

Home Group series for Spring term 2020

Session 1	Sunday 5 th January	Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:10-18	Epiphany of glory
Session 2	Sunday 12 th January	Psalm 42 (vs2 = text for year)	My soul thirsts for God
Session 3	Sunday 19 th January	James 1:1-18	Persevering under pressure
Session 4	Sunday 26 th January	James 1:19-27 and James 3:1-12	Using the tongue wisely
Session 5	Sunday 2 nd February	James 2:1-13	No room for favourites
Session 6	Sunday 9 th February	James 2:14-26	Faith and works
Family service	Sunday 16 th February	Family service	Family service
Visiting speaker	Sunday 23 rd February	Visiting speaker from CPAS	Visiting speaker from CPAS
Session 7	Sunday 1 st March	James 4	Wise advice
Session 8	Sunday 8 th March	James 5:7-20	Suffering, healing and prayer

Session 1. Ephesians 1:3-14 and John 1:10-18. Epiphany of glory

Background

The book of Ephesians identifies itself as being written by the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 1:1). The lack of personal greetings, found in other Pauline letters, may be because it was a circular letter intended for other churches in addition to the one in Ephesus (modern day Turkey). Ephesus was a highly significant port in Paul's day (now silted up) and thriving commercial centre. Unlike other letters of Paul, the book does not address any particular error or heresy but, rather, seeks to expand the horizons of its readers. It may have been written about AD60, while Paul was in prison in Rome. The book can be sub-divided into four main parts: firstly, God's purposes (1:3-14); secondly, prayer that God's people may realise these (1:15-23); thirdly, steps toward the fulfilment of God's purposes (chapters 2 & 3) and, finally, practical ways to fulfil these purposes in the church (4:1-6:20).

Although covering a period before AD 60, John's Gospel is written much later – perhaps as late as AD85 or even 90. The author, the beloved disciple, now very advanced in years, has had time to reflect on the significance of Jesus. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, John has a deeper understanding of what his Friend meant as he taught him on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Both the book of Ephesians and John's Gospel depart in style from much of the New Testament. While most other books concentrate on practical issues and historical facts, both these books are more spiritual in nature. Indeed, they are both vitally important because they represent the pinnacle of Christian doctrine and theology.

Questions

Read Ephesians chapter 1 verses 3 and 4. **Meditate** on what it means to be chosen not by another human or human institution, but by the Creator of the universe.

Question 1. How do you feel about the fact that **YOU** are chosen by God?

Now read verses 5 and 6. Paul uses the picture of adoption (see also Romans 8:23; Galatians 4:5).

Question 2. What is the legal and social significance of adoption today? What is the significance of God adopting us?

Next, read verses 7 and 8. The Ephesians would have been familiar with the Graeco-Roman practice of redemption where slaves were freed by the payment of a ransom.

Question 3. How are we set free from the sins that bind us with the resulting curse imposed by the law? (see Gal 3:13-14)

Next, read verses 9 and 10.

Question 4. What do you think these verses mean? To what extent do you think that they have a political, economic, social or ecological significance?

Next, read verses 11 to 14

Question 5. Who do you think Paul is referring to when he says, "we", and "you"?

In writing the fourth Gospel, John's problem was how to present Christianity to the Greek world. In chapter 1, he used a pattern of Greek thought which would have resonated with his audience. In 560 BC there was a Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, who postulated that while everything is in a state of change, this change was not haphazard. There was a pattern, a logic and a reason behind everything. This was called the *Logos* or the *word* and Greeks (and Jews) began to understand this concept. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, John chooses to communicate to the Greek world that Jesus is nothing short of the one who makes sense of everything. He is the *word* of God. Jesus is the

word who is the creating, illuminating, controlling, sustaining mind of God which has come to earth in human form. That is, the *word* became flesh (verse 14).

Read John 1: 10-18

Question 6. What are the main things that strike you about this passage?

Now focus on verse 14

It might be argued that this is the greatest single verse in the Bible and, indeed, the whole of literature. A lifetime of study and thought could not exhaust the riches contained in this verse. Here we are introduced to the glory of Christ. There are at least four parts to this: (i) the life of Christ was a manifestation of glory (see John 2:11); (ii) the glory which Christ manifests is the glory of God (see John 5:41); (iii) Christ's glory was uniquely his own (see John 17:5); (iv) the glory which is his, he has transmitted to his disciples (see John 17:22).

