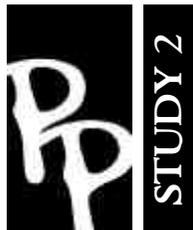


THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TO LIFE AND DEATH



James 1:9-12

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Suffering as a trial
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

It is not immediately clear how these verses connect with their context, but it seems best to see them as a continuation of the theme of trials that test our faith. James is very practical in his letter to believers. People of all ages, past and present, from all walks of life and from all different cultures are affected and obsessed by riches and poverty. James knows that we need God's wisdom to have a right attitude to such things. James' main theme is the testing of faith and he sees that poverty and riches in themselves provide part of the testing of faith. James' style is not logical argument but a series of comments in verses 1:2-18 helping his readers to develop a Christian attitude to these trials. The result is a number of statements that can stand on their own apart from the context, or be seen in the light of the general theme.

What these verses mean

Verse 9

The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.

A Christian who is driven to poverty may well be tempted to despair. This can be resisted by remembering all the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.

Realising these blessings we will reckon them to be of greater and more lasting value than any material benefit we may have lost. Our high position is peace with God, membership of the royal family of God and an inheritance of eternal glory. This attitude is only possible to a born again believer, made wise by the Father (1:5).

Verse 10

But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower.

The temptation of the rich is to dote on their riches, to find all their satisfaction in them, and to fear losing them. Such a reliance on worldly possessions can only be short-lived. Like a wild flower they last only a short while and then pass away. This temptation to look to material possessions can be resisted by remembering that in God's sight we are worthless apart from his grace; we are paupers apart from his mercy. This is the condition of true and lasting blessing. This is what we are to seek and to be satisfied with. The world may look upon this as being lowly, but this is the condition in which the person enters the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3). We should not grieve over material loss because our spiritual riches cannot be taken from us.

Verse 11

For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed.

James continues with the picture of the wild flower and the person who puts their trust in earthly riches. The flower may look beautiful, but only for a short while. When the sun comes up it will wither and be finally destroyed. The sight of its beauty is not everlasting, it passes so quickly.

In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

Just as the plant withers in the scorching sun so will the rich man as he goes about his business if that is all he is concerned about. The Bible does not condemn being rich, but it does warn of the dangers. Even believers, when they become rich or at least have enough resources to save them from worries, can forget the need to care for their spiritual state. A rich convert must quickly realise what are the important things of life. Before conversion his possessions were his obsession. After conversion they are treated as being temporary and unreliable. His trust is now in the lowly things. The wisdom he receives from on high enables him to avoid the dangers and enticements of his riches, which he now recognises as being perishable. All this is heavenly wisdom (1:5) which opens eyes to see the glories of heaven and the emptiness of the earth. (See also the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-21.)

Verse 12

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial,

James links back to what he has said in 1:2-4. Trials test faith, which in turn develops perseverance. Godly wisdom guides the believer through the trials, by helping him to understand his situation and how he should live his life accordingly. Now James gives us the reason why we are not to give up, but to keep on going. Believers have been given the means (faith and wisdom) to endure the trials. At times the believer might feel overwhelmed by the trials he is going through and it may seem that they will never end. They will end and when they finally do the believer will be blessed. Why? because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

The believer will be blessed because at the end of his trials there is something wonderful waiting for him, the “crown of life”. This is picture language for a triumphant reception, with the Master’s welcome “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt.25:23). This will be the experience of all believers (“those who love him”) who are enabled to persevere through every experience of life. This may be called a reward, so long as we remember that it is only possible by the wisdom, power and mercy of God, and that all the glory is his, while the blessing is ours. People who are suffering severe testing may be the objects of pity in the eyes of people who are not Christians, but in reality, even in the midst of their agonies, such people are to be envied (“blessed”) because of their certain destiny.



Summary

The Christian believer is under pressure because of the world we live in. The Christian may be poor in material things or rich in many possessions. Both are under trial. One may be tempted to doubt God because he has so little and the other to desert God because he has so much.¹ (See also the prayer of Proverbs 30:7-9.) We are not to give in to the things of this world. They will pass away very quickly. Instead we are to put our trust in the things that will last. In the world’s eyes these people will be of little value, of lowly position. God does not look upon such people in a lowly way, but rewards them at the end of their earthly trials with a crown of glory. We learn from these verses that our spiritual state is very much more important than our material possessions or our physical well-being, because it is vital, not only for this life, but also for the life to come.

¹ John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (Evangelical Press)



Two suggestions of what to preach about from these verses

Theme I: The Christian attitude to material possessions

1. It is not wrong for Christians to be wealthy

Jesus himself used wealthy people (Luke 7:3). The issue is not how much we possess, but our attitude to what we have no matter how much, and how we use it.

