, he may be referring to an otherwise unrecorded saying of Jesus, like that in Acts 20:35.

William Bridge: 'The more you are tempted by Satan, the more you are pitied by God.'

2. What must we never say when tempted? (1:13) What is the character of God?

How would you explain Genesis 22? What is the difference between testing and tempting? _____

See 1 Corinthians 10:13 too. Both Paul and James may have been guarding against a misuse of the Lord's Prayer which says 'lead us not into temptation'. Robbie Burns led an immoral life, and tried to excuse it by writing:

*Thou know'st that thou has formed me
With passions wild and strong;
And listening to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong.*

What would James say about Burns' poem? _____

3. How does temptation take hold of us? (1:14) Whose responsibility is it? _____

'Desire' is not in itself wrong (see Luke 22:15), so the context in James demands something like 'evil desire' or 'lust' (not only sexual). James Adamson thinks that James is using a fishing metaphor, so his translation is 'the enticement of its bait'.

4. What are the three stages of temptation and sin? (1:15) What imagery does James use? Give an example of how sin works e.g. a person walks into a shop and sees something that he especially likes, or in the lives of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. _____

John Owen: 'The deceitfulness of sin is seen in that it is modest in its first proposals but when it prevails it hardens men's hearts, and brings them to ruin.'
Thomas à Kempis on temptation: 'At first it is a mere thought confronting the mind; then imagination paints it in stronger colours; only after that do we take pleasure in it, and the will makes a false move, and we give our assent.'

Thomas Manton: 'It is ill dallying with thoughts.'

Ted Bundy did not suddenly go out and murder 28 women. Evil gripped him, and he capitulated to it.

5. What warning does James give? (1:16) Why is it necessary to give such a warning? _____

6. What two things does James tell us about the character of God? (1:17; see

Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8) _____

7. How does the new birth come about? (1:18) Who initiates it? (recall John 3:3-8) For what purpose? _____

8. What flows from this? (1:19) What three things should we do as a result of the truth of verse 18? _____

The NASB is not the best here; it leaves out the 'therefore'.
'Be quick to hear' is not simply quick to hear God's Word (as Alec Motyer and James Adamson think), but 'be a good listener'. 'Be slow to speak' does not mean 'speak with a drawl'!

Benjamin Disraeli said that one of his contemporaries was 'intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity'!

9. Why is anger wrong? (1:20) Does any sin mean that God's will is thwarted? (Ps.76:10) _____

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and pow'r controlling
All I do and say (Katie Wilkinson)*

10. What are we to put aside? (1:21) What are we to receive? What does this mean for you? What is the Word able to do? _____

Faith Works (1:22-27)

1. What are Christians to do? (1:22) What does James say if Christians do not so act? Is this message any different from that of Jesus or Paul? (see Matt.7:24-27; Rom.2:13; 6:1-23; 8:1-17) _____

Calvin: 'Obedience is the mother of a true knowledge of God.'

2. To what does James compare the person who hears but does not do? (1:23-24)
The Word is to reveal God to us, but what else does it reveal? _____

3. What is the contrast between the person in verse 25 and the person in verses 23-24? _____

James Adamson's translation is 'he who has bent over to look into the perfect law of liberty', to emphasise that James is writing about intense studying, not just a cursory look at the law.

Some gold mines in South Africa are apparently 12,000 feet deep. People will dig down that far to reach gold.

4. What is one test of true religion? (1:26) How vital is this? _____

See Ps.141:3; Matt.12:34. John Blanchard reminds us of Norway where the sound of a human voice can trigger off an avalanche.

5. What does pure religion entail? (1:27; cf. Isa.1:10-17; Ex.22:22; Deut.14:28-29; 16:11; 26:12; 27:19; Ps.146:9) _____

James Adamson: 'Verse 27 is not, and is not intended to be, a comprehensive definition of Christianity: it is an assertion of one element positively but not exclusively indispensable in that religion.' In other words, one cannot say everything in one verse. The context here is that James is dealing with the outworking of salvation, not the way of salvation.

