

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF JAMES – PART TWO

James' modest introduction of himself as a bond-servant of Jesus rather than parading his importance as the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jewish Christians should speak to our love of titles and recognition. A bond-servant chose that role because he loved his master.(Exod.21) As the leader in Jerusalem after the apostles scattered around the world his natural audience were the dispersed Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire.(1:1)

He came straight to the point. Being an unashamed Christian in those days was going to be as tough as living as a Christian in a Muslim country today. How were they to respond with joy under such oppressive circumstances? When grace, 'charis', is received by faith the result is joy, 'chara', the deep down certainty of how good God is which allows us to be strong and to keep growing, ready for anything.(1:2-4)

The New Testament makes many wonderful promises about 'asking' in prayer,(Matt.7:7;18:19;21:22; Jn.14:13;15:7,16; I Jn.3:22;5:14,15) but on only two occasions are we told for what we should ask. Luke 11:13 urges us to ask for the Holy Spirit, which we did when we first truly trusted Jesus Christ. Now James tells us to ask for wisdom. Until we have God's wisdom we have no idea what to ask for next. In the same way that we are to respond to trials by faith, so we are to seek God's wisdom. James makes it very plain that real faith is whole-hearted. We are not to hold on to our wisdom as an alternative. Moment by moment we are only to want to know how God sees each new situation. To try to have it both ways is like being swept in and out by the tide.(1:5-8)

One of the first consequences of beginning to receive God's wisdom is that our view of ourselves will change. In the world without Christ people are graded by education, wealth and status. Those who have these are important and those who do not are insignificant. God's wisdom turns this view upside down. Those who do not count in the world will start to see how much they matter to God. Those who thought they were celebrities will come down to size. James encourages his readers to start to see ourselves God's way and celebrate our new value.(1:9-11)

Once we have found an answer to the question, 'who am I in God's eyes?' the next common puzzle is to understand why bad things happen to us at times. Is God punishing me for something? Is He being unfair in letting one of His children suffer? Is this a situation in which I should give up because it is all too hard? God gives those who trust Him wholeheartedly an understanding of suffering. It definitely does not come from Him. Job chapters one and two make it plain that suffering whether sickness, loss of loved ones or loss of possessions is entirely the Devil's work, whether for the just or the unjust. The Greek word 'peirasmos' is translated both 'trial' as in verses 2 and 12 and 'temptation' as in verses 13 and 14. Adversity is an opportunity to trust God, or to doubt and blame Him, in which case it is sin. Temptation comes both as the seemingly attractive and the clearly unpleasant. God's wisdom shows us that only good and all that

is good comes from Him. When we realise this and trust Him we become a showcase to the world of God's goodness. The tougher the conditions the more obvious His goodness to us becomes.(1:12-18)

Having understood where adversity comes from our next need of God's wisdom is in knowing how to respond to attacks and criticism. Our natural instinct is to react by counter attack, physically, or more often with words. It does not work. A sharp answer does not bring our enemy to Christ. Instead of being injured by the words of our attacker, wisdom hears instead the words of God and then lives them before him. As in verse 18 it is God's goodness spoken by our lives, not just our mouths, which is the message that can change the hearts of those who make life difficult for us. David's gracious response to King Saul in I Sam.18-26 is a magnificent example of this principle in action. God's wisdom allows us to see ourselves in a mirror and to let Him change us. In the mirror of His word I see, not how much better I am than the world around me, but how I compare with Jesus.(II Cor.3:18) God's wisdom brings life not just talk.(1:19-25)

Not only does God's wisdom enable us to keep our mouths closed in the face of spiteful words, it looks around to see where we can help those who are most needy. The greatest needs throughout history have always been widows or solo mothers, and orphans or at least children with no father. Nothing has changed today whether as a result of HIV/AIDS or war in developing countries or the breakdown of family life in supposedly affluent ones. Wisdom allows us to get our hands dirty helping without dirtying our hearts in compromise with the world that does not know Christ.(1:26,27)

This theme of the needy and our response runs on through the rest of James' letter. Before answering the questions on chapter two, read it through repeatedly to pick up the key ideas and how they develop chapter one. Again divide the chapter into sections.

## QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER TWO

1. How does James in this section pick up the theme of 1:9-11 and develop it further? When we make a fuss of the rich and ignore the poor what is the underlying reason and what are our motives? How do we do the same thing today? Why is doing this so damaging to our witness as Christians? How will God's wisdom change this attitude?(2:1-7)
2. How does the writer now broaden the first idea to expose a wider problem? What other kinds of partiality do we show? Why are they also so damaging? If 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', is a summary of the last six of the ten commandments, how does it follow that breaking any one of God's laws is in effect to break the whole lot? If the New Testament principle of grace sets us free from the Old Testament law does that mean we can now do what we like? What is the relationship between justice, grace and mercy? How will God's wisdom enable us to exercise all three? Give practical examples.(2:8-13)

3. Is James saying here as some suppose that we are saved by works not faith? If not, what does he mean? How is he still following the theme of God's wisdom and our response to the needy?(2:14-17)

4. How does the position of the demons before God explain what James means by real Christian faith? What two Old Testament examples are used here to demonstrate the relationship between true faith and godly works? With each example which came first?(2:18-26)