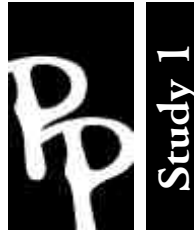


THE TESTING OF YOUR FAITH



James 1:1-8

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: Prayer
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

After a believer named Stephen was stoned to death in Jerusalem, in the early days of the church, there was a great persecution against the believers and large numbers of them were scattered far and wide (Acts 7:59-8:4). Wherever they went they spoke about Jesus Christ and salvation through him, and undoubtedly many of them suffered severely for their faith. James stayed in Jerusalem, but out of concern for these people he began his letter with the words of encouragement and instruction in these verses.

What these verses mean

Verse 1

James,

This is almost certainly a brother of Jesus Christ (see the Introduction, page 1). The idea that Mary was never other than a virgin and that the “brothers” of Jesus (Matt.13:55) must have been children of Joseph and not Mary has no support in Scripture or anywhere else.

a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Assuming the writer was Jesus’ brother, these words are remarkable in their humility and in the complete absence of any special claim. James gives our

Lord’s full title, reflecting his uniqueness. “Lord” identifies him as God. “Jesus” reflects his humanness, the one who trod the roads of Palestine. “Christ” (the Greek word of the Hebrew “Messiah”) means the one who was promised and appointed to carry out God’s saving work.

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

This does not mean that the 12 tribes of Israel still existed as such in New Testament days, or that they can now be identified. James wrote as a Jewish Christian and his letter is addressed mainly to Jewish believers scattered widely from Jerusalem because of persecution (Acts 8:1). The inclusion of this letter in the Bible, however, means that it is for Gentile Christians also, since every part of the Bible is God’s Word for all people (2 Tim. 3:16).

Greetings.

It is a fair assumption that the “letter” mentioned in Acts 15:23 was composed by James who had led the meeting (Acts 15:13), and that it is the same James who began in the same way here.

Verse 2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, James is addressing his “brothers” which means that they are born again believers belonging to the spiritual family of God, with God as their Father and all other believers as their brothers and sisters. No doubt James had news of trials faced by the scattered believers. The trials were in the form of persecution from Gentiles because they were Jews. Opposition would also have come from non-believing Jews because they were Christians. But all Christians are warned in Scripture that they will suffer because of their faith (Matt.5:11-12; 2 Tim.3:12). Normally trials make us miserable rather than joyful. This joy is possible for Christians who consider their situation to be under God’s control, and who remember their present blessings in Christ and their glorious future (Rom. 8:18).

Verse 3

because you know

Christian joy does not arise from physical or material pleasures and benefits, but from what we know about ourselves and what God is doing with us in every situation.

that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Faith is like the muscles in our body. If they are not used they become useless, but if they are made to work hard, they become stronger and benefit the rest of the body. Trials make our faith work hard because they drive us to the Lord in prayer. Trials also make us think deeply about what we believe so that we see the Lord and all the blessings he gives as more important than passing problems. By these means we are strengthened and

enabled to persevere in the Christian life. This assumes that someone is doing the testing! This then is another reason for joy in suffering because we know that our heavenly Father is working out his loving and wise purpose in us.

Verse 4

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

A large part of God's purpose in our trials is to bring us to the best possible usefulness in our Christian life, witness and service. We can liken this to the full development of our bodies, so that we are full of strength, life and vitality and reach our full physical potential (see also Rom. 5:3-4). In and through all this, the Lord is preparing us for everlasting glory when we will indeed be "complete, not lacking anything".

Verse 5

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God,

One thing that we may lack is wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to apply what we know to ourselves and our situation so that we can be joyful and grow into spiritual maturity. This is not a natural talent or intellectual knowledge we learn. Wisdom is a spiritual gift from God and in this context the wisdom referred to is particularly how we are to understand and behave when facing trials. We therefore have to ask for it.

who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

James puts in these two general comments about God's response to our prayers for wisdom. God is generous and responds to our prayers for wisdom. This also applies too for any other request we might make of God (Matt. 7:7-8) when asked in the proper manner (see next verse). James encourages us by assuring us that God is not reluctant to meet our needs, nor is he impatient with our constant coming to him.

