

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

In his final chapter James continues to plead for the poor by challenging the rich. The poverty of his own childhood with Jesus must have been a major influence in his mind. The struggles of the poor are in a large part the result of the selfishness of the rich. Having at the end of the previous chapter challenged the wealthy entrepreneurs to reconsider their money-motivated planning, which left God out, he goes on to look more deeply at the behaviour of the rich which certainly does not spring from the wisdom of God.

Weeping and howling was used to describe the grief of death and of repentance in the Bible.(Isa.13:6; 15:3) Jesus told us how those who mourn, presumably in repentance, would be comforted.(Matt.5:4) With God there is always a way back into blessing. James describes four effects of the love of riches. Firstly if making money and buying things is our objective we will have a fruitless battle throughout life to hang on to it. If on the other hand our treasure is in heaven in the service of others it will last for eternity.(Matt.6:19-21) Secondly so often wealth for us is at the expense of poor people who have not been paid fairly. Cheap goods in rich countries from slave labour in poor ones would be an example of this. Thirdly our pursuit of pleasure and luxury without regard for the needy will bring the judgement of God as well as making us targets of social revolution now. Fourthly money talks when it comes to the legal system and can easily lead to injustice and oppression for the poor. Jesus died because in the end He was a threat to those who profited from religion.(5:1-6)

The root of our obsession with money is impatience which looks to the acquisition of things rather than to the climax of His return. James compares Christian patience to that of the farmer who plants seed, lets the rain cause it to grow, and eventually reaps a harvest. The harvest which matters is that of lost, confused people coming to Christ not dollars in the bank.(Matt.9:36-38) Such patience takes true strength to see the long term outcome not the quick one. Judging others, which James has talked about repeatedly,(2:12,13; 4:11,12) is a key part of our material competition with others. We judge by what people have that is visible to us, rather than by the heart seen only by God. The Old Testament prophets often suffered physically and materially because they put being God's faithful mouthpieces first.(Jer.20, 32-34, 37-39) The story of Job illustrates the solution to the problem of riches misused. He was a wealthy, successful man who lost his business, family and health as the Devil attacked him through others and through natural disaster. He patiently accepted his loss,(Job 1:20-22) even when his so-called friends judged him unjustly. Although he struggled through doubt and depression he patiently clung on to God and eventually the Lord rebuked his friends, gave him a new family and restored his possessions. We assume that Job before or after his loss used his possessions wisely to serve others, that he was full of compassion and mercy. The problem is not money,(I Tim.6:6-10, 17-19) but the love of money.(5:7-11)

Our impatience to possess things leads us to cut ethical corners in dishonesty. We may make a deal and then look for a way out because we see a better one.(Matt.5:33-37) The

patience of God shows among other things in a sense of honour that puts absolute truthfulness before profit.(5:12)

The person who is suffering will be in need of help which may be material, medical or merciful. The person who is cheerful is likely to have an abundance to offer. If the first is listening to God in prayer, He may put him in touch with the second who is recognizing that his blessing comes from God and so shares it. The instruction to the sick has often only been seen in the limited sense of the physically ill. The Greek word sick is 'astheneo' – to be weak, without strength. While it can be used of illness it has a much wider sense as in Rom.14:1,2, where it is translated 'the weak in faith'. In the context of the letter of James it means primarily weakness because of sin whether in selfishness, prejudice, gossip, conflict or greed. When we realise this, the best solution is to humble ourselves in repentance before God. If we struggle to do this we may need the help of maturer Christians. Their prayers will acknowledge their own weakness and well as ours, and the symbol of anointing with oil will speak of the power of the Holy Spirit in every believer to be our strength. As we respond in our hearts, we will experience spiritual restoration and forgiveness. This new life inwardly may well change our condition mentally, socially and physically.(5:13-15)

James urges us to make the most of Christian fellowship, both sharing our problems with each other and being God's means to solve those problems. If we trust God ourselves and so are right before God and men, the Lord can use us to make a big difference in other people's lives. Elijah was a remarkable example of this. His God-given courage to go to a sinful king, at the risk of his life, to tell him of the drought God was sending led eventually to a change of heart in Ahab, even though the king's faith wobbled at times under pressure from his wicked wife.(1 Kgs.17,18) If anyone ever seemed too set in his godlessness to change it was Ahab. The drought and the eventual rain were God's idea to which Elijah responded in prayer. Because he was right with God he could listen to what God had planned for his country and be part of the action.(5:16-18)

The wisdom which God promises those who ask for it in faith will allow us to help one another whether materially or spiritually. So often we respond to someone else's struggle by either judgement or indifference. God's wisdom gives us the huge privilege of being the means of eternal blessing to the needy.(5:19,20)