

The Epistle of James

Week 1: Biblical & Historical Background, and the Message of James

Outline of the book of James

- A. 1:2-27 – Patience and faith in trials, sin & save your souls
- B. 2:1-7 – Rich and “the poor man”
- C. 2:8-13 – Royal law & partiality, Judged by the law of liberty
- D. 2:14-26 – Justification [*dikaio*] & works
- E. 3:1-12 – The tongue
- D’ 3:13-18 – Righteousness [*dikaiosune*], Wisdom, & works
- C’ 4:1-12 – Members at war; Judged by the Lawgiver
- B’ 4:13-5:6 – Rich & “the righteous one”
- A’ 5:7-21 – Patience in suffering, sin & save his soul

I. Biblical and Historical Background for the Book of James

Ministry of Jesus included warnings: Matthew 9-10; Matt. 16:21-23; Matt. 26:51-53; Mk. 14:47; Lk. 22:49-51; Jn. 18:10-11, 36

Acts 1: Church will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness around the world

Acts 4-8: Church persecuted and dispersed /scattered around the world

II. The Message of James

The assumption of these lessons is that James, the Apostle, the brother John, the sons of Zebedee wrote this letter to build an Apostolic foundation of Christian teaching and living for the very early church, not long after the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), probably in the 30's AD.

James the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John: a) He was one of the three "cornerstones" among the Apostles: Peter, James and John; and was with Jesus at key events (Mark 5:37; 9:2; Mark 14:33; Acts 1:13). b) Textual link between James 1:1 and Acts 8:1, 4 & 11:19 ("the dispersion") indicates the specific context. After Stephen's death, there was a great dispersion of many believers, but the Apostles remained. James wrote to Christians dispersed abroad. He was not writing to the Jewish exiles throughout the Roman Empire, but the Christian Church dispersed. Thus, James wrote at the about same time as Matthew, in the 30's. c) James appears to have been an early leader in the Jerusalem church, and was killed in 44 AD by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-2), making the writing of this letter early in the life of the church. d) Since there is no mention of Jew/Gentile issues, the writing of James is likely before Paul, and the discussion of the Jerusalem Counsel (Acts 15).

Jacob, the Patriarch, suffered at the hands of unrighteous men – Gen. 25:19-32:32

How James [Jacob] Came to Be Written

March 21, 2008 by Jeff Meyers

“. . . and just when are you guys going to live up to your Sons of Thunder reputation? Huh? A lot of us are wondering about you two.” With that, the young man got up, climbed down the ladder, and stalked up the street toward the old city.

Jacob [James] turned from watching the man and looked at his brother. This was not the first time he saw that expression on Johanan’s [John’s] face. What was it? Bewilderment mixed with sadness maybe, but then too a hint of fear. Jacob empathized. For months now they had been hearing similar angry speeches. The younger men especially were given to reacting to the persecution with a show of strength, even force. Every apostle in Jerusalem has been approached with similar proposals. But now the situation appeared to have gotten worse. This man reported on activity that crossed the line. He actually urged them to join with the resistance.

“Johanan, do you think his report is credible? Or might he have been exaggerating in an attempt to get us to join the cause, so to speak? What do you think?”

“Well, I don’t think he’s making it up. Perhaps he’s embellished the incident somewhat, but I’ve heard similar stories this week from other brothers who’ve been driven out of Jerusalem.”

“Wait. Similar stories? Do you mean different accounts of this one incident or similar incidents in different places?”

“The latter, Jacob. Many of the brothers are losing patience. They tell me that they are no longer able to control angry disciples. I guess we should have seen this coming. As you know, since the tribulation began last year there has been a steady deterioration of order in our assemblies. . . . Look, Jacob, here comes brother Levi, Peter, and Peter’s deacon Mark. They don’t look very happy.”

Jacob went to the ladder and called the three up. After arranging a few more cushions for their friends to recline with them, Johanan called down to his wife and asked if there was an extra jar of wine downstairs for the five of them. She said there wasn’t, but that she would send Joseph down to the market before it closed to purchase a bottle of that wonderful vintage port from the Negev. “Thank you, dear,” Jacob said.

Jacob then turned toward the three visitors. “Why the dour looks, brothers?”

Levi spoke. “You would think that as my account of our Lord’s life circulates, the disciples would connect the dots with their own situation. But I don’t see it happening. The brothers that do see the connection are being drowned out by these loudmouthed young wannabes who counsel violent action against the persecutors.”

“Violent action. You’ve heard about it, too? We just heard a report from a brother who claims it has moved beyond mere talk. Johanan just now tells me that he’s heard similar reports. I can see from your expressions that it must be true.”

Peter said, “Yes, it’s awful. In Bethel the servant of an agent of the Sanhedrin on a mission to find disciples has been killed. I don’t know all the details. But the reliable word on the street is that the deed was done by disciples that are being described as zealots.”

“We’ve also heard,” Mark added, “that some brothers are cursing the persecutors in their assemblies and privately organizing bands of men bound by oaths to establish the righteous rule of Jesus. What a mess!”

Everyone was quiet for a while. Then Peter spoke up.

