

The Good Shepherd Mission 5th May

James 1:1-8

Today, we're starting a new series of sermons going through the letter of James. James is a really challenging letter that looks at putting your faith into practice. After the series on discipleship before Easter, the letter of James reviews some aspects of discipleship that we've already looked at and also some new aspects. With the huge amount of outreach work that GSM does, along with the broad range of jobs that people have here, we interact with a large number of people who don't know who Jesus is, and we should be putting our faith into action to demonstrate the gospel to them. We are to be the channels through which God reveals Himself to non-believers and James helps us work out how to do that. It is commonly thought to have been written in around 40-50AD by James, the brother of Jesus. There are some who claim Jesus had no brothers or sisters because they believe that Jesus' human mother Mary, stayed a virgin for her entire life. Yet this is contrary to what the Bible says, and in no way does this mean that Jesus' birth is any less divine. In Acts 1:17, Jesus' brothers are mentioned when the apostles choose a new member to replace Judas: "17 They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." In Mark 6, people, attending the synagogue where Jesus was teaching, name all of his brothers and mentions his sisters: "3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?' And they took offence at him." James is also mentioned in Paul's letter to the Galatians 1:18-19: "18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother." This is the James who wrote this letter that we are about to start studying.

Now to the letter itself. The letter is structured in the following way: 1:1-12 introduction to the themes of the letter; 1:13-19 refers to new birth in Jesus; 1:19-25 speak of the growth of a believer in action. The rest of the book focuses on three main areas of development of the out-working of a believer's faith in Jesus: 2:1-26 describe care of the needy; 3:1-12 talk of controlling the tongue and 3:13-5:6 talks about the personal purity present in a believer's life. There are 54 commands that James gives in this letter. Let's grapple with them and pray that the Lord challenges us through them. Here are a couple of lines from the IVP New Testament commentary that summarise the main challenges of James' letter and I think it would be a good idea to keep these in mind during this series: "James' message is this: "Your trial is not the time to rejoice less. Your sickness is not the time to pray less. Your loss is not the time to love others less. Rather, now is the very time to practice the joy, peace and love that we know theoretically to be the Christian life. For the Christian life is not mere theory; it is the life of the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

So, why was this letter written? It is a very practical letter, teaching Christians how to put their faith into practice and also being realistic about some of the challenges that may come along the way. If we were to summarise the letter, you could look at chapter 2:17: "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." The truth that we, as Christians, have accepted and believed, shouldn't be kept to ourselves; it needs to be used, and it needs to be visible in our daily lives. Without this, your faith is cold; it is inactive. Simon will talk on this passage in a few weeks' time in more detail. This letter, as a whole, explains the works and deeds of a living and active Christian. By 'living', I don't mean that

you follow the seven signs of life that I was taught in secondary school biology – MRS NERG (movement, respiration, senses, nutrition, excretion, reproduction, growth); I don't mean biologically alive. What I mean by 'living' is that the revelation of the truth of the gospel is in your hearts and is working actively in your lives; that the Holy Spirit is living within you and through you on a daily basis. For the Christian life is not mere theory; it is the life of the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the letter to the Ephesians 2, Paul says the following: “8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.” As living and active Christians, the faith we receive is a gift from God, it is not something that we can ever earn. In James' letter, he explains to us that the things we do as a result of this gift from God should be a natural response; in response to our salvation through Jesus. So doing the things James asks us to in this letter doesn't get or improve our salvation, but are responses to salvation. This is the focus of James and it follows on from the series we had last term on discipleship.

That's a brief summary of the letter of James, so let's now get stuck into today's passage, which is v1-8:

“1 James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings. 2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”

I'm going to split this passage up into three sections – we'll look at v1 on its own, then v2-4, then v5-8. Now, v1 is a bit of an introductory verse, so I just want to draw out a couple of things from it before moving onto v2-8. Firstly, let's have a look at who it's written by and how they describe themselves. As we saw earlier, this letter was written by James, Jesus' brother. Now, how does he describe himself in v1? Does he say 'James, the brother, by blood, of Jesus and who knew him really well, better than most'? No! He describes himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine calling your brother 'Lord'. You've grown up with your eldest brother, and he looks the same as you – he's human. Yet here, James is calling him 'Lord'. This is after Jesus questions family ties in Matthew 12:46-50: “46 While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.' 48 He replied to him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' 49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” So, imagine your brother, who you've grown up with, who has suddenly left home to go travelling and teaching, publicly announces his preference for social rejects over his family. And here, James is calling him 'Lord'. James has seen the risen Jesus. As Christians, we can be just as certain of Jesus' Lordship over everything. For those of you who are certain, what's holding you back from being certain of who he is?