To grasp the full significance of Jesus' glory, we need to understand what glory meant in the Old Testament. Read the following verses from the Old Testament: Exodus 16:10; Exodus 24:16; Exodus 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11; Isaiah 6:3 and Ezekiel 1:28.

Question 7. What does this say about the glory of God? What does this say about who Jesus was?

Application

Question 8. Is our vision of God wide enough?

Question 9. Have we ever sensed the glory of God in our lives? If so, how?

Session 2. Psalm 42 (verse 2 = verse for the year). My soul thirsts for God.

Background

Psalms 42 and 43 are really just one psalm in three stanzas. In the Hebrew manuscripts the two psalms are merged together and, in our modern Bibles we can see that there is no separate introduction or heading to psalm 43 but rather it simply follows the same pattern "Why my soul are you downcast" is a key theme of psalm 42 and it is repeated in psalm 43 verse 5. The message of the psalm is that within the life of faith in God there are hard times. The psalmist is no stranger to suffering "My tears have been my food" verse 3 and "My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me" Verse 10. Yet in this psalm, the psalmist gives us 3 ways of dealing with despair or 3 ways to push onto 'seasons of hope'. C S Lewis "The Grand miracle "To be sure, it feels wintry still, but the great truth is that the corner has been turned." Firstly, we have got to want God in 2020. Read verses 1 and 2.

Questions

At the Royal Marine Commando training base in Lymstone, South Devon, one part of the training involves the marine recruits being submerged under water in a tunnel. They are totally dependent on their comrades grabbing their hands and having the strength and ability to pull them out. When they are pulled out, they are gasping for air. The air is their source of oxygen to revive them. Why do they go through this life-threatening ordeal? The answer is that they are desperate to wear the Green Beret. They want, more than anything else in the world, to be Royal Marine Commandos. What do we want more than anything else?

Question 1. How desperate are we for God? Do our souls thirst for God?

If we are genuinely desperate to meet with God in times of hardship, we need to start talking. The psalmist talks to God rather than listens to inner voices of despair. Read verse 5 (repeated in verse 11) and verse 9

Question 2. How does talking help in times of crisis? Do we talk to God? Do we talk to others God sends?

The second thing that the psalmist does is to remember. Read verse 4a and verse 6

Question 3. How does remembering God help us in times of crisis?

The next thing that the psalmist does is to get into fellowship. Read verse 4b. See also Psalms 120-134. Every year all male Jews (who often took wives and children) were required to attend the 3 major festivals in Jerusalem: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Weeks or Pentecost), and Sukkot (Tabernacles, Tents or Booths)—when the ancient Israelites living in the Kingdom of Judah would make a pilgrimage to Temple in Jerusalem, as commanded They would meet with other friends, pilgrims, sometimes stay at friends' houses along the way or sometimes camp out.

Question 4. How has fellowship helped you in your Christian journey through life in times of hardship?

Finally, the psalmist looks forward. Read the last part of verse 11. We will one day encounter our Saviour. Nothing can compare with this. No earthly pain or hardship endured can detract from this eternal future hope.

At the end of the last battle (C S Lewis) we see the children beginning 'Chapter one of the Great Story':

"And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter one of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Question 5. Do you find it helpful in times of trial to look ahead to a time when pain will be no more? Are you able to share some experiences of this?

Application

Question 6. If you feel willing and able, reflect on some difficult moments in your life. What did you find helpful in pulling you through?

Question 7. If a young Christian was going through a period of trial, what advice would you give them?

Session 3. James 1:1-18. Persevering under pressure.

Background

Of all the books in the New Testament, the book of James is probably the one that had the hardest fight to be included. Indeed, Martin Luther, in the 16th century would not have included it at all. The reasons are obvious. Firstly, it is in almost direct opposition to Paul and the rest of the New Testament, it ascribes justification by works and not by faith. Secondly, not once does it give to Christians any instruction or reminder of the Passion, Resurrection or Spirit of Christ. Indeed, it only mentions Jesus twice. If these passages are removed, the whole book would probably fit better into the Old Testament, as a Jewish book. However, all these criticisms are slightly harsh. It was written, almost certainly, by James the half-brother of Jesus who was the leader of the Jerusalem church. It was written to, and for, a very Jewish (Christian) audience. It was also written very early on – probably. It may have been written in AD45. If this was so, it gives us an invaluable insight into very early Christian thinking in this part of the world. In many senses it is a very practical book which many Christians have found helpful over the centuries. In particular, there are some very famous verses which Christians often quote. For example, “Humble yourself before the Lord and He will lift you up” (James 4:10); “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26); “the tongue, though a small part of the body... corrupts the whole person” (James 3:5-6), and, mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2.13). Finally, it presents something of a balance to other parts of the New Testament which some regard makes the message richer and deeper, not worse. For all these reasons, inspired by the Holy Spirit, it has been included in the New Testament.

