



Introduction to James

Introduction

What is real Christianity, or “authentic Christianity”, as Ray Stedman calls it? The first Christians had to answer that question and so do we. James wrestled with it, answered it, and we are his beneficiaries.

I. Purpose of James

A. Challenge to the Christian Life

1. Living consistently

The greatest challenge to the Christian life is living it. To walk by faith and not by sight, relying on heavenly rather than earthly wisdom, is a far greater challenge than swimming the English Channel, climbing Mount Everest, or bicycling across Niagara Falls on a tight-rope.

Believers who do not live what they profess are obstacles to unbelievers, recognizing that professing Christianity does not always mean possessing it. Many sincere people try to live the Christian life but without Christ, it is an impossibility.

2. A practical guide

The Book of James is a practical guide to Christian living. It raises a single theological question - albeit a foundational one - that is, can faith which saves be genuine if there is no visible out-working of it in daily life? Will not real saving faith produce good works? From that premise, James proceeds without frills to present the application of basic Christianity to daily life. The key phrase of James is *faith without works is dead* (James 2:20). He then proceeds to describe how faith works in key areas of living.

B. A complement to Paul's emphasis

James and Paul are often seen as contestants in a theological battle over “faith versus works” with Paul in one corner, champion of salvation by faith without works, and James in the other corner, defender of “works” as a necessary adjunct of faith. Such simplistic polarization is a later invention which would probably surprise them both. A closer look reveals that there is no contradiction in their beliefs. James presents faith as seen from our perspective, whereas Paul presents faith seen from God's perspective.

James wrote to Christian Jews who had saving faith. He wrote concerning problem areas that Christians

still encounter today. Since none of us has lived the Christian life before, we meet each situation and relationship with little or no prior experience. How to apply one's faith is a learning process for us as it was for them. James teaches his subject very well.

C. Four Resources

God has given believers four resources with which to meet life:

1. The Bible, The Word of God.
2. The Holy Spirit as guide and comforter.
3. Prayer.
4. Other believers (the Body of Christ).

These four are equally available to all who have received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. See Ephesians 1:3. From the very first chapter, James urges an active response to the Word of God. In the last chapter he describes a powerful prayer life.

D. Two Groups

James addresses two groups of people. He offers helpful instruction for those who find it hard to live as God would have them to (and which of us does not?). He also challenges those who have a shallow concept of the life of faith, who would willingly keep one foot in the world or be content to merely hold the “correct” beliefs. The latter group projects the kind of cold, shallow orthodoxy which has “turned off” thousands, if not millions, of people from Christianity; e.g., Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948).

II. Date of James

Many scholars believe that the book of James may have been the first New Testament writing. Several facts support this view:

1. There is no mention of the great controversies that developed later in the first century.
2. The church is addressed as “the twelve tribes scattered abroad,” a picture of a Jewish church before the great influx of converted Gentiles.
3. The Lord's coming is presented as imminent, as it is in the other early writings, rather than in the broader eschatological view presented in the later epistles (James 5:8).
4. The word for assembly, or meeting place (2:2), is “synagogue” in the Greek language, which again describes a Jewish assembly, a situation which did not last long. Soon believers met in homes. Later, Gentile assemblies met in homes from the outset or occasionally in halls and gymnasiums.

“It is fairly certain that as early as 66 or 67 A.D., the Book of James was known and regarded as Scripture” (Unger’s Bible Handbook, 1967, pg. 783). It is quoted as scripture by the early church fathers. However, it was not accepted into the canon until the fourth century due to of a question of James’ authorship.

III. Recipients of James' Epistle

A. Jewish Believers

James was written to the first generation of Christians, most of whom were Jews (1:1). Their only role model was the Lord Jesus Christ, whom few of them had seen or known. Believers today have the benefit of two-thousand years of Christianity, practiced as well as malpracticed. Even though each one must face his or her own life for the first time, all follow in a train of multitudes who have run their course triumphantly and commendably.