No partiality and no half-measures (2:1-13)

1. There is some dispute about verse 1, but if Christ is called 'our glory', what would this imply about Him? What is inconsistent with faith in Him? _____

2. What two men might enter the Christian assembly? (2:2) Which one do we want - the greasy bikie or the glamorous media star?! _____

The word 'assembly' is literally 'synagogue'. In James 5:14 the word for 'church' is used. The church is thus new Israel.

3. How are the two men treated? (2:3) How might we commit the same sin today? _____

4. If the two men are treated differently, what sins have been committed? (2:4; cf. Lev.19:15-18; Ex.23:1-3; Deut.1:16-17; Prov.17:5; 28:21) _____

5. How does James address his readers? (2:5) Whom has God chosen? For what purpose? Does James mean that all poor people will be saved and all rich people damned? (see Mark 15:43-47) _____

Abraham Lincoln said that God must love the poor. That is why He made so many of them.

6. What have the rich done? (2:6-7) _____

John Wesley: 'I love the poor; I bear with the rich.'

7. What is the royal law? (2:8; cf. Lev. 19:18; Matt.22:39) What is said if Christians keep this law? _____

Today 'love everybody' is often interpreted as 'agree with everybody'.

8. What does showing partiality to the rich entail? (2:9) _____

C. S. Lewis: 'it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'Man only knows who he is in the light of God.'

9. Can we keep parts of the law or even most of it? (2:10) _____

Alec Motyer says that the law is not like a heap of stones, but a sheet of glass. Remove one stone, and you still have a heap of stones, but break the sheet of glass, and that is the end of it.

10. How does James illustrate this? (2:11) How do we often fob off threats to our supposed integrity? (e.g. John 4:16-20) _____

11. How should we speak and act? (2:12) Why? What is the law of liberty? _____

12. How will we be judged? (2:13; see Matt.6:14-15; 18:21-35; Luke 6:36) _____

Thomas Manton: 'It is a sin most unsuitable to grace.'

Faith and Works (2:14-26)

This part of the epistle has led to much controversy, but Paul always taught that true faith will lead to good works (e.g. Rom.6; Titus 3:5-8).

1. What kind of faith cannot save? (2:14) If the Spirit indwells a person, can that person fail to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit at least in some measure? What happens if we truly repent? (Luke 3:7-14) _____

2. How does James illustrate what he means? (2:15-16; recall Matt.25:41ff; Gal.5:6) _____

3. What is faith without works? (2:17; see vv.20, 26) _____

C. S. Lewis said that faith and works were like the two blades of a pair of scissors - both are necessary. That is true, but only in that sense. Faith and works are not equal. How they relate is crucial. Faith is the necessary foundation for works. Lewis' comparison might give the wrong impression.

4. Works show the existence of _____, but faith does not necessarily imply the existence of _____ (2:18).

5. What sort of faith is James referring to? (2:19) Is this faith good? Is it adequate? Who also shares this 'faith'? (see Mark 1:23-24; 3:11; 5:7) How do they respond? _____

William Tyndale: 'The devil believeth that Christ died, but not that he died for his sins.'

John Calvin: 'Knowledge of God can no more connect a man with God than the sight of the sun can carry him to heaven.'

6. Why does James speak so strongly in verse 20? _____

7. What lesson does James point to? (2:21; see Gen.22) What would we have concluded about Abraham's faith had he not obeyed God? _____

8. What is the relationship between faith and works? (2:22) _____

9. What text did Abraham fulfil? (2:23; Gen.15:6) How did Paul use this same text? (Rom.4:3, 9, 22; Gal.3:6) Are James and Paul at odds with one another? _____

J. Gresham Machen wrote:

The difference, then, between Paul and James is a difference of terminology, not of meaning. That difference of terminology shows that the Epistle of James was written at a very early time, before the controversy with the Judaizers had arisen and before the terminology had become fixed. If James had been writing after the terminology had become fixed, what he would have said is that although a man is justified by faith alone and not all by works, yet one must be sure that the faith is real faith and not a mere intellectual assent like that of the demons who believe and tremble. What he actually does is to say just that in different words. James is not correcting Paul, then; he is not even correcting a misinterpretation of Paul; but he is unconsciously preparing for Paul; he is preparing well for the clearer and more glorious teaching of the great Epistles.

