

James 1:17-27

## Actions speak louder than words

In the first chapter of his practical letter, James reminds us that all good gifts come from God. Those who receive them should acknowledge this in the way they live their lives, putting their faith into action by being doers of the word and not merely hearers.



## WATCH

Watch *Turning Red* (Disney Pixar 2022). What are the big feelings that you find difficult to control? What happens when you get angry? Think about ways you could make a positive change.

## Read



This week, some Methodist churches will hold their annual covenant service. Read the Methodist Covenant Prayer: Are you bold enough to pray it?

## Pray



As you read a newspaper or watch/hear the news, spend some time praying for those working to bring change or supporting people in challenging circumstances. These people are putting their faith into action. What inspires you to action?

## Bible notes



James, the brother of Jesus, is the leader of the early Christian Church. As a disciple and sibling, he understood God's heart and purpose. As God's servant (v.1), his counsel is priceless and worthy of heeding. God is the source of every gift, which is perfect, exactly what is needed and dispensed from heaven. These gifts are not the result of human generosity, personal talent, hard work or good fortune, but are blessings from God. Furthermore, God has given us the greatest gift, Jesus, the word of truth. James' readers understood that the 'first fruits' conveys a special status of being set aside as belonging to God (v.18). The invaluable gift is for God's exclusive purpose, and recipients' actions will speak more powerfully and louder than their words. The habits and behaviours James describes are not a figment of his imagination but those inherent in the cultures these Christians inhabited. There might also be no discernible difference between 'the first fruit' and the rotten fruit.

The newfound status of these believers might invite hostility and pressure. It might also lead to arrogance, entitlement and superiority. However, the 'first fruit' should produce God's righteousness (v.19) and, with humility, embrace God's embedded (implanted) word (v.21). While the implanted word saves the soul, James' central theme (v.23ff) focuses on the proclaimed word, which is not personal or private but communal and public. The impact is devastating when God's word is maligned, ignored or forgotten, as is the frustration of God's purpose. There is a blessing in persevering – pushing through against the odds – being doers of the word (vv.22-25), controlling our tongues, looking after the vulnerable and not being tarnished by prevailing cultures.

## First impressions

- What helps healthy plants to grow?
- What in your own life needs pruning or nurturing for spiritual growth in the future?
- How can God's word take root in you this week?



## A sending out prayer

Holy God,  
we pray for opportunities this week to use our hands,  
in helping and comforting, teaching and guiding others,  
so that our actions show that we want to build your kingdom.  
Amen.

## Write

As a new school year begins, write a list of good habits you want to work on this year – for yourself (your reactions) and for others (your actions). Why not write them out and decorate them and put them somewhere you'll see them regularly?

**James 2:1-10,(11-13),14-17**

**Favouritism forbidden**

James continues his letter by giving a vivid example of people being treated differently in the worshipping community, with the rich and important being favoured over the poor and needy. He is stark in his declaration that showing partiality in this way falls short of God's standards. This passage also contains his famous pronouncement that faith without works is dead.



*Write*

Compile a list of 10 possessions that you treasure. In what circumstances would you give them to someone else and which would you find most difficult to give up? Give thanks for the things and people God has given you.

**REFLECT**

Think about someone at church who is a good role model. Write down a list of things about them that you like. Notice how many qualities are about the sort of person they are and not about what possessions or skills they have. Set some goals about who you want to become, not just what you want to achieve or gain.

**WATCH**

Watch an episode of *Rich Holiday*, *Poor Holiday* or *Rich House, Poor House* (both available on Channel 5). What do the families learn?

**Bible notes**



James continues his moral teaching in the Old Testament wisdom literature tradition. Believing that Jesus is the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord is the central tenet of the Jewish (and Gentile) Christians. It is what sets them free from the guilt of the Law. Yet James is not convinced that their pattern of behaviour, especially their judgement about others, matches their beliefs. Favouritism is a sin. It's neither hospitality, respect nor honour. Preferential treatment sets the culture within the assembly; it treats the unjust and their injustices as acceptable and righteous, while treating the poor, who are rich in faith and custodians of the kingdom, with disrespect and disregard. This is the opposite of Christ's intention.

