



LIFE GROUP STUDIES AUTUMN 2024

1 FAITH IN THE FIRE JAMES 1. 1-18

Who wrote this letter?

Not James, brother of John, the son of Zebedee, one of the first and closest of Jesus' disciples. He was executed by King Herod at a time when the early church began to suffer persecution. (Acts 12. 1-2)

This letter was written by **James, the brother of Jesus**. He is named, with the rest of Mary's family, in Matthew 13. 55-56. In Matthew 3.21 we find that Jesus' family thought he was mad. So it's remarkable to find James and his mother and brothers with the apostles, waiting in the Upper Room for the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1. 14). In Acts chapter 15 verse 13 he speaks as the Leader of the church in Jerusalem, to make a judgment on how Gentile converts should be accepted.

- How does James' description of himself at the beginning of his letter indicate the way his view of Jesus was transformed? When do you think this transformation took place?

His letter was probably written about AD 40–45 and is addressed to the Jewish 'Diaspora', Christians who were already dispersed far beyond Jerusalem and Judea, and subject to persecution and other hardships.

Read James 1. 1-18

James doesn't waste any time in getting down to the situation in which his readers find themselves.

- What is that situation?

In this passage, James moves between several connected topics in what may seem a rather disjointed way. You will not be able to cover them all, and will have to be selective.

Trials which test the believers' faith (verses 2-4, 12-15).

- What is your immediate response to the instruction in verse 2?
- What sort of life trials are you going through (ie difficult experiences in which you have the choice to soldier on in your own strength, or look to God for strength and guidance)? How do you respond to the instruction to consider these experiences 'pure joy'? Has this been your experience? If not, why not?

Note: Some of us who've been at St Andrew's since the last century (!) recently attended a joyful celebration of the life of Angela Newton, wife of our former vicar Richard Newton. Her response to the many serious health trials she encountered from young adulthood onward blessed many others, because of the joy she radiated. She wrote poetry because 'she wanted to give others hope and share her gratitude for the love, joy and peace that she was given in the midst of her struggles.'

- It was dangerous for those early Jewish Christians, as it is for many believers throughout the world today. Is being a Christian here in England today too easy? How would we respond to real persecution?
- What does perseverance entail, in your life as a follower of Jesus? How will it make you more mature?
- What blessing is promised to those who persevere through their trials? What do you think it means?

Note: Alistair Begg (<https://www.truthforlife.org/devotionals/alistair-begg/9/26/2023/>) comments: 'When James writes about the believer who "has stood the test," he uses the word *dokimos*, which refers to someone who is tested, tried, and approved. This kind of person has the seal of God's approval on their life, and that becomes clearer and clearer through their perseverance... Our trials are opportunities to learn perseverance and grow in Christlikeness, proclaiming to the world that the one whom we are walking toward is sufficient not just for life but also for joy. What trials are you walking through today? These are the tests... which the Lord knows will enable you to persevere and will prepare you for your crown.'

Another commentator writes: 'Jesus promises the crown of life to those who remain loyal. The "crown" refers to the wreath that was given to the winner of an athletic contest. At the end of life's race an imperishable wreath awaits all who faithfully served Christ even unto death (1 Corinthians 9:25).'

At Angela's thanksgiving we sung this song. You might like to watch and listen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fudMFN9M8s>

Recognising the difference between God's testing and temptation, verses 12-15.

- We've already looked at verse 12, but notice now how 'testing' by God is compared with temptation to do something wrong. In the Lord's Prayer we say 'Lead us not into temptation...', but the meaning of this is clearer in the Good News translation of Matthew 6.13: 'Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.' James may have in mind Jesus' own experience of temptation and how he resisted.
- Contrast the outcome of being tested by God, in verse 12, with the outcome of yielding to temptation, in verses 14-15. See Proverbs 14.12, and Matthew 7. 13-14

Praying for wisdom (verses 5-8)

- There is great comfort in verse 5. How many times have we come to God to ask for his wisdom, to get out of a fix of our own making? James says God is generous in responding, and doesn't tell us how stupid we've been. Have you experienced this?
- Do you feel you waver in your belief that God's wisdom will guide you? Is it uncomfortable to read verses 6-8? How can we encourage one another not to doubt, but be steady in our trust?
- Compare the picture of human wavering with the description of God in verse 17. You might like to listen to the song 'God I look to you', and pray for steadfast faith and trust <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEubLmNPxwg>

Teaching on poverty and riches (verses 9-11).

I suggest leaving aside these verses, and returning to them when we study chapter 2. (See James 2.5.)