

OVERVIEW ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

(PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY IN A TIME LIKE THIS")

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WHO WAS JAMES?

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (**James 1:1a**) is the way he introduced himself. It was a popular name, a form of the great Old Testament name Jacob. There were several men who bore this name in New Testament history.

- James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John. He was one of the most prominent to bear the name. He was a fisherman called by Christ to follow and become a disciple (**Matt 4:17-22**). He and his brother John were nicknamed by Christ "sons of thunder" because of their impulsiveness (**Mark 3:17; Luke 9:51-56**). James was the first of the disciples to give his life for Christ. He was killed by Herod in A.D. 44 (**Acts 12:1-2**).
- James, the son of Alphaeus. He was another of the disciples (**Matt 10:3; Acts 1:13**), but very little is known about him. Matthew (Levi) is also identified as "the son of Alphaeus" (**Mark 2:14**), and some students conjecture that the two men might have been brothers. There is no indication that this James wrote the letter we are about to study.
- **James, the father of Judas the disciple.** He is an even more obscure man (**Luke 6:16**, KJV, where "brother" ought to be "father"). This Judas was called "the son of James" to distinguish him from Judas Iscariot.
- **James, the brother of our Lord.** He seems to be the most likely candidate for author of this letter. He does not identify himself in this way; humbly, he calls himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." "That Jesus had brothers and sisters is stated in **Matt 13:55-56** and **Mark 6:3**, and one of His brothers was named James. (By "brother," of course, I mean half-brother. Joseph was not our Lord's father since He was conceived by the Holy Spirit of God.)

- James and the other brothers did not believe in Jesus during His earthly ministry (**Mark 3:31-35; John 7:1-5**).

Yet we find our Lord's brethren in the Upper Room praying with the disciples (**Acts 1:14**). What effected the change from unbelief to faith? **First Corinthians 15:7** indicates that Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection! This convinced James that Jesus truly was the Savior, and he, in turn, shared this knowledge about Jesus to the other brothers.

James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Paul called him "a pillar," in **Gal 2:9**. It was James who moderated the church conference described in **Acts 15**. When Peter was delivered from prison, he sent a special message to James (**Acts 12:17**); and when Paul visited Jerusalem, it was to James that he brought greetings and the special "love offering" from the Gentiles (**Acts 21:18-19**).

We have no record in the Bible, but tradition tells us that James was martyred in A.D. 62. The story is that the Pharisees in Jerusalem so hated James' testimony for Christ that they had him cast down from the temple and then beaten to death with clubs. The story also relates that James died, as did his Savior, praying for his murderers, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

What kind of a man was James? He must have been a deeply spiritual man to gain the leadership of the Jerusalem church in so short a time. His stature is seen in **Acts 15**, where he was able to permit all the factions to express themselves, and then bring peace by drawing a conclusion based on the Word of God. Paul, in **1 Cor 9:5**, suggested that he was a married man. Again, tradition tells us that he was a man of prayer, and this explains the emphasis on prayer in his letter.

It was said that he prayed so much, his knees were as hard as a camel's! James was a Jew, reared in the tradition of the Law of Moses; and his Jewish legalism stands out in his letter. (Note also **Acts 21:18ff**, where James asked Paul to help him pacify the Christian legalists in the Jerusalem church.) There are over fifty imperatives in the Epistle of James. James did not suggest - he commanded!

He quoted the Old Testament only five times, but there are many allusions to Old Testament passages in the letter.

While still an unbeliever, James must have paid attention to what Jesus taught; in his letter there are numerous allusions to our Lord's sayings, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Compare these passages:

Keep in mind that James led the church in Jerusalem during a very difficult time. It was a time of transition, and such times are always upsetting and demanding. There were many Christian Jews in Jerusalem who still held to the Old Testament Law (**Acts 21:20**).

