

What's Your Fixed Point

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[0 : 00] We'll turn back and look for a short while at the passage in James chapter one. Now I'm going to look at not every single verse, it's a packed, full chapter.

James really works like that. You feel like you read every few verses. He comes onto a new subject. There's lots of different issues being raised. Some of them come back over and over again.

Some of them are like themes that keep coming in and out again. But there's lots of things going on here. So we're just going to look at really the first 18 verses and only some of them. But I want to tie, right at the start, I just want to tie everything together by asking you to think about whether or not you have a fixed position around which you base the decisions that you make.

So like a kind of guiding principle, what is the guiding principle of your life? So when you come to a point in life where you have to make a decision, well what affects that decision?

What's the fixed point that you hold on to? You know, a business, if you work in finance or if you work for a company, most businesses, you hope most businesses have a kind of code of ethics or a way that they do business.

[1 : 16] Well, okay, well here's us, we're a business and this is how we work. This is our fixed point for how we make our decisions. You might be into football. So Liverpool Football Club, as an Everton fan I'm delighted to say I've been going through a hard time and they weren't doing so well.

Now what happens is they get rid of their previous manager and they bring in a new manager. So Liverpool Football Club bring in a guy called Brendan Rogers, who used to be in Swansea. But they don't just bring in Brendan Rogers, they bring in Brendan Rogers and his kind of philosophy, his fixed position, like his way of looking at football and how it should be played.

So the team, it's not just random, they bring in this guy who says, well this is how we play football. This is the best way to do it. And if you follow this guiding principle of how to play, well this is how I believe we'll get success.

Another example maybe is to think about if you were to go travelling. If you think in the days when a lot of travel was done in this country by sea, so people instead of travelling across land, they'd go round the coast in ships.

Dangerous, loads of people would lose their lives. Now what they needed and what you still need, even if you're going to go say hiking in the Minnows or something, is a fixed position.

[2 : 36] You need to know your coordinates, don't you? So the decisions you make about where you're going to go and how you're going to get from A to B are based on not randomness, not just like, I feel like going over there. But well this is how I'm going to get from here to there.

So you need to be clear on what, you know, I'm going to make this decision to go here based on this coordinate. Now if we think about the way that we make decisions about life, there can often be problems with these, can't there?

You know, who says the Brendan Rogers' philosophy on how liveable football clubs should play is a good one? It might not work. And equally, in another sense, it may be that somebody was put out to sea with the right coordinates, but the storm that they come into is too strong and they can't deal with it.

Their ship can't deal with it, their ship breaks up. When you look at your life and you think about the way that you make decisions and the reasons that you have for doing this or that, making this or that decision, you know, what we're often trying to do, particularly if we've not got God in the picture, if we're just trying to manage our lives, is we're trying to...

I wonder what that was for a minute. We're trying to work within a system whereby we kind of manage what's going on in our lives. We have a particular hope for the direction of our lives. Well, here's what I'd like my life to look like.

[3 : 58] Here's what I'd like to go, to hear about people who are really going places. And we think, well, here's what I'm going to do in order to get there. But the problem is that we can often be thwarted.

Somebody else can come into your life and throw you a curveball and wreck all that. Or you yourself might just not be up to it. You might not be able to keep up with all that you're trying to do in your life.

And what we find in James here is a kind of insistence, and I think it comes out throughout the whole book, that your fixed position, right, your kind of guiding principle is based on God and who He is and His power and strength rather than on yourself.

So right from the start, what it's saying to you is, through the ups and downs of your life, your fixed position is the Lord. Certainly, for salvation, if you're thinking about, well, how can I be in God's favour? How can I be saved?

Well, if you're fixed position, if your starting point, as it were, is yourself, well, you'll fall sharp. Because the Bible says that not one of us can kind of like come into God's presence and say, here it is.

[5 : 15] Here's a philosophy that I followed here are my life choices and wasn't it good and successful? Well, God will say, well, you know, if you're trying to attain my perfection, you fall way short. So James speaks into our lives and says that the founding principle that we need to base who we are and the decisions that we make is that God is a living God who has spoken into our lives and assured us of who Jesus is as our saviour and of His love for us.

Now, what this does is it gives us a long term as well as just a short term view on life. It's not just about managing those little daily decisions that we make to make each day feel like a feel good day.

It's about a longer term perspective. So what we're going to do is we're going to look throughout the book of James and we're going to see how that big picture perspective that we have, that God is the starting point for the decisions that we make, fits into four key areas of our lives that we can come across.

