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James Introduction and 1:1

Introduction

Who wrote the book of James? Quiz. Was it:

a) James, brother of John and son of Zebedee, the first apostle martyred and also known as *James the Less* (Matthew 10:2, Mark 15:40, Acts 12:2).

b) James the son of Alphaeus, another of the twelve disciples (Matthew 10:3).

c) James, the father of the “other” apostle Judas (Luke 6:16).

d) *James the Just*, the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) and the brother of Jude (Jude 1), who led the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).

A brief history of the life of *James the Just*

James the Just was the half brother of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, and Luke 8:19-21

Matthew 13:55

Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? ⁵⁶ And His sisters, are they not all with us?

So what we know of James is that he was the half brother of Jesus, and had a large family, with at least three brothers and at least 2 sisters.

We also know that James, along with the rest of his family, was not a believer. An example of this unbelief is given in:

John 7:3-5

and Jesus' brothers said to him, “Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! ⁴ You can't become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!” ⁵ For even his brothers didn't believe in him.

The following verses show what their attitude was towards Jesus:

Luke 8:19-21

Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. ²⁰ And it was told Him *by some*, who said, “Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You.”

²¹ But He answered and said to them, “My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.”

Notice how Jesus redefines relationships. His family are those who hear and believe, and then obey. For Jesus the spiritual or kingdom relationships were far more important than His blood or physical family relationships. It should be so for us as well.

Again, why were Jesus Mother and brothers standing outside wanting to talk to Him? Because they thought that Jesus was out of His mind, crazy. I imagine that in their eyes Jesus was making a fool of Himself and bringing great dishonour to their family.

Mark 3:20-21

Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. ²¹ But when His own people heard *about this*, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, "He is out of His mind."

Imagine how discouraging it would have been to Jesus to be mocked and ridiculed by His own family. But this is the cost of being a disciple of Jesus, of following the will of the Father.

Luke 14:26-27

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

However, Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection and James became a very important leader in the early church. His mother and brothers also believed.

Acts 1:14

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that He was seen by Cephas (Peter), then by the twelve. ⁶ After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. ⁷ **After that He was seen by James**, then by all the apostles.

Wow! What a turnaround. James becomes the leader of the church in Jerusalem and is mentioned as a pillar of the church and an apostle. This is one of the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus — the changed lives, people willing to die for what they believed

Galatians 2:9

In fact, James, Peter, and John, who were known as pillars of the church,...

Galatians 1:19

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ **But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.**

I find it incredible that no-one in Jesus' family believed in Him before His resurrection. Talk about spiritual blindness. They grew up in the presence of God and didn't recognise Him. But once James' eyes were opened, he wasted no time in submitting himself to his new Lord and Saviour.

Quote from David Guzik:

"When he did follow Jesus, he followed with great devotion. An early history of the church says that James was such a man of prayer that his knees had large and thick calluses, making them look like the knees of a camel. It also says that James was martyred in Jerusalem by being pushed from a high point of the temple. Yet the fall did not kill him, and on the ground he was beaten to death, even as he prayed for his attackers."

According to the historian Josephus, James was martyred in approximately A.D. 62.

When was the book of James written?

It is possibly the oldest of the New testament books written, maybe as early as A.D. 45, before the first council of Jerusalem in A.D. 50. This means it was one of the first New Testament books, written only about 12 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Who was it written to?

All the Jewish Christians, the twelve tribes, scattered among the nations (James 1:1). Of course it applies to all Christians today.

What is the theme of the book?

I think that the best way to describe the overall theme of the book of James is to compare it to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. There are actually at least 15 allusions to the Sermon on the Mount. A good way to sum it up is:

Matthew 7:24-27

"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: ²⁵ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

²⁶ "But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: ²⁷ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."

