

The Book of James

The book of James provides a plea for practical Christian living. It is not a treatise on Christian doctrine, written to reveal God's grace to the unbeliever. That grace, instead, forms the background for James' words.

James has been compared with Proverbs in the Old Testament, because of its practical, everyday application of faith. It has also been compared to Amos by virtue of its stinging rebuke to those who, in complacency, ignore social injustice.

The people written to were evidently beset by many trials (1:2) and were not taking sufficient advantage of prayer (1:5). As members of the poorer class, they were suffering social injustice. Members of the labouring class (1:9), employed by the wealthier landowners, were being dragged into court (2:6-7) or were having wages withheld (5:4). Instead of showing patience and humility, the people were engaging in complaints against one another (4:11-12) and in quarrels and dissension (4:1-3). James sums up their attitude as materialistic and worldly (4:13-17). How is this so?

James' plea is to put into practice what is preached. It is really a sermon rather than a letter!

The author identifies himself as "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (1:1). Since James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:1-2), the most likely candidate for authorship is James the brother of Jesus. He is the only other figure who fits the criteria for acceptance into the Biblical canon.

Apparently, Jesus' brother did not accept him as the promised Messiah during Jesus' ministry on earth, for we read: "*Even his brothers did not receive him*" (John 7:5). The names of Jesus' brothers are recorded twice in the New Testament: James, Joses (or Joseph), Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55 & Mark 6:3). It seems that James accepted Jesus as the Saviour after the resurrected Christ appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15:7). James and the other brothers then did undertake some missionary journeys, perhaps in Palestine (1 Corinthians 9:3-6), but James seems to have concentrated his work in Jerusalem.

After the execution of James, the brother of John, James the brother of Jesus became the recognized leader of the Christian church at Jerusalem. For example, when Peter miraculously escapes from prison in A.D. 44, he asks that his escape be reported "*to James and to the brethren*" (Acts 12:17). In writing to the Galatians, Paul ranks James as an apostle (1:19) and mentions him ahead of Peter and John as "pillars" of the church at Jerusalem (2:9). Paul refers to people who came to Antioch from Jerusalem as those who "*came from James*" (2:11-12). At the apostolic council at Jerusalem the voice of James is most prominent (Acts 15:13-21) and no doubt he is the main writer of the circular letter issued by the council (v. 23-29). Finally, when Paul returns to Jerusalem after his third journey, he reports "*to James*" (Acts 21:17-18).

James' letter, and his speech to the council in Acts 15, are calls to the Christian to listen, to take to heart the message and to live it. According to early church history, he was a model of

Jewish piety. In fact, it is said that he spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they became as hard as the knees of a camel! Even the non-believing Jews respected James, for he was called "James the Just." He died a martyr's death in A.D. 62 or 66. Some Jews even regarded the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as divine punishment for James' execution.

Introduction

1:1

Little need be said of this verse. Simply note that it is written to all the church--but especially to those of Jewish descent.

Trials and Temptations

1:2-18

James, although about to rebuke his readers, addresses them as "brothers." Is this simply a case of "buttering them up?"

Putting faith into practice requires Christian courage. See Hebrews 11:1, Romans 5:1-5, 1 Peter 1:1-9 and Matthew 5:11-12. Comment on verses 2-8 as they address faith, doubt and Christian "joy."

Especially note and comment on the images in verses 6-8.

Note, too what is to be asked for in verse 5. What might be the content of this "wisdom?"

A description of one of the problems to be addressed is found in verses 9-11. How might we take those words to heart today?

Continue through verses 12-15. What is the difference between testing and tempting? See 1 Corinthians 10:13 and its context. Note, too, the three stages: desire leads to sin which leads to death (Romans 6:23).

A further word of encouragement is given in verses 16-18. Again, Scripture points to God's faithfulness to us as reason to persevere.

Listening and Doing

1:19-27

Notice how this section begins: *"My dear brothers."* Fifteen times in this short letter, James refers to his readers as brothers, my brothers or my dear brothers. What does this tell us?

There is a contrast in the following verses. It is stated twice and the second is built upon the reasoning given in the first. What is the contrast in verse 19?

What reasoning is given in verse 20?

How is the contrast re-stated in verse 21?

How does one "humbly Accept" the Word? Continue on through the next verse. It is really quite simple--or is it?! Comment:

We know that perfect obedience to the Word of God is not possible for sinful human beings. So what is the advantage to be gained, if any, by taking verses 22-25 to heart?

What does one see in the "mirror" of the law?

How do you understand verses 26-27? Compare Jeremiah 22:15-16 and its context.

"Good works come naturally for the Christian; as a rock lying in the sun does not choose whether or not to become warm."
Martin Luther

Favouritism Forbidden

2:1-13

Consider verses 1-4. Throughout James, Christ is presented not as Saviour and nothing more, but as an example *because he is* the Saviour who *has won* our free salvation. How might we today become guilty of just what James' example points out?

What is James' assessment of such judging (v. 4)?

