

James 1

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James 1¹⁻¹ Nehemiah 5⁶⁻⁹ Matthew 18⁹

Somewhere around AD60 Or 61 the Roman procurator of Palestine Porcius Festus died and it was to be 2 years before a replacement could be found. In the intervening period while there was effectively no law in Jerusalem the Jewish authorities, jealous of the vibrant Christian church organised a Sanhedrin to try the leader of the Church, James the Just as he was to be known, the brother of Jesus. That Sanhedrin meet and found James guilty of breaking the law and sentenced him immediately to be stoned which he was sometime in AD 62. First, however, they tried to kill him by throwing him off a high wall. However James survived and got to knees and began praying that these men might be forgiven by God. Seeing that he was alive they then stoned him to death. James had led the church well for around 20 years and his death was, no doubt, a huge blow to the church.

Interestingly enough it was actually a blow also to the religious authorities of Jerusalem since many pious Jews recognised that they had used the absence of a procurator to take the law into their own hands and to get rid of a man who had been appreciated by many in the city and whose piety was undoubted.

He was an incredibly humble and pious man and it is said of him that

'This one was holy from his mother's womb. He drank neither wine nor strong drink, ate no flesh, never shaved or anointed himself with ointment or bathed. He alone had the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies, since indeed he did not use woolen vestments but linen and went alone into the temple and prayed in behalf of the people, insomuch that his knees were reputed to have acquired the hardness of camels' knees.'

Since only the Jewish High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies it is quite possible that James was also High Priest which is quite amazing given the antagonism of many Jews for the Christian community and yet this seems to be the case. Indeed the record of his death also points to him being a man of significant influence. It reads like this...

They came, therefore, in a body to James, and said: "We entreat thee, restrain the people: for they have gone astray in their opinions about Jesus, as if he were the Christ. We entreat thee to persuade all who have come hither for the day of the Passover, concerning Jesus. For we all listen to thy persuasion; since we, as well as all the people, bear thee testimony that thou art just, and showest partiality to none. Do thou,

therefore, persuade the people not to entertain erroneous opinions concerning Jesus: for all the people, and we also, listen to thy persuasion. Take thy stand, then, upon the summit of the temple, that from that elevated spot thou mayest be clearly seen, and thy words may be plainly audible to all the people. For, in order to attend the passover, all the tribes have congregated hither, and some of the Gentiles also."[55]

To the scribes' and Pharisees' dismay, James boldly testified that **"Christ himself sitteth in heaven, at the right hand of the Great Power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven"**. The scribes and Pharisees then said to themselves, **"We have not done well in procuring this testimony to Jesus. But let us go up and throw him down, that they may be afraid, and not believe him."**

Accordingly, the scribes and Pharisees... **threw down the just man... [and] began to stone him: for he was not killed by the fall; but he turned, and kneeled down, and said: "I beseech thee, Lord God our Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."**

And so James died as he lived – in love with the God who had been his brother. Before he died he wrote to a group of Christian Jewish communities who had left Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen which promoted a significant

persecution of the Church. These Jewish Christians had packed up and left Jerusalem to find a more peaceful place somewhere else.

Now I want you to imagine what this must have been like. Imagine growing up in a place where you had heaps of friends, where you could find good work and which you loved and then all of a sudden your life was at risk there and you had to flee.

Imagine not being able to sell your house. Having to leave many of your possessions behind. Having to head out into unknown places facing unknown odds. Add to that the violence of the times, the distrust of the Jews, the fact that those who left likely didn't have much in common except that they were leaving because Jerusalem had simply become too dangerous to stay and you have a recipe for difficult days; for communities that struggle to get on and struggle to live out their faith.

These are precisely whom James has directed his letter; to the 'diaspora' – the scattered ones outside Israel.

Most of the problems James will deal with in this letter concern one of two things. Either they will be divisions within the community of faith or they will concern trials they are facing as a community.

So in the first chapter today we find James dealing with

- a.) Trials in general, why they occur and how to cope with them

- b.) Divisions between rich and poor
- c.) Who God is in the midst of trials and
- d.) Why action is so important in the face of trials.

James is writing to a Christian community in pain. In pain because of what they've had to leave and in pain because of what they've had to become in order to survive in a pretty tough world. They've had to leave all that they've known and all the comfort that went with that and they've had to band together with people they would not normally have associated with.

We see precisely the same thing happening during another period of Israel's life – when Israel returns from exile to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. Things are very similar for this group of people. Returning after 70 years are a group of the exiles and their children many of whom have known nothing of the Jerusalem and for whom Babylon is their home. And those who return are mixed bunch – some pious, some not. Some wealthy, some not. Some workers, some not.

And they run into much the same issue to the point that the wealthy Jews have by their financial practices forced many poor Jews to have to sell their children into slavery in order to pay their debts. Nehemiah's response to this is one of outrage. Listen to this...

“⁶I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. ⁷After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, ⁸and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. ⁹So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? (Neh 5)

So James and Nehemiah are dealing with much the same thing. A community divided very much into rich and poor which should be united but which is feeding on itself – abusing its own members; taking advantage of the weaker ones and having no concern for people who are struggling.

This was never meant to be how Israel should operate and it was also not to be how Christians should behave. Indeed Jesus insists that our deepest and most urgent concern should be our love for each other.

The fascinating thing about this situation is that the divisions between rich and poor did not arise out of their new context. Rather they brought those divisions into the new context with

them and it is the struggle and the testing which has brought these things to light.

People were rich before they left Jerusalem. Others were poorer but nothing was done because there was enough fat in the system to live with it. However when the conditions change – the divisions become sharper and the wrongness of the way they've been living is exposed.

That is the way it is with you and I. We can live with a wrong attitudes for a long time and still exist but when the testing comes all of the lies are exposed and the truth of the way we've been living is revealed. What does James say about this? He says a number of things.

Firstly He says don't look on this time of discovering your weaknesses as a kind of Grand Jury from Heaven – as if God is set on exposing our weaknesses and showing just how pathetic we are.

¹³No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (James 1)

Rather look on it as an opportunity to change and to make improvements. God is not into tempting us so that we fall but He is into using such times to strengthen our faith. So two attitudes have to be resisted. 1. Becoming so depressed about ourselves that we do nothing and 2. Blaming God.

I find often that it's not so much what I've done wrong that trips me up but my own self condemnation. God, however, doesn't condemn. Rather God calls us upward, forward, onward

Secondly, deal with the obvious issues and this really is a key theme in James. Luther didn't like the book of James and called it the 'Epistle of straw' probably because it appears to be a letter that focuses on shoulds and should-nots. In fact what James emphasises is God gracious positivity towards problems and issues in the life of the community.

There was obvious division caused by some obvious inequalities within the community of faith. These needed to be dealt with and once they were a huge amount of pressure would be released from the church. Jesus teaches a similar thing when He says...

⁹And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. (Matt 18)

Jesus too could be very direct and say things which sounded rather law like. But so often we need some very direct advice... Stop it! Do this! Try this! Avoid that! I don't know how many times a simple piece of very practical advice has helped me avoid disaster.

So can I leave you with this today? Is there something obvious you need to deal with in your life, something practical, something simple? Is God saying something simple to you today?