

JAMES: The Activity Of Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

The New Testament falls into various sections, each dealing with specific themes. A last section, introduced by the book of Hebrews, is concerned with the single theme of faith. The whole thrust of these letters of the New Testament is to explain to us what faith is and how it works, and each letter makes its unique contribution to that theme.

James is the second book, then, in this section that deals with faith. This letter is of unique and peculiar significance to us because it comes from the one who knew more about the Lord Jesus than any other human being -- at least as far as the record that is passed on to us is concerned. James, the brother of our Lord, was raised in the same home in Nazareth, grew up with the Lord Jesus, saw him through all those silent years of which we have no record, and joined with his three other brothers -- Joseph, Simon, and Judas -- in opposition to the Lord Jesus during the early days of his ministry. James was finally converted by the resurrection of the Lord; and the Apostle Paul tells us that after the resurrection, the Lord appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7).

Many of us would give a lot to know what happened during that time when James had looked upon Jesus as nothing more than his brother. He was one who had grave doubts that Jesus was indeed the Son of God as he claimed; once he had regarded him as a madman, and came with his mother and brothers to have him locked up -- or at least go home with them, get him out of the public view. But finally, by the resurrection, he was convinced that here indeed was God manifest in the flesh -- "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" {John 1:14a RSV}, and James, too, saw "his glory as of the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," {John 1:14b KJV}. And so he begins his letter,

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, {Jas 1:1a RSV}

That is a great testimony, isn't it, to the deity of Jesus? That this one who was his half-brother by nature should address him this way: "Our Lord Jesus Christ." And throughout this letter, there breathes a reverence and a respect for the person of the Lord that is unequalled anywhere in the New Testament.

There has been considerable controversy as to whether James, the brother of Jesus, was the one who wrote the letter, but if you look carefully into its background, you can see that it almost certainly must be the Lord's brother who pens this letter. In the early days after the resurrection, he became the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, and was regarded by all with reverence and respect even by the Jews -- so that he gained the title, "James the just one." Tradition tells us, supported by Eusebius, one of the great church fathers and a respected historian, that James was finally martyred for his faith by being pushed off the pinnacle of the temple. The pinnacle was the point in the wall around the temple that jutted out over the Kidron Valley. There is a drop of about a hundred feet from the height of that wall straight down into the Valley. I once stood on that wall, on the pinnacle of the temple, and as I looked down I was reminded that this was the very place where the devil took Jesus and tempted him to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.

Eusebius tells us that in about the year 66 A.D., James the Just, the brother of our Lord, was pushed off this pinnacle by the Jews who had become angered with him for his Christian testimony. Eusebius says that the fall did not kill him, and that he managed to stumble to his knees to pray for his murderers. So they finished the job by stoning him to death, and he joined the band of martyrs.

Now it is very evident that this letter was written during the early part of the life of the church. It comes out of that period reflected in the book of Acts, and may therefore be the earliest Christian document that we have, written perhaps even before the gospels of Mark or Matthew.

You cannot read this letter of James without being struck by its likeness to the teaching of Jesus; in fact, if you

take the Sermon on the Mount, and the letter of James, and lay them side by side, you'll see more than a dozen exact parallels. So, it is quite evident that this man James listened to the Lord Jesus and heard these messages, even though perhaps he struggled with them at the time. Also, this letter, more than any other letter in the New Testament, is characterized, like the teaching of the Lord himself, by figures of speech taken from nature. You have the waves of the sea, the animal kingdom, the forests, the fish, and others, all drawn from nature, just as the Lord Jesus himself used to do.

The theme of this letter, as I have said, is faith. If you do not have faith, you will receive nothing from God. Without faith, the book of Hebrews tells us, it is impossible to please God {cf, Heb 11:6 RSV}. Faith, therefore, is the channel by which all God's blessings come to us, and without faith, all that you do is sin; "whatever does not proceed from faith," says the Apostle Paul, "is sin." {Rom 14:23 RSV}. So all activity that does not stem nor derive from faith is sinful activity. If you are not acting out of what you believe, then what you are doing is distasteful and disgusting to God, even though it may be highly applauded by everyone around.