James gives three arguments against showing favouritism to the wealthy or influential:

v. 5-7: _____

v. 8-11: _____

v. 12-13: _____

Note that the judgment referred to in verse 12 is not judgment for eternal destiny, for James is writing to believers whose eternity is already determined. This is speaking of earthly blessings and their use (John 5:24, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 22:12).

Faith and Deeds

2:14-26

James will, in chapter 2, present the difference between a faith that is no more than intellectual assent and a faith that is genuine. Again, to quote Martin Luther, we are *"justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone."* Genuine faith *will* produce change in a person's life. 1 John 3:16-24 may provide an interesting parallel to the discussion of false faith in 14-17. Who is the beneficiary of genuine faith? Does this discussion set any standards for types or levels of faith prompted action?

Continue through verses 18-26. Describe the delicate balance between salvation by faith alone and the present arguments.

Taming the Tongue

3:1-12

The first 2 verses are sobering words for many of us! Why would teachers be judged more strictly?

Read verses 3-8. A natural progression is described: evil spreads from the tongue to the parts of the body, to the whole person, to the entire course of a person's life. How could this be?

Compare verse 6 with John 8:44. Figuratively, the source of the tongue's evil is the devil.

Verses 9-11 are definitely sermonically. Again, in verse 10, a term of endearment is used: "My brothers." As further motivation for this matter-of-fact description of the Christian, discuss the role that feelings and Christian discipline play in such a lifestyle.

Two Kinds of Wisdom

3:13-18

Read these verses and compare them to Proverbs 1:2-4, 2:10-15, 4:5-9 and 9:10-12. Again, the theme of "lived-out" faith predominates. How are verses 14-15 connected with John 8:42-44?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:33 in the light of verse 16. What sin is really being discussed in this entire context and where does it originate?

Verse 17-18 begins with a succession of adjectives which describe the *"wisdom that comes from heaven."* Refer back to verse 13. What characterizes the *"deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom?"*

What is *"a harvest of righteousness?"*

Submit Yourselves to God

4:1-12

Consider the realistic description of humanity and the roots of discord contained in verses 1-3. Note that the Greek word for "desires" (h₁donw'n) is the root for the English word "hedonism," the attitude that pleasure is the sole purpose and good of life. We usually are critical of those who adopt this attitude, but according to this context, are we completely innocent ourselves? Explain?

"You do not have because you do not ask God" (v. 2b). Explain:

"You do not receive because you ask with wrong motives" (v. 3a). What wrong motives could be included? Check Matthew 10:37-39.

Read verse 4 as follows: *"Friendship with the world is the cause of hatred toward God."* That is the true sense of the Greek. Explain this in everyday terms.

Regarding the two alternate readings for verse 5, it is true in any case that it is God (either the spirit--the faith--he plants within humans or the Holy Spirit) which longs intensely for our faithfulness and love.

God's envy is not cause for the Christian to be uncertain of salvation, for *"he gives us more grace"* (v. 6). What is the key to Christian assurance as it is described in this particular setting?

The submission in verse 7 is described by using a Greek term which means to arrange as under the command of a military leader. Read verses 7-10. Ten commands are given: submit, resist, come near, wash, purify, grieve, mourn, wail, change and humble. Each calls, in Greek, for immediate action. Considering our discussion of the opening verses of chapter 4, what root sin is at the bottom of all of these sins?

Finally, how do you understand verses 11-12?

Boasting About Tomorrow

4:13-17

What do these verse have to do with pride and Christian humility?

Warning to Rich Oppressors

5:1-6

Chapter 5 speaks to both the wealthy and the everyday worker. James, however, begins with words for those in positions of influence.

Begin with verses 1-6. These are not written to Christians, for the "rich" are spoken of as coming to judgment. They are similar to Old Testament declarations of judgment against pagans nations, interspersed in books otherwise addressed to God's people (Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 46-51, Ezekiel 25-32, Amos 1:3-2:16, Zephaniah 2:4-15). In this setting, they can be viewed as words of encouragement for God's humble people. How? Think about the phrase "last days" (v. 3b) and see Matthew 25:40.

Patience in Suffering

5:7-12

Read verses 7-9. What encouragement or motivation is given here?

Compare verses 10-11 with Hebrews 11:38. Comment:

Why, in this particular letter, would verse 12 uphold what it proclaims as being important "above all?"

The Prayer of Faith

5:13-20

Read through the end of the letter. How does this follow naturally from verse 12?

Compare the KJV's translation of verse 15. It is far more accurate, for nothing about physical healing appears in the Greek. It simply states that the person prayed for will be "raised up." Whether or not this involves a physical return to health is irrelevant, at least for the purposes of this text. Compare the first and last portions of verse 15.

Prayer by the elders and anointing with oil can be understood in two ways. They were, indeed, ancient practices used in James' culture as aids to faith. They were also, however, thought to be medicinal remedies of the day. What, if anything, might this tell us?

According to verse 16, what is the real issue being discussed?

The importance and effectiveness of prayer, however, cannot be downplayed. Elijah's experience is offered as an example.

The letter ends on a word of encouragement and hope. Truly, one a Christian exists in community with the rest of the church.