James does a masterful job of describing the connection or relationship between faith and works. Like Jesus said in Matthew 7:24-27, if you do what I say, then you are like the wise man who built his house on the rock, but if you don't do what I say, then you are like the foolish man who built his house on the sand. Like in the book of Proverbs, the wisdom in the book of James is very practical. You are wise if you do, but a fool if you don't.

Common misunderstandings concerning the book of James

It's important to point out from the start that James is not saying that we are saved by what we do. For example, he said in:

James 2:10

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all.

Here, James made it clear that no-body can be made right with God by keeping the law. But James also goes on to say that faith without works is dead. Just believing something to be true is not enough. James said that even the demons believe and tremble, but obviously, they are not saved. Why? Because they don't have faith. It's like believing that a parachute will save you if you jump out of a plane from 30,000 feet in the air, but if you don't actually put it on, you will still die when you smash into the ground.

The book of James, with its emphasis on the fruit of our salvation (good works), doesn't contradict Paul's teaching on grace and justification, but rather complements it. Even Paul talked about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 being love, joy etc. Also James make clear from the start in 1:5-8 that we need to, by faith, ask God to give us the wisdom or strength that we need to live a godly life. Nowhere does James tell us that we just need to try harder. No. James' message is that we need more of God's wisdom if we are to be wise and live a life that pleases God. The wisdom James is talking about here is not just knowing God's will, but the power to *do* God's will.

Purpose of the book of James:

The Bible Project says concerning the book of James, "This is a beautifully crafted punch in the gut for those who want to follow Jesus." This book is where the rubber meets the road. Do you want to know if you are living as a Christian should live? Then go no further than this letter from James the Just.

Overall, James was writing to Jews to encourage them to continue growing in their new Christian faith. James emphasises that good actions will naturally flow from those who are filled with the Spirit and states that where there is no repentance or no change in the way a person lives, then their faith is dead. In other words, they were not saved in the first place.

Basically, I see the book of James as being like a New Testament book of Proverbs. It quotes the book of proverbs frequently and also makes many references to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Its focus is to get us to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk." Key concepts include:

- speak with love,
- serve the poor, and
- be wholly devoted to God.

What is the key verse?

It's difficult to come up with a single verse that sums up everything in the book, but I think that James 1:2-4 comes close. I would encourage you to memorise these verses:

James 1:2-4

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be **perfect** and complete, lacking nothing.

The word **perfect** is important. It's repeated seven times in the book. It refers to "wholeness." It means living a completely integrated life, where your actions are always consistent with biblical values and doctrine or teaching. The truth is that we all live as fractured people, with big inconsistencies in our character — we know what is right, but often don't do it. For example: not regularly sharing our faith with others, not committing to give regularly to financially support God's work through the church, continuing to watch worldly movies or play worldly video games, having no or little compassion for those who are less well off (by that I mean giving no or little practical help), getting involved in relationships that are not godly and can involve fornication, gossiping or unwholesome speech, showing favouritism, and using bad language, are some examples. As you can see, these are very practical things. However, God's purpose is to make us whole, to live an integrated life. This is the process the Bible calls sanctification, of being set apart to God in our thoughts, words and deeds. We should be seeking to become what God has already declared us to be.

It all begins with wisdom, the ability to see my hardships with a new perspective. God will generously give this wisdom to those who ask, without doubting God's character and love for them. True wisdom is choosing to believe that God is good, despite my circumstances. All our problems lead us to a deeper faith in God, as we learn that God will always meet us in our trials and will always give us everything we need to get through.

We discover this when we not only listen to God's word, but also do what it says. Because we are new creations in Christ, we can face our trials with total faith in the Father, just like Jesus did, and, like Jesus, experience the peace that passes understanding and joy in the midst of sorrow.

Let's get into the book of James.

James 1:1

**James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad:
Greetings.**

v 1 **James:** We showed previously that James is the half brother of Jesus.

v 1 **...to the twelve tribes of Israel scattered abroad:** Why was the nation of Israel, referred to as **the 12 tribes**, scattered abroad? Because of their disobedience and refusal to repent in the days of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. They were defeated by their enemies, first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians, and over time were deported to other lands, where many settled down and never returned to their homeland, the land of Israel, when their seventy years of captivity was completed.