Next, read James 1:1-18 as a group.

Questions

Read verses 2-4. If we meet trials in the right way it can produce perseverance which is a Christian quality. The Greek word *hupomonē* is used which means more than just perseverance. It means the ability to turn trials into greatness and glory. To the amazement of the pagans, the martyrs did not die grimly. They often died singing. One was asked why he was smiling in the flames to which he replied: “I saw the glory of God and was glad”.

Question 1. Do you think trials can produce joy (verse 2)?

Next, read verses 5-8.

The question now arises, “How do we meet trials in the right way?” The answer is, says James, to seek wisdom from God. Unlike the Greeks, to the Jewish Christians, wisdom was not philosophical but rather practical. It is akin to seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. We should pray to God for direction, trusting that He is a God who delights in giving (Matthew 7:9; Luke 11:11) and we should ask without doubts (Ephesians 4:14).

Question 2. How often do we pray to God for guidance in times of trial? What sort of prayers do we use?

Next, read verses 9-11.

For James, Christianity makes the poor realise that they are valued and makes the rich realise that they should not rely on their material possessions. He uses a vivid picture, familiar to the people of Palestine of wild flowers sprouting for a short season before the drought kills them all off.

Question 3. How is the church and the Kingdom of God a great ‘leveller’ in exalting the poor and humbling the rich?

Next, read verse 12.

Look also at 1 Corinthians 9:25; 2 Timothy 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4 and Revelation 2:10.

Question 4. What do you think is meant by the ‘crown of life’?

Next, read verses 13-15.

Question 5. Do we ever blame God for our predicament? What is the message of James about this in verses 13-15? Who or what causes us to sin then?

Next, read verses 16-18

James re-emphasises that all good things come from God. While shadows move and lights change, the one who created light never changes. In the ancient world all first-fruits were sacred to God. So, it is for us, we belong to a constant, faithful God who loves to give us only good things.

Question 6. How does this passage make you feel about God?

Application

Question 7. Have you learnt anything new from this passage about perseverance and the nature of God?

Question 8. If so, how will you put this new learning into practice?

Session 4. James 1:19-27 and James 3:1-12. Using the tongue wisely.

Background

Once again, the book of James gives us clear and practical teaching which doesn't need much further explanation. A rich and influential lady in London invited two leading politicians to dine with her. Benjamin Disraeli talked to her all night and when he left, she felt he was the cleverest man in all London. Then William Gladstone visited. He listened to her all night and when he left, she felt that she was the cleverest woman in all London. It was William Gladstone that she invited back.

Read verses 19-20

Question 1. Do we talk more than we listen? Which is the wisest approach to communication?

Jewish culture is about questioning, to this day. Some in James' time were putting forward the view that a blazing argument can lead to good outcomes. While this is true on some occasions, James also points out that a constant attitude of confrontation is likely to be counter-productive as any parent or teacher will testify.

Question 2. When is it good to be confrontational? Can you think of any examples?

Next, read verse 21 and also look at 1 Peter 3:23; Hebrews 1:14 and 9:28

Question 3. What do you think verse 21 is about?

Next, read verses 22-24

James provides two vivid pictures of which he is a master. Firstly, he speaks of a man who listens but doesn't act. This might be us. We may attend church meetings, listen to Bible readings, listen to countless sermons and podcasts but none of this makes us a Christian. Secondly, he draws a parallel with someone who looks in a mirror. She sees her hair out of place and a smudge on her cheek but doesn't do anything about it before leaving the house.

Question 4. How much do you agree with the following statement: "what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the market place – or there is no point in hearing at all"

Next, read verse 25

This is the kind of verse in the book of James which Luther disliked. He disliked the idea of 'law' altogether because he maintained that "Christ is the culmination of the law" (Romans 10:4).