B. Struggles with the law

James’ audience was grappling with the “how” of their new faith. “Life in Christ” was a totally novel concept. It needed to be understood and lived out simultaneously, while also enduring hardship and stress. There was no “prep school” or rehearsal for Christianity, only the real thing. One might compare it to being turned loose on a freeway while learning to drive, or even to the lack of preparation for a lifetime commitment of marriage! There, too, the drama must unfold without rehearsal. The new believers were becoming aware that they were no longer under the penalty of the law because one greater than Moses had come. They now had to learn what it meant to live in the freedom of grace in the love of God. James wrote his letter to spell it out for their intellects and for ours. We need the Book of James as much now as the original audience did.

IV. Author

A. Identification of James

Which James mentioned in the New Testament wrote the epistle? Or was it ghostwritten with James as a nom de plume? We know of three "James" in the New Testament.

1. Son of Zebedee

The apostle James, son of Zebedee, brother of John the Evangelist, was one of the first to follow Jesus (Matthew 4:21). He was in the inner circle who saw Jesus transfigured on the Mount and was part of other dramatic experiences not shared by all the disciples. However, he was martyred in 44 A.D. in the first wave

of persecutions under Herod (Acts 12:2). It is not likely that he was the author.

2. A lesser known apostle

Another James, called James the Less (not exactly an ego builder as a title), son of Alphaeus (Matthew 10:3), was an apostle about whom nothing is known whereas the author of James must have been well-known to his readers, calling himself simply James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1).

3. Brother of our Lord

The only other James who could have written with apostolic authority and was well-known to the church at large, was James, the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1:19). “Brother” could mean that he was a cousin, using “brother” loosely, or the son of Mary and Joseph, born after Christ’s virgin birth (Matthew 1:23 and Luke 1:27, 34), therefore the half-brother of Jesus.

B. Qualifications of James, the Lord’s Brother

1. Witnessed the resurrected Christ

James was a witness of Christ’s resurrection and he was present in the upper room, praying with the other believers (1 Corinthians 15:7 and Acts 1:14).

2. Head of the Jerusalem Church

After Peter left Jerusalem, James became head of the almost entirely Jewish congregation there (Acts 12:17). It was James who officially gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9), acknowledged Paul’s apostleship, and sent them out with the church’s blessing. Paul consulted with James and Peter, and no one else, soon after his conversion (Galatians 1:19).

3. Presided over First Church Council

James presided over the First Church Council in Jerusalem. Debate was intense over what place the law of Moses and its rituals should have in the lives of the new Gentile believers. This topic threatened to divide the growing church. So a council was held to decide the issue (Acts 15).

4. Held in high esteem

James was held in high esteem by Peter, the apostles (Galatians 2:9,12), and the whole church. Paul readily complied with James’ request to identify himself as a Jew who kept the law of Moses (Acts 21:18-26). This was either an act of submission or cooperation relative to James’ authority.

5. Orthodox and Palestinian background

This James seems to have had the God-given position and background to have written the letter. He was an orthodox Jew who referred to *Abraham our father* (2:21). After the crucifixion and resurrection, he believed in Jesus as Lord, Saviour, and Messiah. He was committed to the unity of the believers, both Jew and Gentile. He lived his whole life in Palestine. He refers to wine and olives, the land's main crops, early and latter rain, a Palestinian phenomenon, farmers, and outdoor scenes as illustrations.

6. In the family of our Lord

This James is referred to as *the brother of our Lord* four times in the New Testament; interestingly, he does not refer to himself as such, but rather as the *Lord's servant*. Likewise, Jude refers to himself as the brother of James even though they are named as brethren of Jesus in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3. Josephus, the Jewish historian of that time, calls James "the brother of Jesus, the so-called Christ."

7. "James the Just"

He was known as "James the Just", a reflection of his own high ethical and moral life and "Old Camel Knees" because he was so often found in the temple praying, kneeling for long periods of time.

8. James' death

The story of James' death is told by Josephus and in great detail by Hegesippus, a Jewish Christian, the earliest church historian (170 A.D.). It is said that James was clubbed to death by a priest in the temple in 62 A.D. Some say that he was first thrown down from the pinnacle of the temple. Either way, he earned the martyr's crown which the Lord will reward at the judgment seat of Christ to all those who have laid down their lives for His sake and *did not love their lives to the death* (Revelation 12:10-11).

