

Sunday, January 5, 2025 pm

## A STUDY OF JAMES (1)

### Introduction

Today, we are beginning a study through the book of James. This will be a monthly study, typically on the first Sunday of each month. We will continue to examine the text section by section and verse by verse. It is my hope that we can learn how to grow in Christ through our study of this letter. In this lesson we will introduce this letter.

#### I. Background

- a. The book of James is part of a section of letters described as the general epistles. These are the letters from James – Jude (7-8 letters – some include Hebrews in this list). They are named in contrast to the 13 letters written by Paul. Written by 4 different individuals, these are shorter letters (but no less important than the long ones). Unlike Paul’s letters, they are addressed to more general audiences that we cannot as definitively identify.
- b. **Who wrote the book?** James. WHICH James? 4 possibilities have been presented.
  - i. James the brother of John (Son of Zebedee). He was one of the 12 apostles (Matt. 4:21, 10:2). He is typically dismissed as the writer because Acts 12:2 records him as being executed by Herod which occurred early (~10-15 years after the establishment of the church, ~44 AD). However, a few have argued that it is still possible for him to be the writer considering the letter was written “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad”. This would indicate a primarily Jewish audience. It would make sense that someone shortly after Paul began persecuting Christians and they scattered (Acts 8:4), would write a more general letter encouraging faithfulness and maturity (which fits the theme of this letter). BUT, if that is the case, James would be the EARLIEST NT letter.
  - ii. Luke 6:14 – James the father of Judas (not Iscariot). OR some other unnamed James (it was a common name. This is highly unlikely when we consider the need for apostolic authority of letters.
  - iii. James, the son of Alphaeus – Luke 6:15. He was one of the 12, but if this was written by him, we know nothing else about him.
  - iv. James the brother of Jesus – he is an interesting consideration. Recall that while Jesus was on earth, his brothers did not believe (John 7:5). But, AFTER the resurrection we find conviction. Matthe 13:55 – He did have a brother named James, Joses, Simon and Judas. We read about him in Acts 1:14 assembled with the apostles as Matthias is chosen. Galatians 1:19 finds Paul going to Jerusalem 3 years after his conversion where he sees only Peter and “James the Lord’s brother”. VERY likely this is the same James we read of in Acts 12:17 where Peter having been freed from prison tells the brethren to tell James of his escape (James, the brother of John is already dead – Acts 12:1-2). Acts 15:13 finds James involved in the discussion about what to require of Gentiles. Finally in Galatians 2:9 speaks of James, along with Peter and John being pillars gave to Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship” to go to the Gentiles. I lean toward THIS JAMES as the author of this letter.
  - v. BUT, which of these James’ wrote the letter does not matter as much as its content.
- c. **To whom was this letter written?**

- i. James 1:1 – to the twelve tribes scattered abroad. Likely this is a reference to Jewish converts who had were now scattered throughout the empire (Acts 8:1-4, 26:7 – where Paul is giving his defense before Agrippa & Festus. He makes reference to the twelve tribes and their hope that he stands accused as a Jew.)
  - ii. *It is likely that they were struggling.* Having been scattered, where would they go and what would they do? When you consider how Jews were often viewed by Gentiles AND as converted Christians, they were also rejected by traditional Jews. This would mean hardships for them.
  - iii. *There was spiritual immaturity* – as James will bring out in his admonitions. Perhaps they struggled with trials and temptations, faithfully keeping God’s word, prejudice (likely both class and ethnic), understanding faith, controlling their tongues, humility and disunity to name a few subjects James will address.
- d. **When and where was it written?** These are questions that are difficult to answer because of the general nature of this letter.
  - i. It also depends on who the author is. If it was James, the apostle and brother of John – it would be in the early 40s.
  - ii. If the brother of Jesus it could be years later – late 40s to early 50s. Some believe it even later just prior to Jame’s death (which is believed to be ~64 AD).
  - iii. A couple of observations about its dating – 1) James does not deal with false doctrine like other letters. This tends toward it being an earlier letter. 2) There is no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem which likely placed it BEFORE AD 70. So clearly, this is a first century letter.
  - iv. With both probable authors it would have been written from Judea, copied and distributed.
- e. **Its authority?** Obviously, we accept this letter as part of God’s word (the NT Canon). But this is one of the 7 letters that was *slow to be accepted*. Among the reasons why James was scrutinized included:
  - i. Identifying who the author was. Most attributed it to the brother of Jesus and because he was one of the original 12 apostles, he was questioned. HOWEVER, see the discussion on him above – he was clearly prominent and highly respected within the church at Jerusalem.
  - ii. It was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience.
  - iii. It was not as frequently referenced by some of the earliest “church fathers”
  - iv. Its emphasis on a works-based faith James 2:14-26). Note: Because of this Martin Luther did not want to accept it. But he also questioned Hebrews, Jude & Revelation.
  - v. NOTE: This is not to say we should question its inspiration. The fact that it was scrutinized and then accepted implies that thorough investigation was done before it was accepted. This occurred during a time of history (2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD) when many false gospels and letters were being generated. In determining what was to be accepted, they were VERY careful because they did not want to include anything that was NOT definitively from the Holy Spirit.
- f. Its purpose – James is writing to an audience in need of spiritual maturity. He addresses what life as a Christian ought to include. A key verse (to me) is James 1:22, *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* Another possibility, James 4:7, *Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.*

