

Truth for Life: Book of James

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to the letter of James and to chapter 1. And this is how we're going to outline it. There are five chapters, and the translators of the NIV, the New International Version, have given headings to certain sections.

So I'm going to take their headings, which are not, of course, part of God's Word, but they're helpful in dividing the material up. So we're going to take their headings as the subheadings of the five points of this presentation this morning.

So here we go without any further delay. Chapter 1, and the first heading is Trials and Temptations. And I'll give you, as well as the heading, one key verse in that section.

So now you know exactly what we're going to do. So in this first section, I'm going to take verses 2 and 3 as the key statement.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds. Now let me interrupt James for a moment and say, that already sounds strange.

[1 : 05] Count it joy when you face trials of many kinds. But James doesn't leave us hanging in the air. He gives a reason for it. Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. Now here are two truths for the price of one.

Firstly, trials are not to be seen as evil originating with Satan. Let me give you this and write it at least in the notebook of your mind, although I guess you'll be able to read it afterwards in the book.

Trials, excuse me, temptations are sent by Satan to make us fall. Trials are sent by God to make us stand. But God is in complete control of all of the temptations and all of the trials.

In other words, God is sovereign over everything that comes into your life. Paul tells the Ephesians, God works everything according to the counsel of His will.

[2 : 19] And we so often focus on the secondary cause of things that come into our life. So difficulty, a problem, a trial, a pain, a pressure comes into our lives and we focus on whoever brought it in or the circumstances that brought it into our lives there and then.

But that's only the secondary issue. The primary issue is that God, sovereign over all, allowed that thing to happen. And instead of focusing on who or what brought it to us at that moment, our focus should be on who sent it or allowed it in the first place.

The simplest illustration I know of how to demonstrate that is that when in the mail you find something deeply disturbing or hurtful or painful or sorrowful or in a phrase that is bad news, you don't find the mailman and kick him.

It has nothing to do with him. He's simply the messenger. And when something is in the mail that's really a big surprise and hugely joyful, indeed a miracle like a rebate from the IRS, you don't go chasing the mailman and kiss him.

And if he was my mailman, you certainly wouldn't want to do that. In other words, our focus always needs to be, look, God is in control of whatever comes into my life.

- [3 : 42] And I must learn to respond primarily to God and to his wisdom in allowing this thing to happen. And this is something, incidentally, that is totally overlooked by one of the greatest religious plagues you have in this country, which is those who preach a prosperity gospel.
- That as long as you believe certain things, God intends you to be healthy and wealthy and all of those things and never to have problems and pressures, then why did he let Jesus down?
- If that's how God intends us all to be, to be for our lives to be without any trials, without any pressures, without any temptations, and to be healthy and wealthy throughout our lives, why did he let Jesus down?
- But this is how we should approach it. The second thing, we're going to have to move on. I know you want this to be developed. You can read it how it is afterwards. But we need to get to the second section, which is listening and doing.
- And the key verse here is verse 22. Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.
- [4 : 54] Look back to verse 29 where James says everyone should be quick to listen. We really should be eager to listen to God when he speaks to us.
- Whether it's at home in our own private Bible study, whether it's in a Sunday school class, a Bible study group, and especially when we come to church and listen to the preaching of God's word.
- We should be eager to hear what God is saying to us. I find it a very interesting thing that in our church circles and my church circles culturally are very much the same as here at First Baptist Pickens.
- Our emphasis is on the preacher. So here you have, I'll take a chance here, here you have a visiting preacher this morning. If you meet someone from another church during the week and you say to them, oh, we had a visiting preacher on Sunday, and they say, what was the service like?
- You will ignore everything that happened in the service, including this really wonderful singing that you have Sunday by Sunday with this man leading it, and you talk about me.
- [6 : 03] I think you're making a mistake. The preacher is not really important at all. In our circles, we're always focusing on the preacher.
- I'll go to that conference, that meeting, because of that preacher. In the Bible, the emphasis is not on the preacher, it's on the listener, and how the listener responds to the ministry of God's word.
- So the most important thing when you've heard someone preach is, what was he like? Didn't like his voice very much. Couldn't understand his accent. Well, I'm not going to be taught lessons about accent from a country where they park their cars on the driveway and drive them on the parkway, but that's neither here nor there.
- Well, I don't like the way he did this, or he missed out on that, or why didn't he emphasize that? Listen, the point is, what did God say to me in this part of his word?
- Remember John Stott, one of the most revered preachers of our day, saying to me once that people would come to him sometimes at the end of a service and say, Dr. Stott, that was a wonderful sermon.
- [7 : 10] Thank you for that. Stott's response was, what are you going to do with it? It's an interesting thing to say.
- I think it's a very appropriate thing to say at the end of a service. Somebody goes up to the preacher and says, that was a wonderful sermon. Thank you. Now, what do you say when somebody says, that was a wonderful sermon?