James' readers understood the problem with the Law – when one element is broken, the whole system falls down. There is credit for obeying the royal law (as expressed in Mark 12:30-31), but since favouritism and prejudice are sins, they undermine the good deed. The corrosiveness and impact of favouritism and bias make them no lesser sins than adultery and murder. Therefore, they must speak and act as being accountable to God.

These verses are a test of genuine faith. James' ambition for the church is to see tangible evidence of God working through the believer and with the poor. Therefore, he challenges Paul's counsel (Galatians 3:1-9). Faith without works achieves nothing, it is dead. If we believe in Christ, we must show it through our lives.

**First impressions**

- What kinds of people do you tend to ignore?
- Is your head ever turned by riches or beauty?
- What one thing could you do today to 'love your neighbour as yourself'?



**A prayer for all ages together**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
we pray for faith in you,  
love for others  
and equality in the world.  
Help us work to show your glory. Amen.



**LISTEN**

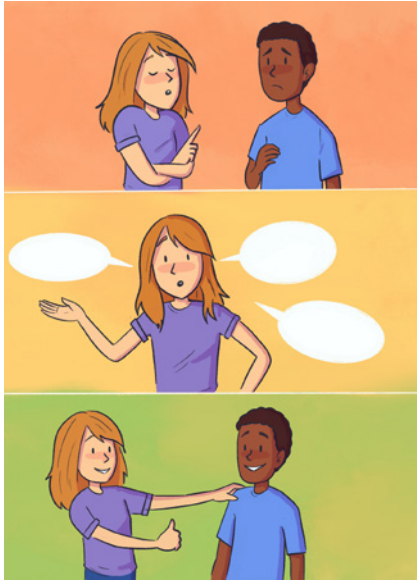


Listen to 'The Golden Rule' by Nick and Becky Drake, on *Worship for Everyone*. Consider if this really is the 'golden rule' for your household.

**James 3:1-12**

**What comes out when you are squeezed?**

James uses a succession of striking images to illustrate the power of the tongue, the impact of which can be used for both good or ill, going well beyond its small size. Nobody is perfect, but this state of affairs does not befit followers of Jesus.



**Pray**



Pope Francis offered the following teaching on different ways to fast (to give up something, so you can draw closer to God). Prayerfully consider what you could give up.

Fast from hurting words and say kind words; Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude; Fast from anger and be filled with patience; Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope; Fast from worries and have trust in God; Fast from complaining and contemplate simplicity; Fast from pressures and be prayerful; Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy; Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others; Fast from grudges and be reconciled; Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

**Discuss**

Powerful words: What are the three most impactful things you've said, or had said to you?

**LISTEN**



Listen to 'Build Up' by Fischy Music and reflect: How can you use our words to build someone up today? Is there someone who'd appreciate a phone call? Or could you make or write a card for someone?

**Bible notes**



James makes a powerful argument on the power and potential consequences of what we say. This passage addresses the importance of controlling our tongues. In a technological age, we might want to include the many instruments of communication we use that would have a similar impact. James cautions aspiring teachers that they have a greater responsibility to bear. Teachers influence and guide others. They may, however, point people in the wrong direction or misuse their power. Teaching should not be undertaken lightly but with self-awareness, humility, and integrity.

James seems resigned that controlling the tongue is a universal human struggle. Mastering the tongue is a sign of overall self-control. And just as a small rudder guides a massive ship, our words, though seemingly insignificant, have the power to direct the course of our lives and impact those around us.

The tongue is compared to a fire that, though small, can cause immense destruction (vv.5-6). James points out that our words can potentially create chaos and harm. Harmful speech can spread like wildfire, damaging relationships and reputations. The paradox is that humans have been able to tame many aspects of nature but struggle to control their own tongues. James emphasises the difficulty of consistently using speech in a positive and constructive manner. We may use our words to praise God and then turn around to speak negatively about fellow human beings who are created in God's image. Unsurprisingly, a freshwater spring cannot produce salt water, or vice versa (v.12). Therefore, despite being in difficult situations and pressed on every side, our hearts should manifest consistent, positive speech that aligns with God's Word.

