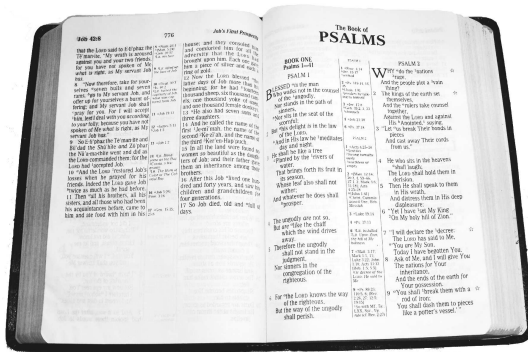


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



January 2020

Bible readings from Psalm 17, Haggai and James

Dear Friends,

You will observe that I often quote from psalms and hymns in these Bible reading notes. You may wonder why I do not quote from modern hymns? The main reason is that there are generally copyright restrictions. This also applies to some well-loved hymns such as ‘Great is thy faithfulness.’

The psalms show how God’s people sang in all kinds of circumstances. The Israelites in Babylonian captivity were mocked by their oppressors who said, ‘*Sing us one of the songs of Zion!*’ The captives asked, ‘*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*’ (Psalm 137:3–4). Daniel and his three friends triumphed in adversity in the same land.

There are many modern authors whose hymns I love and gladly sing. Margaret Clarkson comes to mind and she exalts the sovereignty of God. She suffered great pain throughout her long life and went to be with the Lord in 2008. Some of her hymns are found in the new hymn-books. Timothy Dudley Smith and Jeremy Walker, pastor of Maidenbower Baptist Church, Crawley, have also written many fine hymns.

John Armstrong, an elder at Cowley Hill Free Church, Boreham Wood has written some excellent hymns. A PDF file containing John’s hymns and poems can be downloaded from the church website: www.cowleyhill.org.uk

We should sing the praises of God not only in church services but in our homes. The psalmist declares, ‘*I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever; with my mouth will I make known your faithfulness to all generations*’ (Psalm 89:1–2). We love our Saviour and want to sing his praises. Scripture urges us, ‘*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*’ (Colossians 3:18).

May God bless you and encourage you in the coming year as you read God’s Word and sing the songs of Zion.

Alec Taylor

Key to notes

- All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version unless stated otherwise; they are printed in italics. **If you have a different translation of the Bible, you will still be able to use these notes.**
- The number in brackets eg. (6) refers to the verse number in the passage that we are reading; (23:16) refers us to another chapter and verse in the book of the Bible from which we are reading. When we read from Matthew, this would be Matthew chapter 23, verse 16.
- Where verses from other books of the Bible are brought to our attention, the name of the book is also indicated in the brackets eg. (Psalm 19:1).
- Where I ask you to compare another verse of Scripture, I prefix the reference with cp. (eg. cp. Psalm 1:1). I prefer this to the more common abbreviation cf. which relates to the obsolete word ‘confer’.

The word ‘Lord’ in the Old Testament

The Hebrew words translated ‘*Lord*’ are:

- ‘Adon’ which is used with reference to men (Genesis 42:33; 45:8–9), and with reference to God (Joshua 3:11,13; Psalm 8:1).
- ‘Adonai’ literally ‘my Lord’ (Exodus 4:10; Psalm 68:19).
- ‘Yahweh’ (‘Jehovah’), the sacred name for God, considered by many Jews as too sacred to utter. They regularly used ‘Adonai’ in its place. ‘Yah’ is a contracted form of ‘Yahweh’ (Isaiah 12:2; 26:4). The word ‘Alleluia’ or ‘Hallelujah’ (Revelation 19:1–6) means ‘Praise Yah’.

Dale Ralph Davis writes with reference to Exodus 3:12,14: ‘In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence and “Yahweh” captures and summarizes that thought – **he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be.** “Yahweh” means the God who is present to help ... “Yahweh” is a personal name, while “the LORD” is a title ... there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey’ (THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS IN THE MUCK OF LIFE – PSALMS 1–12, page 8).

NB. Our Bible translators have made it possible for us to recognise when ‘Yahweh’ is used in the Old Testament. ‘Yahweh’ is printed ‘*LORD*’, whereas ‘Adon’ or ‘Adonai’ are printed ‘*Lord*’.

I shall be satisfied when I awake in your likeness

Spurgeon writes in his commentary on the Psalms (THE TREASURY OF DAVID), ‘The smell of the furnace is upon this present psalm, but there is evidence in the last verse that he who wrote it came unharmed out of the flame. We have in the present plaintive song, an appeal to heaven from the persecutions of earth.’

David may have written this psalm when Saul was seeking his life (cp. 1 Samuel 23:26). He knew that he had not done anything wrong to merit such dreadful treatment at the hands of Saul (cp. 1 Samuel 24:11) and he cried out to God to vindicate him (1–5). We often come before the Lord with little passion or urgency in our prayers. Notice how David calls upon the Lord – ‘*Hear ... attend to my cry; give ear*’ (1). He prayed that the Lord would protect him (6–12). He then ended his prayer confident that God would deliver him (13–14) and one day would bring him to heaven (15).

David prayed, ‘*Show your marvellous lovingkindness .(or ‘steadfast love’) by your right hand*’ (7). He could be confident in the face of danger because God loved him. He had proved this in many ways and had experienced wonderful deliverances from danger and death. Let us also encourage ourselves in God’s steadfast love for us .

The ‘*men of the world*’ (14) live for this world and its passing pleasures (cp. Philippians 3:19; 1 John 2:15–17). When they die, their pleasures are no more and they have to leave their wealth behind them. **After death there is judgment (Hebrews 9:27), but the child of God has a glorious eternity. We will be made perfect in righteousness and will see the face of our Saviour.** The Christian is able to say, ‘*I shall be satisfied when I awake in your likeness*’ (15). Let us close with some words from the New Testament: *Beloved, now we are the children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure* (1 John 3:2–3).

HAGGAI

Haggai and Zechariah both prophesied during the reign of King Darius II of Persia, approximately 520 BC. Work on rebuilding the temple had ceased several years earlier on account of slander and opposition. These two men encouraged and challenged the Jews to restart their work on the temple (Ezra 5:1–2).

Both Haggai and Zechariah repeatedly describe God as ‘*the LORD of hosts*’. It is a great comfort to know that though Satan and evil men oppose us, God and his mighty army of angels are on our side. Why should we fear?

Outline of Haggai

Haggai’s prophecies were given over a period of fewer than four months (1:1; 2:10,20) during the second year of Darius II (520 BC).

1. First message (Month 6, day 1 — mid-August)
 - The word of God to a lethargic people – 1:1–11
 - The people’s response – 1:12–15
2. Second message (Month 7, day 21 — October)
 - The temple builders encouraged – 2:1–5
 - Future glory promised – 2:6–9
3. Third message (Month 9, day 24 — December)
 - An unclean people – 2:10–14
 - Past curses – future blessings – 2:15–19
4. Fourth message (Month 9, day 24 — December)
 - A message of encouragement for Zerubbabel – 2:20–23

Recommended commentaries for Haggai:

T.V. Moore: Haggai & Malachi (published by Banner of Truth).

