

Lesson 1
James 1:1
Introduction

Memory verse: “We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God’s service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them.” 1 Thessalonians 3: 2 -3 (NIV)

The epistle of James is not a popular book, which is surprising since it is so practical. We live in a practical age – so practical that most people are usually impatient with doctrinal teaching. Teach about justification, regeneration, or some other largely theological theme, and they push you to get on to such subjects as “How to raise your children,” “How to have a happy marriage,” “How to apply biblical principles to work place (and get rich doing it),” and others like these. But if that is so and if James is a practical book, how is it that this letter is not read more often and thought about by Christians?

The problem is just that. It *is* practical, too practical, in dealing with our personal short-comings, errors, and sins! It is so pointed that we cannot easily dismiss or escape James’ teachings.

Everybody knows *about* James. It is the book Martin Luther objected to, believing that it is not the same level as the other biblical books since it says so much about good works and not enough about faith. He called it “a right strawy epistle.” But who was James? There are three possibilities.

James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John

We know from the Book of Acts that this James was martyred, probably about 44 A.D. It would be nice to think of him as the author of this book, but most scholars believe that his death within fifteen years or so of the death and resurrection of Jesus eliminates this possibility. In their judgment the condition of the church described in James reflects a later period of church history.

James the son of Alphaeus

We know very little about this man, even though he was an apostle. He is also called James the Less in contrast to the better-known James who was John’s brother. He does not seem to have had a position of great leadership. Although his name, James, makes him a far-out possibility as author, there is not other reason to think of him as the writer of this letter.

James the Lord’s brother

This man is mentioned in nine significant passages in the New Testament, apart from the Book of James. We know that he rose to importance in the early church, that he exercised leadership over the first church council described in Acts 15 (also Galatians 2:1-10), and that he had a special ministry to Jewish Christians, just as Paul and later Peter had special ministries to Gentiles. In view of this, it is hard not to think of this James as we come upon the opening words of the letter: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (verse 1). He seems to be an apostle to the Jews writing to the Jews. And if this is the case, then James the Lord’s brother is the most obvious candidate for being the book’s author.

To Whom Did James Write?

“To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting” (James 1:1b). James wrote to Jews living outside the land of Palestine. The term “twelve tribes” can only mean the people of Israel, the Jewish nation (Acts 26:7). The fact that many Jews lived outside their Promised Land is evidence of the spiritual decline of the nation. God had to scatter them (Deut. 4:25ff.). When Peter addressed that huge Jewish congregation at Pentecost, he spoke to men from many different nations (Acts 2:9–11).

James sent his letter to Christian Jews. At least nineteen times he addressed them as “brethren,” indicating not only “brothers in the flesh” (fellow Jews), but also “brothers in the Lord.” James was very clear on the doctrine of the new birth (James 1:18). There are times when James also addressed wicked men who were not in the fellowship (the rich, for example, in James 5:1–6), but he did so in order to teach and encourage the saved Jews to whom he sent the letter.

The word scattered in James 1:1 is an interesting one. It means “in the dispersion.” The term “the dispersion” was used to identify the Jews living outside the land of Palestine. But the Greek word carries the idea of “scattering seed.” When the Jewish believers were scattered in that first wave of persecution (Acts 8:1, 4), it was really the sowing of seed in many places; and much of that seed bore fruit (Acts 11:19ff.).

Christian Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire would have needs and problems of their own. Being Jews, they would be rejected by the Gentiles, and being Christian Jews, they would be rejected by their own countrymen. This letter indicates that most of these believers were poor, and some of them were being oppressed by the rich.

Things to learn: 1) Writer of this book 2) Purpose of the writer 3) Benefits of this study

Questions for discussions:

1) Why did James write this book?

2) How Can We Get the Most Out of This Study?