

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 2

BEGINNING PASSAGES

I. The introduction to the letter describes the author as James, "the slave of God"

A. The term reflects authority given by God because of faithfulness to Him. Leaders in the Old Testament were often referred to as slaves (doulos in Greek) of God. See, e.g., 1 Kings 8:53 (Moses), 8:66 (King David); Jer. 7:25 (the prophet); Amos 3:7 (same). Likewise, St. Paul's letters to the Romans, Philippians, Galatians, and Titus, as well as the second letter of Peter and the letter of Jude refer to the authors as slaves of God. Rom. 1:1, Ga. 1:10, Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude:1.

B. There is also a general implication that complete service of God leads to true power and glory, in contrast to service to the desires of the world. See, e.g., Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-30; John 13:1-20; Romans 6:17-23; Gal. 1:10, 5:13-15; 1 Peter 2:16. There is also the complementary notion that we are friends and sons of God, but even that status comes from obedience to God. See John 15:11-17.

- The entire letter will develop this notion of serving God by putting this faith into action. See James 1:22-25, 2:14-26.

C. The letter addresses Jews in the Diaspora, but by extension all Christians and the new Israel, the new People of God. See, e.g., Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:29-30.

II. The letter then begins by reflecting on the rightful attitude towards suffering (here called trials), seeing them as an opportunity to grow in perfection.

A. It is not clear right here whether the trials mean persecutions, or more ordinary difficulties, or both. In any case, these trials lead through steadfastness to greater perfection.

1. Even Jesus in His human nature grew more perfect through obedience. See Heb. 2:10. Although He had no flaws, the greater suffering brought His human nature to perfection.

 2. And Jesus spoke of the blessedness and joyfulness that comes through suffering for God's sake. See, e.g., Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23.

 3. James likewise speaks of the joy that should come from the suffering. This joy is not an emotional happiness, but rather a thrill, a sense of love at being in God's presence, and is in fact consistent with a certain sorrow in the world and human sinfulness. See, e.g., Matt. 5:4, 11-12; Romans 12:15. In the Old Testament, such joy was most frequently accompanied by the common worship of God. See, e.g., Ps. 15:11, 32:9, 16; 149. There was also a common sense of joy as God's blessings. See, e.g., 1 Sam. 18:6; 2 Sam. 7:11-22; Ps. 2:9, 14; Is. 35:10; 65:13-14. That joyfulness leads to resentment by the enemies of God. In the New Testament, there is also a strong sense of joyfulness at suffering with Jesus. See, e.g., Acts 5:41; Col. 2:2; 1 Peter 4:13.
- B. The passage reflects the idea of God bringing perfection to His beloved precisely by struggle. See Wis. 3:5-10; Sir. 2:1-5; Romans 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6-8. Jesus spoke of the need to endure the Cross with Him if we would be His disciple. See Matt. 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38, 9:49; Luke 14:26-33. Like Jesus, the letter calls for nothing less than perfection. See Matt 5:48.
- C. The letter will later cite Abraham, Job and the prophets as examples of those who showed faith in the midst of suffering. See James 2:21-24, 5:10-11.

III. The letter then builds upon this comment on suffering to call for confident prayer.

A. The letter says that if any lacks this wisdom he should pray for it, and it will be granted.

1. Jesus had likewise, often promised that prayers made in His names would be granted. See, e.g., Matt. 7:7-11, 18:19-20; Luke 11:9-13; John 14:13. The idea is that one in the deep relationship with God that is signified by invoking His name will ask for good things and do so fittingly. Thus, the prayers would be granted
2. The letter here and later addresses why prayers are often not answered. But here there seems to be an absolute assurance that prayers for wisdom will be granted if one asks in confidence. The reason is that this wisdom is always a good thing, for it gives one more union with God.

B. The idea of wisdom is multi-fold.

1. It can mean simply the ability to understand a goal and accomplish it well. See, e.g., 1 Kings 7:13 (wisdom in building); Is. 40:20 (wisdom in artistry); Sir. 37:21 (wisdom to one's own advantage), 38:1-8 (medicine); Matt. 10:21. In this sense, wisdom can be good or evil depending on the goal pursued. See, e.g., Is. 40:20; Luke 16:8 (dealing with prudence in the world); James 3:15.
2. At a higher level Wisdom means the ability to solve difficult problems and govern and conduct affairs with deliberation. See, e.g., 1 Kings 3:10, Sir. 20:6; Daniel 1; Matt. 7:24, 25:4-8.
3. But wisdom above all is the order through which God created the universe. See, e.g., Wis. 9, Sir. 1:1-8; 24:1-8; Prov. 8:22-31. When God gives people this wisdom, they perceive all things in light of this order and

conduct their lives accordingly. See, e.g. Wis. 7:13-30, 10:1-11:1; Sir. 1:12-17, 4:11-19. And God gives anyone who seeks it with a fear of the Lord, devotion and discipline. See, e.g. Prov. 1:1-7, 2:1-11

4. Here, the letter is speaking of what St. Paul calls the wisdom of the cross, the fact that through suffering, and above all else the suffering of the Cross, the love and law of God re-establishes the order of the world. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 1:17-2:13. The forgiveness of God, reconciling us to Him through the Cross is that wisdom beyond all comprehension. See Rom. 11:33, Col. 2:1-3.

