

The Epistle of James

Lesson #1

September 19, 2021

James 1:2-16

- Let me see a show of hands of those who really like the Epistle of James.
 - Who considers it a favorite?
 - James is one of my favorites. If I just need a jolt to get my mind refocused, I'll frequently go to James. It's just so practical.
- And because this letter is so practical, I want to make sure we take the opportunity for personal reflection and application.
 - So each week, I will provide some questions for your consideration, and we will allocate time for you to reflect.
- In other words, the lessons will not be primarily lecture. We will dissect a passage. We will discuss what it means. And then each of us will think about how it applies to us individually.
- But not this week!! 😊 Today will be more lecture than usual.
- Because as we begin our study of the Epistle of James, I think it's important we establish some context.
 - We need to ask the questions: who-what-when-where-why.
 - Or at least, who-when-where-why. We'll save the "what" for the next couple of months.
- **Read v. 1.**

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

- How's that for an intro? Short and to-the-point! One verse, nineteen words.
- Contrast that with the apostle Paul.
 - His introduction for the Book of Romans is seven verses and 132 words.
 - And his typical greeting is something like "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
 - James simply says, "Hi."
- **The first thing we want to consider is who wrote this epistle.**
 - Verse 1 actually provides a clue, even in its terseness.
 - Whoever this James is, he is obviously someone so well-known, that he doesn't need to take time to clarify.
 - When believers opened this letter and read the name, they immediately knew who had sent it.
 - There are three individuals in the gospels named James:
 - The first, and possibly the most obvious candidate is James, the son of Zebedee, and brother of John.
 - This James was one of the apostles.
 - We find him showing up frequently in the gospel narratives.
 - He was part of the "inner circle" of Peter, James, and John (Mount of Transfiguration; Garden of Gethsemane).
 - As such he should be considered a serious candidate.

- But the fact is, he was executed by Herod fairly early in the history of the church. (Acts 12)
- So it is doubtful he was the author.
- A second possibility is James, the son of Alphaeus.
 - He too was one of the original twelve apostles, but rather obscure.
 - I know that sounds odd, to say that one of Jesus' twelve apostles is obscure.
 - After all, aren't these the men "who have turned the world upside down"?
 - But what I mean is, his only mention in Scripture is in the several listings of the apostles found in Matthew 10, Mark 3, and Luke 6.
 - There are traditions concerning where he went, and what he did, and how he died, but nothing more in Scripture.
 - Chances are, he was not the author, although both John Calvin and Matthew Henry (1662–1714; nonconformist pastor) thought that he was, probably stemming from the fact he was one of the original twelve.
- The third possibility, and the most likely candidate is James, the half-brother of Jesus. We actually do know quite a bit about him.
 - This James was the oldest son of Joseph and Mary.
 - In Mark 6 Jesus was preaching in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. And even though the people were amazed at what they were hearing Jesus say, they actually dismissed him.
 - After all, they said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon?"
 - It appears this James was not a believer during much – if not all – of Jesus' earthly ministry.
 - In Mark 3 we read that Jesus was beginning to attract large crowds with his teaching, but especially with his miracles.
 - In verse 9 it says he told his disciples to have a boat ready, lest the crowd crush him. The people were pressing in on him. Afterward, Jesus took his disciples up on a mountain for a rest.
 - Then beginning in verse 20:

He went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."
 - And in John 7, we find his brothers mocking him.
 - Verse 5 says, "For not even his brothers believed in him."
- What else do we know. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is listing the various people Jesus appeared to after his resurrection, and he specifically calls out James.
 - We can be pretty confident he is not referring to "the son of Zebedee" here, because he includes that James when he mentions "the twelve".
 - Some commentators think this may have been the time James actually became a believer.
- Another thing. Even though he was not one of the apostles, we do know he was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

- When Peter was rescued from jail, he shared with the gathered believers what had transpired, and then said, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers.” (Acts 12:17)
 - This verse is especially relevant. You might remember from my earlier comment that “the son of Zebedee” had been killed by Herod.
 - That event is recorded right at the beginning of this same chapter 12. And now we see that the James mentioned in verse 17 is already quite prominent.
 - And in Galatians 2:9, when Paul is referencing a trip Jerusalem, he says he met with “James and Cephas and John... pillars”.
- Finally, even though James was not a believer for some part of Jesus’ ministry, it is clear he spent time with Jesus, listening to his preaching.
 - There are a number of passages in the Epistle that sound quite similar to things Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount.