Regarding the extent of the dispersion, Josephus wrote: “There is no city, no tribe, whether Greek or barbarian, in which Jewish law and Jewish customs have not taken root.”

David Guzik comments: “Paul referred to *our twelve tribes* in his speech before King Agrippa (Acts 26:7). The concept of the “twelve tribes” among the Jewish people was still strong, even though they had not lived in their tribal allotments for centuries.”

Even though it was written to the Messianic Jews, the Jews who have converted to Christianity, it still applies to us as believers in Christ. We, like them, also need a good kick in our spiritual rear to help us to be perfect or complete in Christ — to deal with those areas of our lives where our actions don’t match our profession of faith. The book of James will take a lifetime to apply and will keep us walking in the Spirit as we learn to humbly depend upon God for the strength to choose to live a life worthy of our calling. As bitter as this truth pill or reality check is to swallow, this book will become your best friend if you continue to seek the Lord and grow to become like Him.

v 1 **a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ:** The word **bondservant**, Greek *doulos*, literally means slave. It meant that you were a permanent slave, **a slave for love for life**, a slave by choice. We read about this Hebrew custom in:

Exodus 21:5-6

But if the servant plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,’⁶ then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever (also see Deuteronomy 15:17).

It would have been so tempting for James to instead boast about his close physical relationship to Jesus as Jesus’ half brother. But there is none of that here. James demonstrates amazing humility. Also consider that in the Greek culture of the day, personal freedom was highly valued, and so to declare yourself to be a slave was very degrading. But for us who believe, it is an honour to be a slave of Christ.

Remember that when Jesus was here He didn't come to be served, but to serve, and give His life as a ransom for many.

v 1 **Lord**: This is the Greek word *Kurios*, and simply meant the master of a slave or *doulos*. However, in this context it showed that James considered Jesus to be God. A quote from Oesterley: "Hellenistic Jews used *Kurios* as a name for God; the non-use of the article gains in significance when it is remembered that *o Kurios*, 'Dominus,' was a title given to the early Roman Emperors in order to express their deity." (Oesterley in *Expositor's*)

So here we see James not mentioning his physical relation to Jesus, being a half brother, but also going much further. James here declares that Jesus is God — *Kurios* Jesus, Lord Jesus. James here sees that his physical kinship means nothing. What matters is that he is now a part of the family of God. He is a part of the Kingdom of God. He took to heart what Jesus said in:

Luke 8:21

²¹ But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."

And guess what? You and I have the same privilege if we are born again.

Conclusion

Remember that a slave or *doulos* is a slave by choice — a slave for love for life. God is looking for willing submission. It starts with acknowledging that Jesus is God, then willingly or voluntarily submitting to Jesus. The key here is *willing* submission to God's will for our lives. Will we choose to humble ourselves and trust Him or seek our own will and desires?

Remember the main point of the book of James, and the most important verse to memorise. God's will for us is for us to become more and more integrated in our lives, someone whose life matches what they profess to believe, someone who is whole and not fractured.

James 1:2-4

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be **perfect** and complete, lacking nothing.

The first step in this journey is to recognise my place in God's kingdom, in God's family. I must become a *doulos*, a voluntary slave to God the Father and to Jesus, God the Son (1:1). Just as it was for James, we will have to deal with our pride and also make the decision to put our faith in God's goodness despite our circumstances. I need to have a Gethsemane experience, like Jesus did, where, when the going gets tough, I get on my knees, humble myself, and say, "Father, not my will but Yours be done." I must make a conscious choice to trust in God's goodness, love, and power no matter what my circumstances. Do this this week, because going through the book of James will require humility of us like no other book of the Bible.