V. Place in Scripture

A. A General Epistle

James is one of the group of Bible books known as the "General Epistles", those addressed to the whole church rather than to a specific congregation or individual. 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude complete this group. Hebrews is included by some. It is probably no accident that James follows Hebrews, both written to Jewish Christians, although we do not know how or why such juxtaposition originated.

B. Canonicity

James was one of the last books to be recognized as canonical, officially received by the whole church as fully inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore authoritative, infallible, and inerrant. The sixty-six books of the Bible are inspired by the Holy Spirit and, therefore, canonical. It is a distinction no other writing or group of writings can claim. James was not universally received as early as the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, but by the end of the second century, was universally accepted as Holy Scripture.

Origen (185-254 A.D.), a church father, made the first recorded reference to the Epistle of James as Scripture in 250 A.D. One hundred years earlier there are numerous echoes from James in a work called "The Shepherd of Hermas", which struggled for canonicity but was finally rejected. Nevertheless, its vocabulary, phrases, quotes and parallels point to a familiarity with the epistle, such as asking for wisdom, asking with faith, and without doubting.

Eusebius (died in 341 A.D.), another church father, allowed that some had doubts about the Epistle of James as Scripture, but from the close of the Fourth Century until the Reformation, its position was undisputed.

Luther banished the Book of James to the back of his Bible, referring to it as a "right strawy epistle" because of its lack of Gospel and Christology, and its emphasis on works, which seemed in opposition to the doctrine of justification by faith which had so transformed Luther's own life.

Lutherans have long since reinstated James and have reconciled it with their doctrine. Some Lutheran scholars think that if Luther had lived longer and had more time to study James, he would have agreed. Despite its occasionally controversial history, the Book of James was received as Scripture by much of the Church very early.

C. Category

James takes its place among the wisdom literature of the Bible along with books such as Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. James is sometimes called "the Proverbs of the New Testament." Like Proverbs, James contains short, concise statements of logic, cause and effect, good and evil and wisdom and foolishness. Its style is direct, devoid of mysticism, symbolism or hidden meanings.

D. Clarity

No one should have difficulty understanding James! The difficulty is more likely to be acting on what is understood.

VI. Theme

A. The Nature of True Faith

The theme of James is that "Faith Works." Faith works in trials, temptations, social relationships, and in the nitty gritty of life. Faith works through words, consistency, praise, and prayer. Like Paul, James no doubt believed that faith alone, in Christ alone, is sufficient for life here and hereafter, but he insists that such faith is virile, productive and evident. It is ironic that James is thought of as an antagonist of faith, when actually the underlying theme of his book is the nature of true faith, and that saving faith is seen as serving faith.

B. Language

James was originally written in Greek, as was the rest of the New Testament. Scholars recognize the Greek of James as among the finest in the New Testament, a fact that is difficult to explain since he apparently did not have a classical education. But is it really so unreasonable? James lived in an age of international travel and in a place which was a crossroads of north and south, east and west. He would have learned Hebrew in the synagogue, Latin from his Roman conquerors, and Greek from the culture. Greek was the diplomatic language of the empire and had been for 300 years, since the time of Alexander the Great. It is probable that everyone knew some Greek and Latin, although the Jews spoke Aramaic in daily life.

James grew up with Jesus, possessor of the most brilliant mind the world has known. These environmental and hereditary factors could have conditioned his intellect keenly. Every Hebrew boy was thoroughly exposed to the Scriptures, and God's word stimulates one's thought-life as nothing else can. Psalm 119:99 says, *I have more understanding than all my teachers; for Your testimonies are my meditation.* There is no literature or drama to compare with God's word. Indeed the greatest literature, drama and music have come from the pen of those who know the Bible well. It is not surprising that James' Greek was excellent. His mind had been excellently trained. Even more important, he was also inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

VII. Relevance of the Study of James

Today, when the national intelligence is declining rapidly and the first television-reared generation is seeming less able to perform intellectually than previous generations, a revival of solid Bible study is needed to quicken and sharpen our minds. If you give God one half-hour each day for this study, and approach the notes and questions prayerfully and faithfully, God will prove Himself to you and reward you in measurable ways that will astound you.