2. Consider wrong attitudes to possessions

We are wrong if

- we are proud of what we have (1 Chron.29:14-16; James 1:10-12)
- we envy those who have more than we do (James 3:16).
- our possessions mean more to us than our spiritual blessings (Matt.6:20-21).
- we rely on possessions to give us our greatest pleasure and satisfaction (1Tim. 6:17).
- we use what we have selfishly, or even in a way that is hurtful to others (James 5:1-6).
- we live as though our possessions are ours for ever (James 1:10-11).

3. What are right uses of our wealth?

We must honour our responsibilities to our family and to lawful authorities – e.g. taxes etc. (Rom.13:6-7; 1 Tim.5:8; Matt. 22:21).

We should use what we have to advance Christ’s kingdom and to help the needy (Mal. 3:10; Gal. 2:10; 6:10). We may spend moderately on physical or cultural pursuits.

Theme II: How should Christians react to suffering?

1. Christians *must* expect to suffer.

We share the same possibilities of suffering from accidents and germs as people who are not Christians. In addition, we may be subject to satanic attacks and to the Lord’s chastening.

2. We may be tempted to complain.

To ask “Why me?” or to fall into a sullen acceptance of what is happening to us. This is no better than the reaction of unbelievers.

3. We will benefit from suffering.

If we accept that our Heavenly Father has permitted our suffering for a wise and loving purpose (Heb.12:4-11).

If we examine ourselves to see if the Lord is directing us to deal with some sin in our lives. This is not necessarily so, but it may be (1 Co.11:29-32).

If we prove the reality of his strength by seeking his help to endure our suffering (Phil.4:12-13).

If we use our suffering to make us look forward to our entry into heaven's glory (Rom. 8:18).



Focus Point:

Suffering as a trial

James has been saying that Christian believers are to endure trials. Through trials will come blessing. The greatest blessing will be through the reception the believer will receive into heaven. Living for God in obedience to all his ways, through all the trials that this will bring, will be worth it. Many of these trials will be through suffering. We therefore in this focus point consider the subject of suffering.

We live in a fallen world

The first question we must examine is, "Why is there suffering in the world at all?" This has often puzzled many because the Bible teaches us that when God created the world, he said that it was very good (Gen. 1:31). So what has gone wrong? The reason is that the world today is quite different from when God created it. And that is because it has become a fallen world. By that we mean it is a world that has fallen into sin. Sin has entered the world. We learn about this in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, disobeyed God's command not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Because they disobeyed him, they sinned, and God has judged mankind, and the whole of creation suffers as a result.

God told Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed him they would die. So death has now come into the world – that is, spiritual death whereby sinners are separated from God, and physical death. Consequently all suffering eventually leads to physical death. God cursed even the ground as punishment for man's disobedience (Gen. 3:17-19). So we see that the whole of creation was thrown into turmoil because of man's sin. Suffering is a part of the consequences of man's disobedience. We live in a sinful, a fallen world and, therefore, part of our lot is that we shall suffer, whether we are Christian believers or not. Thankfully, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth again, the world will be changed. There will be a new heaven and a new earth when all these things will be done away with. There will be no more

suffering for the people of God (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-4). But that is in the future, and until then, we have to share in the common lot of all mankind, because we live in a world affected by man's sinfulness.

Is suffering a punishment from God?

Now it is at this point that we need to be very careful. Some people have concluded from what we have just said that when anyone suffers it is as a direct result of some wickedness in their own lives. They say that those who suffer must have committed some great sin, or else they would not be suffering. Is this correct? This is an important question and the Bible answers it in two ways.

i. We must say that not all suffering we endure is necessarily as a direct result of something which we ourselves have done wrong. We have examples in the Bible. In the Old Testament we read of the sufferings of Job. In John's Gospel chapter 9 Jesus met a man who had been born blind, and when the disciples saw him they asked Jesus, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" They were really following the teaching of the religious leaders of their day. They reasoned that if death came into the world because of sin, then there can be no personal suffering without someone's doing wrong. They even taught that a child could commit some sin in its mother's womb before it was born, and that this would result in the baby's suffering in some way! Jesus' answer is interesting because it shows that this popular approach to suffering was quite mistaken. This is what he said, "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened that the work of God might be displayed in his life.*" In other words, he was not born blind because either he or his parents had done something dreadfully wrong. Rather, it was going to be used by Jesus to bring glory to God. God was using this man's suffering to bring him great blessing. That was seen on that occasion by Jesus restoring the man's sight.