Iain M. Duguid: Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi (published by Evangelical Press).

The time has not come ...

The rebuilding of the temple had been halted through enemy slander and opposition (Ezra 4:24) and fifteen years had passed without any attempt being made to restart the work. The discouraged people had fallen into spiritual lethargy and had become complacent, saying, *'The time has not come, the time that the LORD'S house should be built'* (2). They had redirected their time, energy and money into building beautiful houses for themselves (4,9). Their excuse for neglecting God's house was, *'The time has not come.'* **We may have good intentions to give more of our time or money to God's work in the future, but such intentions rarely come to anything.** Satan is quite happy to see us have good intentions and neglect the work of God because *'the time has not come'*.

There is no harm in improving our homes or in seeking a better job, but if such things become priorities in our lives, they will ensnare us and lead us into spiritual apathy and sin. If bettering ourselves means that we will be less useful in our local church or damage our family life, let us beware! The Lord Jesus said, *'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you'* (Matthew 6:33). We must never forget that the Christian life is one of warfare (Ephesians 6:10–18). Our great enemy, the devil, will do all in his power to discourage us so that we will drop out of the fight. It is all too easy for us to settle down to a life of ease but we must not give up. We must rather seek the Lord for the grace to persevere when we face setbacks and discouragement in our work for him.

Have you been lethargic in your Christian life? That is just what Satan wants! The time has now come for you to stir yourself up to pray and to work for the Lord.

*Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease,
While others fight to win the prize,
Or sail through storm-tossed seas?*

(Isaac Watts)

Consider your ways!

We saw yesterday that discouragement can easily lead to spiritual apathy. We may then look for an escape by turning to material things and worldly pleasures and forget that we are to *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*. God was not indifferent to his people's neglect of his house which had not yet been rebuilt. He sent drought and poor harvests to the people because of their sinful apathy (6, 9–11). They suffered rampant inflation so that *he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes* (6). Our politicians generally fail to recognise that economic troubles are often rooted in sin and corruption, and a refusal to obey his holy Word.

God sent Haggai with a message for his people: '*Consider your ways!*' (5,7). The Lord urged them to bring wood from the mountain slopes and to build the temple so that he would take pleasure in it and be glorified (8). *The people feared the presence of the LORD* and they took the message to heart. God stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel, the governor, Joshua, the high priest, and the people to obey him and they worked on the temple as Haggai continued to encourage them (12–15).

When we read God's Word or hear it preached, we must expect both rebuke and encouragement. If things are going wrong for us, could it be that God is saying to us, '*Consider your ways!*'? We must not make excuses that the time is not ripe for obedience to God. **The time has come for us to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the work of God.** As we obey him, we will increasingly know his awesome presence among us (12).

*Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the childlike praying love
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And fill me from this very hour.*

(Charles Wesley)

‘Be strong,’ ... says the LORD, ‘and work; for I am with you’

Zerubbabel, Joshua the high priest, and the people had been rebuilding the temple for four weeks when God gave Haggai another message for them (1–2; cp. 1:15). Some older people who remembered the glory of the previous temple felt that the new house of God would never match that temple for splendour and beauty (3). The Lord encouraged Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people in the face of this pessimism and despair: *‘Yet now be strong, ... and work; for I am with you’* (4). The Lord promised, *‘The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former’* (9). We must not look for God’s glory and peace in magnificent temples or cathedrals (cp. John 4:21–22), but in his church which is his temple (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 3:20–21). **We do well to learn the lessons from the past, but we must not fall into the error of living in the past so that we are useless in the present.** We have different challenges and opportunities from those of past generations. God will build his church and fulfil his wise purposes.

Some believe that *‘the desire of all nations’* (7) is a prophecy referring to Christ. T.V. Moore argues convincingly against this view, pointing out that ‘Christ in fact is not the desire of all nations, but rather their aversion. He is *“a root out of dry ground”*, having *“no beauty that we should desire him”*’ (Isaiah 53:2). – HAGGAI & MALACHI, pages 75,76.

The new temple would not be richly adorned with gold and silver as Solomon’s temple had been but the Lord reminded his people, *‘The silver is mine, and the gold is mine’* (8). David had acknowledged this when he gathered in the offerings for the first temple (1 Chronicles 29:14,16). Matthew Henry comments, ‘If we have silver and gold, we must serve and honour God with it, for it is all his own; we have but the use of it; the property remains in him; but if we have not silver and gold to honour him with, we must honour him with such as we have, and he will accept us, for he needs it not; all the silver and gold in the world are his already.’ **Are you honouring God with all that he has given you (Proverbs 3:9–10)?**

From this day forward I will bless you

Two months passed by before the Lord spoke again through the prophet. The date, the twenty-fourth of the ninth month is very significant, being given three times (10,18 and 20). God gave Haggai two messages, one for the priests and the other for Zerubbabel (10,20; cp. verse 1). In the meantime Zechariah had also prophesied, calling upon the people to return to the Lord (Zechariah 1:1–3).

The Lord told Haggai to speak to the priests about the law concerning defilement. They confirmed that holy meat carried in the fold of their garments would not sanctify other food that was touched by those garments. They also agreed that anything that was holy would become unclean if touched by someone who had been defiled through contact with a corpse (10–13; cp. Numbers 19:13,22). The people had been polluted by their past disobedience and their work and offerings were unclean (14). Now, three months after the work on the temple had started (10; cp. 1:15), God promised that he would begin to bless them: *‘But from this day forward I will bless you’* (19).

God gave Haggai a message for Zerubbabel telling him that he would *shake heaven and earth* (21; cp. verse 6). Matthew Henry comments, ‘If the earth be shaken, it is to shake the wicked out of it (Job 38:13). In the apocalyptic visions, earthquakes bode no ill to the church. Here the heavens and the earth are shaken, that proud oppressors may be broken and brought down.’ Zerubbabel was God’s chosen servant to accomplish his work. God said that he would overthrow kingdoms but [Zerubbabel would be safely kept (23). The Lord would make him as *‘a signet ring’* watching over him and protecting him as a treasured possession (23).

Zerubbabel foreshadows God’s greater servant, the Lord Jesus (Isaiah 42:1; Acts 4:27,30) whose human descent is traced through him (Matthew 1:12). God has also chosen every Christian and we are precious in his sight (Romans 8:28–39). **Let us encourage ourselves in the Lord as we serve him.**

JAMES

There are three men in the New Testament with the name ‘James’, two of them being numbered with the twelve disciples – James the son of Zebedee, brother of John; James the son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:2–3; Acts 1:13). The other one is James, son of Joseph and Mary, half-brother of the Lord Jesus (Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19). Though we cannot be sure which of the three wrote this letter, it is traditionally accepted that it was James, the half-brother of Jesus. James was not a believer before the crucifixion of Christ (John 7:5). The Lord Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7) and he was in the upper room with Mary and his brothers on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). He became a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9).

