

JAMES: *Every Day Faith*

Evidence of Genuine Faith

J*ames* is the most Jewish book in the New Testament. It reminds us of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. Martin Luther called James the "epistle of straw" because it says little about justification by faith, while emphasizing works as evidence or *proof* of one's saving faith.

The early church placed James, along with Peter, John and Jude, in the "general," or "catholic" (universal) epistles.

AUTHOR: The author was a Jew of Palestine (2:21) who gives his name as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are four James in the New Testament. Only two have been proposed as the author of this letter: James the son of Zebedee and James the half brother of Jesus. John the son of Zebedee was martyred in A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2). The authoritative tone of the letter rules out the lesser known James son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:2, 3). The half brother of Jesus became a strong leader in the Jerusalem church, and the likely author of the letter. Who is this James? (1) A child of Joseph by a former marriage, which would make James a stepbrother. (2) Some have suggested the word "brother" is used loosely to mean "cousin." The first two theories have been advocated by those who argue for the perpetual virginity of Mary. (3) Half-brother of Jesus, a son of Joseph and Mary, who was born after Jesus (cf. Lk. 2:7; Matt. 1:25; with Mark 6:3; Matt. 13:55; John 2:12; 7:2-8, 10; Matt. 12:46-50). If this is true then James was brought up in the same environment as Jesus and was in close touch with Him all during the years that led up to His ministry. His family and social background would be practically the same as that of Jesus. He, along with his brothers and sisters, came to a saving faith in Christ after Jesus' death and resurrection (I Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14). He became an important leader of the early Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13, 19 21:18-26). He was noted for his strict adherence to the law (Gal. 2:1, 9-12; Acts 21:17-26). It is interesting that the canonical status of this letter was questioned until the church realized that the most likely author was James the half brother of Jesus. The author is so well known in the early church that the simple designation, "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ" was sufficient to identify him at once to his readers.

DATE AND PLACE: The letter was probably written from Jerusalem not later than A. D. 50 (possibly 48). It was one of the first books in the New Testament. Some scholars put *First Thessalonians* before *James* in point of time. The epistle appears to have been written at a time when the church was still within the general circle of Judaism, i.e. heavy emphasis on ethics, not much on Christology, and parallels with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. There is no reference to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) which met in A. D. 49.

RECIPIENTS: "To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:1b) who were being persecuted for their faith. If the letter was written early in the history of the church then the first readers were among those in Jerusalem who were scattered after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60; 11:19). There is a Jewishness about this letter as seen in the salutation and greeting. There is little reference to systematic Christian doctrine, and the name of Jesus appears only twice (1:1; 2:1). The meeting place is the synagogue rather than the church (2:2). Illustrations are taken from the Old Testament and rural life. The recipients were Jewish Christians who had been dispersed into other parts of the Roman empire because of persecution for their faith.

PURPOSE: "Faith without works is dead" (2:14-26). James places strong emphasis on the practical ethical life of justification by faith. He examines practical applications of truth in everyday situations, encouraged Christians who are being persecuted, and gives instruction on Christian ethics.

KEY VERSE: 2:26

STYLE: It uses excellent Greek with a strong blend of sharp, penetrating provocative truths and personal warmth and love. An attitude of authority permeates the letter. It is "severely practical." It contains words that are sharp and uncompromising. This letter contains more reminiscences of the teaching of Jesus, and especially of the Sermon on the Mount, than all the other apostolic writing put together. However, he does not quote from our Gospels.

FAITH VS. WORKS: Martin Luther thought James contradicted the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. Romans and Galatians places emphasis on justification by faith in order to be saved. On the other hand, James while not denying the necessity of faith in order to be saved, was insisting that faith must produce works. Paul and James deal with entirely different subjects. They are in complete harmony. James is protesting the hypocrisy of pretending to have faith without demonstrating it in works (2:18). He is insisting that faith must produce results. Note how Paul and James both make their appeal to the faith of Abraham (Cf. Romans 4 with James 2:21-24). Alexander Ross notes the practical exhortations "have their roots in deeper things, in the vital truths of Christian theology, though these roots, as is natural, are, to a large extent, hidden from the eye."

PRAYING FOR THE SICK: The Roman Catholic Church uses these verses to teach the doctrine of extreme unction (5:14-15). However, oil was probably thought to have healing properties. Many believe this passage teaches the use of prayer and medicine in healing the sick. The reference is to the application of medicinal assistance to the sick person first, and then the elders are commanded to pray for the sick. It is God who heals all people, believers and unbelievers alike, with or without medication. Often, God heals even when we do not pray. He is a sovereign God.

A. T. Robertson observed: "There is no doubt as to the ancient opinion about, and use of, oil as medicine. It is probable that each one will decide this question according to his predilections. For my part, I incline to the view that we have here not a sacramental or priestly function on the part of these elders but the double duty of ministry of the word and of medicine (with prayer). The nearest parallel in modern life is the medical missionary, who goes with the word of life and the healing balm of modern science. He heals the sick with the physician's skill and the prayer of faith."

Title: Introduction to James
Series: A Look at the Book

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