Verse 6

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

James now balances his encouraging comments about prayer with some heart-searching about our attitude in prayer. There has to be prayer. Without our asking God will not give. The prayer has to be a believing prayer. This means that the person praying is totally convinced of the power, love, mercy, grace and faithfulness of the one he is praying to. The greater the knowledge and understanding a person has of God from the Bible, the more certain will the person be of their request. The prayer must be firm and not a mixture of boldness and unbelief. James uses the picture

of a very strong wind blowing over the sea. The waves are blown about. If a boat were to be on the sea it could be blown anywhere by the wind with no ability to control where it was going. This is a description of someone who prays without real faith and conviction. See Ephesians 4:14 for a similar picture Paul uses to describe false teaching and teachers. We can say that firm prayer comes from a sound understanding of God's truth and a close relationship with God.

verse 7

That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

We must be serious, determined to hear what God says to us and to act upon it. God does not treat seriously the prayers of those who are not serious in their requests.

Verse 8

he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

It is possible for us to be guilty of looking in opposite directions at the same time. We may be trying to see both man's wisdom and God's wisdom. We may want to retain our own ideas while asking God for his help. The man with a divided heart is not steady. He is unstable in all that he does. He will end up being a sad and miserable person. This is not the way to progress in the spiritual life. What we are in prayer is the real truth about us!



Summary

The Christian is to expect trials and difficulties because of being a follower of Jesus Christ. These things do not happen by accident, but are used by God to test the faith of his children. Through such experiences the person of faith is strengthened and enabled to persevere and to be useful in the Christian life. This Christian life is supernatural and can only be lived out by born again people who constantly look to the Lord for his wisdom and help. It is wisdom that enables a person to apply to their life the circumstances going on around them. This gives them joy and they are able to grow in spiritual maturity. This wisdom is to be requested with a belief that God will give it. He will give wisdom to those who ask because he is generous. Those who hesitate and doubt will not receive wisdom and their lives will be sad and unsteady, blown around like waves on a windswept sea.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: The true nature of Christian joy

Introduction

The subject is important because

- (a) many Christians are not as joyful as they should be.
- (b) a joyless Christian is a bad advertisement for Christianity.
- (c) a joyful Christian is a good witness in a society full of tragedy and distress.

I True joy is only possible to true believers

1. Think of some outstanding examples of joy.
 - a. Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25).
 - b. Christian martyrs who were prepared to die for their faith.
 - c. Jesus, within hours of the cross, spoke much about his joy (John 15:11; 17:13).
2. This is of a higher quality than natural joy.
 - a. Natural joy depends on physical well-being – Christian joy is independent of it.
 - b. Natural joy depends on pleasing circumstances and prospects – these are absent from the examples.
 - c. Natural joy is often achieved by such things as drink, drugs, sex, entertainment. Christian joy has no need of such stimulation - it comes from within ourselves.
3. It is the inward work of the Spirit. (See Galatians 5:22.)

II Christian joy arises from what we know

1. We do not have to wait for a special ecstatic experience or work up joy by attending lively meetings.
2. Our joy arises from the application of what we know:
 - a. that nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8: 38-39).
 - b. that we are destined for glory (Luke 10:20).
 - c. that God has a wise and loving purpose in every situation (Rom.5:3-4).
 - d. that we are in good company (Matt. 5:11-12).



Focus Point: Prayer ¹

James in opening his letter touches upon the subject of prayer. He does this when considering wisdom. We are to ask God for it. James talks about

prayer later on in the letter (5:13). What is prayer? How do we pray? These are questions that many ask about. The disciples themselves asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). Prayer is a vital part of the Christian believer's life.