I know that experience. I've had it twice in 55 years. What do you say? John Stott said, this is what I say. What are you going to do with it?

So my question to you this morning, when we reach the end of the service, is not, well, what did you think of the preacher? I wouldn't dare ask you that. What are you going to do with whatever it is that God is saying to you?

And he may not have said, at this moment in our service, the big thing that he's going to say to you before we end. So forget the preacher. Make sure that the sermon gets into your bloodstream, God's word, and into your DNA, and not just into your notebook.

[8 : 13] Well, now on to chapter 2, and the first section is called Favoritism Forbidden, and the key is right there in verse 1.

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Now, James, as you'll discover when you read the book later, is a great illustrator.

He gives you a truth, and then he illustrates it and nowhere more clearly than this. Let me read the following verses. They hardly need a comment. His point is this. Don't show favoritism.

Don't treat people on the basis of how wealthy they are is the point that he's making. Look at this. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes.

Interestingly, in the Greek, the original phrase could be translated, he is gold-fingered. He's got a nugget at every knuckle and a gem at every joint. I mean, he's loaded. I don't know what the Greek for loaded is, but that's what James means here.

[9 : 17] He comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes. Oh, and a poor man. Shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you, but you say to the poor man, you can stand there.

You can sit on the floor if you like. If you do that, James says, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

And the word is dialogismus, from which we get the word dialogue. He said, if you treat people like that, a wealthy visitor comes to your church and you're all over him and the poor man comes in and you say, sit on the floor if you like, aren't there evil thoughts going on in your head?

And what you are saying is, we better treat this rich man well because he could be worth a few thousand dollars to our church. But there's no point in treating the poor man well because there's nothing he can contribute to what is going on here in the church.

Well, James says, don't do that. And the best example of all he gives us, of course, is Jesus, who never treated anybody on the basis of their position or their possessions.

[10 : 40] Then the second section in verse, excuse me, in chapter two, is called faith and deeds. And the keys here are two verses. Verse 14 first, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?

Can such faith, notice the word such, can such faith save him? Then go over to verse 24 and read this. You see, he gives an example of Abraham, we don't have time to develop that.

You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. Now, I can imagine a newish or relatively untaught Christian reading through the letter of James and he comes and this man has truly been born again.

He is a new Christian and he reads James saying these particular words. And he can hardly believe what he is reading. That James should say this, a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

And I can just imagine a young Christian saying, but wait a minute. Now that I've become a Christian, I can see that I am justified not by what I've done but by faith in what Jesus has done for me.

[12:00] And maybe the words of Paul in Ephesians 2 are resonating in his mind. By grace you've been saved, through faith. And that not of yourselves, it's the gift of God.

And then specifically, not of works, so nobody can boast. So he turns up Ephesians 2 and reads that, turns back to James 2 and says, well, something's wrong here.

Paul says, we are not saved by works, we're saved by faith. James says, well, you can see that you're not saved just by faith, but by works.

Now, what is going wrong here? If they are disagreeing, we can throw away the whole of the New Testament as being unreliable. It may be one of the reasons why Martin Luther initially treated the letter of James with a bit of disdain or certainly with a lot of reserve, and he called it a right straw epistle.

It's an epistle of straw. There's no real substance to it, but he understood better later, and we should understand better this morning. Here's the best way I can put it across to you.

[13:10] James and Paul are not facing each other, fighting each other. They are back to back, fighting two different enemies. Paul is facing the person who says, I am saved, I can become a Christian by what I do, by my own good deeds.

I'm better than a lot of people I can think of. Surely God grades on a curve, that's a fair thing to do, and I go to church, and I read my Bible, well, a bit, and I pray a bit, and I give a bit, and I try to be good and decent in my life, and I pay my taxes, I'm trying to be a good citizen, and surely God will reward me as the result of what I have done.

And Paul says, no. All our righteousnesses, he says, quoting Isaiah, all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags. If you believe that God grades on a curve, and you may be here in First Baptist Pickens this morning thinking, you know, if I try to be good enough, oh, I hear a lot of teaching about becoming a Christian and how important it is, but if I behave well enough, I'll reach that point, I'll have crossed the line, and be safely in the kingdom of God on the basis of how well I have done, how well I have lived.

Paul says, if you're going down that route, you're in serious trouble because God requires perfection. So Paul is fighting the person who says, I can get right with God under my own steam.

