



WISDOM FOR THE SERVANTS OF GOD – James 1

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I'd like you to pretend you are one of Jesus' early Jewish followers for a moment. Jesus had died and come back to life again about 15-20 years ago. You hadn't been among Jesus' disciples during that time, but you had come to faith in Jesus early on. Maybe you believed in Jesus as a result of hearing Peter's early preaching in the Temple or seeing Stephen's testimony as he was stoned to death. You had rejoiced at the good news that Jesus was the once-for-all sacrifice for sin and had believed that He was the Messiah, the Son of God. You joined the other believers as they met in homes to hear about the things which Jesus had said and did. You prayed for courage and wisdom on how to live this new life as followers of Jesus. You learned so much from the leaders of the community of believers there in Jerusalem – people like Peter and James, the brother of Jesus.

Eventually, however the persecution from the Jewish religious leaders became so intense that you were forced to flee Jerusalem, travelling with other believers out of Israel and into surrounding Roman provinces. You had to leave behind almost everything – your homes, businesses, extended families. You were alone and frightened, not sure what would happen next. And you weren't free from persecution, either. Jews from the local synagogues shunned you once they heard that you were a Jesus follower. But the local Gentiles also made life difficult for you because you were a Jew, a second-class citizen.

In these new surroundings, you once again began to build a community of Jesus followers. To begin with, this would have been just those of you who had fled the persecution in Jerusalem. But as you began to share the good news with those around you, others became followers of Jesus. They were mainly other Jews, but sometimes Gentiles wanted to become Jesus followers as well. That felt a bit uncomfortable to you!

In this new situation, far from the knowledgeable leadership of the Jerusalem community of Jesus followers, you were struggling to know how to live. Life was hard. You didn't understand why God was allowing you to face such difficult times. The relationships between people in the community of believers weren't always easy. People came from such different backgrounds and they had very different expectations about what it meant to follow Jesus. How was being a follower of Jesus meant to affect how you lived your life every day? What things from your Jewish background carried over to this new life as a followers of Jesus? You are a bit like a bushwalker, trying to find your way

in a hostile and unforgiving terrain. You needed a good map and compass to guide you to where you want to go.

BACKGROUND

It was into this situation that the book of James was written. It is generally accepted that the author of the book was James, the half-brother of Jesus. In the Gospels, we see that Jesus' siblings didn't initially accept Him as the Messiah. (Mark 3:21; John 7:5) However, Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection. (1 Corinthians 15:7) We don't know if James had changed his mind before this, but after it, we see James taking on a leading role in the community of believers in Jerusalem. Later, he becomes a key figure in the decision to accept Gentiles into the church and in sorting out how they were to relate to the Jewish roots of the Gospel.

James says, *"I am writing to the "twelve tribes"—Jewish believers scattered abroad"*. (v.1) These are probably Jewish believers who had fled Jerusalem due to persecution. He would have felt pastoral responsibility for them and they would have looked to him for advice. By the time of the letter, more converts would have joined these believers so that the recipients would have been a mix of Jews from Jerusalem who had been taught by the apostles and others who had come to faith through their witness. However, most if not all of them would have been Jews and they would have been well-versed in the Jewish scripture – what we now call the Old Testament.

James was probably the first New Testament book written, being composed about the same time as the gospel of Matthew - around 45-50 A.D. Both are written primarily to Jewish believers with many references to Old Testament people and ideas. James indirectly references many things which Jesus said which can also be found in Matthew. As we go through this series, we will often look at these connections between James and Matthew.

There are some noticeable differences between James and the New Testament books which were written later. For instance, Paul's letters and John's Gospel have a more developed theology of Jesus and salvation. As time went on, the church also becomes a more formal structure with elders and pastors, rather than a loose community of people who follow Jesus. This means different issues are addressed. Finally, many later books are written to a mix of Jews and Gentiles and so more time is spent talking about how they should relate to each other.

As the earliest Christian writer, James has a different focus. He is addressing practical issues faced by people living in community in the midst of a hostile environment. His focus is not on theological reasoning and how we fit into God's eternal plan. James is concerned about how to live wisely - as followers of Jesus, in community, in a hostile environment.

STRUCTURE

This difference is evident when we look at the structure of James. For instance, Paul's writings can usually be divided into two sections. Part one is a closely reasoned theological statement. When we studied Colossians, for example, we saw Paul's explanation of Jesus – who He is and what He has done and the new life we have in Him. Part two of Paul's letters then exhort us to live in light of that truth. It says, "Since this is true about Christ and His salvation, therefore these things are true about you and your life now that you are His". This includes both ways to think about our lives and specific commands to follow.

