

Introduction to the Book of James

James 1:1-11

I. Author – “James”

A. James – but which one?

1. James, son of Zebedee, John’s brother – died to soon (Acts 12)
2. James, son of Alphaeus – we don’t know much about him – unlikely
3. James, brother of Jesus
 - He is the only one sufficiently well-known enough to not give any additional credentials in his letter other than “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - He is attested as the author by church tradition

B. What do we know of James?

1. He wasn’t always a believer – Jn. 7:5
2. It may have taken a special resurrection appearance from Jesus to convert him – 1 Cor. 15:7
3. By the time Jesus ascended to heaven, he was with the 120 in the upper room, awaiting Pentecost – Acts 1:14
4. He was a leader at the church of Jerusalem (the first “pastor” of that church) – Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18, Gal. 1:19, 2:9, 2:12
5. He was remembered as James the Just:
 - Eusebius, the church historian, records the testimony of Hegesippus 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.” --quoted in *James: Faith that Works*, R. Kent Hughes, pg. 16

II. Audience & Occasion – “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion”

1. Jewish believers or churches made up predominantly of Jewish Christians.
2. The Dispersion, may refer to the Jewish Dispersion in 722 BC/586 BC (fall of Israel/Judah) – but probably also refers to the scattering of the predominantly Jewish church that started in Jerusalem, was scattered to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1ff.) and then later scattered to Syria and other points around the Mediterranean (Acts 11:19-20).
3. James in one sense is speaking to his flock, in another to the growing number of churches springing up among the Jewish communities around the world.
4. These believers were commonly persecuted, and had trials of various kinds – often they were poor and marginalized, and they also needed instruction and correction for a variety of problems (don’t we all have problems too?), as will become clear as we study the epistle.

III. Genre – “the letter of James”

1. James is a letter, but not exactly the same as one of Paul’s formal letters with point-by-point argumentation. It has more similarity to John’s letters, Jewish thought with repetition and themes rather than a careful outline.
2. James has similarity with Wisdom literature – it is known as the Proverbs of the New Testament. [1:10-11, 19-20, 2:1, 3:2 as examples]
3. James includes sections similar to Prophetic literature in that James boldly denounces sin in his people and the surrounding community. [5:1, 4-6 as an example, similar to Amos 5:11-12, Is. 5:8-9]
4. Perhaps most striking is the similarity James has with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus. Significant here is to note that when James was written (most likely the mid to late A.D. 40s), none

of the other books of the NT were as yet written, the Gospels among them. So there were not well known word-perfect quotations of Jesus' words – this limits our ability to trace out even more parallels in James to the Gospels. Here are some examples [examples noted with a * are from the Sermon on the Mount]:

- Love of neighbor is a great command – James 2:8 // Matt. 22:39
- Self-exaltation leads to humiliation – James 4:6-10 // Matt. 23:12
- Take no oaths* – James 5:12 // Matt. 5:33-37
- Do not judge* – James 4:11-12 // Matt. 7:1-5
- Moth and rust destroy riches* – James 5:2 // Matt. 6:19
- The Lord is coming; he is at the door – James 5:8-9 // Matt. 24:33
- Believers must rejoice in trials* – James 1:2 // Matt. 5:11-12
- The goal of the righteous is maturity* – James 1:4 // Matt. 5:48
- We ask God for good gifts* – James 1:5 // Matt. 7:7
- We are doers, not just hearers, of the word* – James 1:22 // Matt. 7:24-27
- Disciples must keep the whole law* – James 2:10 // Matt. 5:19
- We act upon our profession of faith* – James 2:14-26 // Matt. 7:21-23
- We are accountable for every word – James 3:2 // Matt. 12:36-37
- Peacemakers are blessed* – James 3:17-18 // Matt. 5:9
- We cannot serve two friends or masters* – James 4:4 // Matt. 6:24

--list derived from *James (Reformed Expository Commentary)*, Daniel Doriani, pg. 11

IV. Characteristics of the Book of James

1. The book has apx. 60 commands in its 5 short chapters but almost no mentions of the Gospel, Jesus' death and salvation by faith. This and its strong requirement of works led Martin Luther to doubt its canonicity – although he later warmed to the book. In fact it was a doubted book at one point in the early church, but soon found widespread attestation.

2. Despite this controversial character, the book has been warmly embraced and loved by average Christians for thousands of years. It is incredibly practical and helpful. And its words are memorable.

3. The Gospel does shine through this book in hidden ways. Here we want to just show some of this element of James.

- The commands in James do not give us confidence that we can keep them – the bar is raised very high – 2:10, 4:17, 1:22
- There are paradoxes presented too: we must control our tongue 1:26, but no one can 3:8; we must avoid the pollution of the world 1:27, but our envy and quarrels prove we are worldly 4:1-4.
- Furthermore, we are all in peril since within us are desires leading to sin and ultimately death – 1:14-15
- But we are not left to ourselves, God birthed us anew, of his own will, leading to life – 1:18,21
- Indeed “mercy triumphs over judgment” – 2:13 since “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy” – 5:11.
- God does “grace to the humble” – 4:6.