In this letter, then, the Apostle James is telling us several things about faith. In chapter one you have a wonderful answer to the question, "What makes faith grow?" Jesus said that it does not take very much faith to start -- if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, just a little bit of it, just enough to get you to act, even though you are filled with doubts in the doing of it, that is enough -- that will move mountains, he said.

There are two things, James tells us, that make faith grow. The first is trials. This is a wonderful chapter for those who are facing trials. He said,

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness [or patience] have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. {Jas 1:2-4 RSV}

You need trials. And then he goes on to describe how to take trials. Accept them, he says, as from God, and if you lack wisdom about it, ask God to explain to you what is going on. But you have to ask in faith; you have to expect him to do this. And if you are poor, do not let that bother you -- that is a trial, but it is a trial that can lead to blessing:

Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him. {Jas 1:12 RSV}

As I was thinking about this -- about trials -- I was mentally contrasting the way these early Christians faced trials with the way we do. I was thinking particularly of the Apostle Paul. You remember that in Second Corinthians he tells us, "Five times I have received ... the forty lashes less one" {2 Cor 11:24 RSV}. On five occasions he was bound at a stake, and the Jews took their leather whip and beat him thirty-nine times across his back. So that when he wrote to the Galatians, he said, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus," {Gal 6:17b RSV}. Three times he was beaten with rods. And "Once," he said, "I was stoned," {2 Cor 11:25b RSV}.

And what was his attitude in all this? Well, the wonderful thing about these early Christians is that when they went through trials, they rejoiced -- they counted themselves fortunate to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of the Lord. The writer of Hebrews says, "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one," {Heb 10:34b RSV}. I could not help but contrast that with us. We get all unhappy over finding crabgrass in the lawn, don't we? Or if we hear that our mother-in-law is coming for a visit, it makes us almost ready to commit suicide. We become disturbed over these little things.

Not long ago, a pastor told me about a woman who came down to see him, and she wanted a divorce from her husband. But when he got to the heart of the matter, he found that she was upset because she had fixed a special luncheon for him, and had done all kinds of special extra work, expecting him to come home, and he had called up at just the last minute and said he could not come home. She was furious! And she wanted a divorce!

Now what kind of an attitude is that? God sends trials, the Scriptures say, because we need them. They teach us lessons which we could never learn otherwise, and if we did not have them, we would be weak, spindly, incomplete Christians, unable to take the great responsibilities that will be placed upon us in the day when we are with the Lord -- when we enter into his kingdom and into the fullness of his service.

Second, the instrument that makes us grow is the word:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For is any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, {Jas 1:22-25a RSV}

He reminds us that it is the Word of God that makes our faith grow -- expressed in our actions. "Faith comes by hearing," says the Apostle Paul, "and hearing by the word of God," {Rom 10:17 KJV}. And I have never seen anybody grow strong in faith who neglected the reading of the Bible. How can we expect to know the great thoughts of God, the deep things of God, the underlying secrets of life, unless we spend time with the book that reveals them? There is no other source. No university in the land moves at all into this realm of unveiling the secrets of life. So, let your faith grow by rejoicing in trial and by understanding and doing the word.

Now in chapters two and three, James answers for us the question, "How can faith be recognized?" How is it made visible? How do you see that you have faith, or that someone else has faith? And he suggests three things that are the indication of faith: First, there must be no partiality, nor prejudice. If a man is prejudiced against another, because of the color of his skin, or the state of his bank account, and he treats him as though he were unimportant simply because he is not wealthy or the right color, then obviously he has no faith, says James {cf, Jas 2:1-8}. If a poor man comes into church and you say to him, "You go over there and sit in the corner;" but you bow to the wealthy man and take him down to the front and see that he has a comfortable pew, and turn to the place in the hymn book for him and fawn over him, he says, "don't link that with faith in Jesus Christ," because the one is canceling out the other. You cannot manifest faith that way. Faith destroys prejudice.

During a time of particularly severe racial tensions, I was privileged to speak on the subject, "The cause of racial violence" at a State college campus. I pointed out the fact that the major cause of the racial conflict we have in our land is the church of Jesus Christ. Had the church been what it ought to have been, had Christians in both the North and South actually received Negroes and others on the basis of being brothers in Christ Jesus, this whole conflict would long since have disappeared, if indeed it had arisen at all, because the church controls the attitudes of society -- not by legislation. not by propaganda, but by simply being what it ought to be. And when the church failed, society failed, and thus prejudice took root deeply in our social life.