Secondly in v1, James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. What does this mean? In the Old Testament, the nation of Israel was made up of 12 tribes formed from the sons of Jacob. They moved to Egypt with Joseph and became the nation of Israel. Today, they are known as Jews. So, was James writing to the Jews scattered across the Roman Empire? No – James is calling himself a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jews didn't, and don't recognise Jesus as Lord. In the New Testament, there are the 12 apostles who Jesus chooses as his disciples. What James is referring to is the new nation of Christians, formed by the teaching of the 12 apostles, who were scattered across the Roman Empire after they were persecuted in Jerusalem. These are people from all nations who are part of God's heavenly nation. Like Paul, James and the other apostles were former Jews. If you flick over to the next book of the Bible, Peter starts his letter in a similar way. Today, Christians are scattered across the world among almost every nation. This letter is addressed to us and we should take notice of what James teaches us.

So now onto v2-8. I think the best way to look at these verses is to remember the phrase 'consider it pure joy'. v2-4 explain why trials should be considered pure joy, and v5-8 help us to understand a source of help when we struggle with trials. This seems a bit contradictory doesn't it? Yet James is deliberately putting these together to show us that God uses trials 'to work all things for the good of those who love him' as it tells us in Romans 8. Taking v2-4, these verses might be easier to understand if we work backwards from the end point to the start. If we look at v4, the end point that James wants us to be at is to be mature and complete, not lacking in anything. James wants us to be fully equipped and prepared for the Christian life, so that we aren't caught out or unready for any trials that may come our way. So how do we become complete? We persevere, as James says in v3. We stand firm in what we believe and don't waver from following God's will in our lives. And how do we persevere? There needs to be something to persevere through doesn't there? So, there will be trials to persevere through as James tells us in v2. And the reason for considering it pure joy in times of trial is because the end result is to become mature and complete in our lives as Christians. And before you start thinking that there are some people who are already complete, this is an on-going process. It is a continual perseverance until our time on earth ends, or until Jesus returns again to judge the world, whichever one comes first. We don't have to endure 10 things and then we're done

So that's how v2-4 work together and make sense. We need to look at their meaning now though. This time, we'll work forwards. We consider trials as pure joy because of the result, but what does pure joy look like? Joy is a word that is commonly used when you regularly come to church. It's a tricky word to work out though? Does it mean that you're happy and clappy all the time? Does it mean that you're inwardly happy, but you don't have to show it? Is it something that should only be shown at very special times? Looking up 'joy' on Wikipedia comes up with the following results: it could be an emotion, a name, a surname, several towns in the US, a crater on the moon, a band, an album, a song, a piece of literature, a radio station, a computer programming language or a perfume brand. If I click on the link to joy as an emotion, it takes me to a page entitled 'happiness'. Is that what joy is then? Happiness? So whenever Liverpool win a match, most of us here are happy, so does that mean that we're joyful? Yes it does. But, even non-believers are joyful when things go well. When we, as Christians, are joyful because of God's work in our lives, it is so much more than just being happy. For Christians, God is our source of joy. We consider trials to be pure, uncontaminated, complete joy because of the completing work God is doing in us

through those trials; the completing work that makes us more like Jesus. For the Christian life is not mere theory; it is the life of the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Trials. What are they? Immediately, there is a negative connotation. As Christians, are we going to be sitting in the dock in court for most of our lives? No, trials mean tests, struggles or difficulties. James is telling us that life is no picnic. At the time of writing this, Christians were being forced out of their homes, losing their position in society and being persecuted. As we saw last term, discipleship is costly, and as disciples of Christ, we will face animosity and opposition because of our faith. But it's not just opposition to our faith that James is talking about. He is also talking about those times where we face the death of someone we love, or we lose our job, where, as a whole, Christians are seen as intolerant and irrelevant in society. It could be sickness, family tensions or isolation. It might be exams, work performance reviews, a colleague you don't get along with, maybe even missing a train or getting stuck in a traffic jam. I say this because the testing of our faith means that both our faith and the working out of our faith are tested during trials. Can we persevere in patience during a traffic jam? Do we show grace and kindness when a colleague lets us down? Do we trust that God is in control? James tells us in v2-3 that there is a point to these difficulties. In metal work, tempering is a method of re-heating metal (usually steel) to increase its toughness. So, the metal has to undergo heating to high temperatures, but becomes stronger as a result. In the same way, all of these trials test our faith and, if we look to Jesus as our source of comfort and strength, then this will result in perseverance and endurance. As a result, our faith will become stronger; we will become tempered, and this allows us to be joyful because we are glorifying God by persevering, and because He is making us mature and complete, lacking in nothing. Persevering isn't being a martyr; it isn't about self-pity. Neither is it about the English stiff upper lip and 'keep calm and carry on'. Perseverance is staying true to God because He is true and faithful to you at all times.

