

Real Faith / Real Life Series

# The Birth of Faith

June 13, 2021 | James 1:17-27

# *THE BIRTH OF FAITH*

JAMES 1:17-27

We're going to be taking a closer look at James' letter for the next four weeks. As for what the letter is about and who it's for, well, it's not a letter that tries to evangelise people; it's not a letter that tries to prove God exists or that Jesus is the Messiah or that we really ought to follow him. James assumes that we already believe in God and know Jesus, and that we want to follow him. This letter is directed at those who are already "in" and want to experience the transforming power of faith in their day-to-day lives; James' letter is all about the shape of Christian life, the attitudes and actions of faithful Christian people. And that is what this four-week deep dive into this letter is going to be about, too: the shape of our lives, and the shape of our faith, and whether the two align.

Christian tradition identifies James as the brother of Jesus, although other identities have been suggested, too. The truth is that we don't know for sure either way; but what we do know is that James' theology – what he says about God and Jesus in his letter – agrees very well with the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' great teaching sermon. We know that James was writing to "the twelve tribes in the dispersion;" to small pockets of Christians, scattered widely, embedded in cities and towns and societies with different ethical and moral standards, alone and apart. We also know that this is one of the "general" letters of the New Testament, meant to be passed from church to church, from Christian to Christian, and I always feel like we are carrying on that intent when we read and reflect on these letters anew in our own time and place.

If I had to sum up James' message in one sentence, I would say that it's this: the faith that counts is the faith that is at work in your life, and through your life. Because a faith that is not active is not faith at all.

Today's text is focused in on the birth of that faith, and it explores two questions: "who is God?" and "who are you?"

Let's take a moment to answer that first question ourselves before we see what James' answer was. Close your eyes for a moment and ready your imaginations. Now picture...God. And hold the image in your mind's eye. What word would you use to describe him? What feeling does your imagined picture inspire in you? Who is God, to you?

James' answer to that question is pure gospel and pure poetry. God is known by what God does, and God is the giver of every good and perfect gift. God is the Father of heavenly lights, in whom there are no shifting shadows. In the beginning, God brought light into being and scattered more light across the skies and heavens. God brings light, both literally and spiritually; although, of course, we see that darkness exists in the world, there is no darkness in God, no shadow of inconstancy or changeability. God is God, and God is the giver of light and life, before and above all else.

God gives this life – new life – by his word of truth, by which James is referring to the gospel, the good news. Let's digress for a moment and think about what we mean when we say "good news." Jesus is the heart of the good news. He's God's grace, embodied, born to live and die and rise again to new life, freed of darkness and sin, and then take us with him on that same journey. But running alongside the personal good news of Jesus as our Saviour and Redeemer, come to save our lost and battered souls, there's also the corporate good news of the kingdom of God, of Christ in his role as Messiah.

The kingdom of God is God's great plan, God's vision for our life together with each other and with him. Jesus reveals this kingdom-life in his teaching and his miracle-working; many of his parables try to capture its essence for us. The kingdom is coming and is yet already here, in places and moments where who God is, is lived out; places where there is justice, equity, compassion, forgiveness, freedom and self-giving love. The good news is that Jesus, by dying and rising to new, resurrection life, has made it possible for us to live this kingdom-life, here and now, full of hope for a future where the kingdom of God is fully realised, if we embrace this new life that God offers by this gospel, by his word of truth.

The word of truth is God's creative agent. It gives birth to new life in a person. Jesus used birth language at times in his own teaching; remember Nicodemus, and how bemused he was by Jesus' assertion that we must be born again. Birth language – which James uses here, too, when he says that God chose to give us birth through the word of truth – birth language points to a life that has a physical, bodily side, but that isn't limited to the beating of our hearts or the breath in our lungs. It means new life in relationship with God. James says that those who are given new birth become "first-fruits."