James wrote his letter to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine (1:1). He warns us against false religion, stressing that faith must be seen in action and showing how faith is to be worked out in our lives. Faith without works is dead (2:20) and though good works do not save us, they are an evidence of true faith (2:18).

Outline of James

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|------------------------------------|---|---------|
| 1. Introduction | – | 1:1 |
| 2. Faith and trial | – | 1:2–20 |
| 3. Faith and obedience | – | 1:21–27 |
| 4. Faith and favouritism | – | 2:1–13 |
| 5. Faith and works | – | 2:14–26 |
| 6. Faith and control of the tongue | – | 3:1–12 |
| 7. Faith and wisdom | – | 3:13–18 |
| 8. Faith and humility | – | 4:1–17 |
| 9. Warnings to the rich | – | 5:1–6 |
| 10. Faith and patience | – | 5:7–12 |
| 11. Faith and prayer | – | 5:13–20 |

Two recommended commentaries for James:

Thomas Manton and Robert Johnstone: (both published by Banner of Truth).

Count it all joy when you fall into various trials

James begins his letter with a brief greeting to Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. He then makes what may appear to be an astonishing statement, ‘*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials*’ (2). How can we consider it *all joy* when persecution, hardship, disappointment, sickness and other trials come upon us?

- We must remember that God is always in control of all our circumstances. Trials belong to the *all things that work together for good* (Romans 8:28). Paul and Silas were flogged and unjustly imprisoned in Philippi, but they prayed and sang praises to God in the prison. The jailer and his family were wonderfully saved that night (Acts 16:23–34).
- The testing of our faith produces *patience* (‘endurance’). This is essential to the process of making us *perfect and complete* (3–4). The Greek translated ‘*perfect*’ indicates ‘maturity in character’; it has nothing to do with sinless perfection. Maturity does not come from chasing after sensational experiences, but in the school of affliction. Testing and chastening are for our profit, producing godly character (Romans 5:3–5; Hebrews 12:11).
- We must remember that suffering is not for ever. Glory will be revealed in us when Christ returns (Romans 8:18).

Our attitude to testing is all important! We may not feel full of joy when our faith is being tried, but it will help us if we see it as part of God’s wise and loving purpose for us. Job was able to exclaim through his grief and tears, ‘*But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold*’ (Job 23:10).

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

(‘K’ in Rippon’s Selection, 1787)

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God

We are often very perplexed and distraught when our faith is tested. We certainly need much wisdom if we are to honour God and to be able to deal with doubts whispered by Satan. The advice and prayers of Christian friends are a great help at such times, but we must also seek the Lord: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him* (5). The Greek of this verse says, ‘Let him ask the giving God’. What an encouragement this is for us to come to God in prayer when we are in need or troubled! The Lord gladly hears prayer providing that we come to him in faith and with the right motives (without *doubting* or being *double-minded*). Those who do not pray in faith are unstable and they will not receive anything from the Lord 6–8). **Are you passing through a testing time? Have you asked God for wisdom and grace to help you in this trial? Are you trusting in him?**

*Oh, what peace we often forfeit!
O what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

(Joseph M. Scriven)

Poverty or loss may prove to be a great trial to a believer and there are words of wisdom to the poor and the rich in verses 9 to 11. Poverty makes some people bitter and full of envy but wisdom in poverty teaches us to be content (cp. Philippians 4:11–12; 1 Timothy 6:6). We know that we will be exalted in heaven (9).

Wealth has its dangers and trials (1 Timothy 6:17–18). The rich Christian must never depend on his wealth but remember that his riches could vanish in a moment (cp. Job 1:13–22). He must be generous in his giving and humbly depend on the Lord at all times. If God has blessed us with material comforts and possessions, we must never make a ‘god’ of them. We are not in this world for ever and we cannot take our possessions with us when we die (10–11).

Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’

The words ‘*trials*’ and ‘*temptation*’ (2,12) come from the same Greek noun which means ‘a testing’. There is blessing for those who persevere when tested, but they will only receive such blessing if they react to their trials with a godly, positive attitude. If you are hard-pressed and tried, remember, trial leads to great blessings and you will receive the welcome and commendation of our precious Saviour and *the crown of life* when your earthly journey is done (12).

We must distinguish between the testing of our faith (2–3,12) and temptation to sin (13–15). God tests our faith (eg. Hebrews 11:17) but he does not tempt us to sin: *Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’* (13). The tendency to make excuses for sin and to shift the blame began in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:12–13). Some claim that they would not sin if God prevented them from being tempted. That will not do with God. Thousands of believers have been providentially placed in circumstances where temptation comes upon them, but they resolutely resist it (eg. Joseph; Genesis 39:7–12).

Temptation also rises from within ourselves through our sinful nature (14). Satan is also called ‘*the tempter*’ (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5) and he will see to it that sin appears to be an attractive option for us. We must recognise that we may encourage temptation through our own thought life. The Puritan Thomas Manton comments, ‘The soul of man is chiefly and mainly made up of desires; like a sponge, it is always thirsting, and sucking of something to fill itself’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 93).

May our great desire be to have a closer walk with the Lord. Never forget, though sin may appear to satisfy us, it brings forth death (15; cp. Romans 6:23). **Are you battling with temptation? Temptation is not sin, it is yielding to it that is sinful.** The Lord Jesus was tempted but never sinned (Matthew 4:1–11; Hebrews 2:18). He will give you the grace and strength to overcome if you will but look to him for help (1 Corinthians 10:13; Hebrews 2:18).

The Father of lights, with whom there is no ...shadow of turning

James appeals to his readers throughout his letter by addressing them as *'my brethren'* (1:2,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:10,12; 4:11; 5:9,10,12, 19). There is a tenderness in his appeal as he writes, *'Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren'* (16, 19). This verse links the previous verses (13–14) with those that follow. James wants us to understand that God does not tempt us to sin; on the contrary, he is the giver of *every good gift and every perfect gift* (17). The best of all those gifts is the gift of his beloved Son to save us from our sins (John 3:16).

God is described as *'the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning'* (17). The word *'Father'* is used here to show God as the creator of the sun, moon and stars which light up the sky (Genesis 1:14–18) and that he is the source of light – physical, intellectual and spiritual. *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all* (1 John 1:5). The heavenly lights created by God have their variations. We are left in darkness when the sun and the moon are eclipsed or hidden by the darkness of the night, but God is immutable. He never changes and he is unfailing in his goodness.

God is also sovereign in our salvation. He chose us in Christ before he made the world (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). *Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth* (18; cp. 1 Peter 1:23). This is also emphasised in the Gospel of John; those who are children of God are born, *not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God* (John 1:12–13). We owe our salvation with all its blessings to God.