g. Some distinct characteristics

- i. This is a practical book about how to live the Christian life. When one young in the faith asks me what to read first. After a gospel and Acts I would suggest this book, even though it does contain some challenging texts that need to be developed.
- ii. According to Truth Commentaries: James<sup>1</sup>, Dan King lists the following characteristics of this letter:
  1. James has an authoritative tone. James speaks in the same way as Paul with no apology for his commands and instructions. He speaks as a messenger of God.
  2. He does not include what we generally think of as “Christian doctrine.” He is not dealing with false doctrines the way that Paul, Peter and John did. Jesus is only mentioned by name 2 times (James 1:1 & 2:1). He does not deal with the incarnation or resurrection of Jesus, etc. But that is not his point!
  3. James is eminently practical in its approach – he is dealing with practical living, as we will notice in the outline next.
  4. The letter is impersonal in nature. He does not send personal greetings in the letter. He “gets down to business” from beginning to end.
  5. James demonstrates an appreciation of nature – Consider the illustrations related to the tongue – taming animals, fresh and salt (bitter) springs, fig trees, withering grass and flowers, etc.
  6. His teachings have similarities with “the Sermon on the mount” taught by Jesus – Matthew 5-7. Referencing a work by Thomas Nelson<sup>2</sup>, a chart with 26 markers of similarity is mentioned.
  7. His writing is in the tradition of Old Testament literature. It bears similarities to OT poetic books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Job.
  8. It is written in a refined Greek style, with a rich Greek vocabulary. James uses many Greek words not found in any of the other NT letters.

h. Some of the subjects James addresses

- i. Finding joy (and good) as we face trials (1:2-8)
- ii. Dealing with temptation (1:12-18)
- iii. Be swift to hear and slow to speak (1:19-20)
- iv. Be doers of the word (1:21-27)
- v. Don’t show favoritism (2:1-13)
- vi. What a living faith looks like (2:14-24)
- vii. Controlling our tongues (3:1-12)
- viii. Heavenly wisdom vs. worldly wisdom (3:13-18)
- ix. Pride and humility (4:1-10)
- x. Judging our brethren (4:11-12)
- xi. Including God in your plans (4:13-17)
- xii. Warnings to the rich (5:1-6)
- xiii. Patience (5:7-12)
- xiv. Prayer (5:13-18)
- xv. Restoration of the erring (5:19-20)

**II. How does James apply to us?**

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<sup>1</sup> King, Daniel H. Sr., Truth Commentaries: James; Guardian of Truth Foundation, 2015. PP 87-97.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pg. 115.

- a. As you read through this book it is clear that his audience struggled with a number of issues in their personal lives as well as within the churches (congregations).
- b. Looking at the subjects James addresses, we ought to be able to see how practical this book is for us today. Both as individuals and as churches, we deal with many of the same problems he addresses. I suspect that everyone of us can find something in this letter that we need to work on.
- c. And while these subjects are diverse and practical, they all fall under the heading of spiritual maturity. It is that spiritual maturity that will help each of us grow both individually AND as the Lord's body together.

And thus we are introduced to the book of James. I hope you find this study beneficial and practical. Let us read and study this book with a desire to grow closer to God and to one another. We know that is what God wants from each of us. Think about it!