In Jeremiah 15:16 we read, *Your words were found and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.* Jesus said that *'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'* (Matthew 4:4). God's words in the Bible are words to live by. They are nutrition for the soul and produce a healthy personality. Far from leading to inhibitions and narrowness, as is occasionally charged, they add breadth and depth to the personality. James calls God's word the *word of truth, which is able to save your souls* (1:18 and 21).

Studying James should revolutionize your character, relationships, speaking, application of wisdom and perseverance in prayer until miracles happen.

VIII. Outline of James

Whether or not James is an orderly presentation of subjects, or rather a collection of sayings depends upon your own analysis. James wrote with a purpose in mind. He had a theme and he developed it.

- A. Victorious Faith - James 1
- B. Valid Faith - James 2
- C. Verbal Faith - James 3
- D. Vital Faith - James 4
- E. Vindicated Faith - James 5

Applications

1. Is your faith real according to the Bible? Or is it just a fuzzy feeling?
2. Is your faith placed in the person of Jesus Christ, so that you can say with James that you are a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ?
3. Will you give God thirty minutes a day to study James? How will you set apart this time?
4. Will you ask God to make James meaningful and life-changing to you?

QUESTIONS

Questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Read notes and references.

1. What was interesting to you in the comments on James?

2. What do you want the study of James to do for you?

DAY TWO: Read the Book of James.

3. Underline the words “faith” and “wisdom” throughout the book. List the verses.

4. Where and how does James define “true religion”? (Give verse)

5. Name people from the Old Testament whom James uses as examples to follow.

DAY THREE: Read James 1:1-8.

6. a. Compare James 1:1 with Acts 12:17, Galatians 1:19, and Matthew 13:55. Which James do you think was the author of the epistle?

b. How does he refer to himself in 1:1?

c. Find and list the references to the Lord Jesus Christ in James (use the whole book).

7. a. What attitude toward trials and temptations is mentioned in the following verses:
Matthew 5:11-12

Acts 5:41

1 Peter 1:6-7

1 Peter 2:20

1 Peter 4:1

b. What attitudes are mentioned in these verses?
Psalm 27:1

Psalm 101:5

Matthew 10:31

1 Corinthians 10:10

Ephesians 4:31

Philippians 2:14

Colossians 3:8

- c. ♥(Heart Question) What attitude is generally yours in difficult circumstances (be honest)?
- d. What attitude could a Christian choose to have?
8. a. When we lack wisdom to handle a situation, what can we do to obtain it? (Give verse.)
- b. Memorize this verse to repeat to someone.
9. What attitude must be avoided when praying to God about a specific promise of His?
10. a. What do you think James 1:8 means?
- b. Give another word for “double-minded” (KJV), perhaps from another version, or a dictionary.

DAY FOUR: Read James 1:9-17.

11. Compare James 1:9 with Luke 10:20. What can one who believes in the Lord Jesus find to rejoice about in even the most difficult circumstances?
12. ?(Thought Question) a. How long do riches and material possessions last at the most?
- b. Read Jeremiah 9:23 and Luke 12:15. If possessions and riches are not “the essence” or “basic stuff” of life, what do you think is a person’s “life”?
13. a. Temptations in vs. 12 are a kind of trial. What does it mean to “endure” temptations (KJV)?
- b. Can you think of a word which means the same thing?
14. a. What does James 1:12 teach about God’s character?
- b. What does verse 12 teach about His relationship with you and all people?
- c. Where does temptation to become involved in evil find its root (Give verse)?

- d. How does Jeremiah describe our hearts in Jeremiah 17:9?

 - e. How does the Lord Jesus describe our hearts in Matthew 15:18-19?

 - f. What do you think about these descriptions?
15. List the steps of progression to spiritual death described in 1:13-15: (for instance):
- a. A person is tempted to do evil (13)

 - b. 1:14

 - c. 1:15
16. What do you need to believe about God in order to not be mistaken about Him (1:13)?

DAY FIVE: Read James 1:18-25.

17. According to James 1:18, what began the process that gives us eternal life?
18. a. According to James 1:22, what is the purpose of all Bible study?
- b. Are you more like James 1:24 or 1:25? In what way(s)?

DAY SIX: Read James 1:26-27.

19. What can absolutely destroy one's relationships and witness (1:26)?
20. What three things will true faith in God and obedience to His Word always produce (1:27):