10. What is James' conclusion? (2:24) _____

Calvin: 'Faith alone justifies, but the faith which justifies is not alone.'

11. What second biblical example does James appeal to? (2:25) Show how Rahab could only have been justified by grace through faith, and how her faith was revealed in works. _____

12. What is faith without works? (2:26) To what is it compared? _____

Guarding the Tongue (3:1-12)

The tongue can do the most harm or the most good. Calvin: 'The disease of evil-speaking is more odious than other sins.' See Proverbs 12:18; 21:23.

1. Why should Christians hesitate to become teachers of the faith? (3:1; see Matt.12:36-37; Luke 12:47-48) Can a Christian man desire to become a teacher? (1 Tim.3:1) _____

Milton called false teachers 'blind mouths'.

An American pastor told John Blanchard: 'We are suffering now for what happened in this country a few years ago, when anybody with a bright tie, a flashy pair of socks and a big Bible could get a job as an evangelist.'

2. How universal is sin? (3:2) What could be said of the man who never sins with his tongue? _____

The RSV and the NRSV are weak here: 'all of us make many mistakes'. Proverbs 10:19.

3. To what two things does James compare the tongue? (3:3-4) Why? (note Prov.18:21) _____

Thomas Manton: 'Most of a man's sins are in his words'.

4. What is the tongue like? (3:5-6) In what respect? _____

5. What has mankind been able to do? (3:7; see Gen.9:2; P.8:6-8; note also Isa.11:6, 9) _____

In the third century B.C. The Carthaginian general, Hannibal, used elephants to cross the Alps and defeat the Romans. Snake charmers in India can control a venomous viper.

6. But what has mankind been unable to do? (3:8; see Rom.3:13; Ps.140:3) _____

7. What do we do with our tongues? (3:9) Why is this so inconsistent? _____

James Adamson thinks that the doctrine of total depravity would mean that the

image of God in man was destroyed. That is to misunderstand the teaching.

8. What is wrong with our speech? (3:10) _____

Bunyan's Talkative was 'a saint abroad and a devil at home'.

9. What two images does James use to illustrate his point? (3:11-12; note Luke 6:44, 45; Matt.7:16) What is his point? _____

Peaceful Wisdom (3:13-18)

1. Whom does James address now? (3:13) What is the proof that a man has wisdom and knowledge? _____

W. D. Ross: 'Practical wisdom cannot exist independently of virtue. The power to attain one's end, be it good or bad, is not practical wisdom but cleverness ... Let the wrong end be aimed at, and it becomes mere clever roguery.'

2. What would indicate that we were not of the truth? (3:14) _____

3. Where would such wisdom come from? (3:15; cf. 1 Cor.2:13-14) _____

4. What kind of evil might exist among James' readers? (3:16) What would result from this? _____

5. What are seven characteristics of godly wisdom? (3:17) Define them.

(a) (see 1 John 3:3) _____

(b) (see Heb.12:11) _____

(c) (what Matthew Arnold called 'sweet reasonableness') _____

(d) _____

(e) _____

(f) _____

(g) _____

James Adamson: 'Wisdom like love is not just a fact but a spirit.'

6. How does the fruit of righteousness come about? (3:18) _____

James Adamson: 'Fruit is both an end and a beginning, the crown of one process

and the germ of the next being present in the seed.'

Love of the World and Love of God (4:1-10)

1. What is the source of strife? (4:1) Can peace ever be achieved without the source being dealt with? _____

Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard, David coveted Bathsheba, Hitler coveted Lebensraum - these all led to local or wider conflict.