Question 5. In what sense does the perfect law give freedom?

Now read verses 26-7

For James, real worship does not lie in elaborate vestments or beautiful music or meticulous planning. Real religion (or worship) is more about the practical service of mankind and especially those need – in James' day this would be the widow and the orphan. Today it may be the homeless, the unemployed, the sick.

Question 6. To what extent do you think the Church of England has got the balance right between religion (or worship) and service?

Next read James Chapter 3 verses 1-12

Focus now on verses 1-2

Teachers were held in very high regard in New Testament times, ranked second only to Apostles and prophets (see 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11). The reason is simple: in a world without written materials, the church was totally dependent on them to explain what Christianity was and what Christianity taught.

Question 7. Why then, were teachers likely to receive a greater condemnation? Why might home group leaders be more susceptible to being judged more strictly than, say, a newcomer to church?

Now read verse 3-6.

Question 8. What images does James use for the effects of tongue?

Next read verse 7-8 and also look at Genesis 1:28; Genesis 9:2 and Psalm 8:6-8.

Question 9. What do you think these verses are saying?

Now read verses 9-12.

Once again, we are confronted with clear teaching using a series of vivid images. It is this sort of easily digestible narrative that makes the book of James so popular with Christians and a good model for Christian teaching.

Question 10. Can you think of 3 modern day analogies that would speak to a young Christian living in Surrey today.

Application

Question 11. Name one thing that you have learnt from these passages in James on taming the tongue

Question 12. How are you going to put this into practice in your working or home life this week?

Session 5. James 2:1-13. No room for favourites

Background

Yet more clear teaching. This time on the importance of not showing favouritism. This was evidently a key topic in the early church for reasons that will become obvious which we can apply today.

Read James 2:1-13

Now focus on verse 1

In verse 1 James underlines the importance of **NOT** showing favouritism. It is important to understand that the ancient world was built on hierarchies. Everyone had their place. It would have been extremely hard for a rich and powerful man to sit next to a slave and harder still to receive a sacrament from him. However, despite this temptation to segregate, the church was the one place in the ancient world where segregation must not happen.

Question 1. Do you think the modern church segregates on class background or level of educational achievement?

Next, read verses 2-5.

In verses 2-4 James outlines this temptation. We must remember the early church was filled with poor people and it had limited resources. It would be so tempting to encourage, though favouritism, rich people to come to church so as to redress this imbalance and begin to have a financial and social influence.

Question 2. Why do some church leaders, especially encourage materially rich people into their congregations?

Question 3. What is James' response to this sort of thinking in verse 5? Why does James take this view?

In verse 5 "Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith.." No doubt James was thinking of Jesus Himself who was poor too. Abraham Lincoln once said, "God must love the common people because he made so many of them." In the ancient world, when a slave became a Christian, he no longer looked upon his master as the most important being in his life, rather Jesus was. In addition, the Christian slave would no longer support his master's sharp practice and petty dishonesty. Therefore, many masters got annoyed with their slaves and 'bad mouthed' the name of Christian.

Now read verse 7.

Question 4. How do you think the rich people would therefore respond to the early church? Do you think that there is a link here to verse 7?

Verse 7: "Are they (the rich) not the ones who are slandering the name of Him to whom you belong?" No doubt there was a counter argument from the early church which stated: "the royal law of loving our neighbour includes the rich as well as the poor"(verse 8)

Question 5. Look at verse 9. What is James' response to this argument in verse 8?

Very well, says James but make sure that you are showing love as a neighbour and not love as a rich person (verse 9).

Next, read verses 10-12

In Jewish thinking at the time there was the view that all good deeds put you in credit with God and all bad deeds but you in debit. At the end of your life the two columns are added together and if the credits outweigh the debits then you are okay! James counters this simplistic legalistic view (verses 10-12). Like Jesus, James raises the bar for the Christian. Any sin is wrong. We cannot manipulate or engineer a favourable bank balance with God. Rather, we need to avoid all sin.

Question 6. Read Matthew 5:38-9. How does Jesus 'raise the bar' above 'the law'

Question 7. What do you think is meant by 'the law that gives freedom' (verse 12)?

The law for the Christian is not governed by external rules; it is governed by internal freedom. This is the inner compulsion of love which is harder than external rules. It is not driven by fear but by a love for God.