4. The book of James is not just a haphazard list of commands, but addresses the needs of the young (at this time in history) Jewish church. In the first 11 verses of this first chapter James will state the three primary themes or points he wants to drive home, then in the rest of the chapter he will restate these themes explaining even more what he is going to press home with the bulk of the letter (chapters 2-5).

Statement of the Three Primary Themes of James (1:1-11)

I. The Trials of the Christian Life (vs. 1-4)

A. INEVITABLE “when”

1. All of life is a trial:
 - Each stage of life has its own trials
 - Always looking for when things will be easier
 - Hardships are trials, but so are times of prosperity
2. Scripture promises trials for Christians

1 Pet. 4:12 “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

2 Tim. 3:12 “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Acts 14:22 “Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

1 Thess. 3:3 “That no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this.”

John 16:33 “...In the world you will have tribulation....”

Luke 21:16b-17 “Some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake.”

B. VARIABLE “various kinds”

1. Trials come in all shapes and sizes:
 - We’re not talking about overt persecution for the faith only here.
 - Hebrews 12:4 – “struggle against sin”
2. Trials in James:
 - Poverty or Riches (we’ll see this in 1:9-11)
 - Knowledge
 - i. Knowing of a need means we must meet it (2:15-17)
 - ii. Knowing enough to teach, means more strict judgment (3:1)
 - iii. Knowing of a moral obligation, means we must meet it (4:17)
 - Suffering for the faith (5:7-11)
 - Taming the Tongue (3:1-9) *can do good & bad*
 - Our energy and ambitions/plans tempt us (4:13-16)
 - Illness of body or mind tries us (5:13-18)

C. REJOICEABLE “count it all joy”

1. A repeated pattern in Scripture.

1 Pet. 4:13-14 “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

Rom. 5:3-5 “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

Matt. 5:11-12 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

2 Cor. 7:4b “In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.”

Acts 5:40-41 “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name”

1 Pet. 1:5-7 “Who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

2. Should we be “Joyful” in Trial?

- Not a glib joy about the trial.
- Not happy-go-lucky.
- Not denying it (this isn’t a mind game).
- Finding a way to see this as a joyous thing. (1 Pet. 1 – we still grieve, but noticing the fruit of trial we are happy)

D. VALUABLE (or productive)

TRIALS – Seen as a TEST – produces ENDURANCE (toughness) – leads to MATURITY – leads to PROVEN GENUINENESS OF FAITH – gives ASSURANCE & JOY

(genuineness & assurance – 1 Pet. 1, 2 Pet. 1 also 1 Jn. 3:19-21 & Rom. 5:3-5)

If you desire maturity, and assurance, then count trials as Joy. REJOICE in trials.

II. The Wisdom {for Trials} Needed (vs. 5-8)

“Lack” ties vs. 5 to vs. 4 (thematically this continues the thought)

A. MAN

1. Natural reactions to trials:

- Guilt “if only”.
- Confusion “Why is this happening? Is God punishing me? Does God love me?”
- Fear “What will become of me?”
- Anger “How can they do that to me?”
- Envy “Why aren’t they suffering like I am?”
- Self-Pity “Won’t somebody feel sorry for me?”
- Hopelessness & Despair “There’s nothing I can do, I’m doomed. I’m trapped and will never get out.”

B. GOD

1. Focus instead on our Great God.

- The “Giving God”
- Gives to all.
- Generously gives.
- Doesn’t begrudge us.

Amplified Version (1987) = “If any of you is deficient in wisdom, let him ask of the giving God Who gives to everyone liberally and ungrudgingly, without reproaching or faultfinding, and it will be given him.”

C. SIMPLE PRAYER

1. Simply ASK.

2. Ask in FAITH (or from a standpoint of faith)

- Not how well you ask, but how genuine you are asking (sincere, faithful)

- Perfect faith not required – faith is a gift (2:5), trials grow faith, cf. Mk. 9:25 “I believe, help my unbelief”
- Constant “wavering”-lifestyle not momentary doubt

III. The Problem of Riches and Poverty (vs. 9-11)

A. Economics in light of Eternity (example of handling trials)

1. The Rich Poor – perspective on ultimate riches/standing in Christ.
2. The Poor Rich – mindful of their constant need of Christ (like everyone else), bend low at feet of cross
3. This Transient Life – life is fleeting
4. Based on the Gospel ultimately – only those born again (Jm. 1) and saved by faith ultimately are exalted in the last day (2:5 – “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?” also “mercy triumphs over judgment” 2:13 & 1 Pet. 1:3-5 roots 6-8)

B. The Ultimate Test (jumping ahead to vs. 12)

1. All of life ultimately is a test – passing this test (endurance with faith) gives the crown of life.
2. RECAP of vs. 1-11 “blessed (i.e. happy)” “steadfast under trial”, “stood the test”,
3. Crown of life is not just an optional reward – it is LIFE – ETERNAL LIFE Rev. 2:10 similarly see 2 Tim. 4:8
4. LIFE is won by those who Endure but who also LOVE (ultimate Hope in the Gospel and God’s Spirit – Rom. 5:5) – trials produce endurance (in the godly), endurance produces maturity, (not just our efforts)