

The Epistle of James

I. BACKGROUND

The epistle of James is the first of the General Epistles, being addressed to the Church of Jesus Christ at large. It would also be the first epistle of the New Testament to be composed, written about 45-50 A.D. Yet, it was one of the last books to be accepted into the New Testament canon. The evidence points to this date being directed primarily to a Jewish segment of the early church.

1. Reference to teachers and elders instead of bishops and deacons as in the other epistles (3:1; 5:14).
2. The synagogue was the meeting place of the believers (2:2).
3. There is a lack of references to the great doctrines of the faith noted in the later epistles.
4. With regard to James 5:1-6, the gulf between the rich and poor ended with the Jewish-Roman War (about 66 A.D.)

II. AUTHORSHIP

The author identifies himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are four men in the New Testament who bore this name:

1. The father of Judas the apostle (not Iscariot- Luke 6:16).
2. James the son of Alphaeus who was an Apostle (Matthew 10:3).
3. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matthew 4:21). He was martyred early in the history of the church (Acts 12:2).
4. James the brother of Jesus Christ (Matthew 13:55). Tradition supports that this is the author of the epistle that bears his name. His leadership in the Jerusalem church makes him the most likely choice (Acts 12:17; 15:13; Galatians 1:19; 2:9).

Prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus, James was not a believer (John 7:5). He was a witness to the resurrection (I Corinthians 15:7) and definitely followed Him after that event (Acts 1:14). When the church council convened in Acts 15, he is recognized as the leader of the Jerusalem church. Instead of claiming to be the brother of Jesus, he underscores his relationship in terms of Christ's lordship in his life, referring to Him by His full title - "***The Lord Jesus Christ***" (James 1:1). In that statement, he viewed Christ as deity, since to serve Him is to serve God.

Most believe that James was martyred in 62 A.D. The manner of his death varies in the different accounts. Some indicate that he was executed by stoning while others reveal that he was beaten severely.

III. RECIPIENTS

James addresses "***the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad***." The larger part of his audience would have been Christian Jews indicated in the word "brethren" in James 1:2 and 2:1. While it was primarily directed to Jewish readers, it would be obvious by this time that there were also Gentile believers that would have been part of his audience.

The Jewish people referred to in the text did not live in Palestine. These were those that were scattered in the diaspora (Acts 8:1, 4). The fact that was written in Greek may indicate that most of the Jews addressed were living in Syria, part of what is now Turkey (Acts 11:19) and in other parts of the Mediterranean world.

IV. PURPOSE

1. To encourage the saints going through trials (1:2-18).
2. To deal with their spiritual immaturity - discipleship (1:4, 22).
3. To emphasize the practicality of faith (1:19-26).

4. To deal with practical areas of Christian living.
5. To encourage people who had come out of a strongly legalistic religion. The works of the Law would not save them but true faith would result in doing what God wanted them to do all along.

V. KEYS

1. Key Words: Faith and Works.
2. Key Verses: James 2: 20, 26.
3. Key Phrase: ***Be ye doers of the Word*** (James 1:22). Combined with the key Word: ***Faith that works***.
4. Key Theme: Genuine faith will be demonstrated in how we live.
5. In the King James Version: 5 chapters, 108 verses, 2,309 words.

VI. DOCTRINAL

The other epistles are formulated around doctrine, largely because of apostasy that crept into the church. Some early scholars found it difficult to understand how James, with its emphasis on works, harmonized with the rest of Scripture. The Epistle of James was written prior to apostasy gaining a foothold in the Church of Jesus Christ. James centers his writing more on how to live the Christian life indicating that it is more practical than doctrinal. It definitely belongs in the Scriptures emphasizing that the doctrinal aspects of Christianity are to be lived out practically.

VII. PRACTICAL THEMES

1. The Believer's Trials (1:1-18) - Faith Overcomes Testings
2. The Word of God (1:19-27) - Faith Receives God's Word
3. Faith and Fellowship (2:1-13) - Faith Produces Impartiality
4. Faith and Works (2:14-26) - Faith Generates Works and Sharing
5. The Tongue (3:1-12) - Faith Controls the Tongue
6. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18) - Faith Produces Godly Wisdom
7. Worldliness (4:1-17) - Faith Replaces Worldliness with Commitment to God's Will.
8. Materialism (5:1-6) - Judgment on Unserved Rich.
9. Patience and Prayer (5:7-20) - Consolation to Persecuted Believers.

VIII. GOD AND CHRIST IN JAMES

God the Father

1. God gives wisdom (1:5).
2. God gives the crown of life (1:12).
3. God cannot be tempted with evil (1:13).
4. God does not tempt man (1:13).
5. God gives every perfect gift (1:17).
6. God's righteousness (1:20).
7. God chooses poor to be rich in faith (2:5).
8. One God (2:19).
9. Man made after similitude of God (3:9).
10. God's wisdom (4:17).
11. World's Friend is God's enemy (4:4)

God the Son

1. Jesus is God's Son (1:1).
2. Jesus, Lord of glory (2:1).
3. Not a respecter of Persons (2:1).
4. Jesus will lift up the humble (4:10).
5. His coming draws nigh (5:8).
6. He is pitiful, of tender mercy (5:11).
7. He raises the sick in answer to prayer (5:15).