

Lesson One INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JAMES

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.” James 1:1

In beginning a study of a book of the Bible, it is like preparing to go on a trip to a place where you have not been before. When I go on a new trip, I may spend hours reading books and maps about the place. This is so that when I arrive, I can enjoy the visit much more, because I know what I am looking for and how to find it.

We will follow this method in our first session by presenting a general introduction to the book. We will do so by examining both the author and the message of the book. First, the authorship:

I. JAMES, THE AUTHOR

A. His Identity

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (James 1:1a) is the way he introduces himself. It was a popular name, and was a form of the great Old Testament name Jacob. This brief introduction shows two facts about James. First, he was well known. He introduced himself with only his first name, assuming that his readers could identify him. Second, he showed great humility in that he wanted to be known as a servant of Jesus. More will be said on this later.

Four men named James appear in the New Testament. Two of these are, James the father of Judas (**Luke 6:16**) and James, the son of Alphaeus (**Luke 6:15**). While both of these are members of the twelve apostles, they are little-known figures who do not seem to qualify as possible authors of the letter. James, the son of Zebedee, and brother of John, was a prominent leader among the Apostles, but his early martyrdom occurred at a time before the Book of James was written, thus eliminating him as a possible author. This is recorded in **Acts 12:2** and is believed to have occurred in A.D. 44.

This leaves only James, the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the most likely candidate. The early church accepted him as the author of the book.

B. His Biography

James was a younger brother of Jesus. By brother, I mean of course, a half-brother. Joseph was not the father of Jesus, since He was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God (**Luke 1:35**). Contrary to Roman Catholic teaching, Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born. This truth is implied in **Matthew 1:25** which says of Joseph that *“he knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.”* It is explicitly stated in Luke’s description of Jesus that Mary *“brought forth her firstborn son”* (**Luke 2:7**). In **Matthew 13:55** and **Mark 6:3** it is clearly stated that Jesus had both brothers and sisters, and His brothers names are listed. **Mark 6:3** reads: *“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?”* In both Matthew and Mark, James is listed first, suggesting he may have been the oldest of the other brothers. Paul explicitly calls James *“the Lord’s brother”* (**Galatians 1:19**).

It is surprising to observe that though they grew up with Him and observed His perfect sinless life, His brothers did not believe in Him throughout His earthly life and ministry. This is stated in **John 7:2-5** and may be referred to in **Psalms 69:8** which reads: *“I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother’s children.”* It was due to the unbelief of His brothers that Jesus went on to state in **Mark 6:4**: *“a prophet is not without honor, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.”*

It is profitable to reflect on what it was like to grow up in Jesus’ home. They lived in the presence of a perfect, sinless person. They ate, played, worked, and worshiped with Him. Our fallen sinful natures are usually uncomfortable in the presence of others who are more holy than we are holy. How perplexed they must have been. Think of the arguments and divisions they must have had about Him. Can’t you hear them saying, “You always think you are better than us!” Or “He has such a holier than thou attitude!”

The story does have a good outcome. We find after the resurrection that the brethren of Jesus met with the 120 in the upper room for prayer (**Acts 1:14**). What was it that caused the change from unbelief to faith? **I Corinthians 15:7** states that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection! This convinced James that He was the Son of God, and James then came to faith in the Savior. He then, in turn, would share this knowledge with the other brothers.

While James was not an apostle, He soon became one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem. When Paul would later visit Jerusalem, he would describe James, along with Peter and John as *“pillars”* in the church (**Galatians 2:9**). He would later become, to use a contemporary term, its “senior pastor”, or elder. When Peter was miraculously released from prison, he told the believers to *“go show these things unto James, and to the brethren.”* (**Acts 12:17**).

James presided as moderator over the important Jerusalem Council, which met in **Acts 15** to discuss the relationship of the Gentile converts to the Mosaic Law. Many years later, Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey and James was still in the presiding role. **Acts 21:18** records that *“Paul*

went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present.” Note that a plurality of elders did not negate James’ primary role as leader, just as the equality in the apostolic office did not negate Peter’s leadership of the twelve.