Whereas the Bible is the Word of God to man, prayer is the word of man to God. Prayer simply means talking with God and expressing our fellowship with him. It is the provision of the Lord whereby we may develop and deepen our relationship with him. This means prayer is much more than coming to God with a list of needs and no more.

When the Lord Jesus Christ was on earth he taught his disciples how to pray. And he taught them what is often called "The Lord's Prayer". We find this in Matthew 6:9-13. It is a prayer that many followers of Jesus have committed to memory and they find great comfort in thoughtfully and earnestly repeating the actual words of the prayer when they talk to God. It is a wonderful prayer and it really covers every area of need that we shall ever face. But it is more than a prayer to learn and repeat. It is a pattern for our own prayers. It is a model prayer, if you like.

This is important to remember because there is always the danger when we know a prayer off by heart, that we can simply repeat the words without really meaning what we are praying and asking for. Indeed, Jesus warned his disciples not to be like the hypocrites who prayed just like that (Matt. 6:7): "*And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.*" A very good example of this is found in 1 Kings 18. Elijah, the prophet of God, gave a challenge to the prophets of the false god, Baal. He told them to pray to their god, Baal, and he would pray to the Lord. They were both to build altars, place sacrifices on them, and pray that fire would fall from heaven to light the sacrifices. The true God, said Elijah, would be the God who sent the fire. The prophets of Baal prayed all day, repeating themselves and saying many words in a frenzy – even cutting themselves to make Baal answer them. But they received no answer. Then Elijah prayed. If you look at his prayer it is obvious that Elijah knew God. In it he desired the will of God and the glory of God. Elijah prayed in true faith and reliance on God, and his prayer was far more effective than all the repetitious cries of the prophets of Baal. His prayer was very short, but came from his heart, and the fire fell from heaven. We should pray as Elijah prayed.

¹ The following notes have been taken from "Bible Study and Prayer", a booklet published in association with a radio programme series called *Sound Words*. This booklet together with another one in the series called "Help with Prayer" can be obtained by writing to Grace Baptist Mission.

Jesus, having warned his disciples about the wrong kind of praying, then introduced “the Lord’s Prayer” (Matt. 6:9) with these words: “*This, then, is how you should pray.*” In other words, this prayer is to be our guide in all our praying.

Our Father in heaven,

“The Lord’s Prayer” begins with these words, “*Our Father in heaven*”. This is a remarkable statement. It tells us that God, who created the universe, who flung stars into space and made the beautiful flowers, the almighty, sovereign, holy God becomes our Father when we follow Jesus! And that in itself opens up for us the whole area of praise and adoration of God in our prayers. What he has done for us in Jesus is truly amazing. (See Galatians 4:4-7.) As our Father, God is full of concern for us, his children. He is someone who cares for us. His heart is filled with warmth and tenderness towards us and he wants us to talk to him. The fact that he is “*in heaven*” is also very instructive. It tells us God is over all. There is no one higher or greater than he. He reigns there as the almighty ruler of the universe. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (See 1 Timothy 6:15-16.) While again this causes us to praise him, it also gives us great confidence in prayer, because God has the power to help us. How useless it would be to pray to someone who was unable to help us. But we pray to “*our Father in heaven*” who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20-21).

hallowed be your name,

“*Hallowed*” is an unusual word that we do not use very often. It really means that we want God to be seen as glorious and holy. It is a prayer that God would be seen by all the world as separate and pure and exalted. It is a prayer that desires God to be glorified. It means that you desire that God should be honoured. It also reminds us that God is wonderful and fearful, and helps us to approach him with reverence and love. These two opening phrases of the Lord’s Prayer help us in several ways in coming to God. They complement each other in this way. That God is our Father teaches us of his closeness to the followers of Jesus, while desiring God to be hallowed teaches us he is great and awesome. Closeness without awe leads to an over-familiarity, and could easily lead us to despise God or take him for granted. On the other hand, awe without closeness leads to terror and anxiety and fear. Then, we would be afraid to approach God at all. But Jesus teaches us that both things are true about God. He is close to Christian believers, while at the same time being awesome. When we follow Jesus’ teaching on prayer this helps us approach God with reverent submission and with confident dependence.