James is fighting the person who says, look, it doesn't really matter what kind of life I lead. I believe all the right things. I believe there's one true God.

[14:55] I believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. I believe that He was born of the Virgin Mary, that He lived a perfect life, that He died on the cross in the place of sinners, that He rose from the dead, that He's seated at the right hand of God, that He's coming back again in glory.

I believe all those things. I've ticked every one of those boxes, and that makes me right with God. And the quality of life I have, the things I do, the way I treat my family and my business associates and my friends, that's immaterial.

James says, you are totally wrong because it's when you have true faith that your life changes. Go back again to verse 14.

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds, in other words, there's nothing in his life to back it up. Notice why I asked you to notice the word such earlier.

Can such faith save him? And he says, no, it can't. Faith that is all words will save nobody. There have got to be the deeds to back it up, which is why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation.

[16 : 05] The old has gone, the new has come. Paul is not saying that when you become a Christian, you become perfect, but he does mean that when you become a Christian, you become different.

Then we move on to, I should say then that this is the heartbeat of the entire epistle. These verses, 14 through 24. If you grasp what James is saying here, then you've grasped what the whole of the epistle is all about.

On then quickly to chapter 3. And the first section is taming the tongue. And the key is verse 10. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.

My brothers, this should not be. Now James is dealing with a very slippery customer. Look at verses 3 and 4. When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal or take ships as an example.

Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder, wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise, the tongue is a very small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

[17 : 18] And then on to verse 7. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue.

It's a restless evil. I recall leading a Bible study group in Norway on one occasion. We were on a day trip down one of those lovely fjords. Huge mountains rising up on either side and covered in snow in the winter, of course.

And I happened to say to the guide, when the spring comes and the snow begins to melt, surely the properties and the people living near the bottom of those mountains are going to be in great danger.

He said, yes, and there have been. There's been great damage and sometimes great fatalities, too. And then he said this, words I will never, ever forget. He said, sometimes an avalanche can be caused by the sound of a single voice, by the sound of a human voice.

Just enough, it's the last thing that triggers off a fall of snow with catastrophe to follow. And none of us is capable of quantifying the catastrophes that have been caused by the sounds of human voices and by our voices at times.

[18 : 36] Our tongues are weapons of mass destruction. We can destroy a person's reputation. We can destroy a person's home life.

We can destroy their family. We can destroy their church by saying things that are untrue, unnecessary, unwise, and ungodly.

Sometimes when you go to a physician, he will say in the course of an examination, show me your tongue. It wasn't an interesting thing to do. He used to see the same doctor every year and he'd say, show me your tongue and then give me a running commentary on what was going on in several other parts of my body because of what he could see in my tongue.

And it's out of the heart that the mouth speaks and the tongue so often gives us away. Allow me to say this and I hope you won't find it too critical.

I just hope you'll find it deeply searching. Most of us talk too much. Most of us talk too much. There are many occasions when we'd be better to keep our mouths shut and people would think we were fools than open them and remove all possible doubt on the subject.

[19 : 53] I've found this person as I studied James a very great challenge. Yes, there have been many times in my life when I kept my mouth shut and I should have opened it.

I've missed the chance to witness, to say something, to make a positive contribution. I plead guilty to doing that more times than I could ever count. For every time when I have kept my mouth closed when I should have opened it, there have been ten occasions when I've opened it and I should have kept it closed.

And only afterwards I've got home and I've just felt deeply ashamed. Why did you say that? Why did you add that extra word?

Why did you feel you just needed to contribute to that situation? So James says, hold your time. Tame it. Is what you're about to say true?

Is it honest? Is it fair? Is it helpful? And is it necessary? And then very quickly in two kinds of wisdom is the next section and the key is verse 13.

[21 : 05] Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. The one thing very quickly that I want to say about this because we really do need to pass on is this.

We all of us would like to think that we are wise. Most of us, I guess, would like to think we're also very smart. But we're not all intellectuals. We don't all have a great education.

We're not all. There are so many things I know nothing about. But we like to think that we are wise. I think you use the word smart in America. I'm not sure that's the right word, but I'll forgive you.

But, you know, we're just wise. Notice what James says is a mark of wisdom that you act in humility. I find that deeply searching and telling.

The height of wisdom, here it is, deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. Let him show it, James. Actions do speak louder than words.

[22 : 07] Well, quickly on to chapter 4. And the first section is called Submit Yourselves to God. And the key is verse 7. Submit yourselves then to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

And we should add, come near to God, and he will come near to you. But the point here is about submission. One of the great open secrets of what used to be called, maybe still is in some circles, the victorious Christian life, what I would prefer to call the normal Christian life, is this.