While we have no record of his death in the Bible, the first-century historian Josephus records that James was sentenced to death by stoning on orders of the Sadducean high priest named Annas. The fourth century Christian writer named Eusebius maintains that the Jewish leaders cast him down from the roof of the Temple, but he survived the fall. He was then stoned and finally killed by a blow to the head from a club held by one of his attackers. This is believed to have occurred in A.D. 62.

C. His Character

James refers to himself as a **“bond-servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1:1)**. This is a display of his humility. Leadership in the early church was based on Jesus’ teaching on humility. He who would be great must become the least. In spite of being the son of Mary, the brother of Jesus, the head of the Jerusalem church, and the fact that Jesus appeared personally to Him after the resurrection, James just describes himself as a bond-servant. The word for bond-servant is *doulas* and describes a slave, a person who had no personal freedom and under the control of his master. In exchange for absolute obedience and loyalty, a master would provide his bond-servant with food, clothing, and housing. The word further describes one who had become a slave at birth. James had become a *doulas* by his new birth by grace through faith in Christ. (cf. **James 1:18**).

To be a *doulas* of God was considered a great honor in Jewish society. By taking that title, James identified himself with these who were honored not for who they were, but whom they served, “the living God.”

Tradition has it that he was such a righteous and good man, that he was nicknamed “James, the Just.” Also that he spent so much time in prayer on his knees that they became hardened, and thus he was called “Old Camel Knees.”

D. His Ministry

James addresses his letter **“to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.”** The word scattered means “dispersed.” The twelve tribes was a title used to refer to the nation of Israel as a composite whole. It is Jewish in nature. They were scattered or dispersed abroad into the Gentile nations from their land in Palestine. By New Testament times many Jews, for personal and business reasons, had chosen to live abroad. Peter used the word as a technical term to identify Jews living outside of Palestine (**I Peter 1:1**).

James sent his letter to Christian Jews. At least fifteen times he refers to them as brethren, that is **“brethren in the Lord.”** In other words, all in one family by means of the spiritual birth. It is very possible

that many of these believers had been under the pastoral care of James while they were in Jerusalem. **Acts 8:1-4** and **11:19** describe the great persecution which came upon the church in Jerusalem at the time of the death of Stephen, and how many had to flee for their lives. This would expose them to trials of many and various types. Being Jews they would be rejected by the Gentiles, and being Christian Jews, they would be rejected by their own countrymen. The first subject James addresses in his letter is the purpose behind trials. (James 1:2-12).

E. His Greeting

In the first verse he uses the word **“greetings”** which means to “rejoice” or “be glad”. It was a common secular greeting such as “hello.” But to James the word was more than a formal greeting. He expected to gladden the hearts of his readers by giving them various means to prove the genuineness of their salvation. This he begins to do in verse two. Christians need great comfort during trials for it is then that Satan tries to make them doubt that they are truly God’s children.

II. JAMES, THE BOOK

A. It’s Date

James wrote his epistle sometime after he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem in A.D. 44 and before he was killed in A.D. 62. This can be verified by considering both the internal and external evidence which is available to us. Whereas Paul and Peter in their epistles make a distinction between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, James addresses only Christians which belonged to the twelve tribes (**1:1**), and who called Abraham their father (**2:21**). Because there is no hint in the book of the Jewish-Gentile controversy that occurred in the Jerusalem council of **Acts 15**, the letter was probably composed before that council meeting. Scholars believe the council met in A.D. 49. This would make James the first epistle to the Christian Church.

B. It’s Place In The Canon

For more than a century and a half after it was written, the epistle was not circulated and failed to gain publicity. There are a couple of reasons for this. One, since it was addressed to a limited group of Jewish Christians, it remained unnoticed in the Gentile churches. Two, James was not one of the apostles, and the church applied the rule that unless a book was apostolic it could not be included in the canon. Though it is referred to by writers in the second and third centuries, it was not until the end of the fourth century that it was officially recognized by both the Eastern and Western church as belonging in the Canon.