And we'll just go through the first section of chapter one and go through some of these. Well, the first one, if you look at verse one to verse eight, this is maybe the passage that you remember from James.

A lot of people are kind of familiar with this and this is about dealing with trials. Okay? Now, when we were reading this, you might well have been thinking to yourself, that's crazy, that's ridiculous, or you might have just been thinking, yeah, good theory, but no way, no way in practice is that a real situation.

[6 : 53] So just look at what it says. James, having brought his greetings to the different people that he's writing to, look at what he says in verse two. Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.

So how did you feel when you read that? Consider it pure joy when you face trials. It kind of goes against the grain, doesn't it? It doesn't seem to make sense on the surface of things when we read that.

But it's important to understand that James is speaking into a real-life situation. He's speaking to people's lives who've got real difficulty. So this isn't just like saying, okay, well, adopt a sort of martyr complex.

You know that thing where we go about thinking like, ah, the world's against me and I'm dealing with it ever so well, aren't I? Poor me. I get brownie points for being so optimistic in the face of so much difficulty.

You know, so where we take any little bad thing that happens to us. And, you know, we think if we get through it, then it stacks up points in our favour. Haven't we done a good job of dealing with that bad thing? Well, that's not the case here.

[7 : 58] James is writing to people, look at back in verse one, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. He's writing to early church believers who've been scattered all over the place and who are not in their home country.

They're not in a comfortable place where everybody around about them are believers. They worship the same God and allow them to follow the same practices, the same religious practices.

In many cases, these people faced a really hard time for being believers. A really hard time. And it's probable that they faced financial hard time.

They were marginalised. They were like outcasts. So James writes to them and says, consider it joy when you face these trials.

Why? Well, look at verse three, because you know that the testing of your faith developed perseverance.

[9 : 05] In other words, as you go through these trials, God's at work. This is not for no reason. You think, James says to these people, again, that this is just random.

Don't just think, ah well, this is just bad stuff's happening to me. It happens to everybody, you know, stiff up our lip, just get on with it. It's not just a kind of stiff upper lip so that we get through it and don't cause a fuss.

It's because the testing of your faith developed perseverance. And then he goes on to say perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The other thing to notice about this is the point of going through difficult times, and notice if you're a Christian tonight, if you're a believer and you're reading this and you find it a hard thing to swallow, it's not just saying to you, just be a persevering person.

It's saying be persevering so that what? Do you see that? If you follow the verse on? So that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

[10 : 07] And then speaking about your development as a Christian. It's taken on the idea that, and Derek says it often from this pulpit, Christianity isn't just a thing that happened then, it did happen then, you're saved, and you're going on maturing, and you're going on growing.

And the incredible truth that we sometimes find it so hard to get our heads around is that God uses trials to bring about our maturity. Because as you go through hard times, what He says to you, what His advice to you is, is to look back to Him and to remember His strength, remember the fact that He has saved you, and remember the fact that there's no thing that you can go through that He isn't able to deal with.

It doesn't know about it, that He's not, you know, in some way able. Like, we sometimes have the idea that God can't help us in a situation. There's nothing that we go through that God can't speak into, couldn't help us from.

But yet He chooses at times to allow us to go through times, and it's through these times of trial that He matures us. The next thing to notice about this little bit here is that you must be open to the fact that you need help.

We're sometimes not very good at asking for help, are we? Because we can be proud. And we like to think that if something bad happens, well, we'll just deal with it.

[11 : 39] Now, what this is saying is that as you go through life, as you face trials, what you're to do is see it as a situation where through perseverance your faith is being matured.

Now, look at verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God. Ask God. If you lack wisdom, ask God.

Don't have the mindset that you are, that this won't happen to you, that you won't have to ask God. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault.

The first thing is that this brings us into a point where we're being matured. The next thing is that we need to recognize that we need this, and this is part of the experience that the Christians should expect.

But the final thing to mention in this section here is that we need to have confidence in the one that we ask help from. So it's no good throwing up a prayer to God like, ah, maybe he's there and maybe he'll just notice me enough to maybe help me.

[12 : 54] Probably doesn't care anyway. That's not a prayer of faith. When he asks, he must believe and not doubt.

Now, go back to the example we started with. What happens when Liverpool lose three games on the top? Well, it's probable that the team will start to think, this new manager, I don't know if his methods are all that he says they were cracked up to be.