The temple and its services were still in operation, and the full light of the Gospel of God's grace had not yet dawned. They were saved people, but they were still in the shadows of the Law, moving out into the bright light of God's grace. While there may have been differences in degrees of spiritual knowledge and experience, there was no competition between Paul and those who directed the Jerusalem church (**Gal 2:1-10**).

TO WHOM DID JAMES WRITE?

"To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting" (**James 1:1b**). James wrote to Jews living outside the land of Palestine. The term "twelve tribes" can only mean the people of Israel, the Jewish nation (**Acts 26:7**). The fact that many Jews lived outside their Promised Land is evidence of the spiritual decline of the nation.

God had to scatter them (**Deut 4:25ff**). When Peter addressed that huge Jewish congregation at Pentecost, he spoke to men from many different nations (**Acts 2:9-11**).

James sent his letter to *Christian* Jews. At least nineteen times he addressed them as "brethren," indicating not only "brothers in the flesh" (fellow Jews), but also "brothers in the Lord."

James was very clear on the doctrine of the new birth (**James 1:18**). There are times when James also addressed wicked men who were not in the fellowship (the rich, for example, in **James 5:1-6**); but he did so in order to teach and encourage the saved Jews to whom he sent the letter.

The word scattered in **James 1:1** is an interesting one. It means "in the dispersion." The term *the dispersion* was used to identify the Jews living outside the land of Palestine. But the Greek word carries the idea of "scattering seed."

When the Jewish believers were scattered in that first wave of persecution (**Acts 8:1,4**), it was really the sowing of seed in many places; and much of that seed bore fruit (**Acts 11:19ff**).

Christian Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire would have needs and problems of their own. Being Jews, they would be rejected by the Gentiles; and being *Christian* Jews, they would be rejected by their own countrymen. This letter indicates that most of these believers were poor, and some of them were being oppressed by the rich.

WHY DID JAMES WRITE?

Each New Testament letter has its own special theme, purpose, and destination. Paul wrote the Book of Romans to prepare the Roman Christians for his intended visit. First Corinthians was sent to the church at Corinth to help correct certain problems. Galatians was written to a group of churches to warn them against legalism and false teaching.

As you read the Epistle of James, you discover that these Jewish Christians were having some problems in their personal lives and in their church fellowship. For one thing, they were going through difficult test. They were also facing temptations to sin. Some of the believers were catering to the rich, while others were being robbed by the rich. Church members were competing for offices in the church, particularly teaching offices.

One of the major problems in the church was a failure on the part of many to live what they professed to believe. Furthermore, the tongue was a serious problem, even to the point of creating wars and divisions in the assembly. Worldliness was another problem. Some of the members were disobeying God's Word and were sick physically because of it; and some were straying away from the Lord and the church. As we review His list of problems, does it appear to be much different from the problems that beset the average local church today?

Do we not have in our churches people who are suffering for one reason or another? Do we not have members who talk one way, but walk another way? Is not worldliness a serious problem? Are there not Christians who cannot control their tongues? It seems that James is dealing with very up-to-date matters!

But James was not discussing an array of miscellaneous problems. All of these problems had a common cause: spiritual immaturity. These Christians simply were not growing up. This gives us a hint as to the basic theme of this letter: the marks of maturity in the Christian life.

James used the word perfect several times, a word that means "mature, complete" (see **James 1:4,17,25; 2:22; 3:2**). By "a perfect man" (**James 3:2**) James did not mean a sinless man, but rather one who is mature, balanced, grown-up. Spiritual maturity is one of the greatest needs in churches today. Too many churches are playpens for babies instead of workshops for adults. The members are not mature enough to eat the solid spiritual food that they need, so they have to be fed on milk (**Heb 5:11-14**). Just look at the problems James dealt with and you can see that each of them is characteristic of little children:

IMPATIENCE IN DIFFICULTIES - 1:1-4

TALKING BUT NOT LIVING THE TRUTH - 2:14FF

NO CONTROL OF THE TONGUE - 3:1FF

FIGHTING AND COVETING - 4:1FF

James 5:1ff convinced that spiritual immaturity is the number one problem in our churches. God is looking for mature men and women to carry on His work, and sometimes all He can find are little children who cannot even get along with each other. The five chapters of this letter suggest the five marks of the mature Christian. Of course, this is but one approach to this letter; there are other ways to study it. As the chapters are examined, spiritual maturity and how it may be attained will be emphasized.