The first-fruits of the harvest in Bible times were offered to the Lord with thanksgiving and in anticipation of a good harvest (Numbers 18:12; Proverbs 3:9). We belong to God as *a kind of first-fruits of his creatures* (18). **We owe him so much. Let us be sure to live as those who belong to him.** The hymn 'Great is Thy faithfulness' is based on verse 17 and Lamentations 3:22–25. Read through it and offer your thanksgiving and praises to God.

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves

The Lord uses his Word to bring us to new birth in Christ (18) and this should influence our attitude in the way that we hear, receive and do that Word.

- We must *be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath* (19). Beware of those who are more fond of talking and arguing about the Bible than of listening to it. They often grow angry in debate and are not *slow to wrath*. Such behaviour does not promote godliness (20). Are you eager to hear God's Word preached and to learn from it?
- We are to *receive with meekness the implanted word* (21). God's Word is here likened to a seed planted in our hearts. The ground for that precious seed must be prepared so that it can grow and prosper in our lives. This preparation comes from dealing with remaining sin in our lives, putting away all filthiness and wickedness, in thought, word and deed. We will then receive God's Word with a meekness and humility.
- We must not only believe the Bible but also practise its teaching in our lives: *Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves* (22). There are two ways of looking in a mirror – with a passing glance or with an intense gaze (23–25). The passing glance does not take in any detail and the man who is not a doer of the Word is like one who is content with the passing glance. The Word has had little chance to show him what kind of man he is. **We must beware of deceiving ourselves into thinking that all is well when it is not.**

We must take time over our reading and hearing of the Bible and discipline ourselves to meditate on the teaching of this precious book. The Word of God is described as *the perfect law of liberty* (25). This does not mean that we are encouraged to live as we please. If we really love the Lord, we will gladly obey his Word which points the way to true liberty (John 8:31–32), to freedom from the power of sin and divine wrath. If we do not fashion our lives by it, we are not in a healthy spiritual state.

Pure and undefiled religion

Verses 26 and 27 give a preview of three areas of concern which are highlighted in the letter of James. If we have no concern for these things we must question whether our Christianity is genuine:

1. We must control our tongues. If we do not control our tongues, our religion is acceptable to God. We will be thinking about this when we read James chapter 3.
2. We must have compassion for those in need.
3. We must lead holy lives.

Verse 27 is not a definition of the Christian faith but it does show how *pure and undefiled religion before God* should work out in our lives. Widows and orphans are very vulnerable and were more so in Bible times. They are ripe for exploitation by wicked people and the Lord is especially concerned for them (cp. Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17).

Where do we begin in our deeds of compassion? We must always give priority to fellow believers (Galatians 6:9–10).^{*} We must make ourselves aware of needs among those in our own fellowship and to do this we must take the trouble to be interested in others. Do not leave the pastor, elders or deacons to do all the visiting. There are those who need your help and spiritual encouragement. Some who are frail or infirm need jobs doing around their home and children of one-parent families need the love of the whole church.

We may easily be influenced and polluted by the world around us (cp. Romans 12:2; 2 Peter 1:4) and *pure religion* is to keep ourselves untainted by its ways. We can hardly shine in the world around us if it has soiled us (Philippians 2:15). **Happy is the person who has died to self-interest, who has a compassion for the needy and who lives a godly life in this dark world! How is your religion before God?**

^{*} When giving to disaster appeals, be sure that you give through reputable evangelical organisations. In many areas of great need overseas, Christians are the victims of persecution. They are often neglected when local officials are used to channel aid.

Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus ... with partiality

When James condemns wrong attitudes and practices, he is gentle in his appeals. He again addresses his readers as *'my brethren'* and *'my beloved brethren'* (1,5). He now deals with favouritism, where we may show respect to one person coming to the church, while ignoring another. He writes, *'Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality'* (1). He describes two visitors, one a very rich man, dressed in fine garments and having gold rings on his fingers. The other is a poor man whose clothing is shabby and filthy. If we welcome the rich man and despise the poor man we do not follow the example of *the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory* (Matthew 11:5). James is quite clear in teaching that pure religion (1:27) does not favour the rich or ignore the poor (1–9).

We must never despise those who are poor, those who are of a different race, or those who have learning disabilities. If a Christian has a snobbish attitude to certain people, there is something seriously wrong with his faith. Why is it wrong to show partiality or favouritism to certain people?

- It is evil-minded to have such an attitude (4)
- Social standing makes no difference to the Lord. God has not chosen his people on the basis of such considerations. How dare we use such criteria in our dealings with others? James asks, *'Has not God chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him?'* (5). Let us remember that the Lord Jesus became poor in order to save us from our sins (2 Corinthians 8:9).
- The rich are often the very ones who oppress Christians (there are of course, notable exceptions). Prominent and wealthy people were often the instigators of persecution against the early church (cp. Acts 13:50; 19:23–41).

Do we make everyone who comes into our church feel very welcome and wanted, regardless of social standing or race?

The royal law according to the Scripture

What is *the royal law according to the Scripture* (8)? It is ‘*you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*’ It is interesting to note that this is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18 and that verse 15 of the same chapter warns against showing partiality. Why is this called ‘*the royal law*’? It is because it is the law of the kingdom of God and those who belong to the Lord will obey him. The Lord Jesus emphasised this law which undergirds the other laws (Matthew 22:36–40).

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan after he had been asked, ‘*Who is my neighbour?*’ (Luke 10:25–37). Our *neighbour* is more than the person living next door to us. He is anyone whom God brings to us in his providence. Just think for a moment about those in your church. Do you love them as you love yourself? Listen to the words of Robert Johnstone. – ‘When the icy fingers of selfishness chill the soul, and the whisper rises, “Have I not loved my neighbour, my brother, enough?” the still small voice of conscience answers, “Be not weary in well-doing: hast thou cared for his interests with the same ardour as for thine own? Hast thou shown to him the same devotedness as to thyself, of affection like the love with which Jesus devoted himself for thee?” (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 161).

The royal law stands as a whole. To show partiality is to sin and this renders us guilty in the sight of God. We are then breakers of God’s law as are adulterers or murderers (10–11). The Word of God is called *the law of liberty* (12; cp. 1:25). It is true that Christ has fulfilled the law for us but this does not mean that we can live as we please. God has called us to be holy, not to be lawless (1 Peter 1:15–16). We are *under law towards Christ* (1 Corinthians 9:21); this is a law of liberty. In our salvation *mercy triumphs over judgment* (12). **We are free from condemnation and from the curse of the law, but we are also free in Christ to obey the law.** We have been set free to overcome temptation with the help of the Holy Spirit.