**First impressions**

- How do you react under pressure?
- How can you control what you say so it doesn't cause hurt to others?
- What words can you use to bless others this week?



**A sending out prayer**

God, you change the wriggly caterpillar into the fluttering butterfly, the swimming tadpole into a leaping frog! Change us too, in the power of your Holy Spirit. Re-form us to be sharers of your good news in thought, word and action. Amen.

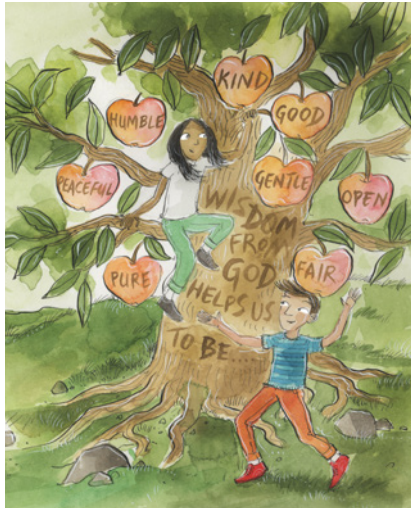


Read the short Letter of James in its entirety, and then make a list of the practical ways he challenges Christians to live. How could you apply them today?

James 3:13–4:3,7-8a

### Choosing God, choosing wisdom

James outlines the qualities of a wise person, which come from above, while the qualities of the world (envy, selfish ambition) cause disorder and conflict in the church and beyond. The solution is to submit to God.



### Bible notes



The Letter of James is concerned above all else with the *life* of faith. It is not a doctrinal piece. The writer is concerned that his readers should make good, holy, wholesome choices. Such choices are informed by wisdom, a virtue particularly prized in the Hebrew Scriptures but maybe less so today. In his book *Waking up to God*, Neil Richardson suggests that 'wisdom is a blind spot in our economically dominated, globalised culture. Clever, skilled, well-informed people we recognise and value. But a wise person? What might a wise person contribute to the economy?' Typical of James is the emphasis on faith lived out (3:13). It is interesting to note the similarities of the characteristics of wisdom listed by James to the fruits of the Spirit and their opposites, the fruits of the sinful nature that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5. There is another parallel with Paul in 4:1 when James speaks of the 'cravings that are at war within you' (cf Romans 7:24-25). So, maybe contrary to what Luther thought (allegedly), James isn't that different to Paul after all. The wisdom that James writes of is the gift of God, not the achievement of humanity. So, in choosing the way of true wisdom we are essentially choosing God.

'Submit to God' (4:7) is an unusual New Testament phrase (the only other place it occurs is Hebrews 12:9, NIV; NRSV translates this as 'subject to'). Usually, the word submit is used of human authorities or interpersonal relationships. On the devil, Michael Townsend argues James 'undoubtedly believed in such a *devil*, i.e. a spiritual power in opposition to God'. Townsend suggests that 'Those who find this belief difficult to share, and who prefer to regard the terminology as metaphor for the mystery of human evil, nevertheless need to recognize the emphasis of standing up to such evil'. Here we have a reminder that wisdom and discernment are close cousins when it comes to making wise, godly choices. We then have comforting and assuring words affirming the faithfulness of God – a key attribute of God that will be both celebrated and questioned across the focus passages in this edition of Roots. There are echoes in these verses of the temptation narratives where Jesus, drawing on the wisdom of the Scriptures, resists the devil and angels come to attend to him.

The passage ends in a rather blunt and unusual way for James whose normal form of address is brothers or dear friends. The Greek word for sinners, *hamartolos*, is used for someone who is wilfully disobedient and who positively loves the sinful life. James' call for change is pretty forthright.



Recipes for breaking bread have been handed down through the generations. Reflect on the process of kneading, how we must submit to a recipe and have patience as you make some Wisdom Bread. Scan the QR code for the recipe.