your kingdom come,

The kingdom of God is the place where God’s rule and authority are recognised and seen. Jesus began his ministry preaching about this kingdom (Mark 1:15): “*The time has come,*” he said. “*The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.*” Sometimes this kingdom is called “*the kingdom of God*”, and on other occasions it is called “*the kingdom of heaven*”. They are both referring to the same thing. It is simply that different Gospel writers used either description. When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when this kingdom would come, he answered, “*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.*” (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus then went on to speak about his second coming. So what the Bible is teaching us is that the kingdom started when Jesus came. It began to be displayed as it began to conquer men’s hearts and lives. And it is continuing to do this as the good news about Jesus is shared around the world and people are brought to acknowledge God as their King. This will continue until Jesus comes again, when the kingdom will have reached its fulfilment.

So when we pray, “*Your kingdom come,*” we are praying for three things.

- that we want God’s rule to be established in our own lives. That Jesus would reign as King in our hearts and that our lives will be changed to show this as we submit to his commands.
- that we want his rule to be established and acknowledged worldwide as many men and women and girls and boys are brought to trust in Jesus and are saved. So it is a prayer for evangelism and worldwide mission.
- that we want the Lord’s kingdom to be fully established when he returns.

This, then, directs our minds to the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Then we shall be with Jesus, in that place he has gone to prepare for us (John 14:3). Like the previous part of the prayer, this also stimulates our hearts to praise and worship as we think of all that awaits Christian believers.

your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We have already touched on this previously, but because it is so important we need to consider it again. God’s will is immediately, fully and willingly obeyed in heaven. Christian believers long for this to be the same on earth, including in our own lives. This aspect of prayer is not telling God what to do, but seeking in prayer those things he has promised, so that his will is done. And even in our asking for things, we should only desire God to answer our requests according to his will, not simply ours. Very often the Christian’s will coincides with God’s will, and that is marvellous. But on other occasions Christians can want things that are not God’s will, or that

they are not sure are God's will. So this petition in the Lord's Prayer means we will only ever want and expect God to answer us in accord with his will.

Many Christians find that as they read their Bibles each day, they are stimulated in prayer by what God has revealed in the Scriptures. So as we read the Bible we can ask ourselves questions such as, "What is God teaching me to pray about today? In what area of my life do I need help to apply what I have been taught in my reading?"

To pray for God's will to be done in our own lives is very challenging, yet also encouraging. It is challenging because it means we should be living in a way that is obedient to God. This applies to all that we do and the way we do it. It applies to what we say, and when and how we say it. It even applies to what we think and allow our minds to dwell upon. But alongside this it is also a great encouragement to pray. As we think, for example, what we shall be doing today and those areas of our lives where we want God's will to be done for us, we can bring these to God in prayer. This really means we can pray about everything we are involved in, and seek the blessing of God's will being done in our lives, and in the lives of those we love and are concerned about. It really means that we want God at the centre of our lives and desire to serve God and do what he says.

Up to now the Lord's Prayer has taught us to concentrate our thoughts on God, his honour and his will. What Jesus has done is to teach us to put God first. Serving him is to be the Christian's great aim. The followers of Jesus are to be God-centred and Christ-centred, not self-centred.

Give us today our daily bread.

While we are to be God-centred, that does not mean we cannot pray about our own needs. Jesus encourages us to do this here. This request really indicates that we are dependent on God for everything. Christian believers are very needy, and this phrase of the Lord's Prayer teaches us to cry out to God, who we know loves us, to provide for us each day. The fact that we are to pray for today's need means the followers of Jesus will be praying every day, and will be living every day in conscious dependence on the Lord. This again shows how interested and concerned God is for us, even down to our daily food. Learning to trust God in this way will help us not to be over-anxious, but to have calm and peace because we rest in his care (Matt. 6:25-34).