Firstly, to submit. Submit yourselves, therefore, to God. That's in direct contrast to the spirit of the age in which we live, which is always assert.

Make your own presence felt. Show them that you're number one, that you're in charge. Instead, we should make knowing and doing God's will the overriding determination of our lives.

And look at verse 6. God opposes the proud. We just mustn't miss what is being said there. Those four words, God opposes the proud.

[23 : 18] That word, opposes, is a military word. I want you to imagine in the days of pre-nuclear warfare, here is a, we'll call the podium a huge valley for the time being, and here's a big mountain range, and an army is set up on this side of the valley.

On the other side, here is another army. And the intelligence from this army discovers that the enemy is about to attack on this wing and has moved his forces, most of them along here.

The defender now moves his strongest forces there. He is matching the position of the attacking army. Then the attacking general changes his mind and moves most of his army this way.

So the defender, who's got intelligence of what is happening, moves his army this way. So he's ready to defend it. Are you following me carefully? The proud person asserts himself here.

Guess what? God moves his armies to oppose him. Antitasa is the word. It's an extraordinarily powerful and direct and immediate word. And when you think that God's army is the Lord of, is the hosts of heaven, everything in the universe is at God's disposal.

[24 : 25] And if you set yourself up to be proud, God will oppose you. God hates pride. It may well be, without going into detail, it was pride that caused Satan to fall in the first place.

Pride dethrones God and puts man on the throne instead. And so James warns us in the strongest of language, God opposes the proud.

And he adds, and resist the devil. Have you noticed that nowhere in the Bible are we told to attack the devil? Nowhere. There's no need to pick a fight with the devil. And the other thing is this, the more we submit to God, the more fights the devil will pick with us.

And if you are here this morning and you're saying, well, the devil is attacking me so fiercely at the moment, and maybe directly I'm just being tempted so severely, and sadly in the same area where I've known so much temptation in the past, I feel that somehow there must be something wrong with me because I'm being tempted so much and so badly and so frequently.

Hear me carefully. Temptation is not a sin. Constant, fierce, relentless, repeated temptation is not necessarily a sign that there's something specifically wrong with you.

[25 : 55] After all, Jesus was tempted in all ways, just as we are, but he was without sin. And the promise of James is this, resist the devil and he will flee from you.

But, it doesn't say he'll flee from you permanently when Jesus had wiped the floor with the devil in that fantastic confrontation in the wilderness.

Luke says this, when the devil had finished all this tempting, the devil left him until an opportune time. So, there were more temptations to follow.

When you think that you've successfully beaten off the devil in a certain situation, he'll be back. The story is told of a young lady who was struggling with becoming a Christian and eventually did become one and someone fairly soon afterwards suggested that she should be baptized.

And she said, well, no, I'd sooner just wait a little bit and feel secure and settled in my faith, which was a great thing to do, rather than be baptized prematurely and then for that not to go as it should.

[27 : 07] But a few months later, she came to the pastor and said, I feel I'm really making some good progress in the Christian life. I really would like to be baptized. Well, there was great rejoicing and she was baptized.

And six months later, she came to the pastor and said, look, I really need some help. I'm just having a big struggle in my Christian life. Things are not the way they used to be. In fact, I feel less of a Christian, less effective as a Christian and making less progress than I used to before.

And to make matters worse, I thought my baptism would put an end to all of that. And the pastor said, no, I didn't hold you under long enough. So if you as a Christian are looking for a post-conversion experience that will put an end to temptation and have you living triumphantly and gloriously forever, there is a post-conversion experience that you can have.

And here it is. Die. That'll do it. Just die. All you have to do is die and your temptations are over. And I suspect that most of us would like to postpone that.

So he will flee from you, but it's not permanently. So Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5, be self-controlled and alert. And then very, very briefly, the next section, boasting about tomorrow and the key verses, verses 13 and 14.

[28 : 32] And addressed to businessmen, of course, today or tomorrow, we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, make money. Why? You don't even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life?

You're a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Some of us, now not least, are in the kind of work and ministry where a lot of long-term planning needs to be done.

In the few days before Pam and I left home, just about three days ago to come here, I had to do so much forward planning to do with a big tour in Scotland and another in Northern Ireland and all of it had to be done before this trip because after we get back from this trip, I do a Bible conference in the middle of England and 48 hours later I'm in Portugal and it just would get all snarled up so I had to do all of that ahead of time.

But James says, don't boast about it. Do what is sensible, of course, and proper, but don't count your days, just make sure that every day counts.

That's the all-important thing. Pam and I pray every morning at the beginning of every day. We just pray that that day will count. We don't know what that day is going to bring forth.