Well, this is not the case with us because what we do is we remember the character of the God that we pray to. Who is it that we're speaking to? We're not going to sort, you internalize every situation that you come up against, every trial, and you go to just your friend and you say, help me get through this situation.

There's an element of which we can help each other. There's an element in which we are called to work through things ourselves. But there's a bigger picture here. There's a bigger goal, which is the maturing of your faith.

And as you, as you, as in trouble as you call out to God and as you ask him to give you a bigger perspective on all that you're going through. A heavenly perspective, a long-term perspective, he's maturing you and he's growing you as a Christian.

[14 : 13] You know, when we pray to God, what do we expect him to do? If we expect him just to take away the bad things, then we're expecting something that the Bible never encourages us to think about really.

Let me just read from a verse in 1 Peter, 1 Peter chapter 10. And the God of all grace, Peter's finishing up his letter and he says, And the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, After you've suffered a little, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

After you have suffered a little. So that verse in 1 Peter presupposes that the Christian life won't just be plain sailing. And you know, it can be so easy for us sometimes to get into a mode of thinking where we almost expect, you know, a bad thing happens.

We think, why is God doing this? Why would God do this to me? Why would He allow this trouble to come to my life? Well, the Bible doesn't give us a reason for thinking like that because it says, Well, you will go through things that aren't easy for you.

So, first thing to notice from this passage is that we will go through trials, but the believer should allow perseverance to do its work. Not just grudgingly, not like, I'm going to go through this, but I hate it, and I'm angry at God for doing this.

[15 : 34] Really what He should do is take this away from me. We submit to His understanding of who we are and what we need for our lives.

Second thing, and moving on into verse 9 now, is about avoiding complacency. So this is the second kind of life situation that this chapter speaks into. And it's complacency, particularly, in regard to wealth.

James is quite open about addressing the issue of money throughout the book. So, verse 9. Let's just read this little section. For the brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position, but the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he'll pass away like a wildflower.

The sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant. Its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

In some ways, we don't have to say a lot about this, do we? One way in which some people manage their life, remember we were speaking at the start about how, what fixed point you use, well, one way is to think, well, if I get wealth, then I'll be able to manage people around me and my life, and that'll make each day go according to plan.

[16 : 56] This section reminds us otherwise, because what it does is it says, well, that's a very small picture way of looking at life. That's like saying, well, if I get kind of enough money, I can just manage things myself and make everything go smooth.

I remember when I was thinking about this film that used to crop up in loads of, you know, these magazines that have 50 best films ever, polls, like 10 guys in a room decide which is the best 50 films in the world ever were, and somehow they have the right to do that.

There's a film called Citizen Kane that's quite an old film now, and it's about a guy who was very wealthy, and he owned newspapers, Charles Foster Kane, and really what the film is about is it starts with him dying, and then it kind of jumps back into aspects of his life and tries to find out some of the mysteries of what made him who he was and what he was all about.

But the whole point about it was that he got so rich because he was one of the, you know, imagine Rupert Murdoch, just when all the big money in newspapers was kicking off. He got so much wealth and money from his publishing and his newspapers.

He started to build this elaborate palace place for himself, and, you know, he lived his life increasingly, and he sought to get power, and he built this great big fancy place called Zanadu, and he died alone, lonely, and the film shows us confused in this empty, big, weird-looking palace.

[18 : 33] The point of that example is to say that we don't have to go to the Bible to be taught that wealth can't be the thing that gives us security.

You know, a film like that shows us very clearly. This guy made all the money in the world, and he was lonely, and he died alone. Now, what this passage here in this section of James does is he reminds us of how we need to have a big picture view of life.

Look at the example it gives us. It talks about the person, again, it kind of turns things, the way we view things, it turns it upside down on its head. So the person in humble circumstances should take pride in his high position, but if you're rich, well, you should take pride in your low position.

Why? What's this saying? Well, really what it's saying is when you get into verse 11, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Our lives are, you know, they're short, we're very frail people, really.

Sometimes we like to imagine that we're strong and we'll keep going forever. Particularly, that's maybe the trap particularly that wealth can do for us. You know, we can buy health protection, we can buy stuff that makes our lives comfortable.

[19 : 51] But our lives are not our own. The time that we have is given to us by God, and this passage here challenges us. And what it says to us is that you need your fixed position, your understanding of how you go about life, not to be based on how much money you can make to make yourself comfortable, but based on the understanding that the amount of time that you have is given to you by God.