- **Discuss the audience, including the context.**

- To whom did James write this letter?
 - Specifically, who are the “twelve tribes” James is addressing?
 - The apparent answer is Jewish believers.
 - The term “twelve tribes” was a common way of referring to the Jewish people.
 - This epistle was written very early in the life of the church, at a time when there were as yet relatively few Gentile believers.
 - So it seems likely the primary audience was Jewish believers who had left Jerusalem and Judea because of the religious persecution of Saul, and the political persecution of Herod Agrippa.
 - However, that doesn't mean we all should not learn from the letter, and practice what he preaches.
 - In fact, there are some scholars who think James actually intended the term “twelve tribes” in a broader sense, more like the way Peter uses similar terms from the Old Testament.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...

- These are terms that were originally used in reference to the children of Israel. Peter expands their use to include all believers.
- One thing is clear: James considers it a given that his readers are professed believers.
 - He refers to them as “brothers” multiple times in the letter.
 - This is an important fact in understanding some of his statements.
- **When did he write this letter? And what is the historical context?**
 - The letter was probably written sometime between AD 40-49. A couple of significant events that are recorded in Scripture help provide these bookends.
 - On the front end, Stephen’s stoning, as recorded in Acts 7, triggered the initial dispersion of believers around AD 34.
 - If you allow some time for the dispersed believers to get settled in to their new communities, and for local congregations to get established, it’s conceivable 5-6 years could have passed.
 - On the back end of this date range, you have what’s called the Jerusalem Council, recorded in Acts 15.

- This gathering occurred in the year AD 49.
- The Jerusalem Council was a gathering of apostles and elders to discuss whether or not Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and “become Jews” in order to be saved.
 - Incidentally, as further evidence of James’ status in the Jerusalem church, he is the one who summarized the decision of the Council, v.19 “my judgment is...”.
- The importance of this event to our discussion is, James makes no mention of it in his epistle.
 - Given the significance of that decision concerning Gentile believers, it is difficult to believe he would not have said something about it.
 - This is strong evidence the letter was written before the Council met.
- **As far as why he wrote, it was to encourage – even exhort – believers to stand firm** in the faith, and to live in a manner consistent with their confession.
 - Remember, these were primarily Jewish believers. They knew the Old Testament. They knew the law. They knew what God required of them in terms of holy living.
 - And even though they now understood that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, and that he had made a once-for-all sacrifice to atone for their sins, they were still expected to live like people of God.
- **Does the Epistle of James deserve to be included in the canon of Scripture?**
 - There were three primary criteria used by the early church in recognizing books that had been God-inspired and should therefore be included in the canon of Scripture:
 1. Was the book or letter of apostolic origination; that is, was it written by an apostle or under the oversight of an apostle?
 2. Does it clearly correspond to and agree with the doctrine the apostles themselves taught – what we might call apostolic content?
 3. Was it believed to be God’s word by the leading churches of the day?
 - For example, let’s apply those criteria to two other books: the Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel of Thomas.
 - Mark (or John Mark) was not an apostle, but he was a regular companion of Peter. His gospel might rightly be called the Gospel of Peter. It is probably the first gospel that was written, and was well-received by the church from early on.
 - As for the Gospel of Thomas: yes, there was an apostle named Thomas; but the content of the so-called gospel is a mixture of actual sayings of Jesus, supposed sayings of Jesus not found elsewhere, and heretical Gnostic teaching. It was generally considered heresy by early church fathers.
 - So now what about the Epistle of James? Should it be included in the canon of Scripture? Does James meet the criteria?
 - Once again, the criteria are apostolic authorship, apostolic content, and early acceptance by the churches.
 - We have already acknowledged; James was not an apostle. But he was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, the most important church in the world at that time. As such, he was in the constant presence of numerous apostles.
 - If James had taught anything contrary to the apostles’ teaching, it would have been identified immediately.
 - Either the letter would never have been disseminated, or it would have been quickly disavowed by other leaders.
 - This letter was probably the first New Testament document to be written. It was a general letter (that is, not addressed to any particular church or person), and received widespread distribution and acceptance.

- **One final thought: some have criticized the letter because of its apparent lack of “theology”.**
 - For example, there is no mention of justification, substitutionary atonement, double imputation, etc.
 - In particular there is no gospel presentation.
 - But as I said before, James is writing to believers. He presumes that as a starting point.
 - He is challenging believers to behave like believers.
 - When people come to join Crossgate, we ask the following question:

Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes a follower of Christ?
 - I think James would say AMEN!!
- **Next week we will jump into our study of James.**
 - As I said at the beginning, the lessons will not be primarily lecture. We will dissect a passage. We will discuss what it means. And then we will take time to think about how it applies to us individually.
 - Next week, we will focus on James 1:2-16.
 - I would encourage you to try and read through the epistle completely at least once each week.
 - If you do it in one sitting, it will take about twenty minutes.
 - Or you can read one chapter a day.
 - Also, I have checked with Melissa, and we will be posting my notes on our church web site.