Next, read verse 13.

Finally, in verse 13, James reminds his audience that just as God shows mercy, so must we.

Question 8. Read Matthew 5:7 and Matthew 18:22-35. How does this support verse 13?

Application:

Question 9. A central tenet of Christianity is that mercy triumphs over judgement. Can you think of a time when you have been shown mercy rather than being judged? How did it make you feel?

Question 10. Can you think of a time when you showed mercy rather than judgement? How did this make you feel?

Session 6. James 2:14-26. Faith and works (or deeds)

Background

In this passage we have one of the greatest apparent contradictions in the whole of the New Testament and, to some extent, the basis of Protestant reformation in the 16th century and the fundamental schism of the Western Church. When James writes in Chapter 2 verse 17 and again in verse 26 that “faith without deeds is dead”. He seems to be contradicting the basic message of the rest of the New Testament and particularly the writings of the apostle Paul. It is, as if we have James in the blue corner talking about deeds and Paul in the red corner talking about faith. Who is right? How do we resolve this puzzle? Let’s start with Paul in the red corner

Read: Romans 3.28; Galatians 2:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9

Question 1. Working in pairs, summarise the argument from the red corner. Share with the rest of the group your thoughts.

What is the counter argument recorded in James? In actual fact, there is no counter-argument. Careful reading of James 2:14-26 does not directly contradict anything that Paul writes and there is no fundamental division in the New Testament on this issue. To understand this, we need to bear in mind three things. (i) Firstly, James was not criticising faith *per se* but the kind of belief which was purely intellectual and had no impact on people’s lives. This was the sort of religion practised by the Stoics which was a heresy that denied the humanity of Christ. (ii) Secondly, James was writing to Christians about ministry after salvation; Paul was writing to pagans who needed to understand the basis of salvation before anything else. (iii) Finally, the Christian journey through life is not a binary choice. It is not one or the other. It is not faith OR deeds. In practice it is both (see: Joshua chapter 2; Hebrews 11:31; Genesis chapter 22).

Now read verses 14-17.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, James cannot stand profession without practice. Once again, he uses vivid illustrations to show the absurdity of just saying the words but doing nothing.

Question 2. What illustrations does James use? Can you think of any parallels in our church life today?

Now read verses 18 and 19

Christianity is falsely represented when it is portrayed either belief or action; either faith or deeds. It is not “either or” but “both and”. There must be thought and action. Kipling wrote:

“O England is a garden and such gardens are not made
By saying, “O how beautiful,” and sitting in the shade
While better men than we began their working lives
By digging weeds from garden paths with broken dinner knives.

Question 3. What example does James give about belief, by itself, being meaningless?

Next read verses 20-26

Question 4. What 2 examples does James give of faith and deeds working together as one.

Question 5. To what extent are faith and deeds the opposite sides of the same coin?

Application

Question 6. Reflect on three areas of your life where you feel you have strong faith but where this strong faith is not translated into any form of action. Share with the rest of the group – only if you feel able!

Question 7. Choose one of those three areas and decide what you are going to do about it by making plans.

Session 7. James 4. Wise advice

Background

Read James chapter 4 verses 1-17. Does anything new or unusual strike you about this passage?

In the first lesson of the study of economics, students are told that the economic problem is how to allocate scarce resources in the face of unlimited wants. In James chapter 4, the Bible teaches us that unlimited wants fuelled by human desire, aside from God, is the source of many sins.

Now read verses 1-3. Read also 1 Kings 21:1-16 and 2 Samuel 11

Question 1. What is the link between the stories from 1 Kings and 2 Samuel with James’ use of the word “kill” in verse 2?

Question 2. What are the ‘lesser’ consequences of a pleasure-driven life?

Now read verses 4-8

Question 3. In what sense does James use the word adulterous people (verse 4). Hint: see Exodus 34:15 and note Hosea 3:1.

In verse 5, it is not clear which passage of scripture James has in mind. It may be Exodus 20:5. For verse 6, see also Proverbs 3:34 and 1 Peter 5:5.

Question 4. What is the solution to all our 'adultery', found in verse 7? The whole of verse 7 and particularly the second part is a much-loved verse for millions of Christians throughout history. The same is true of the first part of verse 8

Meditate on these words: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you."

