



Session 1 – James 1:1-18

GROWTH THROUGH TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

Life will almost certainly have some major ups and downs. James suggests some characteristics of the Christian which will enable his readers to hold fast even through the most difficult trials.

Perseverance (v.2-4)

People face trials of many kinds – eg ill health, bereavement, financial difficulties, problems at work, lack of work, strained family relationships or, for some, persecution because of their faith.

Such trials can be a real test of a person's faith. But that testing can be seen as a positive thing: without it, none of us would ever develop any spiritual muscle, and we would be ill-equipped to face any difficulty at all.

The immediate result of facing trials and having our faith tested is that we develop perseverance – or steadfastness, endurance, fortitude, staying power, stickability, the ability to keep on keeping on. If we persevere, we are following the example of Jesus who “endured the cross” (Heb 12:2).

Persevering in this way produces further growth in us – growth towards maturity.

- To be mature (also translated *perfect*) is something for NOW. Day by day we aim to be growing more like Jesus – for example in the way we display the fruit of the Spirit. Remember too his words, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mat 5:48). Maturity involves living up to our calling – being the people God has called us to be, characterised by wholeness.

- To be mature is something NOT YET. The process of growing more like Jesus will not be complete until he returns and “we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Because the trials of life produce perseverance and maturity in us, we can view them positively – even with joy. Again we remember Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame.”

Prayerful trust in God (v.5-8)

We all need wisdom. For James, with his Jewish background, this would mean above all practical wisdom – understanding God’s will and knowing how to put it into practice in daily life. This would include the wisdom to know how to respond to life’s trials. If we need wisdom, or indeed anything else, then we should simply ask God, praying with an attitude of trust that he is the one who readily gives good gifts to his children. Asking for something whilst doubting that God will grant it is an example of being ‘double-minded’ and would make us like something blown hither and thither in the wind – believing first one thing and then another.

An eternal perspective (v.9-11)

This is, perhaps, an example of the sort of wisdom that James has just mentioned. As so often, godly wisdom turns the world’s way of thinking upside-down (see eg Luke 1:52f, Mat 23:12).

- Christians who are poor may seem to be in a situation in which they are to be pitied. But a godly perspective enables them to see that they have great riches (treasure in heaven – Mat 6:20); they can rejoice/boast in the fact that God has made them citizens of heaven. James will spell this out further in 2:5.

- Christians who are rich are in a humiliating position: they are constantly facing the prospect of losing all their wealth in an instant when they die – something which could happen at any moment (compare Luke 12:13-21). But a godly perspective enables them to rejoice in the fact that, although their wealth is a temporary as a flower on a plant, they have, in Jesus, something which is eternal.

Resisting temptation (v.12-15)

James returns to the theme of v.2-4: perseverance through life’s trials. It leads not only to maturity (v.4), but also to blessing and the gift of life – life lived in a relationship with God, both now and on into eternity (v.12).

God's intention is that the trials of life should act as a testing and that we should emerge from the testing stronger than we were before. But our sinful nature all too easily allows a trial to become a temptation (*trial* and *temptation* are the same word in NT Greek) – a temptation to give up in the face of our difficulties, to blame God for them, and to turn our back on him. When we give into those temptations, the result of our testing is spiritual death (v.15) instead of the life (v.12) which is God's will for us. James reminds his readers that it is utterly contrary to God's nature to lead anyone into sin.

Remembering God's goodness (v.16-18)

Persevering when we experience trials does not only mean that we take action to keep going; another, more passive, way in which we respond to life's difficulties is simply to remind ourselves that we have a loving Father who is good and to ponder on that fact. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me . . ." (Ps 23). Whatever trials we might face, we can trust in God's complete faithfulness and dependability. The one who gave us the supreme gift of new birth will not hold back other gifts. He is the one who loves to give good things to his children.

For homegroups

- What trials are most commonly faced by people in Ely? By people in other parts of the world?
- Compare v.2-4 with Romans 5:3-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7. Can you look back and see occasions in your life when you have grown as a result of facing trials? Have you seen examples of this in other people?
- If you prayed for Christians who are persecuted because of their faith, what would you pray?
- To what extent do you think we can become "mature and complete, not lacking anything" in this life?

- Can you give examples of occasions when you have prayed for wisdom and God has helped you to know what to do?
- Read Philippians 4:11-13. What can we do to help ourselves to be content whether in riches or in poverty?
- People tend to blame anyone or anything but themselves. What excuses do you hear given for sin? How would you respond to them?
- List all the things that v.17 & 18 say about God. Which is most important to you?
- What good gift from God would you most value when going through trials or temptations?