That's the first 4 verses of the passage, so now we're moving onto v5-8. I'll just read them again to refresh them in our minds. Please look at them in your bibles. "5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. 6 But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. 7 That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. 8 Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do." These verses have been misquoted a few times, without the context of v1-4, and people have taken them to mean that if you ask for anything from God, then He will give it to you. That's not really what these verses mean. They go hand-in-hand with the verses that we've just looked at. Look at the beginning of v5 "If any of you lacks wisdom...", that wisdom is related to the trials in v1-4. James is telling us that if we are struggling to persevere and endure the trials that we encounter, we are to ask God for wisdom in dealing with those trials, and He will generously give all that we need to persevere. How do we ask God for wisdom in these times? We pray. In these few verses, James focuses on the attitude of prayer that we should have. Our prayers need to be certain, focused and undoubting. When he tells us not to doubt, it is about being double-minded. The Greek word used here is 'dipsuchos' – from 'dis' meaning 'twice' and 'psuche' which means 'mind'. The mind is split in two, its loyalties are divided between two things. In v8, James is saying that a person needs to be completely committed to God and certain of His provision, asking for wisdom in trials when needed, not just doing it as a get out clause. If you are asking for wisdom to get

through trials in order that you might prosper in this world, then you do not want to be refined and strengthened by trials, but just to get through them. There's no eternal perspective.

Here's one example. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew that he had been betrayed by Judas and that he was about to be arrested by the Pharisees and chief priests. This is from Luke 22 and can also be found in Mark 14: "39 Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. 40 On reaching the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.' 41 He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 42 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'" Here, Jesus was facing the largest trial anyone has ever had to face. And, being the Son of God, he also knew of the glorious outcome - the joy of bringing his people back into a relationship with himself. So, just because Jesus knew what was going to happen didn't mean that he found it easy to bear and endure. So let's have a look at how he prayed. He gets on his knees and humbles himself, acknowledging his frailty as a human. Do we acknowledge our position before God when we come to Him in prayer? Next, he is honest about what he wants. We can bring our desires to God and He will listen to them. But this doesn't mean we get what we want. Look at the last part of Jesus' prayer - yet not my will but yours be done. Jesus submits himself to his Father's will completely. It is with this submission that we come to God in prayer. We acknowledge who God is, we tell Him our desires and we earnestly ask Him to work out His will in our lives, even in, and through, times of trial. Jesus was single-minded, he was focused on carrying out God's will and prayed to God with that focus. When we pray, pray for God's will to be done. In difficult times, pray for the same thing, but also pray for God's strength to help you to endure, and pray for joy at the work being done in you through those difficulties. Are you willing to go along with God's plan for your life?

Personally, the trials I've recently faced have been similar in their circumstances. Back when I was young, I applied for university. I got an interview at Cambridge University, but got rejected from that particular college. I then got offered an interview at a different college at Cambridge, and I thought, 'great, this is where God wants me to be.' I then got rejected from that interview. So, after those rejections, I then didn't get the results I needed to get into my first choice university. I had to call my second choice university, Manchester, check that I could have my place, find somewhere to live and quickly get used to the idea of living in the North West. During those 8 months or so, it was a struggle to consider it as joy to not know where I would be for the next three years of my life. But, it tempered me, it strengthened me rely on God in uncertain times. And three years later, Alyce and I had just got married, and both of us were without a job. I'd been applying for jobs for over 9 months, and I had practically been offered a job in Harrogate, subject to red tape. We'd even started looking at places to live but then the funding for the job got pulled and the opportunity went. So we lived with my parents in Dartford for a while. Now, I love my parents and I enjoyed living with them, but it wasn't the way Alyce and I thought we'd start married life together. We weren't praying for God's will in our lives at that time, we wanted to get things done on our own strength. It was only when we relied on God that miraculously, in the space of a week, I got offered a PhD and Alyce got offered a job here at GSM working at Bouncers. Again, God was refining us through the trials and shaping us into people that are more like Jesus. That brings us to today. As it stands, I don't know what I'll be doing from September onwards other than I'll need to write up my PhD. I don't know where I'll be, what I'll be doing or whether I'll have a job. But this passage from James has shown me that I can trust in God

and I can consider it as pure joy to be going through this time of uncertainty because God will be teaching me new things and making me more complete. And though I say this with confidence, this doesn't mean that I don't struggle with not knowing what's going to happen from September onwards. I like feeling in complete control and planning ahead. God's teaching me to trust in Him completely and to follow His will regardless of what it is or when He shows me what His will is.

God takes pleasure in his people following His will and glorifying Him by obeying Him. And it is through trials that God enables us to become more mature and complete. Do you want a life of easiness and comfort, or do you want to become more mature in your faith and more like Christ, to truly be transformed into his likeness? Remember this quote I gave at the beginning of this talk: "Your trial is not the time to rejoice less. Your sickness is not the time to pray less. Your loss is not the time to love others less. Rather, now is the very time to practice the joy, peace and love that we know theoretically to be the Christian life. For the Christian life is not mere theory; it is the life of the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." Let's pray that God will be teaching us these things.

Small group questions

1. What characteristics of James are most striking in v1?
2. What does this teach us about our interactions with other Christians?
3. What does joy mean to you?
4. What does James mean by 'pure joy'?
5. What trials do/might we face today in our lives?
6. Is there anything that God might be trying to teach you through those trials?
7. How do we persevere through trials? How might we support each other during trials?
8. When do we need to ask God for wisdom?
9. How should we come to God in prayer? Why?
10. What does James warn us against doing? (double-mindedness)
11. What are the consequences of being double-minded?
12. How does this help us in our prayers?