## REFLECT



Where do you go to get wisdom and advice? A trusted counsellor or friend? Social media, Google or the library? The Bible? How would you know if the advice is good and leading to a good or godly life? TED talks were 'invented' in 1984, to share new ideas on Technology, Entertainment and Design. They are now widely used, and subject to 'rules' to ensure they are delivered effectively. Dip into some examples online (e.g. Malcolm Gladwell: Choice, happiness and spaghetti sauce – scan the QR code) and draft ideas for a TED talk about God's wisdom/the Bible readings. Is there something which could be presented in a new and entertaining way? Could you present the talk to a group outside Church?

### First impressions

- How do you make good choices?
- Whose wisdom do you respect?
- What good fruit might you see if you act according to God's wisdom?



### A sending out prayer

Wise and loving God,  
help us to think about what is right  
so that we can follow you, not other people.  
Help us to do what is right for the good of others. Amen.

## Write

Gratitude Challenge – Make a list of 10 things you are grateful for. When you are tempted to compare yourself with others, read that list out loud and thank God for what you have.

**Esther 7:1-6,9-10; 9:20-22**

**Right person, right place, right time**

Esther, a young Jewish woman who has become queen, has learnt of a plot by her husband's adviser, Haman, to wreak revenge by murdering her people. Risking her life, she courageously stands up for herself and her fellow Jews. Haman is duly punished. The feast of Purim is established as an annual celebration of this deliverance.



**Bible notes**



The Book of Esther is part of the group of texts known as the Writings, the third major group of texts in the Old Testament along with the Law and the Prophets. Five of the writings – Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther – were grouped together as each of them was used at one or other of the major Jewish festivals or anniversaries. The story of Esther is celebrated at Purim as a reminder of God's power to save and that good overcomes evil. The book is set in Susa, the winter residence of the Persian king and takes place in the post-exilic period when the Jewish people were scattered across the Persian Empire. The narrative tells of Haman (a senior political adviser to King Ahasuerus) who, as a result of his grudge against Mordecai (Esther's uncle), was plotting the extinction of all the Jewish people in Persia (which would have been virtually all of the Jewish population). In such a crisis one commentator suggests 'providential intervention was to be expected' and it came through Esther, a Jewish girl who had been chosen to be queen. It is a classic example of the right person at the right place at the right time. It is often pointed out that God is not mentioned in Esther but there is also an apocryphal book (included in some Bibles) of Additions to Esther in which there are many references including prayers from Esther and Mordecai to God. Esther is presented as an exemplar of courage. Even though she was a queen, had Ahasuerus not taken kindly to what she said he himself could have disposed of her. Alongside the themes of providence and courage there are also interesting questions about justice. JG Baldwin suggests 'The author found satisfaction in this outworking of justice, which well illustrates Psalm 9:16b, 'The wicked are snared in the work of their hands'.

**REFLECT**



Reflect on the risk Esther took, challenging the king while admitting to being a Jew. What response do we receive today if we profess our faith? Should we take that risk and why? Are there people or places you know of where people are persecuted for their faith? Could you pray, write letters or advocate for their protection?

**First impressions**

- Have you ever been the right person in the right place at the right time?
- Is God calling you to speak up about a particular issue?
- How can you help others to find their calling?



**EXPLORE**



Purim is a Jewish festival that celebrates Esther saving the Jewish people. Find out more about Purim and how it is celebrated.

**A sending out prayer**

May we listen for God's call,  
know his strength,  
see where he is leading us,  
be faithful in doing his work  
and make way for his kingdom. Amen.



**LISTEN**

Reading the Book of Esther takes less than an hour. Try reading it in one go or find an audiobook version. What do you learn about Esther when you hear all of her story?

**WATCH**



Watch the trailer for *Incredibles 2* where each member of the family finds themselves being the right person or in the right place. Pray, asking God to use your unique gifts and in your unique setting today.

