

# The Epistle of James

## INTRODUCTION AND 1:1

### A. Comments

1. The Epistle of James has been much maligned since the time of Martin Luther who described it as an epistle of straw.
2. Donald Guthrie, *There has been a general inclination to regard James as a product of an inferior Christian outlook in contrast to the strong meat of Pauline theology.*
3. It is probably the oldest book of the New Testament and thus reflects the earliest Christian teaching.
4. Faith and works is discussed independently from that of Paul, giving an added dimension to that relevant discussion.
  - a. It is a pastoral letter of universal and practical value.
  - b. The Epistle to the Hebrews, a doctrinal study written to Jewish believers, is complemented beautifully by the Epistle of James, a pastoral exhortation to Jewish believers.
  - c. Are we content to know the theology of Hebrews but not practice it? The Epistle of James demands a living faith.

### B. Considerations based on James 1:1, *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.*

#### 1. Authorship: James, the half-brother of Jesus

##### a. Four New Testament people known as James

- 1) James, the son of Zebedee, an apostle (Mt. 10:2); killed by Herod in AD 44.
- 2) James, the son of Alphaeus, an apostle (Mt. 10:3); called James the Less (Mark 15:40).
- 3) James, the father of the Apostle Judas (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13).
- 4) James, the Lord's half brother, who became leader of the church at Jerusalem (Mt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19).
  - a) Donald Guthrie, *The Lord's brother is the only James who appears to have played a sufficiently prominent part in early Christian history.*
  - b) The simplicity of the description supports the fact that the author was a well-known James.
  - c) James the Just
    - 1] The historian Eusebius recorded that James *used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God, kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people. So from his excessive righteousness he was called the Just.*
    - 2] James viewed himself as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

##### b. Jewish background

- 1) Direct quotations and indirect allusions to Old Testament.
- 2) Traces of Hebrew idioms and grammatical style.
- 3) Instances of the Hebrew prophetic style, God's personal dealing with His people leading toward restoration.

##### c. Similarities with the teaching of Jesus

- 1) Donald Guthrie, *...there are more parallels in this Epistle than in any other New Testament book to the teaching of our Lord in the Gospels.*
- 2) Comparisons to the Sermon on the Mount:
  - a) 1:2 Joy in the midst of trials (Mt. 5:10-12)
  - b) 1:4 Exhortation to perfection (Mt. 5:48)
  - c) 1:5 Asking for good gifts (Mt. 7:7ff.)
  - d) 1:20 Against anger (Mt. 5:22)
  - e) 1:22 Hearers and doers of the Word (Mt. 7:24ff.)
  - f) 2:10 The whole law to be kept (Mt. 5:19)
  - g) 2:13 Blessings of mercifulness (Mt. 5:7)
  - h) 3:18 Blessings of peacemakers (Mt. 5:9)
  - i) 4:4 Friendship of the world as enmity against God (Mt. 6:24)
  - j) 4:11 Against judging others (Mt. 7:1-5)
  - k) 5:2ff Moth and rust spoiling riches (Mt. 6:19)
  - l) 5:12 Against oaths (Mt. 5:33-37)

3) On the clear link between James and Matthew, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, Williams notes, *James has a point of view so similar to that which marks the teaching of Jesus during his lifetime. Much of James reads like the Gospel of Jesus rather than the Gospel about Jesus.*

d. New Testament account of James

- 1) He was first introduced as an unbeliever, Mk. 3:21; John 7:5, *For not even his brothers believed in him.*
- 2) A change was due to resurrection when he was mentioned as one of the disciples, Acts 1:14, *All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.*
- 3) James was specially singled out for a resurrection appearance, 1 Cor. 15:7, *Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.*
- 4) Probably James told Paul about it when they met, Gal. 1:19, *But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.*
- 5) James presided at the Jerusalem Council, Acts 15:1-29
  - a) Note authority of James, 15:13.
  - b) A clear teaching of the Gospel not in conflict with Paul, 15:19-21, 24-26.
  - c) Similarity of writing of Epistle of James and the letter from the Jerusalem Council, 15:23-29.
- 6) He lived in an age of transition
  - a) James Adamson, *The Epistle of James is a document of the earliest Christianity. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the giver of the promised perfect law to Israel, and his teaching is the ethic to match that law.*
  - b) James is writing not as a Jewish Christian but a Christian Jew because Christianity is not a new religion but the consummation of the old.
  - c) James strongly declares that the Gospel places demands on those who respond by faith.
  - d) The hard sayings of Jesus are practically developed in the Epistle of James, note the Sermon on the Mount.

