

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Author: James

Date: 45-50

The General Epistles.

James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John and Jude were called by the early church the General, Universal or Catholic Epistles because their addressees (with the exceptions of 2 and 3 John) were not limited to a single locality. James, for example, is addressed "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (1:1)--a designation for believers everywhere (likely all Jewish Christians at that early date).

The Author.

Of the four men bearing the name James in the New Testament, only two have been proposed as the author of this letter, James the son of Zebedee (and brother of John) and James the half-brother of Jesus. It is unlikely that the son of Zebedee was the author, for he was martyred in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2). The authoritative tone of the letter not only rules out the two lesser known Jameses of the New Testament ("James the less" and the James of Luke 6:16) but points to the half-brother of Jesus who became the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). This conclusion is supported by the resemblances in the Greek between this epistle and the speech of James at the Council of Jerusalem (1:1 and Acts 15:23; 1:27 and Acts 15:14; 2:5 and Acts 15:13; 2:7 and Acts 15:17). Furthermore, in the 108 verses of the epistle there are references or allusions from 22 books of the Old Testament and at least 15 allusions to the teachings of Christ which became embodied in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Date.

Some, denying the authorship by James because of the excellent Greek, place the writing of the book at the very end of the first century. However, Galileans knew and used Greek well along with Aramaic and Hebrew. Further, an early date is indicated by the lack of reference to the Jerusalem council (A.D. 49), by the use of the word "synagogue" for the church in 2:1, and

by the strong expectation of the Lord's return (5:7-9).

Canonicity.

The canonical status of this letter was questioned until the church realized that its author was almost surely James the half-brother of Jesus. Luther did not question the genuineness of James, only its usefulness in comparison with Paul's epistles because it says little about justification by faith, while elevating works.

The Contents.

The book is concerned with the practical aspects of Christian conduct; it tells how faith works in everyday life. James' purpose was to provide concrete ethical instruction. Compared to Paul, James shows much less interest in formal theology though the letter is not without its theological statements (1:12; 2:1, 10-12; 2:19; 3:9; 5:7-9, 12, 14). Many subjects are discussed in this book, making it like a series of brief sayings arranged in the form of a letter. While there is little formal structure to the book, its many instructions explain how to be doers of the Word (1:22). Among the subjects discussed are faith and works (2:14-26), the use of the tongue (3:1-12) and prayer for the sick (3:13-16).

- I. Greeting, 1:1
- II. On Trials, 1:2-18
 - A. The Purpose of Trials, 1:2-12
 - B. The Pedigree of Trials, 1:13-16
 - C. The Purpose of God, 1:17-18
- III. On the Word, 1:19-27
- IV. On Partiality, 2:1-13
 - A. The Command, 2:1
 - B. The Conduct, 2:2-3
 - C. The Consequences, 2:4-13
- V. On Faith and Works, 2:14-26
 - A. The Inquiry, 2:14
 - B. The Illustration, 2:15-17
 - C. The Indoctrination, 2:18-26
- VI. On Sins of the Tongue, 3:1-12
 - A. Its Bridling, 3:1-4
 - B. Its Boasting, 3:5-12
- VII. On True Wisdom, 3:13-18
- VIII. On Worldliness, 4:1-17
 - A. Its Cause, 4:1-2
 - B. Its Consequences, 4:3-6
 - C. Its Cure, 4:7-10
 - D. Its Characteristics, 4:11-17
- IX. On Riches, Patience, and Swearing, 5:1-12
- X. On Prayer, 5:13-18
- XI. On the Conversion of the Erring, 5:19-20

1:1 to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad. The letter is addressed to Jews scattered throughout the world, though the author, realizing that the letter would be read chiefly by Christians, addresses most of his sayings to them.

1:2 divers = various.

1:3 patience = steadfastness, endurance.

1:6 wavering means to go back and forth between belief and unbelief (Rom. 4:20).

1:5 upbraideth not = without reproaching.

1:8 A double minded man = a man of divided allegiance.