The Epistle of James logically follows the Epistle to the Hebrews, for one of the major themes of Hebrews is spiritual perfection. The word Perfect is found in Hebrews at least fourteen times. The key verse is **Heb 6:1** - "Let us go on unto perfection" meaning, "spiritual maturity." The writer of Hebrews explained the perfect salvation to be had in Christ. James exhorted his readers to build on this perfect salvation and grow into maturity. Without the perfect work of Christ there could be no perfecting of the believers.

Since the theme is spiritual maturity, we must begin by examining our own hearts to see where we are in the Christian life.

First of all, it is essential that we have been born again. Apart from spiritual birth there can be no spiritual maturity. James mentioned the new birth early in his letter: "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of truth" (James 1:18). The parallel to this is 1 Peter 1:23 - "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth forever. "

As we study the Word, we are looking into the divine mirror and seeing ourselves as we really are. But James warns us that we must be honest about what we see and not merely glance at the image and walk away.

Perhaps you heard about the primitive savage who looked into a mirror for the first time. He was so shocked at what he saw that he broke the mirror! Many Christians make the same mistake: they criticize the preacher or the lesson, when they ought to be judging themselves.

There may come a time in this study when you decide that continuing is too dangerous. Satan may turn on the heat and make things so difficult for you that you will want to retreat. *Don't do it!* When that time arrives, you will be on the verge of a new and wonderful blessing in your own life, a thrilling new step of maturity. Even if Satan does turn on the heat, your Father in heaven keeps His almighty hand on the thermostat!

This leads to a third essential: we must obey what God teaches us, no matter what the cost. We must be "doers of the Word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). It is easy to attend a Bible study, share the lesson, and discuss it; but it is much more difficult to go out into life in the workaday world and practice what we have learned. The blessing does not come in studying the Word, but in *doing* the Word. Unless we are willing to obey, the Lord is not obligated to teach us (John 7:17).

The fourth essential is that we be prepared for some extra trials and testings. Whenever we are serious about spiritual growth, the enemy gets serious about opposing us. Perhaps you feel a need for more patience.

Then be prepared for more trials, because "tribulation worketh patience" (Rom 5:3). The real examinations in Bible study come in the school of life, not in the classroom.

I read recently about a man who was burdened to grow in his patience. He knew he was immature in that area of his life, and he wanted to grow up. He sincerely

prayed, "Lord, help me to grow in patience. I want to have more self-control in this area of my life."

That morning, he missed his train to work and spent the next fifty minutes pacing the platform and complaining of his plight. As the next train to the city arrived, the man realized how stupid he had been. "The Lord gave me nearly an hour to grow in my patience, and all I did was practice my impatience!" he said to himself.

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Even physical maturity is not always an easy, pleasant experience. The teenager walking that difficult bridge from childhood to adulthood has his frustrations and failures; but if he keeps on going (and growing), he eventually enters a wonderful life of maturity. Christian growth is not automatic, as is physical growth. Christian maturity is something we must work at constantly. So don't give up! There is travail in birth, and there is also travail in maturity (Gal 4:19).

Finally, we must measure our spiritual growth by the Word of God. We should not measure ourselves by other Christians, but by the Word of God and the Son of God (Eph 4:13).

CONCLUSION

At the close of this book, a dozen questions are listed based on James, that may help in a personal evaluation

Not everyone who grows old, grows up. There is a difference between age and maturity. Just because a Christian has been saved for ten or twenty years does not guarantee that he is mature in the Lord.

Mature Christians are happy Christians, useful Christians, Christians who help to encourage others and to build their local church. As we study James together, with God's help we will learn together and mature together.