Second, he said, faith is made visible by actual deeds of mercy. James was eminently practical. Suppose someone shows up at your door, he says, and tells you, "I don't have anything to eat -- we're starving over at our house." And you say, "Well, brother, I feel for you -- let's say a prayer together." And you pray for him and say, "Now go your way -- the Lord will work everything out." He says, "You hypocrite! You call that faith! You don't have any faith at all."

If your faith does not lead you to share with your destitute brother, there is something desperately wrong with it. You don't have faith at all, because the faith of Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ, means that you actually have the life of the Lord Jesus. Can you imagine the Lord treating anybody who had a need in that way? Why, he would give him the coat off his back. He would do anything in order to supply the lack and the need of that individual. And can Christian compassion, therefore, shut its heart to the needs of those around, either on an emotional or a physical level? So, if you want your faith to be seen and recognized, it must manifest itself in actual deeds. This is why the Lord Jesus said that in the judgment, he will say, "I was hungry, and thirsty, and imprisoned, destitute and in need, and you did nothing about it," {cf, Matt 25:41-46}

Now James devotes a whole chapter to the third way by which faith can be recognized: a controlled tongue. And what a vivid series of figures he uses to tell us what the tongue is like, "set on fire," he says, "by hell,"

{Jas 3:6b RSV}. You can tame every beast and bird and reptile, but no man by himself can control his tongue. The tongue, he says, is the member of our body most closely linked to our real nature. It shows what is motivating us, and therefore, what you say is very determinative of what you are. It reveals what you are! And so the Apostle James makes very clear here that if you really claim to be a Christian and to have faith in Jesus Christ, something will be happening to your tongue. Faith will be reducing its sharpness and stopping its caustic bitterness; turning it off, and keeping it from lashing out in sharp reproof and criticism. Not that there is not a place for reproof among Christians, but not in a sharp, caustic, bitter, uncensored way.

Then in chapter four and most of chapter five, James answers the question, "What happens when faith fails?" What if you do not exercise faith? What if you are a Christian, but you do not live by faith, believing continually what the Lord Jesus has said and done. What happens? First, wars and fightings break out, and the direct cause is a lack of prayer. Prayer is an example of faith. Prayer is the most perfect expression of faith, because prayer is the manifestation of dependence upon God. James traces this whole matter of wars, fightings, arguments, and disagreements among us to a lack of prayer. He says,

You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. {Jas 4:2 RSV}

That is the trouble. We fight with each other because we do not ask God for anything. We do not take from him the nature of love and compassion that he offers us. We do not choose to receive from him that sweetness of tongue that will give a soft answer back, but we would rather lash out at one another and fight with one another. So it is a direct result of the lack of faith that wars and fighting break out.

Then the next thing is that the love of the world will come in.

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? ... whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. {Jas 4:4 RSV}

And if you stop believing what the Scriptures say, you will find yourself being drawn to the lies and the alluring illusion of the world around. You will start thinking that "things" matter, and that keeping up with the Joneses is the most important part of your life; your money will start going in that direction; your time and thoughts will be invested in those things, and you will soon find yourself drifting into a state of concern only for this life, for the acceptance of others, your peer group, and you will live like this perfectly conformed to the world. That is a direct result again, of a lack of faith.

Then there will be critical judgments. We have already seen something of this, but here he says,

Do not speak evil against one another, brethren. He that speaks evil against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law ... {Jas 4:11a RSV}

That is, he has forgotten that we are to sit under the judgment of the Word of God, and the man who criticizes another has put himself above the Word of God, saying that he is the judge. Instead of letting the Word judge him, he becomes the judge of someone else.

Another result of lack of faith is "presumptuous assurance."

Come now you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and get gain" ... {Jas 4:13 RSV}

Why? Don't you know that you have no assurance for tomorrow at all, that your life is like a breath of air that is gone just like that? You ought to recognize that only God can permit plans for the future like that and carry them out. In other words, do not get to thinking you own all of life!