**Job 1:1; 2:1-10**

**When you don't understand**

The story of Job begins. He is an honest and upright man, who loses everything (home, family, prosperity, health) yet refuses to blame God, believing that both good and bad comes from God's hand. A dialogue between God and Satan (called 'The Adversary' or 'The Accuser' in some translations) seems to indicate that God has allowed Job to be tested in this way.



**Bible notes**



Job is part of the philosophy or wisdom subsection of the Writings of the Hebrew Scriptures, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. In 1:1, Job is presented as the epitome of the wise person celebrated in Proverbs. The existential question of Job is why do good people suffer? The biblical commentator CS Rodd<sup>1</sup> suggests that Job is one of the very greatest works of world literature, but it is also the most difficult text in the Old Testament, particularly as it comes from a culture far removed from our own. Job is a poetic piece that reads like a play, in which truth is presented differently. It is a book to be grappled with. Jesus himself often left those he spoke to with questions to ponder. Philip Yancey points out that, 'Job decisively refutes one theory – that suffering always comes as a result of sin'<sup>2</sup>. In chapter one, we have the particular challenge of illness. The exact nature of the illness is not known but part of its consequence is social isolation – think leprosy in biblical times and, more recently, AIDS and Covid. Job was further ostracised because of the view that his illness was the result of sin. However, Job persists in his view that everything – good and bad – comes from God. The narrator's position here is a bit complicated. Job's suffering is inflicted by Satan but clearly permitted by Yahweh.

<sup>1</sup>CS Rodd, The Book of Job (Epworth).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, The Bible Jesus Read (Zondervan) p.69.

**First impressions**

- What helps you make sense of things?
- What are you confused by in life? What questions do you wrestle with?
- Have you experienced God's peace/presence during a dark time in your life?



**Pray** 

Get cosy, lying down, maybe with a soft blanket. Slowly breathe in and out. As you do think about the things that are tricky or difficult at the moment, tell God about these. Write a word of hope onto a pebble with a permanent marker. Carry this with you wherever you go as a reminder that even in the most difficult times there is hope.

**Read**



Read *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside, Hodder Children's Books, and think about how we manage when things are difficult.

**Write**

In a journal, note down the questions you have for/about God. Share these with an adult you trust, a friend or with God.

**A sending out prayer**

Do we know everything? No!  
Does God know everything? Yes!  
Do we understand God? No!  
Does God understand us? Yes!  
Do we have faith in God? Yes!  
Does God have faith in us? Yes!  
Then let us not disappoint him:  
Lord, help us to live as people of faith holding on tight to you. Amen.

**WATCH**



Watch this video about the Book of Job and aim to share one thing you have learned with a member of your church group.

**Job 23:1-9,16-17**

## Where are you, God?

Despite the unhelpful accusations of his friends that he must be a sinner to have suffered so much, Job continues to protest his innocence. He wishes that he could find God, who he believes would listen to him as he argues his case. Job is in deep darkness, though still alive.



## Bible notes



This is a bleak passage with little obvious hope. There may well be some hearing the text who are in a similarly bleak place. The text needs to be handled with particular care, with hope offered from other sources, or by reading the rest of God's response. The Hebrews text could be helpful here (Hebrews 4:15 especially), as could the Gospel. The verses from Job come after the third round of speeches from Job's 'friends' and immediately after Eliphaz's indictment of Job (one commentator describes Eliphaz as the 'kindest of the three friends'). But even for Eliphaz, Job is plainly marked out as a sinner. So, he concludes that Job should turn back to God (i.e. repent) and accept God's instruction. If he does, Eliphaz believes God will restore Job's prosperity. For Eliphaz, piety and prosperity are inextricably linked. He cannot comprehend Job's greater piety, which holds on to both his innocence and to the God whose actions are incomprehensible. Convinced that he has done nothing wrong, Job longs for the opportunity to present his case directly before God. Alongside this we have Job's sense of despair as God proves to be elusive. Alongside Job's physical suffering there is now clear evidence of mental anguish too in the form of fear (v.16) and severe depression (v.17).

## First impressions

- Have you ever felt abandoned by God?
- What helped you through this time?
- What words of encouragement/consolation would you give to the person in the picture?
- Have you ever noticed God's love in a 'hopeless place'?



