

An Introduction to James

So Who's James?

- In 1:1 he calls himself a “bondservant (literally ‘slave’) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”
- He must have been very well known, because that is apparently all the introduction he felt he needed to give.
- In other words, those who first received this letter wouldn't have needed any more information than that. The letter is from “James” – and that was good enough.

- But the name James or “Jacob” was very common among 1st-Century Jewish men.
- There are four different men named James in the New Testament.
- One of them, James the son of Zebedee, brother of John, is prominent among the apostles in all four gospels.
- He is put to death by Herod halfway through the book of Acts.

- Only one James receives much notice in the book of Acts or later in the New Testament.
- His name first shows up in comments made in Nazareth by those who rejected Christ.
 - See Matthew 13:54-57.
- And it appears that neither he nor any of the Lord's brothers actually followed Him at first.
 - See John 7:2-5.

- But the situation looks very different early in the book of Acts.
 - See Acts 1:12-14.
- In the book of Acts and later in the NT, James is the visible leader in the Jerusalem church.

- He is one of two “apostles” Paul saw in his first visit to Jerusalem after conversion. (Gal 1:18-19)
- He is one of three “pillars” in Jerusalem 14 years later. (Gal 2:9-10)
- In Acts 15, James takes the lead role in a conference of church leaders that includes the apostles.
- On Paul's final visit, James is one of the few people mentioned by name that Paul sees in Jerusalem. (Acts 21:17-18)

So What Happened?

- What changed James from the Lord's brother into His bondservant, from an antagonist into an ally, from an opponent into an apostle and a pillar in the Jerusalem church?
- The answer probably has something to do with Paul's list of resurrection appearances found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.

- Like Paul, James received a personal resurrection appearance from our Lord.
- We're never told directly, but as with Paul on the road to Damascus, this resurrection encounter with Christ may have made all the difference.

James in History

- So James became one of Christ's most ardent followers and most passionate preachers.
- Church historians tell us that his ministry was focused in Jerusalem.
- As a devout Jew, some say a Nazirite, James was respected by non-Christians and Christians alike.
- He was popularly called James the Just, or James the Righteous.

- It's recorded that his knees became deformed "like camel's knees" from all the time he spent on them praying.
- Both sacred and secular historians tell us that he died as a martyr when the Sanhedrin sentenced him to death.
- They found an opportunity to do so when the Roman governor died and the new one was literally on the road to Jerusalem.

A Strange Incident

- You may remember there was a scandal back in 2002 when an ossuary (bone box) was allegedly discovered in Jerusalem stating the man's name as "James the son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."
- It was first widely publicized as authentic, later condemned as a forgery and the "forger" brought to trial.
- In 2012, the man was acquitted and released, but nothing conclusive has ever come of the relic.

About the Letter

- Simple structure, almost lacking in organization, except for a some main topics.
- Many similarities with the Old Testament.
- Totally practical, clearly influenced by the Proverbs and later prophets.
- Very similar to the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount, but without direct quotations.
- Very Jewish and very sermon-like.
 - The word "Synagogue" is used in 2:2, the only place in the NT this word is used for a Christian assembly.
 - It is addressed "to the twelve tribes" without any references to Gentile believers.
- Very Jewish and very sermon-like.
 - No reference to issues affecting Gentile Christians. This is especially interesting since James took the lead, along with Peter, Barnabas and Paul, in establishing church policies regarding Gentiles.
 - Yet it contains none of the profound theology such as is found in Hebrews that would have become important to Jews as the church matured.
- All of this points to a very early date for the letter, probably in the mid-40s A.D. It is likely the earliest NT document.
- It may have been written shortly after the persecution began in Jerusalem that scattered the Christians. (See Acts 8:1)
- This would be a time before there were many Gentile Christians, but also before the need for the theology that later affected the Jews.
- Still, this was one of the last NT books to be affirmed by the church.
- This was not because its authenticity was ever questioned, but rather because it was simply not very widely used.
- It seems the more localized ministry of James meant that his writing was not popularized in churches throughout the Roman Empire.

Key Themes in James

1. Trials and temptations in a Christian's life
2. Godly Wisdom – with a Proverbs-like emphasis on doing the right thing
3. Wealth and Poverty

Reading through James

- We can read the letter through out loud in about 13 or 14 minutes.
- Watch for these key themes we've just mentioned:
 - Trials in the Life of a Christian
 - Godly Wisdom – with a Proverbs-like emphasis on doing the right thing
 - Wealth and Poverty
- Also take note of the following key verses.
 - 1:2-4
 - 1:5-6
 - 1:19-20
 - 1:22-25
 - 1:27
 - 2:17-18
 - 3:1
 - 3:13-18
 - 4:4
 - 4:6-8
 - 5:7-8
 - 5:12
 - 5:16
 - 5:19-20

Again: Key Themes in James

1. Trials and temptations in a Christian's life
2. Godly Wisdom – with a Proverbs-like emphasis on doing the right thing
3. Wealth and Poverty

A Few Lessons from the Life and Letter of James

- Our faith needs to be practical. James is a persistent advocate for the poor and needy.
- Good works make a difference. True faith will produce loving actions toward other people – whether those people are rich or poor.
- Temptation is not sin, but needs to be guarded against because it leads to sin when it goes unchecked.
- From his “camel knees” and his teaching on prayer, we learn that we are probably not praying too much.
- From his conversion, faithfulness and eventual death, we learn that a life of total commitment to Jesus is truly a life worth living.