[29 : 48] We have those days when there are big events in it and we cover those in prayer, but there are other times when we say, well, today's, it's all bits and pieces as far as we can see. No big appointment that I have to meet, no meeting I have to speak at.

It's all kind of, you know what I'm saying, it's bits and pieces. But we cover them before the Lord and we try to make that day count for Him. And then we get to chapter 5 and there are three headings here so we'll deal with them very, very quickly.

The first is warnings to rich oppressors and the key is verse 4. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord all-powerful and you say, well, and serves them right to be told.

They need to be told that. Here are employers and they're underpaying people. They need to be told God knows what you are doing. And you would say, well, I don't employ anybody so this doesn't apply to me.

Yes, it does. The principle which applies is this. Everything you say enters the ears of the Lord Almighty. Everything you do, He sees and knows.

[30 : 59] And there was a monk centuries ago who came up with the phrase practicing the presence of God. And that's the way we should live our lives.

And then secondly, patience and suffering and the key is verse 8 where the word patient means long-tempered which is the opposite of being short-tempered. In Psalm 86, the Bible says, God is slow to anger.

And my friends, if God is slow to anger with us, how slow we should be to anger, get angry with other people. If somebody says of you, boy, they've got a short fuse, they're not paying you a compliment.

Thomas Jefferson used to say, if you get angry, count to 10. And if you're very angry, count to 100. That's not bad advice. Look, God is slow to get angry.

And if we are quick to get angry, we're missing the boat somewhere. We're not acting as God would have us act or as He has acted towards us.

[32 : 01] And then finally, the prayer of faith and the key is verse 16. And the end of verse 16, the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

But just before dealing with it in a moment as we close, just go back to verse 13 which tells us when we should pray. At what point in our lives should we be coming to God in prayer?

How much of our lives is related to our relationship with God? Look, here it is. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

So there is never a time when approaching God and consciously bringing Him into our lives is irrelevant. In Charles Dickens' great book, *The Tale of Two Cities*, it begins with this phrase, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

And my friends, you and I, we have the best of times and we have the worst of times. And what James is saying, whether it's the best of times or the worst of times, take it to God in prayer.

[33 : 17] Thank Him and praise Him and seek to worship Him. Martin Luther, when he heard bad news, used to say, let's sing a psalm and spite the devil. There is no part of our lives that is irrelevant as far as God is concerned, no experience in our life when we can't come to God in praise and in prayer.

Now, as you were looking at the end of this chapter, I imagine some of you were saying, now this will be important. I wonder if the key verses are going to be verses 14 and 15.

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. And you may be saying, well now, what are you going to say about that?

Now, those are verses that really at times would have a serious impact on our lives. So, what will you say about that this morning? The answer is nothing.

[34 : 30] But, in the book *Truth for Life*, I've spent, I cannot tell you how many hours I've spent studying that and writing, I think it's chapter 39. I even went at one stage, it was a coincidence, to Greece and spoke with Greek pastors there about the sense and the tense of the language that's being used here and what it really meant.

And I believe I was greatly helped in being able to flesh out in great detail what James is meaning from this. And the same applies to the rest of what has been written because the book would contain about 50 times the amount of teaching that you've had this morning.

But notice what follows in verse 17. Elijah was a man just like us. And many of you will know the story of Elijah and the incident to which James is particularly referring.

He prayed, and as Elijah prayed earnestly, that it would not rain. And it didn't rain on the land for three and a half years. And again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

And we can stand back from that and say, whoa, now that's the kind of person I would like to be. That's the kind of prayer I would like to be. That when the place was flooded and drenched, he prayed and there wasn't rain for years.

[35 : 44] And then when there was a drought and rain was needed, he prayed, and the rain came. Boy, if I could be that kind of Christian, that kind of prayer, what a difference that would make.

And James hits us straight between the eyes and says, Elijah was a man just like us. He was no different from us. He had his strengths and his weaknesses, his faults and his failures, his flaws.

The passage is not about the power of Elijah. It's the power of Elijah's God. And the point James is making is Elijah's God is our God.

So we should never set any limit on what God may do in our lives or in our church. John Newton in one of his lovely hymns says, you are coming to a king.

Large petitions with you bring for his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much. The epistle of James is what I've called as a title to the book *Truth for Life*.

[36 : 56] And I pray that as you reflect on what you've heard and as you reflect on what later you will read, you will discover what James says is truth not just for other people but is truth for your life.

Let's pray together. Our gracious God and Father, we thank you for your infallible, inerrant, perfect, up-to-date, and applicable and relevant word.

Help us to understand this portion of it and give us the greater grace of obedience to it. and we ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen.