

# OpenTheo

## May 1st: James 4 & John 1:43-51

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Humble yourself before God. The call of Philip and Nathanael.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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## Transcript

James chapter 4 James chapter 4 James chapter 4 Come now, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, and spend a year there, and trade and make a profit. Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time, and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

So whoever knows the right thing to do, and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James has previously spoken of the conflicts that arise in communities through jealousy and selfish ambition, and now in chapter 4 he develops this and other themes. Some communities are distinguished by factions and antagonisms, and James wants us to think about why this might be.

What is ultimately causing this? He traces it back to the passions that are at war within, and gaining control over his heroes. The statements in verse 2 can be understood in different ways. Maybe they are separate statements of the kind, You desire and do not have, you murder and covet and cannot obtain, you fight and quarrel.

Or as the ESV puts it, which I think is right, You desire and do not have so you murder, you covet and cannot obtain so you fight and quarrel. What he is doing I think is describing the same thing as he does in chapter 1 verse 15. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

The point that he is making is that this is the natural life cycle of desire. Sinful desires and passions unarrested lead to quarrels and fights, and those when fully grown lead to murder. This is similar to the teaching that Jesus gives in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21-26 in the Sermon on the Mount.

Remember that your brother has something against you. Leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. The point that Jesus is making here is similar to the point that James makes.

Desire has a life cycle and you need to arrest it before it grows. We might also think here of the way that God challenges Cain when his face falls and he is angry as a result of the fact that his sacrifice has been rejected while his brother Abel's has been accepted. Sin is crouching at the door and unless he masters his anger and deals with that right away, it will become full grown and it will become something that he cannot control.

What underlies their frustrated desires? They fail to ask properly. Even when they are praying they are driven by their passions. Jesus has promised to answer requests in Matthew chapter 7 verses 7-11.

Once again we should observe the importance of the Sermon on the Mount for reading James. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find.

Knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? God answers prayers but he gives good gifts, not those things that merely feed our unruly desires.

However, because of people's wayward desires, they are experiencing frustration of those desires, which are then being aggravated into conflicts. James is a very perceptive

observer of human nature and he has a pastoral eye for such things. He challenges his hearers for their misplaced or divided affections.

They are adulterous, giving their hearts and favours to others, seemingly not appreciating that this sets them at enmity with God. They are playing the harlot, as the Old Testament prophets describe Israel. By being friends of the world, being absorbed and preoccupied with earthly things, they are committing adultery against God.

God is a jealous God, the quotation in verse 5, the source of which is not entirely clear, could be read in a number of different ways. For instance, the spirit might be the human spirit, or it might be the Holy Spirit. It might, as some have suggested, be a reference to the tendency of the human spirit that God has given to sinful jealousy, if it is not held back.

The yearning may be that of the spirit, or it may be the yearning of God himself. I take this as a reference to the holy jealousy of God, spoken of in the Ten Commandments themselves. God is a jealous God, and his jealousy is expressed in the Holy Spirit that he has given us, the means by which we are united to Christ as his bride.

However, James argues, God gives more grace. He is a jealous God, but he gives the grace that we need. While the proud face resistance and rejection, the humble receive grace from God to sustain them, and to enable them to respond to God aright.

Verses 7-10 speak of the posture that we should take towards God, recognising the waywardness, the fickleness, and the dividedness of our hearts. We should humbly draw near to God, seeking the grace that we need. We should mourn our sins, we should resist the devil, and place ourselves beneath God's instruction and his hand.

We must seek God to purify our divided hearts, so that we will seek him alone. And as we humble ourselves and seek God, we may start to find that our prayers are being answered for our good, and our wayward desires that once so unsettled us, are gradually being overcome by his grace. Once again he gives a warning about speech and judgement in verses 11 and 12.

This picks up themes of the beginning of chapter 3. It's almost reminiscent of some of Jesus' warnings about judgement in the Sermon on the Mount again. Speaking against, as James speaks about it here, could refer to a number of different things. To slandering, to false accusations, to challenging of legitimate authority, and other such things.

He makes a peculiar and surprising claim. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law, and judges the law. Similar issues were tackled by Jesus in Matthew 7 verses 1-2.

For with the judgement you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. There are tasks of discernment, which we are called to

perform. However, true judgement belongs to God alone, the one who assumes the status of a judge over his neighbour, in condemning him, usurps the place of the law, and also of God.

In the process, that person ends up placing themselves over the law, and breaking the golden rule. True wisdom is very careful and humble in the task of discernment and judgement. It recognises the place of God's judgement over it.

It only judges as it stands under God as judge. James now moves to discuss the presumptuous arrogance of people who act without regard to God's providence. Just as with judgement, there are clearly times when making plans is appropriate and necessary, but we must be entirely clear that we do so as frail creatures standing under the providence of God, without the control of or knowledge of the future that he possesses.

We are like a mist or a puff of smoke. This might be similar to the points that Ecclesiastes makes as he speaks about Hebel, or Vapor, a word often translated vanity. The idea of mist or vapor captures something of the transitory character of life, and the way that it eludes our control.

We should register the fact of God's providence in our speech, recognising that we stand under it. And when we fail to do this, we are simply boasting in our arrogance in an evil manner. In many ways this is the obverse of Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 6 verses 25-34, once again part of the Sermon on the Mount.

And the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents God's providence in response to the anxiety of the poor and the needy, who feel their lack of control over the future. In his epistle, James presents God's providence in response to the arrogance of the rich and the self-confident, who feel very much that they are in control of the future. Whether we are

anxious or arrogant, we should realise the providence of God, and the way that it stands over all of our plans and concerns.

Now that we as James' hearers know this to be the right thing, he wants us to know that if we fail to do it, we are sinning. Once again, he is concerned that hearing is transformed into doing, that words are metabolised into actions. A question to consider.

At the heart of much of James' teaching in this chapter is the importance of humbling ourselves before God. How would such humbling of ourselves relieve the conflicts, antagonisms and aggravations with which the chapter begins? The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, Nathaniel said to him, Philip said to him, Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him and said of him, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit. Nathaniel said to him, Jesus answered him, Nathaniel answered him, Jesus answered him, And he said to him, And the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. In the concluding verses of the first chapter of John's Gospel, we see the role that word of mouth played in the gathering of the first disciples.

Personal invitations, summons, eyewitness testimony and recommendation are the means by which new followers are recruited to the cause. John the Baptist's mission of making straight the way of the Lord leads him to throw his weight behind Jesus' kingdom campaign. He points two of his disciples towards Jesus as the Lamb of God in verse 35.

One of these two disciples, Andrew, then proceeds to call his brother Simon. The next day, in a strikingly authoritative action, Jesus summons Philip to follow him in verse 43. Philip then finds Nathaniel and calls him to come and see Jesus.

The narrative of the calling of the first disciples involves a number of paradigmatic features. While the account could be read just as prosaic description of concrete actions, the references within these verses to following and seeking, the invitation to come and see, to go to the place where Jesus dwells, and the act of staying with him, all involve terms or concepts that are deeply resonant within Johannine theology. To abide with Christ, to come and see, to bear witness, to follow, not just physically, but as a sheep follows its shepherd.

Within this account then, we can see the spiritual pattern that holds for those who become disciples of Christ, seeking and committing themselves to following him, coming to him and receiving new spiritual vision, abiding with and dwelling with and in him. The summons to come and see is an invitation to move beyond just taking someone else's word for Jesus' identity or to regard him from a distance, but to experience him directly and personally yourself. Such an invitation is extended in the assurance that Jesus is the real deal.

The witness of John the Baptist and others concerning him will stand the test of close and extensive personal examination, taste and see that the Lord is good. Christ is everything that he is declared to be by his witnesses. It's a challenge to move beyond reliance upon word of mouth alone and to enter into a deeper acquaintance with the person of whom one has heard testimony.

While we are reading an account of historical events, John also wants us to hear the resonance for our own lives. We as readers of the text are not just to take the word of John the Baptist, of the gospel writer and of the various disciples for the identity of Christ and his goodness, but heeding their testimony, we're supposed to come to him for ourselves, experience him for ourselves and discover that, as the Queen of Sheba said of Solomon, the half was not told us. The purpose of such eyewitness testimony is seen in places like 1 John 1 1-4.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life, the life was made manifest and we have seen it and testified to it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us. That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ and we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. Witnesses made concerning the Christ in order that persons might enter into fellowship with him and with his people.

In John chapter 1 we see that those disciples who respond to Jesus' personal invitation proceed seemingly unprompted to extend that same invitation to others. Having himself been invited to come and see, Andrew later finds and calls his brother Simon. Philip, having been found and called by Jesus to follow him, finds Nathaniel, encouraging him to suspend his scepticism long enough to encounter Jesus for himself.

Within these verses, Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel all present startling and spontaneous declarations concerning Christ. He is the Messiah, in verse 41. He is the one of which Moses and the prophets wrote, in verse 45.

He is the Son of God. He is the King of Israel, in verse 49. The scepticism of Nathaniel swiftly evaporates when he meets Jesus.

It is not immediately obvious the significance of Nathaniel being seen beneath the fig tree. The fig tree itself could be seen as having a connection with Israel, which is elsewhere spoken of as a fig tree. But why this has such a strong effect for Nathaniel is not apparent.

Perhaps Nathaniel received some sign at that time under the fig tree, and Jesus' statement taken together with that served as a confirmation. Nathaniel is described as an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile. In many ways we might see this as a true Jacob.

The patriarch Jacob, the man first called Israel, was a man who was arguably very full of guile. He was a deceiver. In Genesis chapter 28, Jacob had had a dream, in which he saw angels ascending and descending upon a ladder.

Later, when he woke up, he erected a pillar and called the name of the place Bethel, house of God, seeing the place as the gate of heaven. The ladder of Jacob is the conduit between heaven and earth. In speaking of angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, Jesus presents himself as the ladder of Jacob.

Within that theophanic vision, he is the one who is the conduit between heaven and earth. This is the third time that Jesus is either explicitly or implicitly presented in theophanic terms within this chapter. In verses 14 to 18, Jesus is presented as the glorious revelation of God that Moses witnessed upon Mount Sinai.

In verses 32 to 34, John the Witness sees the Spirit descending and remaining upon Jesus in another theophany. In verse 51, Jesus speaks of yet one more theophany, in which Nathaniel will see the angels ascending and descending upon Jesus. Perhaps there is a progression to be observed here.

The first theophany is of the descending Word. The second theophany is of the descending Spirit upon the descended Word. And the third theophany is of the angels ascending and descending upon the descended Word, upon whom the Spirit rests.

In Christ, heaven is coming down to earth. Such a passing on of personal witness can be seen at another key point within the narrative of John's Gospel. And it's another point where the character of Philip appears.

He only appears on three other occasions in the Gospel. But one of them is the critical juncture in what might seem to be a minor occurrence that leads Christ to say that his hour has come. In chapter 12, verses 20 to 22, Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks.

So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

There is a similar pattern here. Some people are coming to see Jesus. And there's a movement from one person to another of word of mouth.

The message is going out and new people are hearing. Reading such an account of trustworthy and spontaneous word of mouth, of a proclaimed truth that punctures scepticism, of a reality that does not merely withstand but rewards closer scrutiny, and of a personal encounter that excites people to pass on the news, this can seem to be too good to be true to many jaded and cynical ears. We're wearied of deceptive testimonies, of overhyped disappointments and unfulfilled promises.

And to such persons, the Gospel writer would extend the same simple invitation received by the first disciples. Come and see. A question to consider.

The testimony of Scripture to Jesus of Nazareth is an important part of Philip's witness. He describes Christ as the one of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote. To what passages do you think he might be referring?