

James - Introduction

Getting Acquainted

In Christian circles, this letter is one of the most quoted books of the entire Bible, as it is filled with many phrases that are short, pithy, memorable, and most importantly, highly practical:

- Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various trials
- God cannot be tempted
- Every good and perfect gift comes down from above
- Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger
- Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, lest you deceive yourself
- Faith apart from works is dead
- Even the demons believe – and shudder!
- God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble
- If we resist the devil, he will flee from us

On the other hand, James is also full of mysterious passages that have left Christians scratching their heads:

- Does James have it in for rich people?
- What exactly does he mean by anointing sick people to receive healing?
- Why doesn't James talk very much about the cross?
- What exactly does he mean by salvation by works? Isn't he contradicting Paul here?

Why Study James?

1. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. Prov. 30:5)
 - Despite the fact that Luther called this letter a ‘right strawy epistle’ (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12) for its apparent avoidance of the doctrine of justification by faith, it is still Scripture.

2. James’ letter is extremely relevant and practical for the church today
 - The book of James is a treatise on divine wisdom, and thus deals with the practical problem of living according to God’s will in a fallen and hostile world. (John Sailhamer)
 - James was writing to Christians under pressure. Though at that time Christians were not being martyred, they were nonetheless suffering economic persecution and oppression, and were constantly being tempted to buckle under the pressure and revert back to their old ways to alleviate the discomfort brought about by their profession of faith in Christ (cf. Hebrews).

- James is filled with the teaching of Jesus Himself. No other letter of the NT has as many references to the teaching of Jesus per page as this letter. James especially unpacks many of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount.

Author

This letter is written by a man who identifies himself simply as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

There were very few men named James in the early church who could get away with such a simple identification. Whoever this James is, he is well known amongst the believers.

- James the son of Zebedee was executed between AD 41 and 44 (Acts 12:2), and so it is unlikely him
- James the son of Alphaeus (Acts 1:13) is so unknown that he would have certainly needed to qualify more clearly to his audience

Thus, most conservative scholars agree that the author is none other the James, son of Joseph and Mary, and brother of Jesus.

James' Background

1. During Jesus' public ministry, it appears that none of Jesus' siblings were followers of Jesus
 - Explicit in John 7:5
 - A clear inference from Mark 3:31-35

2. A personal resurrection appearance convinced James that his brother was indeed the Christ

- Most scholars believe he was converted through this (1 Cor. 15:7; cf. Paul in Acts 9)

3. James was with the others in the upper room when the Spirit was given on Pentecost

- Acts 1:14; 2:1-3

4. James later became the leader of the Jerusalem church after Peter's arrest and departure from Jerusalem

- Acts 12:1-3; 15:13-21; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9

5. James died in AD 62

Date of Composition

James is one of the earliest letters written in the entire NT (i.e. definitely before AD 62)

James was certainly written after the persecution under Herod Agrippa (AD 44, Acts 12:1-5)

This letter was likely written prior to AD 48-49 (the famous Jerusalem counsel in Acts 15), or he would have certainly mentioned it.

Thus, many believe that James wrote this letter in the mid-40s, several years before Paul wrote his letters, and only 15 years or so after Jesus had died and risen again.

Other Miscellanies

1. This letter was likely written from Jerusalem, based upon information in Acts and Galatians about James' location (Acts 15:13-22; 21:18; Gal. 1:18-19; 2:9, 12).
2. James is a "general epistle", meaning that it doesn't seem to be written to any particular church, but rather to all Christians churches in general, though James likely has the early Jewish Christians in mind as he writes his letter.

Main Message

The primary message driving this letter is that Christians' faith in the gospel should work itself out visibly and tangibly in a life of obedience. The gospel of Jesus results in a new life of obedience when a person savingly believes the gospel. In Paul's vernacular, James is exhorting the nascent and persecuted believers to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which they were called.

James is an intensely practical book, filled with exhortations to Christians about the way they should live their lives now that they have been given a new life in Jesus.

Since the believers have already believed the saving message of the gospel, the aim of James is not to give a theological presentation of the gospel, but to instruct believers practically as to what faithfully following Jesus looks like in real life.

Key Verse

1:22 – “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

James desire is to take the teachings of Jesus and apply them to the Christian’s personal life.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think of the letter of James, what verses or themes come to mind?
2. Has anyone here ever done an intensive study through James?
3. Any testimonies of how God used this letter (or a part of it) in your life?