And really that changes the way we think about what we're going to do with our lives and how we're going to view what we're looking for and what we want to make from life. So the paradox in this section here is about getting your principle of the way you view life right, and it's about being humbly dependent on God rather than on being self-dependent.

It encourages us to have a kind of dependency culture, not so that we want to, you know, some people look down on people who are dependent because they think that folk who are dependent just sponge off everyone else.

Well, God says to us, no, you need to know that you need me. You need to not be proud and just think that you can get through life by yourself, and you don't have enough money to keep yourself comfortable.

Third section is the next section, verse 12. So having looked at trials and having looked at wealth, the next verse, verse 12, speaks about the future.

[21 : 18] Okay? It speaks about the future. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. So it brings us back to the idea of trial again.

Blessed is the man who perseveres in trial. Because what? Well, because you'll get a crown of life. In other words, you'll be rewarded. In other words, you'll be blessed if you have got through this time.

Now, I want at this point to think, this answers the question. You know, you might think, well, it's all this theory about going through trial is very good, but you don't know what I'm going through, and how does God know what it feels like for me to be going through what I'm going through right now?

You're not convinced that God's a sympathetic God who knows who you are and what you're going through. You're not convinced that he can help you or that he knows what it's like.

We have to look at the person of Jesus when we come to a question like this. There was a God's son who came and lived amongst us 2000 years ago. What did he do when he came and lived amongst us? What was he here for? What did he go through?

[22 : 34] You know that he came and he lived amongst people and he lived a perfect life. And he went through suffering, maybe the likes of which we'll never understand.

Not just physically, you remember when he was in the garden and he was asking his disciples to stay with me. I'm praying and I need you to stay with me. And physically he was shaking. Emotionally he was, you imagine, the greatest weight bearing down on you.

And on top of that, Jesus had to go through the sense of separation from his Father. When he cried out, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Now he did that so that we don't have to experience that. So that when we face our judge, we will know if we're in, if we trust in Jesus, if we're in Jesus' love, we'll know a sense of being able to say, I come to you in Jesus' goodness, in Jesus' righteousness.

But Jesus went through this suffering. He went through this incredible weight for us. And I want to go to Hebrews, let me just turn to Hebrews chapter 12 for an example, which helps us in this situation when we're thinking about going through trials.

[23 : 59] And it gives us a bit of a window into the way that Jesus approached it. Okay, so I'm just going to look at Hebrews chapter 12 for just a minute. When Hebrews chapter 11, the writer's been going through a whole load of different people from Christian history who are like role models, people we can look to for an example.

And then when he gets to chapter 12, look at what he says, therefore, since we're surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders the race that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

He's encouraging them. He gets to this point and he says, right, all these people have gone before you, so be encouraged and keep going in your Christian walk. And then he says, and this is really important, let us fix our eyes on Jesus. Why? Why should you fix your eyes on Jesus?

He's the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorned at shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So Jesus went into this whole situation knowing that he'd have to go through such great suffering for you because of the joy set before him, because there was a future aspect, because he was aware that what he was doing was in his big picture plan for the world, and that means for us, he was going through this time in order to pay for his people so that they could be saved, so that in the long run, 2,000 years later, we, if we sit here this morning tonight in St. Columbus, can be saved because he's paid for us.

[25 : 50] And that was his joy because of his love for us, because he wanted to go through that because he wanted to be able to buy us a people for himself. And so as Jesus anticipated the joy of coming through this time, you know, how hard would it have been in the garden, physically wrecked, emotionally wrecked, and then on the cross having that sense of, where is my father?

Never have I experienced that before. It's still to have the perseverance to go through that for the joy that was set before him, which is bringing his people, his church, to the place where they can know him and love him.

So we come back to our section in James here, and what this teaches us to do, if we have our fixed point, our starting place for the decisions that we make in life, we have that based on the character of God and based on what Jesus has already done for us.

It teaches us to approach life in the knowledge that things will be difficult sometimes, but that we will receive a crown of life that God has promised to those who love him because Jesus has gone through what he's gone through and because Jesus has purchased that life for us.

And so Jesus is our model and Jesus is our saviour, and it is really important for us, at times when we struggle. What does it say in that passage that I looked at? Fix your eyes on Jesus.