I will show you my faith by my works

The great Reformer, Martin Luther had struggled to observe the ritual and works imposed by the Roman Catholic Church but this failed to give him peace with God. The biblical teaching of justification by faith alone brought liberty to his soul but he misunderstood the teaching in James that works are necessary as an evidence of true faith. He called the letter of James ‘a right strawy epistle’. It is most important that we are quite clear in our minds about the relationship of faith to works.

Some people teach that a profession of faith is all that is required for us to be saved and that any looking for works as an evidence of faith is a denial of the gospel. Others say that they are more interested in ‘practical Christianity’ and that what we believe and in whom we believe are not really important. Both are wrong. What James is saying is that faith without works is not true faith. *Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead* (17, repeated in verses 20 and 26).

James presses home his point by giving two examples of dead faith:

- We must not be like the person who is all talk but does not ‘do’. If we see a fellow-Christian in need but only express pious sentiments and do nothing to help that person, our faith is without profit; it is useless to God and to the needy Christian (14–16).
- We must not confuse believing in God with saving faith which trusts in Christ alone to save us and which owns him as the Lord of our lives. Most of the Jewish leaders rejected the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ though they believed in God (John 5:18; 7:48). *Even the demons believe – and tremble!* (19). They confessed Jesus to be the Son of God and the Holy One of God (Matthew 8:29; Luke 4:34) but are doomed!

Works without faith will never save us. There are many kind and helpful people who have no faith in Christ; faith without works likewise falls short. James challenges us, ‘*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*’ (18). **Do your family, fellow-Christians, neighbours and colleagues at work see your faith by your works?**

By works faith was made perfect

James has given two illustrations of false faith (14–19) and he now gives two examples of true faith in God:

- Abraham believed God’s promise that he would have a son and through him millions of descendants, even though Sarah had been unable to bear children and was now very old. He believed God and was justified (23–24) but years later God told him to sacrifice Isaac. He knew that God must keep his promise and if necessary would raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17–19). Abraham proved that he was prepared to offer up his son but God spared Isaac. Abraham’s actions proved the reality of his faith in God. James asks, ‘*Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?*’ (22). Our faith must be perfected (or ‘completed’) by works.
- Rahab was a heathen woman who came to faith in God (Joshua 2:9–11). She showed her faith by hiding the Israelite spies at great risk to her own life (25; cp. Hebrews 11:31). She did not pay mere lip-service to believing in God. She helped his servants and proved that she had a faith that worked.

Some Christians have a very negative view of the Christian life and lay stress on the things that we must not do. This has its place, but our faith must also be seen in compassion for others and in faithful service for the Lord. James points out that just as a corpse has no life, faith without works is also lifeless: *As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also* (26). **How is your faith seen in your life? Never content yourself with an empty profession of faith.**

*Teach me to live! no idler let me be
But in thy service hand and heart employ,
Prepared to do thy bidding cheerfully,
Be this my highest, this my holiest joy.*

(Ellen E. Burman)

If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man

Pure religion involves not only good works, but also the control of the tongue (1:26–27). There is a word of caution here to those who desire to be teachers in the church. Preachers and teachers, by reason of their office, tell others how they should live, but if they fail to live up to their own words, they *shall receive a stricter judgment* (1). The Puritan, Thomas Manton, does not see verse 1 as a warning to would-be teachers in the church, but to those who judge others, seeking to put them right. This is a very common sin. If we have a critical spirit, we need to remember that the Lord hears our words and sees just how well we live up to those high ideals that we find so lacking in others (cp. 4:11; Matthew 7:1–5).

The manner in which we control our tongue also reveals our spiritual condition. If we can control the tongue, we are able to control the whole body (2). Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23); this must also include control of the tongue, which though it is small, is a very unruly member of the body. James illustrates how the tongue, a little member of the body, is able to do great damage. A small metal bit is used to control a strong horse and a great ship is turned by a very small rudder (3–4). The tongue is a little member which is like a fire that is able to set a whole forest ablaze and hell knows its potential to cause great damage (5–6). **You may be able to control your temper, your sinful desires and passions, but how is it with your tongue?**

If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect (‘mature’) *man* (2). Many well-meaning Christians measure spirituality by the ability to speak in tongues. That is a great mistake. Our Christian maturity is rather revealed by our ability to control our tongue.

No man can tame the tongue

We may sometimes apologise because we have ‘said the wrong thing’. Why do we ‘say the wrong thing’? It is because *no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil full of deadly poison* (7–8). Our problem may be that we have little desire to control this unruly member of our body.

We utter the most sublime words of praise with our tongue when we sing our psalms and hymns; with that same tongue which blesses God, *we curse men who have been made in the likeness of God* (9). This should not be so! James takes more illustrations from nature to show the inconsistency of such behaviour. He asks, ‘*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs?*’ (11–12). The lashing received from a harsh tongue is often harder to bear than any physical injury. Many a church has been torn apart and destroyed by unruly tongues. **Have you hurt others with your tongue? Apologise to them and ask them to forgive you and seek the Lord’s forgiveness also.**

No man can tame the tongue’ (8), so should we just give up trying? No! Remember that *the things which are impossible with men are possible with God* (Luke 18:27). How can we then, with God’s help, control this unruly evil (8)? We must pause and think before we speak (cp. 1:19). We should remember that the Lord is the unseen listener of all that we say. *Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one* (Colossians 4:6).

*If you your lips
Would keep from slips,
Of five things please beware —
Of whom you speak,
To whom you speak,
And when, and why, and where!*

(Matthew Mercer)

The wisdom that is from above

James asks, ‘*Who is wise and understanding among you?*’ He answers, ‘*Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom* (13). He then goes on to show that there are two kinds of wisdom; there is a true wisdom which comes *from above*, from God, and there is a false wisdom which is earthly and lacks spiritual light; it is ‘*the wisdom of this world*’ (1 Corinthians 1:20); it is sensual, seeking to gratify the flesh and it is demonic (15). How does this dreadful wisdom show itself? It is seen in *bitter envy and self-seeking ... confusion and every evil thing*; it boasts and lies against the truth (14,16).

Wisdom has been described as ‘the ability to make the right use of knowledge’ (Chambers Dictionary). If we are making the right use of our knowledge of the Lord, we will display the lovely characteristics found in *the wisdom that is from above* (17). What are we told about this wisdom?

- It is *pure*; it is not contaminated by the dreadful sins mentioned in verses 14 to 16.
- It is *peaceable*; there is no trace of bitter envy or strife (14; 4:1). It does not seek peace at the expense of truth, however.
- It is *gentle*; this gentleness is not a sign of weakness; it is shown by thoughtfulness and sensitivity to others (cp. 2 Timothy 2.24).
- It is *willing to yield* (*easy to be intreated* – AV). It is shown in having a reasonable attitude and by being approachable; it is not obstinate.
- It is *full of mercy and good fruits* (eg. the fruit of the Holy Spirit – Galatians 5:22–23).