# LISTEN



Listen to 'All That I Know' by Bridge Music.

# REFLECT

Do we need to go and look for God, or is he everywhere, with us? Within Ignatian spirituality, we encounter the practice of finding God in all things. Reflect on how God can be found in unexpected places. Look at information from the Ignatian Spirituality movement on the internet. How does it feel to ask not, 'Where are you, God?' but 'How can I recognise that you are here with me, God?'

# WALK

Go for a walk and look for signs of God. Can you see signs of his creativity, care, intervention, blessing or kindness? As you reflect on ways that you or your community may be suffering or struggling, acknowledge God's presence around you and with you.

## A sending out prayer

On each day of the week,  
we look for God, and find him:  
in our friends, in our family,  
in the people we pass by,  
in our quiet times, in laughter,  
in the natural world;  
for he is everywhere,  
and look inside for he is there! Amen.

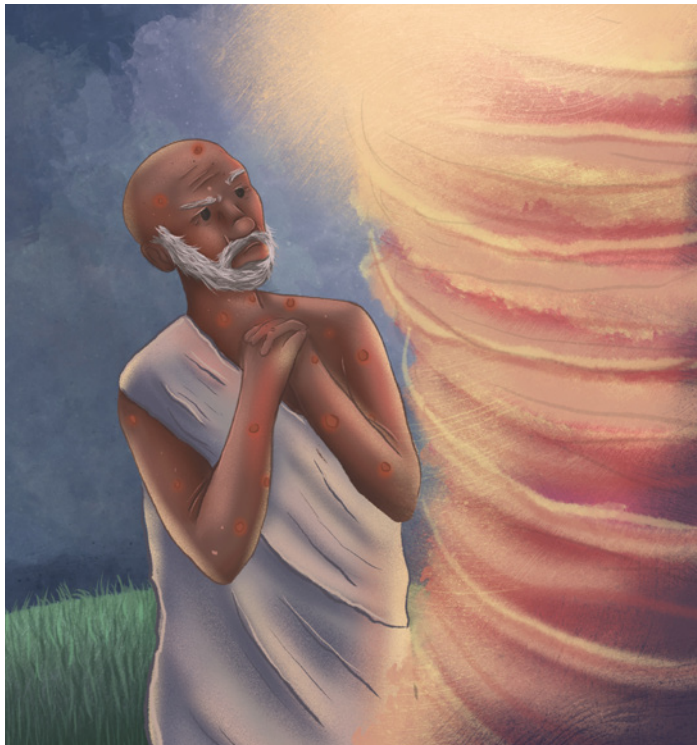
# CREATE

Using modelling clay, or by drawing, create a finger labyrinth that leads from any start point to the centre, where God is represented. Search for examples online to help you get started. These labyrinths can help us to focus on God, as we draw near to the centre, in quiet prayer.

Job 23:1-9,16-17

## Do you know who I am?

As we continue our journey through Job, we come to a dialogue between Job and God. Rather than providing words of comfort in Job's suffering, God points Job towards his power as the creator of the universe. God's omnipotence throws Job's creatureliness into stark relief.



## DRAW



Draw on your mirror with white board pens. What does God love about you? Draw a picture or words and arrows to record what God loves about you.

## LOOK

Spend some time this week stargazing. Reflect on the bigness of the universe and God's care.

## Plant

God demonstrates his care for creation in the passage. Made in God's image, humans carry this responsibility to care for our world. How can you demonstrate care for the planet today? You could, pick up litter, plant some bulbs, water indoor plants or care for a pet, and reflect on how God sustains us all.

## Bible notes



As we read though the Bible an interesting question arises. Does God change or do the writers' understandings of God change? CS Rodd suggests that when reading Job, 'We need to put away all thoughts of the rather sentimental "fatherhood" of God that have become common in modern Christianity.