Throughout the Bible, first-fruits are the first golden sheaves of grain or the first ripe fruit on vine or tree. They are signs of hope, of culmination, because they promise a greater harvest yet to come. First-fruits were regularly offered to God as a gift, a sacrifice, to symbolise that the entire harvest belongs to God, before it is even ready to be harvested, let alone safely stored in a barn. To be a first-fruit is to belong to God, to be claimed by God, to be wanted by God. We know who God is by what God does, and this is what does and desires for us.

The second question that James poses in this opening chapter of his letter is, “who are you?” It might seem like that question has already been answered; if we are followers of Jesus, then surely we are these first-fruits, brought to new life in God by Jesus. But first-fruits are who we ought to be, and James knew, I think, that we do not necessarily live as the people we are in God. He wrote about a disconnect, a misalignment, between hearing the word and doing the word, between who one is and what one does, between who we say we are and what’s really going on inside us.

James asks us to picture someone standing in front of a mirror; so let’s do that. Let’s picture ourselves standing before a mirror. Most of us who are able to do so have likely already looked at ourselves in a mirror today. So close your eyes again, and picture yourself as you looked the last time you took a look in a mirror. Depending on how early in the morning it was, we might have seen that our hair needed combing, our faces a good wash; we might see a sunburn or a tan, freckles or wrinkles; a few more grey hairs than yesterday, or enough stubble to warrant a shave.

We might see ourselves as thin or overweight, dishevelled or neatly put together. But that isn’t what James is getting at; he’s not asking us to see what we look like on the outside, but to look deeper, at who we are on the inside. Because it’s who we are – the shape of our beliefs, our faith – that determines what’s visible in the mirror of our lives. James is inviting us to reflect on who we are, in light of everything he’s just written about who God is. Remember that James is writing to those who believe in God, who want to be shaped by their faith, even if they’re struggling with that.

So...do you see who are? You are someone who has been blessed by God’s gifts, someone who has been brought to new life through God’s word of truth, a person who is a first-fruit, set aside as someone who belongs to God.



It was easy enough to imagine our own faces in the mirror, to remember what we look like; but the person in James' metaphor found it easy to forget his own face, the moment he'd turned away. And that, wrote James, is just what a person is like who hears the good news, who hears the word of truth, takes it in, and does nothing with it. It's as if you saw in the mirror that your hair was mussed up, turned away to get a comb to fix it, forgot all about it, and carried on with your day. Hearing the word and doing nothing is forgetting who we are and who God wants us to be.

What happens when we forget who we are? Well, we get that misalignment that James is talking about, between the shape of our faith and the shape of our life. If you forget how much God, the giver of everything good and perfect, has given you, why would you give anything to others? If we forget how much we've received, how much we've already got, then we shape our lives around the desire to get what we can, while we can. The plight of the widow and the orphan – the most vulnerable people in society – it's regrettable, but simply the way the world is and always has been, and not your concern.

If we forget that God has claimed us as his own, the first-fruits of a much greater harvest, then why would we see ourselves as apart from the world, as small pockets of Christians, scattered widely, embedded in societies that are different than we are, set aside for God? If we forget that we belong to God, then we lose the content of our faith, the faith that works through us and in us. Or what if we forget that God's word has power, that it's God's word – the good news – that has given us new life, brought us into renewed relationship with the God who made us and claims us for himself? If we forget the transforming power of the good news, then what we do with that good news – our words, our actions, our witness – loses their transformative force too, and the good news stops mattering to this world at all.

James rounds off this first chapter of his letter by inviting us to look intently – not into a mirror – but into the perfect law that gives freedom. To look again at ourselves in this perfect law, and see what we can see. To give you a bit of a preview, in chapter 2, James defines that perfect, liberating law as this: love your neighbour as yourself. But even here, without looking ahead, James gives us enough to know what he means: love God, and love others.

This law of love frees us, and frees others, but it constrains us, too. To be loved is one of the most freeing things imaginable, because, as we know, perfect love drives out fear, even as the same love holds us in a relationship of love with God. This is where we should see ourselves, says James. We reborn as a kind of first-fruits, and this is where our faith begins; and this is who God created us to be. Thanks be to God! Amen.