Those who have the wisdom that is from above sow precious seed in peace which yields *the fruit of righteousness* (18). Are you serious about having this wisdom, about leading a life that pleases God? Have you asked God for this wisdom (see chapter 1, verse 5)? **Think about this ‘wisdom that is from above’ and seek to show it more and more in your own life.**

You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss

James asks, ‘Where do wars and fights come from among you?’ and then answer his question: ‘Do they come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?’ (1). Sadly, the same is true of many churches in the twenty-first century and ‘wars and fights’ do much harm to the Lord’s work.

These things are a symptom of battles going on in the lives of professing Christians (1). If we allow ourselves to be driven by the wisdom of this world, we will be self-centred and envious of others (3:14–16). We will live for our own selfish ambition and gratification rather than living to please God. James writes, ‘You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain’ (2). This does not necessarily mean physical murder. *Whoever hates his brother is a murderer* (1 John 3:15). Covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3:5) and the covetous person never knows satisfaction or contentment.

James gives us two reasons for not obtaining the things that we desire:

- A failure to pray. *You do not have because you do not ask* (2). We know that we ought to come frequently to our heavenly Father with our needs but so often we do not make them the subject of earnest prayer. How foolish we are when God is so good to us (cp. Philippians 4:19).
- A failure to have the right motives in prayer because our desires are wrong and our hearts not right with God. Wrong praying will get us nowhere! ‘*You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures*’ (3). Thomas Manton comments, ‘We miss when we ask amiss’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 338). **It is a dreadful thing to be out of touch with God and to lose the enjoyment of sweet fellowship with him because of sin in our hearts.** Ponder the prayer of Proverbs 30:7–9. When did you last pray like that? Remember that *godliness with contentment is great gain* (1 Timothy 6:6).

Friendship with the world is enmity with God

Additional readings: Romans 12:1–2; 1 John 2:15–17.

If we want to have pure religion, we must keep ourselves *unspotted from the world* (1:27). Worldliness is a way of life which refuses to submit to God's rule. It is seen in such sins as self-seeking, covetousness, pride (2,6) and loving pleasure more than loving God (1,3; cp. 2 Timothy 3:4). Worldliness stifles spiritual desire and fails to give lasting satisfaction (2–3).

James makes it quite clear that a worldly Christian is guilty of spiritual adultery. The church is the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7–9). He has purchased us at a tremendous cost through his death on the cross and he demands our undivided loyalty (1 Corinthians 6:19–20; 1 Peter 1:18–19). James asks, '*Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*' (4). J.B. Phillips paraphrases this verse, 'You are like unfaithful wives, flirting with the glamour of this world, and never realising that to be the world's lover means becoming the enemy of God!' (THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH).

What is the answer to worldliness? It is the enjoyment of Christ through daily fellowship with him. We must resist the enticements of the world (remember Christian and Faithful at Vanity Fair in John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress'). 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould' (Romans 12:2 – J.B. Phillips). Think much about the greatness of God's love for you. Can you, dare you, be worldly, when Jesus gave his life to save you? He said, '*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness*' (Matthew 6:33). You will find that there is no joy or satisfaction like that of putting God first in your life. When you do this, the world will have very little attraction for you.

*I thirst, but not as once I did,
The vain delights of earth to share;
Thy wounds, Emmanuel, all forbid
That I should seek my pleasures there.* (William Cowper)

But he gives more grace

Additional readings: Proverbs 3:31–35; Isaiah 57:15.

The NKJV has a capital ‘s’ in its translation of ‘*Spirit*’ (5). Some commentators believe that this refers to the Holy Spirit (eg. Robert Johnstone), but others (eg. Thomas Manton) believe that it refers to the corrupt spirit of man (cp. verse 2). The translators of the AV and ESV would appear to favour such a view as they use a small ‘s’ in translation. We have been purchased at great cost and it is true that the Holy Spirit yearns over us when we stray from the Lord. It is also true that we have many battles with the corrupt nature within us.

We may be uncertain in our understanding of verse 5 but there is no doubt about the wonderful promise in verse 6 – *But he gives more grace*. The meaning of the word ‘*grace*’ is favour that we do not deserve. The grace of God is marvellous because we deserve judgment for our sins, but he has had mercy on us and saved us. Thomas Manton comments, ‘Grace is nothing else but an introduction of the virtues of God into the soul’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 349). God gives sufficient grace for every trial and difficulty that we encounter (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10; Hebrews 4:16). **His grace is never exhausted and there will be more grace for every future trial of our faith.**

The proud person will not submit to God nor come to him for grace. *God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble* (6; cp. 1 Peter 5:5). The humble believer submits to God when passing through perplexing times of trial (7). Are you struggling with temptation and doubts? Humbly look to the Lord and confess your own weakness and needs. He delights to give us freely of his grace and he will never fail you.

*His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.*

(Annie Johnson Flint)

*Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil***Additional readings: 1 Peter 5:5–9.**

If submission to Christ is an essential part of being a Christian, why does James have to exhort believers to *submit to God* (7)? We continue, after our conversion to Christ, to struggle with the enticement of world, and with temptation to sin. James has already warned us about worldliness (4) and he encourages us that the Lord *gives more grace* in all our trials and battles (6). We must, therefore, submit to God if we are to know his grace working in our lives.

Submission to God involves drawing near to him every day, seeking forgiveness and cleansing from sin. We must *lament and mourn and weep* over those things which grieve the Holy Spirit and repent of them. We must humble ourselves before God and bow to his will (8–10). If we are to do these things, we must have some discipline in our lives and have a set time each day for personal devotions.

We are to submit to God but we must not submit to the devil. *Submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you* (7). Thomas Manton points out that it is the obedient Christian who has most opposition from the devil. He writes, ‘Those that have most grace feel most trouble from Satan. He envieth they should enjoy that condition and interest in God which himself hath lost’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 360). We are no longer enslaved by the devil if we belong to Christ and we are able to resist him. He is very cunning, however, and he seeks to catch us off our guard. We must be alert enough to recognise his wiles (1 Peter 5:8). Satan wants us to be proud of ourselves, hence the need to humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord (10).

Well, how are things in your Christian life? Have you been defeated and discouraged? *Draw near to God and he will draw near to you* (8). Many Christians are weak because they do not set apart time to worship and pray to God each day. As you enjoy precious fellowship with him, he will lift you up and give you more grace.

Do not speak evil of one another

Additional reading: Psalm 15:1–3; Ephesians 4:29 to 5:2.

James has already warned us about the need to bridle our tongues (1:26; 3:1–12) and he now refers to a particular sin of the tongue. He writes, ‘*Do not speak evil of one another, brethren*’ (11). We may be correct in our doctrine, faithful in church attendance and be active in serving the Lord; we may avoid the gross sins that are so prevalent in the world, and yet be worldly because we speak evil of our fellow believers. We must not disparage or defame other believers or repeat tales about one another (see Psalm 15:3). Such behaviour is sinful and we must keep ourselves from engaging in gossip.