1:10 made low. Either by losing his money or by being brought through some circumstance to realize that money means little and is at best transitory.

1:12 temptation; better, trial. when he is tried; better when he has stood the test. crown of life: one of the rewards or prizes for the Christian, kingly glory and life. See note at 1 Cor. 3:14.

1:13 being tempted. To tempt is to test, try, prove or solicit to evil. In vv. 2 and 12 the word is used to mean trials which are designed to prove the quality of one's character. In this verse the same word means a solicitation to evil, and this, James says, is not from God but from man's own inner lust. The man seeks a self-excuse based on ignorance of both God and the nature of temptation.

1:14 drawn away . . . enticed. The picture behind these words is that of the hunter or fisherman luring his prey from its safe retreat.

1:16 Do not err; lit., be not deceived, used also in 1 Cor. 6:9; 15:33; Gal. 6:7.

1:17 Every good gift. The word means both the gift and the act of giving.

The point is that these good things come from above. This statement may have come from an early Christian hymn. Father of lights. God is the source of all

light in the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual realms, and He does not change.

1:18 Of his own will. God's own will or purpose is the cause of our regeneration (begat he us) by means of the gospel message. firstfruits: these first believers, largely Jewish in background, were the guarantee of a fuller harvest of believers to come.

1:21 superfluity of naughtiness = remainder of wickedness. engrafted word = implanted word; i.e., the gospel received as in v. 18, the word of truth.

1:23 his natural face; lit., the face of his birth, his physical features. The contrast in vv. 23-25 is a simple one: the careless man looks in a mirror and forgets what he saw. The earnest man looks into the Word of God and acts upon what he sees there. unto a man. The word for man is male and indicates that men, in contrast to women who are more sensitive by nature, need this exhortation to careful observance of what they see in the Word.

1:25 the perfect law of liberty is the Bible itself, though at the time this letter was written it was only the O. T. and the teachings of Christ.

The Word of God is the means of regeneration (1:18), a mirror reflecting man's defects (1:23), the ethical guide for Christian living (1:25; 2:8), and the standard for judgment (2:12).

2:1 respect of persons = partiality; i.e., show no partiality especially in regard to people of position or wealth in the assembly.

2:2 gold ring. It was not uncommon for several to be worn as a mark of wealth and social distinction (Luke 15:22). gay clothing: gorgeous in color and ornamentation. vile raiment = shabby clothing

2:3 under my footstool; i.e., in a lowly place, on the floor.

2:4 judges of evil thoughts; better, with or full of evil thoughts.

It is wrong to show favoritism to the rich because it shows one's own value system to be false (v.4); it fails to honor the poor whom God honors (v. 5); it favors those who oppress you (v. 6); and it is sin (v. 9).

2:10 he is guilty of all. One sin, small or great, makes a man a sinner and brings him under condemnation.

2:14 can faith save him; lit., can that (i.e., a non-working, dead, spurious) faith save him? James is not saying that we are saved by works, but that a faith that does not produce good works is a dead faith. James was not refuting the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith but a perversion of it which did not define faith, as both Paul and James did, as a living, productive trust in Christ. Genuine faith cannot be "dead" to morality or barren to works. An illustration of spurious faith is given in vv. 15-16.

2:15 naked; i.e., ill-clad.

2:19 one God; lit., God is one. The unity of God was a fundamental belief in Judaism, but if that belief does not produce good deeds it is no better than the monotheism of the demons. devils - demons. tremble - shudder.

2:21 justified by works. In Paul justification means to declare a sinner righteous in the sight of God; here in James it means to vindicate or show to be righteous before God and men. Abraham's justification (in Paul's sense) is recorded in Gen. 15:6; Abraham's justification (in James' sense) took place 30 or more years later in this crowning act of obedience in offering Isaac (Gen. 22). By this act he proved the reality of his Gen. 15 faith.

2:23 Friend of God. This title comes from 2 Chron. 20:7 and Isa. 41:8.

