

An Introduction to the Book of James

Over the past few months, I have read various introductions, as well as having read through the Book itself numerous times. And I have discovered that James is unlike any book in the NT. It is a letter as we will see. But, it doesn't have the precise structure of other letters. Some may say the book is void of doctrine. Paul will sometimes labor for chapters to develop specific points of theology, and then move to application. James, however, immediately begins with application. The Book is full of short commands. Probably the most famous is found in 1:22: **“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”** It is not as though James is not concerned with theology. He is! And this will be evident as he bases his teachings on some very fundamental truths. But, I think James' emphasis is the practical life of a Christian. We will see that he will quickly chastise, exhort, and encourage. I believe James' main purpose for writing this letter is faith that works. We might call this “genuine faith” or “saving faith.” Brothers and sisters, if our faith is not evidenced by the obedience to the commands of this book (and all of Scripture), then, our faith is not genuine. For this reason, we need this book at this particular time in our lives. God is sovereign! And here we are . . . with these words before us! (Author, Audience, Setting, Themes)

1. Author. Look at 1:1: **“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ . . .”** If we think of those named “James” in the NT, there are really only 3 possibilities. One is the brother of James, also called the Son of Zebedee. This James is definitely one of the most known apostles. However, he was put to death in 44 A.D. by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2), which was before the letter was written. The next possibility is another apostle, James the son of Alphaeus. But, we know nothing about him as he is only mentioned as one of the apostles. This leaves only one real possibility, James, the younger brother of Jesus. He did not become a follower of Jesus until after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7; John 7:5). And quickly he became one of the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem. When Peter is miraculously released from prison and went to a house where many Christians were staying, he told them to go and tell James and the brothers (Acts 12:17). In Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council, we find him dialoging with Paul about the nature of the ministry of the gospel among the Gentiles, as they make decisions together (Acts 15:13). And later, before Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he went to “James” and the “elders” (21:17). Because of these words and other traditions, he is often referred to as the “pastor” of the Church in Jerusalem. Concerning the date, most conservative scholars agree on some time in or before 49 A.D. (There is great evidence supporting the fact that James was killed for his faith, stoned to death in 62 A.D. Eusebius, Josephus)

2. Audience. Look again at v. 1: **“To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”** At first glance, we might think this letter is written to the Jews only (“twelve tribes”), those who are scattered because of persecution. It is true that the vast majority of believers in Jerusalem at that time were Jews. And after the martyrdom of Stephen, we read in Acts 8:1: **“And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”** However, the reference to the “twelve tribes” was often used to refer, in a spiritual sense, to describe the true people of God in the last days. This means the letter, though

primarily directed at scattered Jews, is just as easily received by Gentiles, even as we find it applying to us today.

3. Setting. Vv. 2-4 give the setting for the letter. It is persecution and difficult times of testing and suffering. **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”** In this letter we see many of the conditions of one in exile. People who are forced away from their homes become poor and oppressed. Wealthy landowners take advantage of them (5:4-6); rich people haul them into court (2:6) and ridicule their faith (2:7). In this letter James reminds them of the righteous judgment of God that is coming (5:7-11). And in the midst of great testing, they are encouraged to maintain their piety. With this in mind, this book will be very helpful to us. When we are sick, when loved ones pass on, when non-believers persecute us, as we live this very brief life in a world of troubles, do we count it all joy? Do we see trials as the training ground for mature faith? Do we see our lives as “lacking nothing” as regards righteousness? Hopefully, we will answer these questions through the lens of maturity and godliness with the help of James.

4. Themes. James is a book of themes, where he gets right to the point of application. He knew his audience and he knew their struggles.

Theology. Let’s begin with theological themes. As I said in my introduction, this letter of James is not like Paul’s letters, or even 1 & 2 Peter. Those letters introduce major points of theology with a good deal of explanation to make a point. Then, application is given. James certainly develops themes. But, he doesn’t mention certain doctrines we find throughout other letters. For example, he doesn’t develop the person and work of Christ like John’s gospel. He doesn’t mention the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He doesn’t give particular theological emphasis to the development of the church. He doesn’t say anything about Jesus being the fulfillment of the OT. In fact, the name “Jesus” is only mentioned twice. In 1:1 he says he is a **“servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.”** In 2:1, He says, **“My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.”** Much of these doctrines are assumed.