Why is speaking evil of other believers such a dreadful sin?

- It is a sin against those for whom Christ died and whom he loves.
- It breaks God’s law which is fulfilled by love (Romans 13:10).
- It is a sin of presumption. *Who are you to judge another?* (12). It is to do something that we are neither qualified or permitted to do.
- It is pride. When we put down others, we elevate ourselves.

What should we do about those who need correction because they go astray in their doctrine or behaviour? We must not gossip behind their backs, but see them privately and seek to bring them to repentance. We need to be spiritual and gentle to exercise such a ministry (Galatians 6:1). **We must warn about those who cause trouble and divisions (Romans 16:17) but if anyone wants to gossip, close your ears.** When speaking of others, ask yourself, ‘Is it true, is it kind, is it necessary?’ Be an encourager of other Christians, speak well of them to others, but *do not speak evil of one another*.

*O give thine own sweet rest to me,
That I may speak with soothing power
A word in season, as from thee
To weary ones in needful hour.*

(Frances Ridley Havergal)

You ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’

Another evidence of worldly behaviour is to shut God out of our planning (13). James reminds us, ‘*You do not know what will happen tomorrow*’ and that human life is *a vapour* (14; cp. Proverbs 27:1). The uncertainty of life drives many people to go to fortune-tellers to find out what the future may hold. The Bible condemns such practices (Deuteronomy 18:9–10; Isaiah 8:19). We do not know what will happen tomorrow and neither do fortune-tellers!

It is arrogant and evil to boast of all that we will do. We should always have a submissive attitude to the will of God (16). *We ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that’* (15; cp. 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7; Philippians 2:19). We must be prayerful when we make our plans and carefully ponder the implications for ourselves, our family and our church in our decision-making. Jesus told a parable about a rich man who disregarded God in his future plans. God called that man a fool and told him that he would die that very night (Luke 12:16–21).

Arthur Pink joined his parents for breakfast on a Spring morning in 1902. His father was reading a newspaper which gave details of the forthcoming coronation of the new king. Pink recalled his father saying to his mother, ‘Oh. I am sorry to see this worded like that.’ And she said, ‘What is it?’ ‘Why,’ he said, ‘Here is a proclamation that on a certain date Prince Edward will be crowned king at Westminster and there is no Deo Volente, God willing.’ The words stuck in Arthur’s mind for the very reason that on the appointed day the future King Edward VII was ill with appendicitis and the coronation had to be postponed (THE LIFE OF ARTHUR W. PINK by Iain Murray, page 4, published by Banner of Truth). *We ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills’* (15).

If you are not a Christian, these verses are a timely reminder that you cannot be sure of the future. Dare you continue to live without Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? Turn from your sin and trust in him and he will freely forgive you. **You will then find that God will take care of you and your future and that he will never fail you nor forsake you.**

Come now, you rich, weep and howl

In the eyes of the world it is very desirable to be rich, but James has some stern words for those who are wealthy: ‘*Come now, you rich, weep and howl*’ (1). Who are these rich people whom James denounces? They could hardly be genuine Christians and may have been unconverted rich people who came into their assembly. James warns especially those who had resorted to exploitation, fraud and even murder in their quest to enjoy a life of ease and luxury (4–6). *The Lord of Sabaoth* (of hosts) does not turn a blind eye to injustice and there are echoes here of the prophecy of Amos (cp. Amos 6:1–6). If we live for pleasure and luxury, we are heading for destruction (5).

Scripture tells us of godly men who were very wealthy, eg. Job, Abraham, Joseph of Arimathea and Philemon. It is not a sin to be rich where wealth is lawfully gained. The Lord Jesus warns us about the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22). Riches do not last and we must resist the temptation to hoard money (2–3; Matthew 6:19–21) while there are desperate needs in the work of the Lord. We may not be rich, but it is dangerous to set our hearts on riches and we will never be content if we seek satisfaction in material things. The Bible warns us that *some have strayed from the faith because of the love of money and have pierced themselves through with many sorrows* (1 Timothy 6:9–10). Jesus said, ‘*You cannot serve God and mammon*’ (‘riches’ – Matthew 6:24). **Many a Christian has resisted fierce temptation and has endured persecution, but then been corrupted by money.**

If God has given us an abundance, we should show our love and gratitude to him by being generous in our giving. Thomas Manton reminds us that ‘it is hard to possess riches without sin’ (COMMENTARY ON JAMES, page 399). If God has blessed us with material things, let us remember the words of Psalm 62:10: *If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.*

Be patient

Christians are not exempt from suffering (verse 6 speaks of the murder of the just). When we are persecuted, we will face pressures to compromise our stand for Christ so that we may have some peace. When affliction seems to be unending, it is easy to give in to despair. How are we to face trials and suffering?

- We must *be patient* (7–8). The Greek word translated *be patient* means ‘to be longsuffering’. Matthew Henry describes this patience as ‘a humble acquiescing in the wisdom and will of God, with an eye to a future glorious recompense’ (BIBLE COMMENTARY). The farmer must exercise patience as he waits for rain to water the seed and later to swell the grain. It is pointless to fret or lose patience when the weather is unfavourable. He has to be patient. We too must be patient and remember the great hope that we have, of the coming of the Lord. James reminds us of the suffering of the prophets and particularly of Job. They were blessed for their perseverance (10–11).
- We must *not grumble against one another* (9). No Christian is perfect and it is easy to find fault with others while excusing ourselves. God is sovereign over all our circumstances. If we grumble, we are really complaining against God. Paul was imprisoned because of his work for Christ, but even in prison he was content (Philippians 1:12–13; 4:11–12). There was never a trace of self-pity in the apostle.
- We must remember that God has a wise purpose (‘*end*’) for us in all our trials. and that he is *very compassionate and merciful* (11). Suffering is not meaningless for the Christian (cp. Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 4:12–14).

Are you having a tough time? Remember, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35–39). He will bring you through. Be patient and keep looking to him.

Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'

Additional reading: Matthew 5:33–37.

There is a warning here against another sin of the tongue, that of the wrong use of oaths in our speech. Notice how James emphasises the importance of what he is writing *But above all, my brethren*. Oaths were used for a number of reasons:

- When making a solemn promise (1 Samuel 19:6).
- To emphasise a threat (2 Kings 6:31; Acts 23:12–16).
- To cover up a lie (Mark 14:71).

Some Christians believe that James is here forbidding the swearing by Almighty God when taking an oath in court. I believe that they are mistaken. There is a lawful use of oaths (Deuteronomy 6:13) and Abraham and Paul used oaths (Genesis 24:3; Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:23). God also made an oath when he gave his promise to Abraham (Hebrews 6:13–18). John saw an angel swearing an oath by God (Revelation 10:5–7).