[27 : 28] Don't fix your eyes on your own strength. Don't fix your eyes on what you think should be happening to you or not happening to you. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Okay, so this chapter also speaks into the future, and the way that we are to anticipate blessing. There is a future aspect to our lives as Christians, the promise and the sure hope of heaven.

Notice, let me just turn back to 1 Peter again. Now, you may have, when I read that verse first of all, 1 Peter 5 verse 10, after you have suffered a little while. Sounds quite pessimistic?

Oh, I've got to suffer. Why is the Bible so honest about these things? Well, look what it goes on to say. After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

To him be the power for the never and ever. Amen. After you have suffered, he will restore you. To him be the power. That's our fixed point.

[28 : 43] You don't trust in your own power or your own ability to make your life on a day-by-day basis feel like how you think it should do. Your fixed point is in the longer term and in the power of God and in what he has done for you and in his love for you on a day-to-day basis.

The fact that he is bringing you, bringing you to himself and teaching you on a day-by-day basis to know him and to trust in him and to have faith in him.

A couple of things just in closing. I'm just going to look at the last few verses here very quickly because there's a couple of responses that we can make when we face trial. If we're honest with ourselves, it is easy, maybe, but it might seem easy maybe just to me to say that kind of thing in theory, but in practice it's maybe more difficult.

James is honest in flagging up one of the possible temptations. Look at verse 13. He's been talking about trials, but look at what he starts to talk about now.

He starts talking about temptation. There is a link. When tempted, no one should say God is tempting me, for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. What James is getting at here is the fact that there's a response to trials which is to blame God.

[30 : 03] You know that way where there's the... And what he's saying here is be careful that you don't give in to that. Be careful that the temptation to think, well, this isn't how I thought it was going to be.

How can God love me if this is what's happening to me? Therefore, he's the blame. And it affects the way that you... And you stop trusting.

And maybe your call to God isn't in faith. Your call to God is grudging or in some kind of desperation. So what he's saying to you in this situation is be careful about the blame culture so that you go through a hard time and you just start to say, well, it must be God.

What James says is that God... We don't have time to go into this, but God cannot be tempted by evil. So the origin of the evil isn't in God himself. He allows you to go through these times, but he allows you to go through these times in order that you may grow as a Christian, in order that you may know his love and care for you.

And the final thing is in the last couple of verses. Okay, verse 17. Rather than viewing the providences of God that you may find uncomfortable, that are uncomfortable in a negative light, what he says is, verse 16, don't be deceived, my dear brothers, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.

[31 : 38] He doesn't change like shifting shadows. Some of the ideas in ancient religions of God's were that they were just... They sat there in the clouds and depending on what day of the week it was, depended on what mood they were in, or depending on whether they all as gods had got along with each other or had a good or a bad day, depending on whether or not you had a good or a bad day.

That's completely different to what James is talking about here, isn't it? He doesn't change like shifting shadows. And what he encourages us in closing to think about, and this ties right back into what we were saying about the start, about having a fixed point of understanding that your security in life and who you are as a person is in God and not just in yourself, is in this.

He chose to give us birth. You thought about how amazing that is? He chose to give us birth. Us being Christians isn't random.

He wants you to know him. He wants you to be a believer. And so he chose to give you birth. Now, it says elsewhere in the Bible that if he gave you birth, he will carry that onto completion.

In other words, if he started you as a Christian, he will finish you as a Christian because he cares for you. And he won't let you go. And finally, what it says in the last verse there, verse 18, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

[33 : 02] In other words, in the fruit of our lives, we would show his goodness to us. And as we live and as we live out what he wants for us in our lives, and as we live close to him and as we follow him, he shows his love and his care for us.

I read one example, a guy saying, this is like a down payment that will eventually apply to all creation. So in other words, the care and the way that he invests in us will one day be shown in the whole of creation.

So don't be tempted to view God critically because he's not giving you what you want now. Instead, remember that he's giving you himself. He hasn't just given us what we want, he's given us himself.

And that is what helps us to trust him and it's what helps us to have faith in him even when what's happening around about us seems like he doesn't care about us.

Let's pray. Lord God, we pray that you'd be with us and bless us tonight and help us to understand even when we go through things that we don't find easy.

[34 : 17] That is true for everyone, that you never promise to just take away all the painful things in our lives now. But we pray that we trust you and have faith in you because you're looking to work in our lives to bring us to a place where we know your power and your love.

Help us to put our faith in you and in Jesus who has done everything that's necessary for us to be saved. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.