2. Date: 40-50 A.D.

- a. There is no mention of Council of Jerusalem (49 A.D.) or relationship of Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians.
- b. There is a very simple organizational structure patterned after the synagogue (the assembly is referred to as synagogue in James 2:2).
- c. There is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.
- d. There is little formalized theology in James due to early date and purpose.

3. Recipients

a. Christian Jews: *the twelve tribes of the Dispersion*

- 1) A reference to the Diaspora
  - a) It began in 722 B. C. when the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes.
  - b) Later, the southern tribes were dispersed when the Babylonians took them captive in 586 B.C.
  - c) Jews were spread all over Mesopotamia, around the Mediterranean, and into Asia Minor and Europe, note Acts 2:5, *Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven.*
- 2) The specific event surrounding the death of Stephen
  - a) Persecution of Christian Jews intensified after the murder of Stephen.
  - b) First, they fled to Judea and Samaria, 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.*
  - c) Then, they fled to Jewish communities around the Mediterranean, Acts 11:19-20, *Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.*
  - d) They were not received by their expatriate Jewish kinsman, but rather were rejected and persecuted.

b. All Jews

- 1) Due to James' view of Christianity as the culmination of Judaism, he is writing to Jews in general.
- 2) He wrote with hope that the Jews would turn to Christ.

4. Theology in James
  - a. Comments
    - 1) James Adamson, *James is addressing people who are supposed to know the rudiments of Christianity.*
    - 2) Unknown, *Theology is not discussed for its own sake in the epistle. It is introduced from time to time in support of practical exhortation.*
    - 3) This is a book focused on application of truth received.
  - b. Christology
    - 1) Lord Jesus Christ, 1:1, *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*
      - a) Authority of Jesus as Messiah and Lord, God the Son.
      - b) Servant of God and Christ, a clear note to the unity in the relationship of Father and Son.
    - 2) Lord of glory, 2:1, *My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.*
      - a) Glory, as in shekinah glory; Jesus is the divine presence of God.
      - b) Hebrews 1:2-3, *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.*
  - c) Theology Proper
    - 1) Goodness, 1:5, *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*
    - 2) Holiness, 1:13, *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.*
    - 3) Immutability, 1:17, *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.*
    - 4) Truth, 1:18, *Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*
    - 5) Mercy, 1:27, *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.*
    - 6) Immanence, 4:8, *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*
  - d) Soteriology
    - 1) Spiritual life as a divine gift
    - 2) 1:18, *Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*
  - e) Demonology
    - 1) Fallen angels, 2:19, *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*
    - 2) Personal devil who is to be resisted, 4:7, *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*
  - f) Eschatology
    - 1) The Lord's return
    - 2) 5:7-8, *Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*
  - g) Spiritual Life
    - 1) Sanctification, 4:4, *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*
    - 2) Prayer, 5:13-16, *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

5. Purpose

a. Introductory comments

- 1) Donald Guthrie, *James is exposing the fallacy of a dead orthodoxy.*
- 2) *how this faith should be genuine, true, active, living, fruitful.*

b. Confusion

- 1) William Hendriksen, *A superficial glance at this epistle may easily leave the impression that every attempt to outline it must fail.*
- 2) Unknown, *...an ethical scrapbook.*

c. Conviction

- 1) A test of faith, *Hiebert, The purpose of James is to goad his readers to recognize and accept their need for a living, active faith and to challenge them to test their own faith by the basic criterion that "faith without works is useless (2:17)."*
- 2) An epistle of practical helps
  - a) His purpose is practical, to present a series of tests whereby his readers can determine the genuineness of their own faith.
  - b) The key to the book is found in 1:3, *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*
  - c) James will supply spiritual measures.

F. Outline of James

1. Introduction and Greeting 1:1
2. The Test of Faith 1:2-18
3. Faith Tests
  - a. Word of God 1:19-27
  - b. Impartiality 2:1-13
  - c. Works 2:14-26
  - d. Self-Control 3:1-18
  - e. Submission to God (Holiness) 4:1-17
  - f. Justice 5:1-12
  - g. Community of Faith 5:13-20

<b>CONCLUSION</b>
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- A. James is a rich book designed to teach us the importance of living the truth.
- B. Are you burdened by theological truth you have not applied? Take James to heart and test your faith.
- C. If your are found lacking, implement James' practical advice by God's grace.