2:24. This verse is the reply to the question of v. 14. Unproductive faith cannot save, because it is not genuine faith. Faith and words are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, and the coupon of faith is not good if detached from works.

2:25 Rahab. Her story is told in Josh. 2:1-21.

3:1 masters; lit. teachers. Since teachers use their tongues more, they will be judged more strictly.

3:2 we offend all; lit., we all stumble. The theme of vv. 1-12 is found in the second clause, if any man . . . he is a perfect man.

perfect = mature, of full moral growth.

whithersoever the
3:4 governor listeth = wherever the pilot directs.
 ^ course

3:6 the course of nature = the whole ^A of human existence. This tremendous power for the tongue comes from hell (lit., gehenna; see note at Matt. 5:22).

3:9 after the similitude of God. The divine image has been marred by sin, but not totally obliterated. Here, the fact that man was made in the image of God is the basis for not cursing our fellow-man.

3:13. The question sets the theme for vv. 13-18. The answer is: the person who remembers his moral responsibilities.

3:17 easy to be intreated = compliant, open to reason.

3:18 the fruit of righteousness; i.e., the fruit which is righteousness.

This is in contrast to 1:20.

4:2 kill. The logical, but not necessarily usual, outcome of lust.

See Matt. 5:21-22.

4:4 adulterers is not in the best text, and adulteresses is symbolic language for "unfaithful creatures," as often in the O.T.

4:5. The thought is this: Do you imagine there is no meaning to the Scripture that says, "The Spirit that dwells in us longs jealously over us?"

4:7-10. There are 10 verbs, all commands, in these verses in a tense which indicates the need for a decisive and urgent break with the old life.

4:8 double minded. See 1:8. Worldliness is basically divided allegiance.

4:9 laughter. Laughter is sometimes desirable (Ps. 126:2), but not when it reflects the frivolity of the world.

4:11-12. The person who judges his brother disobeys the law, thus putting himself above it and treating it with contempt.

4:13-17. The folly of forgetting God in business, as illustrated in these verses, is another illustration of worldliness. The itinerant merchants addressed here were Jews who carried on a lucrative trade throughout the world.

5:3 is cankered - is rusted. The rich did not realize that the last days were already present (2 Tim. 3:1).

5:4 hire - wages. Lord of sabaoth - Lord of Hosts (a familiar O.T. title), or the Lord Almighty, the omnipotent sovereign who is not oblivious to injustice.

5:6 killed the just. This probably refers to the practice of the rich in taking the poor ("the just") to court to take away what little he might have, thus "murdering" him.

5:7 the early (Oct.-Nov.) and latter (Apr.-May) rain. Palestine has two rainy seasons annually.

5:9 Grudge - murmur or grumble.

5:11 the patience of Job: Job was steadfast in his moral integrity. See Job. 1:21; 2:10; 13:15; 16:19; 19:25. pitiful = very compassionate.

5:12 swear not. Not all oaths are forbidden by this verse, only flippant, profane or blasphemous ones. Oaths in the sense of solemn affirmations were enjoined in the Law (Exod. 22:11), practiced by Christ (Matt. 22:63-64) and Paul (Rom. 1:9).

5:14-15. God may heal directly, through medicine or in answer to prayer as here. The oil is a symbol of the presence of God (Ps. 23:5) though it may also have been considered medicinal in James's day (Luke 10:34), though hardly for all diseases. Prayers of faith are answered not simply because they are prayed in faith but only if they are prayed in the will of God (1 John 5:14). God does not always think it best to heal (2 Cor. 12:8), and here the healing is dependent on confession of sin.

Historically, Extreme Unction developed out of this rite, but the significance is entirely changed, for the Roman Catholic rite has death in view, not recovery.

5:14 the elders of the church. Elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 as recognized leaders of the churches. Their mention here and in Acts 14:23 relate to about the same time. They were the first leaders, before deacons and long before bishops arose in the churches.

5:19-20 any of you. The reference is evidently to Christians, and the death is physical death which sin may cause (1 Cor. 11:30).