Now read the second part of verse 8 through to verse 10

Biblical thought demands a fourfold cleansing: (i) a cleansing of the lips (Isaiah 6:5-6); (ii) a cleansing of the hands (Psalm 24:4); (iii) a cleansing of the heart (Psalm 73:13) and a cleansing of the mind (James 4:8).

Question 5. What does Jesus say about being cleansed and pure in Matthew 5:8?

Question 6. How does verse 9 link to Matthew 5:4 and Luke 6:20-26?

James also calls us to Godly humility

Look at: Job 22:29; Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 57:15; Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11

Question 7. What do all these passages teach us about the need for humility?

In life there is one sin which can be said to be the basis of all others; and that is forgetting that we are creatures and that God is creator.

Question 8. James builds upon this knowledge and revelation. When does God lift us up? (verse 10)

Now read verses 11-12. Look also at: Exodus 20:16; Psalm 15:3; 50:19-20; Proverbs 6:16,19

Question 9. According to James, why is it so wrong to speak against a Christian brother or sister?

Now read verses 13-17

In the Muslim world, many conversations about any future plans will start with the words "inshala." That is, "if it is God's will". At the time of the evangelical revival it was common for Christians to frequently say "Lord willing"

Question 10. Why should we not boast about our plans for tomorrow, next week, next month, next year?

Meditate on the words: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

Application

Question 11. There are so many wise sayings contained in James Chapter 4. Pick one verse, or part of a verse, that you have found really helpful in speaking to you

Question 12. How would you explain to someone who was a new Christian or, indeed, someone who wasn't a Christian at all about how this verse has helped you in your life?

Session 8. James 5:7-20. Suffering, healing and prayer.

Background

Read verses 7-20. Have you discovered anything new in these verses?

Once again, we are faced with a wide range of very practical and often much-loved New Testament teaching.

Now focus on verses 7-9

The early church lived in expectation of an imminent Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This is the sentiment behind James' words to his Christian brothers and sisters. At the end of verse 9, James uses the words of Jesus Himself (Mark 13:29; Matthew 24:33)

Question 1. Why do you think that God has delayed the return of Jesus and not returned as the early church thought, within one generation? (see: Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32).

Now read verse 10-11. Read also Matthew 24:13.

Question 2. What inspiration can we draw from these verses?

Verse 12 is a reference to Jesus' sermon on the mount. See Matthew 5:33-37

Now read verses 13-15

Question 3. What did the early church do if someone was (i) in trouble; (ii) happy; (iii) sick

Apart from singing, one of the features of the early church was healing. It inherited its tradition from Judaism.

When a Jew was ill, he was taken first to the Rabbi (before the doctor) who would anoint him with oil and pray over him. This often was more than sufficient. Historians record how prolific the church was in healing many people who were sick. For many centuries the church did use anointing with oil as a means of cure. This changed in 852AD when anointing was used more as preparation for death – a sacrament of extreme unction. Although, some churches do continue to anoint with oil as a means of healing.

Now read verses 16-18

In early Christianity, still built on Judaism, there was the idea that all sickness is due to sin (see: for example, Mark 2:5). Therefore, in verse 16 James draws on this understanding. Of course, Jesus also explained that it was not always linked to sin (see John 9:3). Nonetheless, mental anguish can result from not confessing our sins to God and also to the people we have wronged. In the early Methodist classes (based on the Moravian church), Wesley urged all class members to spend the first part of the meeting confessing their faults to one another before praying for each other. Above all, there is the idea in the early church that there are no limits to the power of prayer. The Jews had a saying: "he who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron"

Meditate on the words from verse 16. "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"

Question 4. Read 1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-46 and Luke 4:25. What did Elijah pray for? What happened?

Now read verses 19-20

Verse 20 is interesting. If the wanderer is someone who has no faith, then they are being saved from the second death (Revelation 21:8). If they are a Christian who needs to be restored, they may be being saved from physical death. William Barclay suggests that the second part of verse 20 refers to the sins of the rescuer (the evangelist). If this is the case, then saving another 'soul' is the surest way to save your own (see, for example: 1 Timothy 4:16).

Question 5. Why does God delight in a sinner who repents?

Application

Question 6. Can you think of an answer to prayer that relieved your suffering or the suffering of someone else recently? Do we pray with expectation and in every situation of need?

Question 7. Have you any examples of restoring a wandering believer or bringing someone to faith through the power of the Holy Spirit? How were you used by God?

THE END