What is James warning against here? It is using the name of the Lord thoughtlessly and blasphemously. Many people use the name of God to add emphasis to their speech, but that is taking the name of the Lord in vain (Exodus 20:7). God's name is sacred and we must always be careful how we use his name. The scribes and Pharisees taught that certain oaths were solemn and binding, especially those in which God's name was invoked, but others were not binding (Matthew 5:34–36; 23:16–22). This was an escape clause to allow lies and deception but Jesus forbids this evil practice.

We must not only love the truth but also be truthful so that others can rely on our word. Half-truths, 'white lies' and anything meant to deceive or to mislead are lies and will bring judgment upon us. Oaths are reserved for special occasions (eg. we may be required to swear on oath in a court of law). They are not for everyday conversation. We must say what we mean and mean what we say. *Let your 'Yes,' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No,' lest you fall into judgment* (12).

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray

The words ‘pray’ or ‘prayer’ are found in every verse of today’s reading. The Christian life is a life of prayer. Just as faith without works is dead, so also faith without prayer is dead. Christians know times of trouble as well as of joyfulness and we must look to the Lord in both situations. *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray* (13). Prayer is a great but often neglected privilege. How should we pray when we are in trouble? We must recognise that God is sovereign over all our circumstances and commit our way to him (Psalm 37:5,7–8). We should ask the Lord to deliver us but be prepared for whatever answer he gives (cp. 2 Corinthians 12:7–10). We should seek him for grace and help in our need (Hebrews 4:16). David wrote at a time of trouble, *Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to you, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I* (Psalm 61:1–2).

Matthew Henry comments, ‘Times of affliction should be praying times. To this end God sends afflictions, that we may be engaged to seek him early; and that those who have at other times neglected him, may be brought to enquire after him. The spirit is then most humble, the heart is broken and tender; and prayer is most acceptable to God when it comes from a contrite, humble spirit’ (BIBLE COMMENTARY).

We sometimes give the impression that the Christian life is a grim and cheerless affair. This does not honour to God or commend our Saviour to sinners. We have plenty to be cheerful about and we should rejoice in the Lord (Philippians 4:4). We have been saved through the amazing grace of God and we have forgiveness and cleansing from sin. We have peace with God and eternal life; we know Jesus as our Lord, Saviour and Friend. God is our heavenly Father who lovingly cares for us and we have God’s Word to direct us and to feed our souls. *Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms*’ (cp. Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). **Prayer and praise are essential in the Christian’s life. Are they in evidence in your life?**

Is anyone among you sick?

These verses are misunderstood by many. The Roman Catholic church claims that they refer to the ‘sacrament’ of extreme unction, a ritual of anointing and prayer from the priest for the dying. Local church elders should visit those who are approaching death but that is far removed from the Roman Catholic practice. Moreover, the verses are about sick people recovering, not dying. Some believe that oil was applied to soothe the afflicted part of the body because the Greek word translated, ‘anointing’ can be used to mean ‘rubbing in oil’. The text indicates that healing comes through prayer, however.

Some extreme charismatics claim that Christians should always enjoy good health. That is not true! James asks, ‘*Is any among you sick?*’ Christians do suffer illness. Some teach that if believers are ill, it is because of sin in their lives. That is nonsense! Notice the words, *But if he has committed sins* (15). The Lord may send sickness as chastisement for sin (1 Corinthians 11:29–30), but Timothy lived with poor health and there is no indication that this was because of sin (1 Timothy 5:23). Others teach that it is always God’s will to heal us and that if we are not healed it is through a lack of faith. Timothy was not healed (see above) nor was Trophimus (2 Timothy 4:20). God is sovereign in our lives and he may choose to heal us when we are sick, but we must be prepared to accept his will if we are not healed.

What should we do when we are ill? We should seek the prayers of our church and when confined to bed or home call for the elders to pray for us. We should reflect on our lives and if we know that we have sinned, we must confess that sin and pray for forgiveness. Prayer must be with faith (*the prayer of faith*; cp. 1:6). Such faith cannot be worked up and it does not depend on feelings. **Faith is a settled confidence in God and it is seen in submission to his will in sickness and in health (cp. 4:15). Do you pray with faith?**

*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much***Additional reading: Matthew 5:23–24**

What should we do when we sin? We must acknowledge our sin before God and seek his forgiveness (cp. Psalm 51:1–4). When that sin has been against others, we must also confess it to them (16). We must seek their forgiveness and prayers, that we may be healed (the healing here is from the harmful effects of that particular sin in our lives). This is not easy! It is very humbling to say, ‘I am sorry’ and to acknowledge that we have been sinful but if this were practised more often, our churches would be spared much trouble and division. There is also a place for seeking the help and prayers of our fellow believers as we face up to our sins and weaknesses. We must be sure that those in whom we confide are godly, mature Christians who can be entrusted with our confidences.

There is a great encouragement here for us to pray. *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much* (16). The Greek verb translated ‘effective’ carries the idea of energy. This has nothing to do with fanatical, worked up frenzy such as that of the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:25–28). Prayer must be energetic, fervent and linked to a righteous life. If we are not righteous, our prayers are useless (Psalm 66:18). Elijah, *a man with a nature like ours*, with the same weaknesses, gave himself to prayer, trusting in almighty God to answer his prayers (17–18). **He was an ordinary man who obtained extraordinary results through prayer!** Do persevere in prayer, especially when the answer seems so long in coming. How can you improve your prayer life?

- Discipline yourself to have a set time for prayer each day and regard it as precious.
- Be determined to be at the prayer meeting(s) of your church.
- If you are neglecting prayer in your life, confess your coldness of heart to God and plead with him to lay on your heart the desire to pray. You will soon find that he is answering your prayers.

He who turns a sinner from the error of his way

If we have no concern for our fellow-believers, our faith is dead (2:14–17). We must also be concerned for backsliders. We all have a tendency to wander away from the Lord, and in these verses, this is linked with deviation from the truth. James writes, ‘*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back*’ etc. You may be asking, ‘If we are eternally secure and cannot lose our salvation (John 10:27–29), how are we to understand verse 20?’

- ‘*Death*’ may refer to judgment through chastisement (cp. 1 Corinthians 11:30 – ‘*and many sleep*’).
- We must not take for granted the salvation of any backslider. The Lord knows those who belong to him but there are false conversions. The ‘backslider’ may not have been truly saved.

We must not forget those who have strayed from the Lord but continue to pray for them and seek to lead them back to Christ. It will not do for us to say that if they are the Lord’s, then he will surely restore them. These verses in James make it clear that we are not to be idle onlookers! *He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins* (20). **Think about those known to you who have backslidden. Do you still love them and long for their restoration? When did you last pray for them or seek to encourage them to return to Christ?**

*Lord speak to me, that I may speak
In living echoes of thy tone;
As thou hast sought, so let me seek
Thy erring children, lost and lone.*

*O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
The wandering and the wavering feet!
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
Thy hungering ones with manna sweet!*

(F. R. Havergal)