C. It's Style And Content

The book of James has been compared to the Old Testament wisdom literature in Proverbs and Psalms. The contents move quickly from one subject to another, resulting in a loosely connected collection of moral or ethical instructions. He quickly covers such subjects as trials, hearing God's Word, the tongue, the right use of money, etc. This reveals that early Biblical Christianity possessed a high regard for practical, moral conduct. James' purpose is not so much to inform as it is to chastise, exhort, and encourage. It is the practical outworking and application of Christian theology or doctrine.

James reminds us that faith involves doing. It is not enough to be hearers of the Word, we must be doers as well. We cannot just say we are believers, we must show it in our lives. This is seen in the way in which we respond to trials, to the teachings of God's Word, the way we control our tongues and relate to others. The rich must share with the poor. The Christian community must live out its faith by demonstrating love and a working faith to those inside and outside the body of Christ.

James was a lover of nature and makes use of numerous figures of speech. This makes his teaching easy to understand and to remember. He refers to the rolling sea (1:6), the withered flower (1:10,11), the face in a mirror (1:23), the bit in the horse's mouth (3:3), the rudder of a ship (3:4), a forest fire (3:5,6), a pure spring of water (3:11), the arrogant businessman (5:1), the corroded metal (5:2), the moth-eaten clothes (5:2), and the patient gardener (5:7). These images appeal to the understanding of all.

D. It's Theology

Some people claim that James has no theology. The validity of that claim depends on what is meant by theology. It is true that the book of James covers little of anything about many basic Christian doctrines. For instance, he does not address such subjects as the person and work of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the nature and gifts of the church as a spiritual body. I suggest that James personally knew those to whom he was writing and that they were acquainted with the foundational doctrines of the church and did not need to have them gone over again. So if by "theology" one means a system of beliefs explicitly built upon the person and work of Christ, then it is true that James lacks a "theology." If the definition of theology be expanded to include teaching grounded in the understanding of God and His purposes in the world, then James is theological throughout. While he does not refer specifically to the person and work of Christ, he is saturated with the teaching of his brother and Lord. No other New Testament book is more influenced by the personal teaching of Jesus than James. There are some twenty-one references or allusions to the teaching of the Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount alone.

This reveals that one does not have to preach the “simple gospel” every time they speak, for the whole book of James is included as the Word of God and it does not define what is the “simple gospel.” It is a sad day for the church when practical Biblical teaching is not considered as theology.

E. It’s Purpose and Study Approach

James writes to give his readers a series of tests for them to determine how well they are doing in their walk with God. Thirteen such tests can be seen in the book. They are:

- I. The Test of Perseverance in Trials (1:2-12)
- II. The Test of Blame in Temptation (1:3-18)
- III. The Test of Responding to the Word of God (1:19-27)
- IV. The Test of Prejudice (2:1-13)
- V. The Test of Good Works (2:14-26)
- VI. The Test of the Tongue (3:1-12)
- VII. The Test of Humble Wisdom (3:13-18)
- VIII. The Test of Worldliness (4:1-12)
- IX. The Test of Dependence Upon God (4:13-17)
- X. The Test of Patient Endurance (5:1-11)
- XI. The Test of Truthfulness (5:12)
- XII. The Test of Prayerfulness (5:13-18)
- XIII. The Test of Confronting Others (5:19,20)

F. It’s Relevance For Today

Each New Testament Book has its own purpose and theme. This is also true of James. As you read the book, you discover that those Jewish Christians were having problems both in their personal lives and in their church fellowship. Some were going through difficult trials. Some were being tempted to sin. Some were catering to the rich while others were being robbed by the rich. One of the major problems was the failure of many to live what they professed to believe. The uncontrolled tongue was a serious problem causing arguments and divisions in the assembly. Worldliness was another problem. Some of the members were disobeying God’s Word and were physically sick because of it. Others were straying away from the Lord and the church.

The Book of James

22 Lessons

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I ask, is this any different than what goes on in the average local church today? Do we not have people who are suffering for one reason or another? Do not some talk one way and live another? Is not worldliness a serious problem? Are there not those who cannot seem to control their tongues? James could have been written today for he deals with very up-to-date matters. May this introduction whet our appetite to feed upon the teachings of this book.