One particular area of emphasis is the doctrine of God. Throughout the letter, he appeals to God’s person and his sovereign working in history. He often grounds his exhortations in the doctrine of God. Especially important is God’s oneness, his jealousy, and his grace. Look at 2:19: **“You believe that God is one; you do well, Even the demons believe—and shudder!”** In 4:12 he reminds his readers, **“There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save an to destroy.”** In 1:17-18 he emphasizes the immutability of God as he gives us what we need: **“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”** The undivided nature of God is especially important to James. This truth is so important because we are so divided. We tend to be fickle and divided in our loyalties, wavering between God and the world. In 1:8 we are **“double-minded”** and **“unstable in our ways.”** Brothers and sisters, we need this teaching. We must KNOW who God is . . . in all the ways the Bible describes Him. This is a truth we need. And we will see this in James. (Add: by calling Jesus Lord, he attributes deity to Him.)

Another characteristic of God we see in this letter is God's jealousy. Look at 4:5: **"Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us.'**" Another theme about God is his great grace in our lives. In 4:6 he says, **"But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"**

One very important theme in the book is eschatology (the study of "last things"). James looks forward to the judgment of God in the future as a motivation and a warning to do what is right. In 1:10-11 speaking to the one who trusts in his riches, he says, **"like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits."** In 2:12 we read: **"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty."** For those who teach he says in 3:1, **"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."** In 5:9 he says, **"Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door."** In other places, he reminds the faithful of their reward. 1:12: **"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."** IN cp. 5:8 he says, **"the judge is standing at the door . . ."** (gospel of Christ?) Throughout the letter he also speaks of the blessings that come now. There is always this already . . . but not yet tension here in this life.

Another theological theme for James is the law of God. In 1:25 he calls it the **"law of freedom."** He appeals to the what he calls the **"royal law"** which is God's command to our neighbor as we love ourselves (2:8). As a Jewish man, he is concerned with OT Mosaic law. In fact, much of his teaching comes straight from Lev. 19 where he rebukes false swearing, the withholding of wages, partiality, and slander. But, as we will see, he is teaching these things under the New Covenant in Christ and the command to make disciples by "teaching them to obey all He has commanded us."

One of the biggest (and sometimes controversial) themes is the doctrine of justification as it is proved through works. Paul's emphasis is justification by faith alone. James comes from another angle, saying that justification is nothing without works. And this theme is SO important to James and to us. If "genuine faith" is the overall theme of James, we must test our faith by our works. This does not mean that we are saved by works. We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ. But James says in 2:14: **"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works Can that faith save him?"** Brothers and sisters, we live in a culture of Christianity where so many claim to be Christians. James can help us wade through these waters as we say with Jesus, **"You will know a tree by its fruit."** This is the emphasis of James. "Do not be deceived!" (1:16). James will help us NOT to be deceived and to **"work out our own salvation with fear and trembling"** (Phil 2:12). James will help us look at our own lives and especially see how we are doing to "obey the commands of Christ."

Other topics include wisdom. In 1:5 he says, **"If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."** This wisdom comes in the

midst of trials (vv. 2-4). Which of us does not need wisdom as we go through tests and trials? In 3:13-18 James compares true and false wisdom. Listen to these words, **“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”**

Another major theme is poverty and wealth. Throughout the letter, we see that God is concerned with the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts. And we imitate God by thinking and acting the same way. We see this particularly with how we treat orphans and widows. 1:27 says **“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . .”** We need these truths as we think about how we treat our community, how we spend our money.

The last theme I will mention today is simply the general Christian life. James’ major contribution to the NT is in ethics. How do we live in this world? Above all James calls his readers to Christian maturity. And this is faith that works. No other letter or book in the NT follows the Sermon on the Mount like James. Oh, how we need these words! I look so forward to the coming days. Please pray! Pray that God would speak to me and that I would clearly proclaim the gospel of Christ in this book. Pray for yourselves that you would hear and understand these words. FYI: I will preach this book differently than any other book I’ve preached so far. Instead of going verse by verse, I plan on working through the major themes in James. And in this way, we will get an exegetical look at the entire book. If we need to stop and camp out on a topic, we will. I am sure there will be a time when I will only preach one or two verses.

In conclusion this morning, I would like us to read through cp. 1 together in responsive reading as we prepare ourselves for the week ahead of us and as we look to the remainder of the book.

Pastor: James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Congregation: But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

Pastor: Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Congregation: Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Pastor: Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Congregation: But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Pastor: If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.