A young student once came to me and he said, "I don't need this Christianity. I've got all it takes to live life -- I don't need God." I said, "That's strange; tell me, are you running your diaphragm right at this moment?" He said, "What do you mean?" "Well," I said, "Your diaphragm is operating -- are you the one who's operating it? Have you commanded it to work?" "Well no," he said, "it takes care of itself." "No," I said, "it doesn't.

Nothing takes care of itself; someone's running it. Have you ever thought how much of your body's activities operate quite apart from your will, and what you're dependent upon them for just the very next moment?"

And then I told him the story of my friend who was back in Washington, D.C. during World War II, and he wanted to go by plane from Washington to New York. It was in the days when you needed a priority for air travel, so he went into the ticket office and said to the girl, "I want to get a ticket for New York." She said, "Do you have a priority?" And he said, "I didn't know you needed one; how do you get it?" And she said, "Well, if you work for the government or for the airlines, I could give you one."

And he said, "I don't work for either one of them. But I'll tell you who I do work for -- I work for the One who owns the air that your airline flies its planes through!" And she looked at him rather strangely, and said, "Well, I don't think that's good enough to get you a priority." He leaned over, and in his characteristic way, he said, "Did you ever think what would happen if my boss shut off your air for ten minutes?"

She said, "Just a minute, I'll see what I can do," and in a moment she was back and gave him the priority, and said, "You can go right aboard." You can't get much higher authority than that!

The final thing that James brings in is that fraud and neglect come from forgetfulness:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, ... {Jas 5:1-2a RSV}

... the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; {Jas 5:4a RSV}

What makes a Christian get over-sharp in business practices? What makes him think he can cheat on his income tax? What makes him pull a shady deal in business or line up with a partner who is perhaps willing to slice things pretty thin at times? What makes a Christian do that? He forgets; he does not believe the Word of God any more. He forgets that there is a judge watching, listening, hearing everything, weighing all that he does. He forgets that the Lord Jesus is coming again and that all that men have done in secret will be shouted from the housetops. And so he goes on to encourage those who have thus defrauded to be patient and wait for the coming of the Lord, for "the Judge is standing at the doors," {Jas 5:9 RSV}.

And then in the final section in chapter five, there is a wonderful picture of early Christian fellowship. It involved four things, this chapter brings out. First, honesty -- honesty in word, integrity.

Above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, ... {Jas 5:12a RSV}

Be dependable, be trustworthy. One of the characteristics that makes for fellowship among people is that they can count on you. Part of the fruit of the spirit is to be trustworthy.

Then the second was confession {cf, Jas 5:13-16}. Talk to one another about your problems, he said. Pray for one another; confess your faults to one another, bear one another's burdens, open up your hearts, take down your facades and your fences, come out from behind your masks, quit trying to pretend to be something you are not, but be what you are! And immediately, the grace of the God of truth, who loves truth, will begin to flow through your group, and it will develop a fellowship that will make the world press their nose to the glass, trying to get in.

I am convinced this is the missing element in society today. We have a lot of Christians who are living in little isolation cells; they do not want to let anybody in at all. They let nobody see what they are like, never admit to failure, never talk about any pressing problems, always screw on a smile when they get together. You ask them how are things going, "Oh, great!" they say. But they are not great at all, and this kind of hypocrisy must come to an end. James says that God will be in your midst if you take down all these fences and be open and honest with one another.

And then, prayer is a mighty factor in this fellowship. And he reminds us of Elijah in this verse that has been such a help to me: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects," {Jas 5:16b RSV}. I do not think we Christians have any idea of the power that is committed to us in the ministry of prayer. Power to control the effects of daily life, and to quiet dissension and riot and tumult within so that, as Paul put it, "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life," {1 Tim 2:2b RSV}. Finally, a concern for each other is evident:

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. {Jas 5:19-20 RSV}

What a wonderful glimpse this is into the life of the early church. No wonder these Christians turned the city of Jerusalem upside down. Under the leadership of this man James, the church grew until there was a vast multitude of believers who were just simply setting the city on its ear, they awakened a tide of resistance finally that had to move out and crush this thing lest it turn the whole earth upside down. That is what God can do in us also, when we live as the book of James suggests.

Title: James: The Activity of Faith
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Adventuring through the Bible
Scripture: James
Message No: 60
Catalog No: 260
Date: Unknown date occurring during April or May, 1968

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