

Overview of James' thought flow



At first glance, the Epistle of James seems to be a series of disjointed exhortations on various aspects of our walk in the Truth. But when we look at it further, we find that it flows naturally from one subject to the next. The purpose of this section is to explain the flow of thoughts James has in presenting his advice to the brethren.

James' style is interesting in that as he is writing, he is bearing in mind what his readers would be thinking as they read his words, and he addresses the issues as they would be thought through before returning to his original theme (e.g. 1:5-6; 4:2-3). This is very similar to Christ's teaching style (cp Matt 12:25; Mark 2:6-8; Luke 6:8; 9:47).

Chapter 1:1-12

James first introduces himself as a servant and wishes joy to his readers - the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. He begins by addressing the trials that they faced and lifts their minds above the immediate sufferings to look towards the effect their trials would produce - the development of patience, maturity, and ultimately a whole offering of service to Yahweh. James qualifies the patience that is required and encourages the believers with the joy set before them. To overcome trials we need to understand the purpose of them, so it is necessary to look upon them from God's point of view and not man's. James shows the believers the need for Divine wisdom and the need to seek it at its source. God is always willing to give wisdom to those who ask in single-minded faith. Those who doubt that God can and will help, are limiting themselves in gaining that wisdom. As long as they are of two minds, they will remain unstable in all their ways. The cares of this life are a common cause of double-mindedness whether we are poor or rich. James compares the fleeting nature of worldly riches with the eternal prize promised to those who love Christ and have endured temptation. It is this that they are to count all joy.

Chapter 1:13-27

James then shows his readers that there is a difference between being subject to temptations and succumbing to them. It is our own lusts which cause us to sin, not God. God is of singleness of mind and only gives what is beneficial for us. His desire is for us to be regenerated through His Word, that we might manifest His character as children of light. It is not natural for us to do this. The way to learn of God's character is to hear His Word, not to say what we think He wants us to do before we hear Him, and to accept what He says without being resentful. Although the Word has been implanted into our hearts and we have received it, it is still necessary that it brings forth fruit pleasing to God. This involves continually looking into God's Word and applying the lessons practically in our lives. Pure religion is seen in selfless works of faithful assistance to others whilst maintaining a purity of conduct unspotted by the ways of the world.

Chapter 2:1-13

The main problem which prevents pure religion from being practised is respect of persons. James addresses this and shows that partiality based on outward appearances is wrong and inconsistent with their faith in Christ. He shows them God's basis of judgement and warns that without change they will find themselves in opposition to God both now and in the day of judgement. James anticipates an objection that might be raised - that they were fulfilling the Law of Leviticus 19:18 in

loving the rich by showing honour to them - and in answering demonstrates that a correct appreciation of the future judgement will dictate our present lives.

Chapter 2:14-26

James then develops his main theme further by showing that faith without the works of faith is of no use. He demonstrates that works are the outward testimony of our faith. He shows that a belief in doctrine without a corresponding change in the way of life is actually useless, and gives two shining examples of true works of faith in Abraham and Rahab.

Chapter 3:1-12

James concluded chapter 1 with a warning about bridling the tongue. Through chapter 2 he showed that the believers' speech was not in accordance with the Law of liberty and that their tongues were active and not their faith. Now he addresses the issue of the tongue directly, particularly in regard to teachers. There was a danger that those who held the false belief concerning faith and works would actively promote it in the Ecclesia. James warns about the responsibility of teachers and the danger of seeking an office for which a person is not suited. In dealing with the use of the tongue, he gives two illustrations of how powerfully small things can affect larger objects and shows that, although little, the tongue boasts great things and can create great havoc. He shows that we cannot be satisfied with half an effort to control it, comparing the tongue with every type of creature from the natural world to show how inconsistent human nature is with the orderliness of God's creation.

Chapter 3:13-18

Those who wish to be teachers must be very aware of the danger of the tongue and James shows how they should conduct their lives. He then reveals that the reason why they are not attaining to the ideal is because they lack God's wisdom and are motivated by their own fleshly nature. True teachers will display their wisdom by their actions and not by the tongue. Their works will declare where their wisdom comes from.

Chapter 4:1-10

Identifying the strife and envy amongst the members of the Ecclesia, James reaches the climax of his condemnation, revealing that in fact their whole attitude and behaviour is caused by their friendship with the world. This will inevitably put us at enmity with God and James rebukes them sharply. He shows them the process that they needed to undergo to correct their relationship with the Father. God's way is far more satisfying than what the world can offer. He will oppose those who are proud and refuse to submit to Him, but will exalt those who humble themselves and seek the means to rid the spirit of the world from their lives.

Chapter 4:11-12

Once we recognise our own personal failure, we will appreciate better the failings of others and be less hasty to condemn them. All have sinned and come short of the Glory of God. There is only one who is able to administer true judgement.

Chapter 4:13-17

Becoming aware of the truth of our own nature will also highlight the uncertainty of life and will help to protect us from arrogant independent plans for the future. We must never forget our dependency upon God. James brings to the brethren's attention their unbalanced view of life and then directs their minds to the correct scriptural approach.

Chapter 5:1-6

James now returns to discussing the ways of the rich who had so blinded their eyes to the requirements of Yahweh that they were persecuting the Ecclesia. He warns of God's anger and exhorts them to change their ways. The wealthy Jews had sinned against God in not believing His Word. After denouncing them for hoarding wealth, James indicts them for specific evils of which they were guilty. Three charges are laid against them - exploiting their fellow man, engaging in riotous living, and condemning and causing the death of the righteous one.

Chapter 5:7-11

With Christ's example of non-resistance before them, James encourages the brethren in their time of persecution. Patience can be displayed when the end is focused upon. James encourages them with an example of a husbandman waiting for fruit, warning that patience will not necessarily be rewarded overnight and involves not holding grudges against our brethren. James then gives two strong examples to look to - the prophets for patience in affliction, and Job for endurance in trial.

Chapter 5:12-18

James exhorts them to avoid exposing their feelings in oaths that would blaspheme God and shows his readers the truly satisfying expression of our feelings (both sorrowful and joyful), while at the same time addressing the problems of sickness. The effects of trials take a toll on us. We can become sick both physically and spiritually. Prayer and singing will go a long way to overcoming our weaknesses, but sometimes due to the burdens of our trials it is necessary to seek additional strength. James provides the cure to overcoming our weakness - through prayer and in seeking the aid of stronger brethren. He uses the example of Elijah as an outstanding illustration of one who, although subject to the exact human nature as us, was heard in his prayers to God.

Chapter 5:19-20

James concludes his Epistle with words of encouragement for those who stray from the Truth, and those who work for the spiritual welfare of the Ecclesia.