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

This is a prayer that refers to our relationships with God and with other people. The word "debts" is often translated by the word "trespasses". Our relationship with God is affected, because it is God that we disobey and sin or trespass against ultimately. Even the godliest Christian on earth needs to

pray this prayer, because we all fall short of the standard God has set for us (see 1 John 1:8-10). Sin still troubles Christians in this life, and sin is a barrier between us and God and needs to be removed (Is. 59:1-2). We are to confess our sins to God, for we need his forgiveness. God has wonderfully provided for this through the Lord Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. Therefore we can seek his mercy in prayer when we have failed him.

But as we pray for ourselves, we must also be mindful of those who have sinned against us. And Jesus says that we must be as willing to forgive them, as we want our heavenly Father to forgive us. That really is a challenge. It rebukes any bitterness we may have against someone. It condemns any grudges we might bear or desires for revenge on someone who has hurt us. It exposes any feelings of malice or plans to do evil against others. It teaches us to be loving and forgiving. In short, it teaches us to be like God. He has forgiven us when we did not deserve it. He forgave us even though it cost him the death of his dear Son. He has forgiven us freely. So how unlike God is anyone who fails to forgive others. In Ephesians 4:32 we are taught to "... be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God has forgiven you [us]." This is a very demanding thing for us to do, but proof that God's grace is in our hearts, and that we are forgiven by God, is that we are forgiving people. (See also Matthew 6:14-15.)

Lead us not into temptation.

Every day Christians face many different kinds of temptation. We can be tempted to be greedy, lustful, dishonest, untruthful, unjustly angry, and in many more ways. Now, to overcome temptation requires God's help. Jesus is teaching us here that we cannot do this in our own strength. We need the special help of heaven itself, God's help. We need him to make us strong so that we will not fall into sin. Now this has very practical as well as spiritual implications. If we pray this prayer and then go and read an immoral book, or visit places where we know we shall be tempted, or watch lustful films on television, then really we are being hypocritical. Perhaps this story will help you understand what Jesus is teaching. There was once a rich man who wanted someone to be the driver of his car. A number of men applied for the job. When they were interviewed the rich man asked the first applicant, "How close to the edge of a cliff could you drive my car and keep me safe?" "One metre," he replied. The next was asked the same question and he said, "Half a metre." The final applicant received the same question and he replied, "If you were in the car while I was driving, then I would keep as far away from the edge of the cliff as I possibly could!" It was the last man who got the job. Now, that is how Christians are to respond to sin and temptation. We are to keep as far away from it as possible, because it is very dangerous.

But even when we have prayed this prayer, and have been careful to avoid temptation, we still have to face it. This is because we live in a sinful world, and we have a spiritual enemy, the devil, who is called the tempter (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5). So when we pray that God will not lead us into temptation, we are also asking that God will help us not to be so burdened by temptation that we give in to it.

But deliver us from evil, or, the evil one.

The difference between a temptation and being delivered from evil, is that the temptation, for example, is tempting to despair, and the evil is falling into the despair. And as these things come from the devil, we need God's strength and grace to deliver us from the evil one. In 1 John 5:18 we read, "... the one who is born of God ... the evil one cannot harm him." In other words, God has promised to deliver us, so that the evil one will not ultimately harm us.

The Lord's Prayer covers every area of our lives as Christian believers, and there is no part of our lives that we cannot pray about. We can even tell God about things we would find it difficult to tell anyone else. What a privilege prayer is!



Over to you

When you preach about joy in trials, do your people listen because you are a good example of what you are saying?

Are you sensitive to the trials your people are suffering, so that your ministry does not aggravate but encourage them?