**The View beyond. August 29 2021 James 1:1-18**

I have never been athletically talented. I was always the breathless kid at the back of the race. So the thought of long distance running seemed to me to be a cruel form of torture. Yet some people love it. They are highly motivated to train consistently for long hours in diverse environments to compete regularly in long distance events. Obviously they see more in these endurance events than I appreciate. They can see through the pain, discipline and self denial to something inspiring, worthwhile, fulfilling even life changing.

Over the next few weeks the lectionary features the letter of James. This letter is well known for its practical content and therefore segments of the letter are often quoted to support various ethical positions related to personal behaviours. I cannot personally recall many sermons on this book nor study groups exploring it but it has a great deal to say to us and underpinning its message is a commitment to the value of endurance when faced with trials.

The book has some valuable insights for the church. James is a letter clearly written to a community or set of communities. Throughout the book the communal emphasis is made through writing in the second person plural tense throughout the letter. The author’s emphasis on relational ethics – such as how people treat one another and who matters in the community highlight his communal emphasis.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The letter is attributed to James, but James was a popular name in New Testament times. Various scholars have explored which James may have written the letter but their research has not been conclusive, however there is strong support from many that James the brother of Jesus, who was a significant and respected leader in the early church may have authored it. The letter contains references to various Old Testament passages and many of its themes seem to match or elaborate on sections of Jesus recorded teaching to his followers, which supports the view of James having authored it. It appears to be addressed to early Jewish Christian communities, who recognised Jesus as the Messiah, and who were seeking to interpret their understandings from Judaism in the light of Jesus.

Jesus family and much of the early Christian movement came from the *“pious poor”* of the society of the time. These people were well known for the strength of their trust in God despite their hardships. We know that the early Christian church in Jerusalem experienced financial needs and the other Christian communities sought to help them. A widespread famine in the Jerusalem area is historically evident. This letter makes repeated references to the needs of the poor and exploitation by the rich. Hence it appears very likely that a significant issue in the churches that James is writing to is how to cope with economic injustice and exploitation even within their own Christian communities.

Like the pandemic, which has unexpectedly triggered widespread changes in how we live at this time and into the future, the famine in the time of James’s community unexpectedly caused widespread and lasting changes in their communities.

The main focus of this first chapter of James is the need for the early church to develop their endurance as they faced long lasting issues in their community, issues which would test them to their limits. Food shortages are likely to be one of the significant trials many of them faced, but it is also apparent from this letter that they faced favouritism of the wealthy against the poor,[[2]](#footnote-2) and exploitation of the poor.[[3]](#footnote-3)

James develops a picture of what endurance looks like and how endurance is strengthened.

He sees the goal of endurance as their maturing in character. James sees this as a very communal activity, they can help each other endure. This endurance is not a stoic tolerance, rather they are challenged to be full of joy, in the midst of their experiences of being tested. Our English translations of this passage rarely emphasise this as strongly as the Greek. The concept of joy, all joy, comes first in the sentence in Greek to give it emphasis.[[4]](#footnote-4) *So is this realistic? Can they or we really be expected to exhibit joy in this context?*

The possibility of expressing joy in difficulty points us to a key factor in this approach to testing. They need to learn to look beyond the experience of testing, they need to look through it, to something beyond their current circumstances. They need to focus on God’s potential outcomes from their trials. They need to focus on the processes of constantly maturing through the challenges of life. These trials can produce in them a more Christ-like character.

James recognises that this process of experiencing joy is not likely to happen spontaneously. They will need to apply their wills, their minds, their emotions to a joy that God can give them. It will require faith, they will need to trust God. They need to “*consider it all joy*”.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is not an ignorant denial of the challenge, but it is an intentional choice to seek to develop a different attitude, in the midst of the challenge. It is a choice to trust God, to focus on God. It is supported by the gift of wisdom offered by God to all who ask to experience it.

James desires that they develop an inner confidence which enables them to continue to faithfully follow Jesus because of their confidence in God. So throughout this letter he describes various attributes of God, to help this community to face the future with confidence in God, based on a true understanding of God. Their own perception of God’s transforming work in them can also strengthen their confidence in God in difficult times.

James builds up an amazing picture of God through this letter. God is good always, (James 1:2) God is unchanging not like the waves or the flower. (James 1:17) God is the source of truth and new life, (James 1:18) God gives generously to all, (James 1:5) God is the source of wisdom, (James 1:5) God always cares for the poor,(James 2:5) God does not show favouritism, (James 2:1) God is gracious, (James 4:6) God yearns for relationship with us, (James 4:5b) God is the one who has the right to judge our actions, (James 4:12) God desires justice, (James 5:1-5) God is compassionate and merciful (James 5:11). With these understandings of God pervading the thinking of his readers they have a wonderful foundation on which to depend in the midst of enduring testing. God is permanent, God does not just convey ideas, when God speaks things happen to us and in us. Healing inner hurts changing motivations.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We live in very hedonistic times, the pursuit of happiness seems to be a given foundation of our society. We have seen in some people’s responses to the pandemic a desire to avoid its practical implications, or to anaesthetise ones’ self against its impact through denial of its reality. This is a time of deep suffering and potentially testing. We are challenged to consider how we continue to approach this time, a time when endurance is being tested.

*How do we wish to come out of this time*? *Will we be bitter or better?* We are challenged to consider what lies ahead, to look through this time to some of the good outcomes God can bring about in us as individuals and as a community. As followers of Jesus how can we not just survive, but make a difference?

Our pandemic *“challenges a longing for a faith that is secure from trial and test, by insisting that faith only matures through what it endures”.* This does not mean that we are always merry and bright, or that we do not struggle with our circumstances, it is really about seeking to choose a different outlook an outlook that looks to God.

God appears as the subject 8 times in this chapter alone. How we cope with trials is linked to how we view God, how we allow God to define our reality.

1. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The Ne international Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011) 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James 2:1-4, 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James 2:5-7; 5:1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James: The New international Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011) 71 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James 1:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. N. T. Wright, *Early Christian Letters for everyone: James, Peter, John and Judah,* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)