James, on the other hand, is concerned to help those who follow Jesus to see life as God sees it. He wants them to be able to see behind what is happening on the surface and understand what is really going on. Then, he shows the readers how this insight should affect how they approach

different situations. This is what the Bible calls wisdom. This is more than just knowledge. Knowledge memorises the Ten Commandments; wisdom knows how to apply the Ten Commandments to different situations and keep them faithfully.

In this way, James is similar to other wisdom teaching in the Bible such as Proverbs in the Old Testament and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. This affects the structure of James. In fact, some feel that there is no structure in James – that it is just a collection of random sayings and commands similar to Proverbs. While it may not conform to a nice outline like Paul's letters, I do think it has a structure which suits its purpose. Throughout the book we will find that James goes back and forth between sharing wise insights into life and giving practical examples of what this looks like in everyday life.

James is famous for his nuggets of wisdom which help us to see the world from God's perspective:

- A person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. (1:6)
- Faith without works is dead. (2:26)
- Friendship with the world is enmity with God (4:4)

And we will discover many more! These statements help us to see the world from God's perspective. But then we need to know how to apply this insight in everyday life. In the first chapter which we read today, we are introduced to several themes which will show up throughout the book.

James talks about how to:

- Deal with hardship and uncertainty (v. 2-4, 12-13)
- Have the right perspective on material wealth (v. 9-11,27)
- Control the tongue and develop positive relationships (v.19-21,26)
- Exercise discernment to understand what is really happening (v. 9-11,14-16, 26)

James also loves to use people the Jews would have known well as examples to follow such as Abraham, Rahab, Job, Elijah, and the prophets.

As I read James, I feel like I am listening to a wise elder – someone who has been around for a while and experienced many things and has come to some conclusions about the best way to live as God intends us to live. He is not afraid to call people out for doing the wrong thing! But he is also positive that though life may get tricky at times, God has provided a good way to live, and we should *“take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near”* and *“the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy”*. (5:8,11)

JAMES FOR US

So, as we take the next couple of months to work through the book of James, what will we be focusing on? As you can see from the tagline for this series, we are searching for “Wisdom for the Servants of God”. We've talked about the “Wisdom” part as we've looked at what James has written. But what about the “Servants of God” part?

If you look at the first verse of James, you will see that he identifies himself as *“a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”* (v.1) Most translations say “servant”, not “slave”. However, “slave” is probably the better translation. The translators have gone with “servant” because we tend to cringe at the thought of slavery to God. A servant sounds more voluntary, less brutal. We want to have some say in the matter!

But I think it is very interesting that James, Jesus' brother, choose to say he was a "slave" to God – but also to his brother! The one he had grown up with and maybe shared a bedroom with. The one he'd disagreed with and was even ashamed of before he became a believer. For James, this is a declaration of His belief in and submission to Jesus the Messiah. He is placing himself under His authority and choosing to be guided by God and choosing to obey Him in everything. A slave, and even a servant, cannot choose what they want to do, they must obey everything their master tells them to do.

The creation account in Genesis makes it clear that we were created to serve God. This was not a demeaning thing! Out of all creation, humanity was chosen to be God's representative and serve Him by caring for His creation. After humanity was created, we read:

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground." (Genesis 1:28)

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. (Genesis 2:15)

Adam and Eve were given an extremely important role, but they had to do it under the guidance and direction of God, they could not do whatever they wished, They were God's representatives or deputies. But humanity decided they knew better than God and they turned away from Him and went their own way. They wanted to be wise in themselves and not depended on God's wisdom. This is sin.

Now that we have turned back to God and accepted His cleansing and forgiveness, we are once again given the opportunity to serve Him. Once again, we become servants of God and we are invited to look to Him for wisdom in carrying out His will here in His world.

However, James tells us that if we want to serve God wisely, we have to be willing to be undivided in our allegiance to Him and His wisdom. James says:

When you ask him, be sure your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world and they are unstable in everything they do. (v. 6-8)

It is not OK to follow God's wisdom some of the time, or even most of the time. We have to be willing to be servants of God – slaves of God – accepting His wisdom and obeying His direction in all we say and do. Yes, we will fail at this! Even James admits that no one can tame the tongue and always say the right thing! But I think there is a basic heart attitude that is turned towards God, seeking His wisdom and willing to obey, even if we don't always get it right. This is what God is looking for. Then we can be assured that He will give us all the wisdom we need to serve Him well and be powerful representatives of Him where we live.

Are you willing to be a servant – to be a slave – of God? If so, then I pray that you will find the next couple of months helpful in gaining the wisdom you need to do this wisely in the circumstances in which you find yourself.