God in Job is the omnipotent and omniscient creator<sup>1</sup>. One could say God in Job is like the drill sergeant Emil Foley, played by Louis Gossett Jr in the classic film *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Foley's sole mission seems to be to get new recruit Zack Mayo (played by Richard Gere) to 'man up' (cf 'Gird up your loins like a man', Job 38:3), putting him through an endless sequence of hellish physical and psychological tests. The whirlwind (38:1) emphasises the power and transcendence of God. The verses that follow form quite a contrast to chapter one, when God is celebrating Job. Here God addresses Job very harshly. One commentator describes it as the divine cross examination. In verses four to seven, we have a picture of creation in keeping with the religio-scientific thinking of the time. Pointing to the complexity of creation, God none too subtly lets Job know who is boss.

<sup>1</sup>CS Rodd, *The Book of Job*, (Epworth), p.73.

## First impressions

- What fills you with awe?
- How do you respond to something vast and beyond your comprehension?
- What words could you use to describe how wonderful God is?



## A sending out prayer

Lord, your majesty is beyond compare:  
you made all created things,  
you are beyond our understanding.  
We are just a small part of the mystery of creation,  
yet we are loved and nurtured by you.  
Thank you, Lord. Amen.



## LISTEN

Look through your prayer journal or reflect on prayers you pray regularly. Make space to stop and listen for God's side of the conversation. What does God want to say in response to you? Write down what you sense or Bible verses that come to mind. Alternatively, draw yourself with your questions, and ask God to show you 'where is love in the picture?' Draw that on your picture too. How does it change your perspective?



**Job 42:1-6,10-17**

## I had heard, but now I see

The Book of Job concludes with Job's second response to God and his realisation that he has come to a deeper knowledge of his place within God's creation. There is a rebuke for Job's friends and their counsel. Job's fortunes are restored, there is an inheritance for his daughters and he dies at a great old age.



## Bible notes



Hurray, a happy passage in Job! So, all's well that ends well. Or does it? Might this passage taken at face value reinforce a prosperity (and beauty) theology? And is the acquiescence to God's perceived omnipotence healthy or helpful?

The questions continue! In verse 2 and following, Job accepts God's power – which he has done throughout. What matters to Job is the sense that he has met God. He still maintains his innocence in all things other than questioning God's rule of the world. This is one of the points when we might want to question if this is a good thing. After all, a large proportion of Scripture is lament with recurring questions of why and how long. The restoration of Job's fortunes is not a reward for good behaviour. It is God's gift and it is restoration, even if it goes beyond what Job possessed at the beginning. One little note of significance is that the daughters are given a share of the inheritance. At the time daughters could only inherit if there were no sons. The restoration of Job still leaves the big question: What is the purpose of the book? Rodd argues 'If in the end we are unwilling to remain with mystery, as the writer of Job left us, placing fellowship with God above intellectual understanding of the problem of suffering and being satisfied with the religious encounter, then the value of soul-making [or character formation] explanation remains the best resort. From a moral aspect it has to be asked whether the extent and severity of the suffering can ever be regarded as the necessary cost for the making of souls, especially when many souls seem to be crushed under their sorrows rather than lifted to heroic virtue. Only a cross and a wounded God remain for us to cling to'. We may wish to add that we also have the risen Christ to cling to.

## First impressions

- What is your favourite image of God? Why?
- Which images of God do you find unhelpful? Why?
- Can you describe a vivid moment in your faith journey – when things became clearer for you?



# LISTEN



Listen to 'Still Holding my hand' from *Matilda the Musical*. Reflect on how God is with you in everything.

# LOOK

Look at some optical illusions. You can find many examples on the internet. Can you just see one image or can you see more? How do these optical illusions help us think about God? Do our expectations of God shape what we see?

# PLAY

Take some play dough and mould and play with it, as you think about how knowing God changes you.

## A sending out prayer

Lord God, when I look at the sky at night, I see that you are...  
When I look at the world around me, I see that you are...  
When life is hard, help me to see that you are...  
Today I know that you are...  
Help me tomorrow to see new things about you.  
Amen.

# CREATE

Create a word art of Job's story and then think about the ways God was always with Job and is always with you.