2. Does sin satisfy? (4:2) What results from this? How can our prayer life be corrupted? _____

3. In what other way can our prayer life be corrupted? (4:3) What does this teach us about prayer? (cf. Ps.66:18) _____

Robert Murray M'Cheyne: 'Every man has his darling sins'.

John Ward, a British Member of Parliament, once prayed: 'O Lord, thou knowest that I have mine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in the county of Essex. I beseech thee to preserve the two counties of Middlesex and Essex from fire and earthquake; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg of thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county. As for the rest of the counties, thou mayest deal with them as thou are pleased.'

4. How does James address his readers? (4:4) Is the adultery literal or spiritual? (see Ex.34:15; Jer.3:14, 20; Hos.2:9, 19-20; Matt.12:39) What does friendship with the world mean? (see 1 John 2:15-17) _____

5. What has the Scripture said? (4:5) Does it say anything in vain? Which spirit is James referring to - God's jealous Spirit (Calvin, Robert Johnstone, Alec Motyer, John Blanchard) or man's spiteful envy? (NIV, NEB, Thomas Manton, James Adamson). What does this teach us about ourselves? _____

Erasmus said there were 'wagon-loads of interpretations' on this verse.

We do not know what Scripture James is referring to (Gen.6:3-7 or Rom.8:7?)

6. What assurance is given to the Christian? (4:6) To whom does God reveal Himself and give grace? (cf. Prov.3:34) _____

William Bridge: 'If you lay yourself at Christ's feet, He will take you into His arms.'

Florence Allshorn: 'For the devil's purpose a proud Christian is of much more use than an atheist or a pagan.'

7. Because of this, what are we to do? (4:7) Are we to expect spiritual warfare in the Christian life? (note Eph.6:10-12) What assurance is nevertheless given?

8. What should we do next? (4:8) How will God respond? What does repentance entail? What do 'hands' and 'hearts' signify? What sin is especially to be abhorred? _____

9. What place has joy and sorrow in the Christian life? (4:9) _____

10. What is the necessary condition of spiritual exaltation? (4:10; see Luke 18:14)

11. What promises are given in these verses? (4:7, 8, 10) _____

Warnings (4:11-17)

1. What are we actually doing if we speak ill of one another? (4:11) How prevalent is this sin? (note Rom.14:10; Ps.49:20) _____

Blaise Pascal: 'I state it as a fact that if all men knew what others say of them behind their backs, there would not be four friends left in the world.'

Charles Simeon said that in 24 years he only knew Henry Venn to speak unkindly of a man once, and then, says Simeon, 'I was struck with the humiliation he expressed for it in prayer next day.'

2. What two things do we need to remember? (4:12) _____

3. What is a temptation as we go about our day-to-day business? (4:13) _____

4. What two things ought we to remember? (4:14; note Prov.27:1) What ought we to be certain about and what ought we to be uncertain about? (cf. James 1:6-8) Is this the way that we naturally look at life? _____

I was teaching a Scripture class where the youngsters were supposed to colour in certain squares to get a Scripture verse. One smart aleck, named Ricky, coloured in the squares to get 'Ricky rules'. He wishes!

William Freeman Lloyd:

*My times are in Thy hand:
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul I leave
Entirely to Thy care.
My times are in Thy hand,
Whatever they may be,
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright,
As best may seem to Thee.*

5. How should we correct our natural view of life? (4:15; see Acts 18:21; 1 Cor.4:19; Rom.1:10) _____

6. Instead, what have James' readers been doing? (4:16) _____

7. What is sin? (4:17) How does this broaden your view of sin? (cf. 1 Sam.12:23; Dan. 6:7, 10; the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan; Matt.25:41-46) _____

Paul Eddington of *Yes Minister* fame wanted his epitaph to be: 'He did very little harm.' This is rather like the man who buried his talent in the ground. When James Ussher, the Archbishop of Armagh, came to die in 1656, his last words were 'Lord, forgive my sins, especially my sins of omission.'

