

## THE BOOK OF JAMES

### Introduction

The Epistle of James is the first in a group of epistles customarily called General Epistles, which includes James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. They are designated as general or “catholic” epistles in the sense that they are universal, not being addressed to any particular individual or church, but to the church as a whole.

The problem of authorship is a major one. There is no question that James wrote the Epistle of James, but *which* James was the author? Some find at least four men by the name of James in the New Testament. I believe that you can find three who are clearly identified:

1. James, the brother of John and one of the sons of Zebedee. These two men were called “sons of thunder” by our Lord (see Mark 3:17). He was slain by Herod who at the same time put Simon Peter into prison (see Acts 12:1-2).
2. James, the son of Alphaeus, called “James the less” (see Mark 15:40). He is mentioned in the list of apostles, but very little is known concerning him. I automatically dismiss him as the author of this epistle.
3. James, the Lord’s brother. He was a son of Mary and of Joseph, which made him a half brother of the Lord Jesus. In Matthew 13:55 we read: “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas?” In the beginning, the Lord’s brethren did not believe in Him at all, but the time came when James became head of the church at Jerusalem. In Acts 15 James seems to have presided over that great council in Jerusalem. At least he made the summation and brought the council to a decision under the leading of the Holy, Spirit. I believe it was this James whom Paul referred to in Galatians 2:9, “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” This James is the man whom we believe to be the author of this epistle.

This epistle was written about AD 45-50. There have been those who have said that James wrote his epistle to combat the teachings of Paul; they argue that James emphasizes works while Paul emphasizes faith. However, the earliest of Paul’s epistles, 1 Thessalonians, was written about AD 52-56. Therefore, even Paul’s first epistle was not written until after the Epistle of James which was the first book of the New Testament to be written.

It is clear that James’ theme is not works, but faith—the same as Paul’s theme, but James emphasizes what faith produces. Both James and Paul speak a great deal of faith and works. They give us the two aspects of justification by faith, both of which are clear in the writings of Paul:

1. *Faith*—we are not justified *by* works. Paul wrote, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and not that of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). And he also wrote “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us...” (Titus 3:5).

2. *Works*—we are justified *for* works. In Titus 3:8 Paul says, “This is a faithful saying and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works...” In Ephesians 2:10 he tells us, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”

Faith is the *root* of salvation—Paul emphasizes that; works are the *fruit* of salvation—that is the thing James emphasizes. Or, we can express it this way: Faith is the *cause* of salvation, and works are the *result* of salvation.

When Paul says that works will not save you, he is talking about the works of the Law. When James emphasizes that works are essential, he is talking about works of faith, not works of the Law. He said, “Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works” (James 2:18). God looks down and sees your heart, and He knows whether you believe or not—that is justification by faith. But your neighbour next door doesn’t see your heart; he can only judge by your works, the *fruit* of your faith.

The following are what I consider to be the two key verses of this epistle. “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22). “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:20).

The Epistle of James deals with the ethics of Christianity, not doctrine. He is really going to bear down on the practical, but he will not get away from the subject of faith. James was evidently a very practical individual. Tradition says that he was given the name “Old Camel Knees” because he spent so much time in prayer.

Due to its practical nature, this epistle has been compared to the Book of Proverbs as well as to the Sermon on the Mount. James argues that justification by faith is demonstrated by works; it must be poured into the test tube of works (ch. 1-2), or words (ch. 3), of worldliness (ch. 4), and of a warning to the rich (ch. 5).

(above material taken from Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee)

### **Theological Contributions**

James reflects many themes found in the OT Law and prophets and in Jesus’ own teaching. James calls on believers to love their brothers and care for the poor and helpless (Jas. 2:14-26; 1:27). The believer is to show no partiality to the rich (2:1-13), and is to be ruled by God’s peaceable wisdom rather than by worldliness (4:1-6) or human passions (4:13-5:6). Each practical exhortation is appropriate for a people whose Scripture was still the OT, and who saw faith in Christ as a fulfillment of OT promises.

While the practical theology of James is in complete harmony with the OT and with the teachings of Christ, James’ teaching on works has troubled many later theologians. Luther calls James an “epistle of straw,” thinking that James was contradicting the Pauline doctrine of salvation by faith alone. The supposed conflict is resolved when we understand that James and Paul deal with different issues. Paul taught the basis of

salvation; James explored the life appropriate to salvation. Neither Paul nor James believed that saving faith could exist apart from a significant change of life. In fact, James uses the word “faith” more often than Paul does in the Book of Galatians.

### James: A Reading and Study Guide

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Content Summary</u>	<u>Related Articles</u>
1	God intends trials to bless us. We must put God’s Word into practice rather than just hear it.	Trial Tempt
2	Believers are not to show favouritism, but to love all. A “faith” that exists without deeds is a dead faith.	Neighbour Faith
3	Faith challenges us to control our tongues. We are to live by the pure and peaceable wisdom of heaven.	Perfect Wisdom
4	Faith calls us to submit to God, to refrain from judging others, and to depend on God for the future	Submission Judge
5	Faith commits us to wait for future blessing, to exercise patience, and to pray together expectantly	Patience Healing

(above material taken from The Revell Bible Dictionary)

### Message

James has three main themes:

**1. The fatherhood of God.** James says of God that:

- He answers prayer generously—1:5
- He promises life to persecuted Christians—1:12
- He never tempts—1:13
- He never changes his attitude to Christians—1:16-18
- He chooses the poor—2:5
- He makes man in his likeness—3:9
- He opposes the proud—4:6
- He is always available with grace when we need it—4:6,8

## **2. The horror of sin**

- Sin has its origin in man's flesh—1:14; 3:6, 16; 4:1-3, 5
- Sin starts small but quickly develops—1:15; 3:5
- Sin means we have offended God and merit his judgement—2:10-13; 4:12; 5:1
- Sin must be treated with due abhorrence—4:9, 10
- Sin can be forgiven by the grace of the Lord—2:13; 4:6; 5:11, 20

## **3. The development of Christian behaviour and character**

- Among the means God uses to develop a Christian character James speaks of:
  - Trials and suffering—1:2-4
  - The word of God—1:21
  - Practical obedience—1:22-25
  - Submission and humility—4:8, 10
- Christian character is described in 3:13-18; 4:13-17; 5:7-11
- Christian behaviour is described in 1:26, 27; 2:1-26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:12-20

(above material taken from Opening Up God's Word by John Balchin)

## **Some Exegesis**

1. Temptations: 2 kinds. How do you know when one is from God? (1:2-8; 1:13-16)
2. Partiality as sin (2:19). Importance of works (2:14-22)
3. The Tongue: Destroyer of man churches (3:1-12)
4. Source of Wars and Fightings (4:1-12). Victory (4:7-12). Future (4:13-17)
5. Prayer for the sick (5:13-18)