

Prayer

You are the source of all goodness in me, Lord Jesus Christ.
You have confronted the evil deep within me, and commanded it to go.
You are glorious in doing Your will, through me, Your least important servant.
You bring triumph out of the most difficult things within of life.
You do for me repeatedly what I cannot do for myself.
I love You and I praise You, Jesus Christ my Lord.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Trees

Trees add to the beauty of the world in which we live. Thank God for the way in which He creates things that are both functional and beautiful, thus making our world a thing of pleasure.

On-going prayers

- Pray for young people who are tempted into taking drugs
- Give thanks to God for the support you receive from friends
- Pray for those caught up in the earthquake in Java

Meditation

Tell me, my friend. Do you love the things of God?
Or are you happy to be influenced by worldly things?

Do you let the Lord God help you in everything you do?
Or do you find it easier to handle life by yourself?

Is Christ the driving force behind your daily life?
Or is it someone else, or others, or even you, yourself?

Does God's Word attract and inspire You every day?
Or does the television occupy more of your precious time?

Do you long to be with others who share your Christian faith?
Or would you rather be with others who are 'better company'?

Can you testify to the wondrous things that God has done?
Or do you prefer to keep your counsel about your Christian faith?

In the end you will have made your choices, for good or ill;
Be careful, lest by default, you have not chosen Christ's way at all.

Bible Study - James 1:5-11

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, then ask God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given you. ⁶ But ask in faith, without criticism, for the critic is like the waves of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed around. ⁷ That person should certainly not imagine that they will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸ being in two minds and unstable in action.

⁹ The downtrodden believer should boast about having a high position, ¹⁰ and the successful one should boast about being brought low; because he will perish like a wild flower. ¹¹ For the sun rises with scorching heat and shrivels the plant; its flower falls and its beauty is destroyed. The well-heeled will fade away just like this in the midst of a busy life.

Review

Yesterday we saw how the letter of James begins with close connections to the teaching of Jesus. The letter gives encouragement to his readers to face persecution steadfastly, and he goes on to talk about the wisdom and faith needed to live a godly life. In so doing he uses images from the life of Jesus, such as the tossing seas (v6) which remind us of when Peter walked on water (Matt 14:22ff). The second part of our

reading contrasts the poor and downtrodden believer with those who are rich and successful, a contrast which is central to Jesus' teaching; for example in 'Dives and Lazarus' (Luke 16:20ff) or the saying 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' (Matt 19:24). The last sentence also reminds us of Jesus' teaching about the fading glory of flowers (Matt 6:30) or the withered fig tree (Mark 11:20ff).

James' concern at the beginning of his letter is for those who need God's help at times of need and persecution (1:1-4, 12f.). It is interesting therefore that he suggests that God's 'wisdom' will help. James' advice (1:5) reminds us of Jesus' words 'Ask and you will receive ...' (Matt 7:7), but why do we need 'wisdom'? In the Old Testament the newly crowned king Solomon (1 Kings 3:9) asked for wisdom in order to secure peace and stability for Israel in his lifetime; and as with Solomon, we also need wisdom when life is tough and sharp decisions must be made. We also need wisdom in order to discern what is right and wrong and ensure that our lives are firmly rooted in Christ when trouble strikes. This is the wisdom God knows we need, and delights to give us whenever we ask.

James then comments on the quality of faith with which we ask the Lord for wisdom (1:6f.). God does not refuse our request for help in the face of persecution, so he therefore castigates those who are 'critics' and do not believe that He will. Some translations of the Bible have the words 'doubts' or 'doubters' instead of 'critics', but either will suffice. James is talking about people who have questions in their mind about God and are uncertain about whether He will respond to us. Those who say they believe in God but have criticisms or doubts about His power or His ability to act in the world are aptly described by James as 'double-minded' and 'unstable' (1:8). James was totally confident in God's care for His people and His presence amongst them in the midst of persecution. From his own life's experience, he knew that God answered prayer, particularly when His people faced trials, and he also knew that God's will was not always what people wanted, but it was right. He had been with Jesus through the ups and downs of his life, and knew the reality of what he was talking about. What he says here is basic to the Gospel and the nature of God's salvation for all through Christ, so he questioned the integrity and faith of those who would not accept that God was interested in and involved in the life of His people.

The following comments are also connected to the endurance of faith at times of trial. James does not talk about raising up the downtrodden and bringing down the rich (v9,10) merely because it mirrors Jesus' teaching (see above). His subject is still persecution (1:2-4), and the fact is that when this comes, it hits those who are comfortable and well off harder than the poor. Distress is a fact of life for those who have nothing to lose and are downtrodden, and faith can give them hope. However, as James says, the successful and rich believer is likely to 'wither' like a plant under the pressure of persecution, because they have so much more to lose by nature of their wealth. This can be for them, as James rightly points out, a major barrier to faith.

The verse which follows our text today (1:12), makes it clear that dealing with the difficult things of life is James' general theme at the beginning of his letter. Today's passage is therefore not just general teaching about faith, or the difference between rich and poor believers. James used elements of Jesus' teaching to talk about how God's people handle the trials that come their way. His suggestion of asking God for wisdom is probably not what we might expect, though it is valuable advice. It leads to his warning against doubts caused by the questioning of God; and he finally demonstrates that all people are in the same position before God (1:9:10). There is no advantage before God for any of us, whatever position we hold in life or whatever we think of ourselves. Nevertheless, those who have much or think of themselves highly have much more to lose in the face of life's trials than others (1:11)! All of us can learn from James' advice and warnings about facing trials.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How will wisdom help us at times of trial? Think of practical situations in which this is the case.
2. Is it possible to be 'critical' of faith or of God in any way without compromising faith?
3. Have a further read of verses 9-11 and work out who, in your culture and society, are the 'successful' and 'well-heeled'. Of what should they be afraid?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

We should be careful to know the difference between the Bible's warnings and its condemnations. In our passage today, I do not think that James is attempting to condemn people, but rather give strong warnings

firstly about blind criticism and doubt, and secondly about the problems of being rich and successful. There are so many things that stand in the way of our being honest with ourselves and with God, and these need to be stripped away if we are to grow in Christ.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Ask a friend you can trust about how you come across to others, and ask this friend about the positive and negative aspects of your character, as seen by others. Expect honesty and nothing else, and discuss your feelings about this with your friend.*
- *Spend a day of prayer and fasting asking God to give you wisdom, and asking the Lord to change you for the better.*

Final Prayer

We thank You, Almighty God, for the gift of faith. You have accepted us on the basis of our faith, and yet it is You who have placed faith within us! Give us the grace to continue living in faith, demonstrating faith and witnessing to faith throughout our lives. AMEN