Woe to the Faithless Rich (5:1-6)

1. How does James call attention to what he is about to say? (5:1) Whom does he address? What does he call upon them to do? (note Psalm 58) _____

2. What does James say about the nature of riches? (5:2-3; cf. Matt.6:19) In reality, what have those done who trusted in riches? _____

3. What have the rich done? (5:4; cf. Lev.19:13; Deut.24:14) How will God respond? (note Gen.4:10; Ex.2:23; Deut.24:15) How is God described? _____

Adolf Deissmann commented that 'The Epistle of James will be best understood in the open air beside the piled sheaves of the harvest field.'

4. What have the rich done on earth? (4:5) What will be their end? What is the Christian perspective on life? _____

Riches, I heed not, nor man's empty praise.

5. What else have the rich done? (5:6) _____

The 'just man' probably only refers to one who did not deserve to suffer in this way. Robert Johnstone says it refers to Christ but this is unlikely.

Patience as the Lord draws near (5:7-11)

1. What does James call on Christians to do? (5:7) What great event is looming? How is the farmer patient? How is the Christian to be like a farmer? _____

2. In the light of the Lord's coming, what should the Christian do? (5:8) In what sense is the Lord near? Is James necessarily referring to the Second Coming? (cf. Rev.2:5, 16; 3:3) _____

3. How should we treat one another? (5:9) Why? Where is the Judge? Again, does James mean the Second Coming only? _____

4. How are the prophets an example to us? (5:10; see Ezek.14:14, 20; Heb.11; and even 1 Pet.2:23) _____

5. What is the final state of those who have endured? (5:11) Show how this was true in Job's life. What is the character of God, so that we can be assured that endurance is worthwhile? _____

The Greek word for 'patience' and for 'perseverance' are one and the same. The 'patience of Job' has become proverbial, but the 'perseverance of Job' is surely better. Job persevered, but he was not altogether patient.

No Oaths (5:12)

1. What does James see as vitally important? (5:12) Why? To what should we confine ourselves? Why? (note Matt.5:34) What does this have to say to us?

The Power of Prayer (5:13-18)

1. What should we do in affliction? (5:13) What should we do when happy?

Bishop Chavasse: 'Praise and prayer are great comforters.'

Anne Steele:

*When I survey life's varied scene
Amid the darkest hours,
Sweet rays of comfort shine between,
And thorns are mixed with flowers.*

2. What should the sick person do? (5:14) What does this tell us about church government? What are the elders to do? _____

Roman Catholic extreme unction appeals to this verse, but that is intended to prepare the person for death, not recovery. James is obviously expecting recovery. The Pentecostals expect recovery too but the text does not tell us to call for the faith healer to hold a public healing service. Jay Adams thinks that the oil refers to medicine, and that James is advocating both physical and spiritual means. That is probably sensible, but there seems no reason to reject the literal view of the text. In certain cases, sick Christians can call on the elders to anoint them with oil. Francis Schaeffer, for example, was anointed with oil when he contracted cancer.

3. What will the prayer achieve? (5:15) Do you agree that 'save' here means 'physically restore'? What else is promised if faith is present? _____

4. What two things ought we to do for one another? (5:16) What will follow? What assurance is given regarding prayer? What condition has to be present?

5. What does James tell us about Elijah? (5:17) What is a temptation when we read about the praying saints of old? What did Elijah achieve through prayer? (5:17-18; 1 Kings 17) What should this teach us about praying? _____

Elijah literally 'prayed with prayer'. James Adamson wants to drop the common addition 'earnestly' or 'fervently'.

'Quiet times' is a bad way to describe praying to God (cf. Rom.15:30; Col.4:12).

Saving a Soul (5:19-20)

1. How ought we to deal with a wandering brother? (6:19-20) What is said of the Christian who rescues a wanderer? What two things has he achieved?