Those who quickly jump to the same conclusion as these disciples did can be very unkind to the person who is suffering by telling them they are guilty of something dreadful, when they may not be. Further, this kind of thinking fails to recognise something much more fundamental, for we are all sinners. We all do wrong, and sadly we have to say that we do so many times in a day. So to reason like that would mean either that we would all be in terrible agony or distress all the time, or that we were claiming to be perfect – which, of course, none of us is! There are, however, some occasions that are obviously the result of doing wrong, such as the punishment of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. But it is not so in every case, and we need to be very careful before we make harsh statements about the reason why a particular person is suffering at any one time.

ii. Having said that not all suffering is the direct result of someone's doing something wrong, there are times when it is. At this point we are referring specifically to Christian believers. Because God loves us, when we foolishly disobey him, then he may have to chasten us to correct us. This is the same way that all good parents discipline their children when they are naughty. There are times when God has to correct his children because we have done wrong. And so he "chastens" or "disciplines" us. And on occasions he uses suffering, and even persecution, to both correct us and instruct us so that we develop as godly Christians. So when a Christian believer suffers, it is right that we examine our hearts to see if this has come upon us because of our foolishness. We need to ask, "What is the Lord teaching me? What is he saying to me? What does he want me to learn? Is there an area of my life that I need to put right?" And if there is, then we need to repent and ask for his forgiveness, remembering the Lord has brought affliction into our lives because he loves us. This will help us not to despair at such times, but to come to him confessing our guilt and seeking his mercy (1 John 1:5-10).

So we need to keep these two things in balance. Not all suffering is the direct result of some sin that we have personally committed, but some suffering is. With the latter, it is usually not very difficult, if we are Christian believers, to discover the reason. This is because we have new hearts that make us long to be like Jesus and we are, therefore, sensitive to sin in our lives. We can see that Christians suffer because we live in a sinful world. We also suffer because God wants to glorify his name in our lives, and because God is making us more holy, more like the Lord Jesus Christ.

Suffering tests and strengthens true faith

In our study of James' letter, we have seen that God allows and even sends suffering to us in order to test and strengthen our faith. Why does the faith of the Christian believer need to be tested? The answer to that is to see if it is a genuine faith. This is necessary because there is such a thing as false faith. This is counterfeit faith and, therefore, is not saving faith. For example, we can come across forged bank notes. They are not real and will not be accepted at a bank. It is like that with faith. It is something that can be copied so that it appears at first to be the real thing.

Now you may be wondering why anyone would want to copy true faith? There are really two main reasons.

i. It is that old problem of sin again. Because of sin, the human heart does not want to accept what God has to say about it. For example, our pride hates owning up to being wrong. Yet in order to become a Christian believer, you must first of all admit that you are a sinner. But many people

do not want to do that. So they pretend to be Christians, when they are not Christians at all! Because of sin the human heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9). So our hearts can easily deceive us into thinking all is well with us and God when, in fact, it is not so at all.

ii. The second reason for some people wanting to copy true faith is the work of Satan, the devil, the great enemy of God and men. We read about his activity in men's hearts in 2 Corinthians 4:4 - Satan hates the Lord Jesus and, therefore, does his utmost to keep people from following him. One of the subtlest ways is that he tricks people into thinking what fine Christians they are, and what marvellous faith they have got, when they are not Christian believers at all! Satan is called the "father of lies" by Jesus in John 8, and that passage has a direct bearing on what we are discussing because Jesus was talking to very religious people who thought they were true believers.

That is why God tests believers to see if their faith is real, and at the same time to strengthen and encourage that faith. He uses suffering and trials to achieve this. This is brought out for us in 1 Peter 1. Peter had been writing about the salvation that God gives to all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And then he spoke about the trial or test of this faith in verses 6 and 7, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed." True faith is very precious, and it is trials of various kinds which demonstrate whether it is real or not, because true faith endures. It lasts. True believers still trust God even when they go through severe suffering. They do not give up following the Lord Jesus because of the difficulty that has come their way. Instead, they realise they have to trust him more, to keep them and help them through the trial. And the result of all this, of course, is that their faith is not weakened by the trial but strengthened. It is like our muscles that grow and develop when we exercise them and put them through hard work. So faith, when it is tried, is proved to be genuine.

The opposite is also true. Suffering exposes false or counterfeit faith. This is taught in the familiar parable that Jesus told about the sower. It is interesting that this parable is recorded by Matthew, Mark and Luke. This tells us something of its importance. In that parable Jesus likened those who listen to his teaching to four different types of soil. His teaching was that the seed and the soils showed the different responses of people to what Jesus taught. Now the rocky soil was described like this by Jesus in Matthew 13:20 onwards, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the

man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." In Luke 8:13 Jesus simply says, "They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." Those who have false faith are shown to be false when under test. When suffering comes to them they no longer follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

So in a very real way the trials Christian believers have to endure are a means of encouraging, rather than discouraging, their faith. We shall look into this in the following chapters as we examine some of the helpful truths and promises God has given in the Bible to help us at such times.

These notes on Suffering were taken from *The Christian and Suffering* from the Sound Words series. A copy of this booklet is available and can be obtained by writing to Grace Baptist Mission.



Over to you

What is your attitude to material comfort? It has been said that a pastor should live at about the average level of his congregation. Do you agree with this? Is it possible in your situation?

In your own ministry and that of your church, how much has the desire for money and wealth featured? Is God's work really held back because of a lack of material resources?

From this passage we have been studying, how will you counsel those in your flock who are poor? What about those who are wealthy?