

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Theme: "The Testing of Your Faith"

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TEXT

(1:1-4) James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:

Greetings. (2) Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,

(3) for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

(4) And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

STUDY NOTES

God's Grace in James †

Although James is a plea for practical Christian living, and not a treatise on Christian doctrine, the grace of God forms the background to this letter. It is similar to the wisdom literature of the OT, such as Proverbs, with 54 imperatives in its 108 verses. James describes the type of life a Christian should live and some common sins he should overcome—as a child of God whose life is molded by the gospel of God's grace.

Numerous passages in James recall the precepts of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), and several phrases in the Greek text parallel those of the author in his address to the council at Jerusalem and in the subsequent letter (Ac 15:13-29), when at the first general meeting of the apostles the gospel of God's grace was defended.

Author

The author identifies himself as James (1:1), and he was probably the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem council (Ac 15). Four men in the NT have this name. The author of this letter could not have been the apostle James, who died too early (A.D. 44) to have written it. The other two men named James had neither the stature nor the influence that the writer of this letter had.

James was one of several brothers of Christ and was probably the oldest since he heads the list in Mt 13:55. At first he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him and misunderstood his mission (Jn 7:2-5). Later he became very prominent in the church:

1. He was one of the select individuals Christ appeared to after his resurrection (1Co 15:7).
2. Paul called him a "pillar" of the church (Gal 2:9).
3. Paul, on his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, saw James (Gal 1:19).

If this early dating is correct, this letter is the earliest of all the NT writings—with the possible exception of Galatians.

Recipients

The recipients are identified explicitly only in 1:1: "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." Some hold that this expression refers to Christians in general, but the term "twelve tribes" would more naturally apply to Jewish Christians. Furthermore, a Jewish audience would be more in keeping with the obviously Jewish nature of the letter (e.g., the use of the Hebrew title for God, *kyrios sabaoth*, "Lord Almighty," 5:4). That the recipients were Christians is clear from 2:1; 5:7-8. It has been plausibly suggested that these were believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen's death, were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (Ac 8:1; 11:19). This would account for James's references to trials and oppression, his intimate knowledge of the readers and the authoritative nature of the letter. As leader of the Jerusalem church, James wrote as pastor to instruct and encourage his dispersed people in the face of their difficulties.

Distinctive Characteristics

Characteristics that make the letter distinctive are: (1) its unmistakably Jewish nature; (2) its emphasis on vital Christianity, characterized by good deeds and a faith that works (genuine faith must and will be accompanied by a consistent life-style); (3) its simple organization; (4) its familiarity with Jesus' teachings preserved in the Sermon on the Mount (compare 2:5 with Mt 5:3; 3:10-12 with Mt 7:15-20; 3:18 with Mt 5:9; 5:2-3 with Mt 6:19-20; 5:12 with Mt 5:33-37); (5) its similarity to OT

Authorship and Context. Early tradition attributed the Epistle of James to the Lord's brother James, who became an important leader in the Jerusalem Church (cf Mk 6:3; Ac 15:1-21; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gal 1:19). However, Eusebius notes that this authorship was disputed (*NPNF2* 1:128). "James" (Hebrew/Aramaic "Jacob") was a very common name among first-century Jews and Christians. Despite various proposals by modern scholars, the Lord's brother remains the most likely author. The character of the Letter fits well into the mid first century as a general letter from a Jerusalem leader to congregations in the "Diaspora" (lands outside of Israel). The simplicity of the Letter, its emphasis on wisdom and OT ethics, and its reference to a Christian gathering as an "assembly" (Gk *synagoge*; 2:2) point to an early date.

Parallels with Other NT Teachers. The Book of James shows numerous similarities to the teachings of Jesus, especially as recorded in Matthew (cf Jas 1:27 with Mt 25:36; Jas 2:10 with Mt 5:19; Jas 2:15-16 with Mt 25:35-36; Jas 3:11-12 with Mt 7:15-19; Jas 3:18 with Mt 5:9; Jas 4:10 with Mt 23:12; Jas 5:2-3 with Mt 6:19; Jas 5:10 with Mt 5:12; 23:34; Jas 5:12 with Mt 5:34; Jas 5:19-20 with Mt 18:15). Luther and other scholars have noted similarities with points of doctrine from Peter and Paul (see Luther's comments above). Luther viewed these as evidence that the writer depended on the works of Peter and Paul. However, the argument easily runs the other way, with James being written earlier, or they simply shared common expressions.

Outline

- I. Greetings (1:1)
- II. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)
 - A. The Testing of Faith (1:2-12)
 - B. The Source of Temptation (1:13-18)
- III. Listening and Doing (1:19-27)
- IV. Favoritism Forbidden (2:1-13)
- V. Faith and Deeds (2:14-26)
- VI. Taming the Tongue (3:1-12)
- VII. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)
- VIII. Warning against Worldliness (ch. 4)
 - A. Quarrelsomeness (4:1-3)
 - B. Spiritual Unfaithfulness (4:4)
 - C. Pride (4:5-10)
 - D. Slander (4:11-12)
 - E. Boasting (4:13-17)
- IX. Warning to Rich Oppressors (5:1-6)
- X. Miscellaneous Exhortations (5:7-20)
 - A. Concerning Patience in Suffering (5:7-11)
 - B. Concerning Oaths (5:12)
 - C. Concerning the Prayer of Faith (5:13-18)
 - D. Concerning Those Who Wander from the Truth (5:19-20)

LIFE APPLICATION

All joy - trials of various kinds,
 the testing of your faith - produces steadfastness
 steadfastness
 perfect - complete - lacking in nothing.

This is the theology of the cross which fits daily
 reality
 for the Christian.

Explain how this is true.