“Too many brothers apparently believe that the success of the Lord Jesus’ cause must be measured the way our apostate nation measures success. If their assembly has no political influence or power, no material wealth or visible signs of prosperity, then how can they claim to be the Messiah’s new people? So they mimic their rich persecutors and think that by responding in kind they will prevail.”

Jacob said, “But this kind of attitude and behavior is diametrically opposed to the way of our Lord Jesus! If we disciples are going to covet the power and wealth of apostate Jerusalem, then we may as well just become pagan Romans. After all, Jerusalem simply mimics Rome these days. I’ve just read an insightful essay on this by a young brother named Rene ben Girard from the Gadarene region. Can’t the brothers at least discern what’s going on? Such pride will cause the Lord’s judgment to fall on us, not just on Jerusalem and Rome. Friendship with the world is enmity with God!”

Peter said, “So we are all feeling the same way, I see. This is a sign from the Spirit to us that something needs to be done.”

“I agree,” said Levi. “Remember how we came to a consensus about this when I was commissioned to write my account of Jesus’ ministry?” Everyone nodded. “Okay. I believe we need to write something to the churches now, specifically to our brothers who are shepherding the assemblies that have been formed outside of Jerusalem since the persecution and dispersion. Do you men agree?”

Peter: “Yes, Levi, I believe this is exactly the right thing to do. And since your account of our Lord’s ministry is now being copied and circulated, the new work ought to draw out the implications of our Lord’s life and teaching for the persecuted church. People should be able to see the connection between Levi’s account and this new work’s presentation of proper behavior for disciples of Jesus. Does everyone agree?”

Johanan said, “Yes, I think the Spirit is moving us in precisely that direction. Let me add that I think this work ought to be a circular letter written to our brothers, the pastors and leaders of the persecuted assemblies. Every disciple will be able to learn from it, of course, but if we write the

leaders and ask them to read and explain it to their people, we will be addressing the source of the most of our problems. These brothers are supposed to be mature, able to lead their people with meekness and mercy. They seem to want to rule like the Gentiles. Someone needs to remind them of the royal instruction given by our Lord in his mountainside sermon! If we want to continue to reign with the Lord Jesus, we better start acting like true kings and leave off imitating apostate Jewish blowhards and pagan Roman warmongers.”

Peter: “Good idea, John. We need to make sure that this concern for how the brothers lead the congregations by means of their words is at the heart our exhortation. Words are powerful, but words will not save us. Our Lord told us ‘wisdom is justified by her works.’ We need to make sure that our appointed teachers understand this.”

“Speaking of words,” Jacob interjected, “I would like to see us address the true heart and soul of faithful Christian piety – caring for the poor and needy, especially widows and orphans. The churches are being sidetracked from this by our persecutors. Stephen was a great example of this. But I gather that some bigmouths think that Stephen’s death proved his ministry was ineffective. They don’t seem to remember that Stephen was following in the footsteps of our Lord. They were both murdered by envious Jewish rulers whose own failures were illuminated by Jesus’ and Stephen’s righteous service to the poor. Our people can talk about faith all they want, but putting one’s faith in Jesus means doing the kinds of works he did. Perhaps we need to remind everyone of the uselessness of empty talk, even empty confessions of faith.”

“Well, men, do we have anyone more passionately concerned about this than our brother Jacob?” Peter asked. “I think not. I think it is especially appropriate that Jacob write this pastoral letter given that he now functions as the lampstand of the assemblies in Jerusalem. Most of the men and congregations that have been displaced last year were under his shepherding care. It only makes sense to have him write these brothers. What do you all think?”

Everyone nodded vigorously, while Jacob looked a bit apprehensive. “I’ll need your help, men. For I’ll need to avoid just the kind of angry speech that I wish to warn the brothers against. This is an honor, but I don’t feel up to it.”

Peter then got to his feet and motioned everyone to gather around Jacob. They did so, laying hands on him, and praying fervently. Peter petitioned the Lord to grant them all humility and patience in the midst of these great trials. He prayed that they would have the grace to count even these tribulations as blessings. Mark prayed that the Lord would judge those apostate Jewish leaders who failed to honor the apostles and disciples of the Messiah. He prayed that the cries of the laborers that were sent to harvest the fields of Israel would reach the Lord of armies and that he would act swiftly to bring in the reign of righteousness he promised. Levi prayed that the disciples of the Messiah would remember the suffering and patience of the prophets, and that the Lord would reward their steadfast faith with the harvest of righteousness they all longed for. Finally, Johanan prayed for his brother, that God would grant that through his words many who are wandering from the truth might be rescued and that this pastoral letter might be the means whereby the Lord would cover a multitude of sins.

When they had finished praying, Jacob got up from his knees and saw his son Joseph standing by the ladder with the promised bottle of wine. After everyone had a glass, he raised his cup and blessed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone shouted amen. They enjoyed each other's company for a little while longer, but Jacob's mind was already busy with the letter he would begin to write early the next morning. He kept hearing the prayers that were spoken over him a few moments ago. His letter was taking shape in his mind.

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