C. The letter then says one must ask for this wisdom with faith, not doubting.

1. Here, there is a dramatic contrast between the one who has faith and the one who doubts. Certainly, one can believe, and yet ask for an increase in belief. See, e.g., Mark 9:24. There can also be different levels of belief, based upon the evidence needed. See, e.g., Matt. 17:20; John 1:50, 20:29.
2. But James emphasizes that, in the end, there must either be this willingness to put confidence in God or not; and if that willingness to believe is not there prayers are ineffective.
 - a. James uses the analogy of a wave on the sea. The sea is a symbol of instability. See, e.g., 2 Sam. 22:5, Ps. 42:8, 65:7-8, 88:7, 89:10-11, 124:5; 2 Pet. 2:17; Jude 13. In contrast, there is the image of the stable land or mountains that reflect the providence of God. See, e.g., Ps. 125:1-2; Is. 2:2-4; Micah 4:1; Matt. 7:24-27.
 - b. The call reflects the ancient command to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind. See Duet. 6:5; Mat. 22:37, Mk. 12:29-30.

IV. The letter then turns to those who are least in the world, and thus most easily trust in God.

A. The idea is that lowliness in the world, while not alone sufficient for faith, makes one more understanding of the need

for God, and thus more likely to place faith in God. See, e.g., Ps. 102:18, 132:15; Prov. 3:34. The Old Testament does have promises that a certain type of prosperity will flow from righteousness, but it is the prosperity of enjoying the fruits of one's labor, not merely enjoying great wealth. See, e.g., Duet. 28:11-12; Ps. 128:2; Micah 4:3-4. There were warnings against the arrogance that can come from wealth. See, e.g., Duet. 8:11-18, 17:17-18; Ps. 52:9, 62:11; Prov. 11:28, 38:8-9.

- B. Jesus took up this theme, declaring the poor and especially poor in spirit to be blessed, and those who consider themselves rich to be setting themselves up for suffering. See Matt. 5:3, 6:24, Mark 10:24-25; Luke 6:20, 25, 7:22, 12:16-34. See also 1 Tim. 6:7-10.

- C. Reflecting this view, the letter praises those in lowly circumstances and tells them to rejoice in their high standing before God.
 - 1. But it also adds a curious paradox, telling those who are more wealthy or prominent to rejoice in their lowliness before God.
 - 2. The letter quotes the beginning of Isaiah's prophecy of liberation. See Is. 40:6-7; see also 1 Peter 1:24-25.
 - 3. There is thus a call to a certain sense of joyful vision, recognizing that the wealth and power that one has, and that the world honors one for, is nothing in God's eyes, or perhaps even a joy at escaping from the traps that wealth can create. See Sir. 3:17-18; Jer. 9:22-23; cf. Luke 10:20 (even power in the church is not important, but rather God's love.) It is the joy Elizabeth, the wife of a well off priest felt, knowing that Mary, the mother of her Lord, was coming to her, proclaiming an end to the reign of wealth and power. See Luke 1:39-55.

- V. The letter then returns to the original theme of trials, but with the additional insight that temptations (a very similar, but distinct word in Greek) do not come from God, but rather from human evil.
- A. The section begins with a beatitude similar to those Jesus used in His preaching. See Matt. 5:3-11, 11;6, 15;16, 13:16, 16:17; Luke 6:20-22. This sort of beatitude has long tradition in wisdom literature. See, e.g., Ps. 1:1, 2;12, 32:1-2, 41:1-2, 84:4-5, 112:1-2, 119:1, 128:1, Prov. 8:34, Is. 30;18; Jer. 17:17, Dan 12:12, Rev. 1:3.
 - B. The reward here is symbolized by the crown that comes at the end of the contest. This promise reflects both the idea of glory coming through struggle, see 1 Cor. 9:25, Phil. 4:1, 2 Tim 2:5, 4:8, 1 Pet. 5:4, Rev. 2:10, 3:11, and also the idea of an eternal kingdom that the faithful are promised a part of. See Wis. 3:7-8; Matt. 25:14-46; John 14:2.
 - C. But, using a subtle word shift, the letter also argues that temptation, as opposed to trials, do not come from God, but rather from flaws in human nature.
 - 1. The beginning of the letter referred to trials (in Greek peirasmos, from the verb periamo.) Here, the letter uses a similar but distinct verb to refer to temptations (peirazo.) The former in James refers to trials that may come from God, but temptations, either because of these trials, or because of other things, come from sin, although even here they exist only because God allows them.
 - 2. Building on ideas from wisdom literature, the author is eager to avoid any implication that temptations can be

blamed on God. See Sir. 15:11-20. St. Paul explains that God may test someone to increase strength, but will not test one beyond his strength. See 1 Cor. 10:13. It may seem that way on the surface. However, instead the order of creation becomes tempting because of disorders in the human soul, which then leads to sin if consented to; and sin then leads to death. See Rom. 6:23.