

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

Author, Date and Place of Writing

The author identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). Traditionally this James has been understood to be the brother of Jesus¹ (Mt 13:55). He did not become a believer until Christ rose from the dead (Jn 7:5). After the Risen Christ encountered him (1Co 15:7), he was changed into a servant of Jesus Christ. Though not one of the Twelve, James was regarded as an apostle, together with Paul, because the Risen Christ visited him personally. Later James became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Ac 15:13). Apostle Paul listed James, Peter and John as those reputed to be pillars of the church (Gal 2:9). James’ wise leadership of the church and the good name he maintained even among the Jews earned him the title, “James the Just.”

There are two major viewpoints regarding the date of writing. Some scholars take the view that it was the mid 40’s A.D.--before the Jerusalem Council--because the book of James does not mention the council’s decision. Other scholars believe it was written around the time of James’ death in A.D. 62. Though we cannot know for sure, most Evangelical scholars prefer the earlier date. This would make it the earliest of the New Testament writings. If we assume the earlier date, the place of writing would almost certainly be Jerusalem where James served as one of the pillars of the church.

Recipients

James addresses “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.” This indicates God’s chosen people who are now scattered throughout the Roman Empire. From the contents of the letter we can see that James was writing primarily to Jewish Christians. In chapter 2 he addresses believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. The use of the words “firstfruits” (1:18) and “the royal law” (2:8), the use of the examples of Abraham, Rahab, Job and Elijah (2:20-25; 5:11,17) without any explanation, and frequent reference to

¹ Early church leaders Origen, Eusebius, Cyril (Jerusalem), Athanasius, Augustine and many others had this view.

wisdom and proverbs give the letter a distinctly Jewish flavor. It is possible that James is writing to those who had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution of Stephen (Ac 8:1).

Genre

The book begins in the style of an epistle by identifying the sender and recipients and short greetings. But in the end there is no benediction or final greetings. The contents resemble Jewish wisdom literature which address various topics. This is why it has been called “Proverbs of the New Testament.” The tone is sermon-like, containing many exhortations and warnings (over 50 imperatives in 108 verses), issued with apostolic authority. The practical teachings about how to live as Christians in a hostile environment are intended to be spread to the scattered church as a general epistle.

Historical Context and Purpose of Writing

_____ It is important to understand the historical context of the book of James in order to grasp its message. It is different from the Pauline epistles. When the gospel was preached to the Gentiles, tension arose between Jewish legalists and Apostle Paul. The Jewish circumcision group advocated that unless one was circumcised and lived according to the law of Moses they could not be saved (Ac 15:1). Paul strongly opposed them and taught that they could be saved by faith alone. Many of Paul’s epistles, especially Galatians and Romans, dealt with this issue. Martin Luther faced the same issue in his time. So, like Paul, he strongly emphasized justification by faith alone, not by works. With this view, he once said that the book of James was like “straw.” It seems that Luther did not carefully consider the context of the book of James. But later he came to understand its importance.² We should keep in mind that the book of James was written primarily to Jewish believers who were scattered in Gentile territory after persecution. They had practical issues, not doctrinal ones. Rightly understood, the book of James is complementary to Paul’s teaching, not contradictory.

² Luther’s Works, Vol. 35, (American Edition: Fortress, 1987), p. 395

_____ James wrote to strengthen the faith of scattered Jewish believers in two regards. One was to encourage them to overcome trials by faith that perseveres. The other was to help them bear the fruit of faith by practicing what they believe. Early Christians were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria by persecution that broke out in Jerusalem (Ac 8:1). Some went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, Cyrene and Antioch (Ac 11:19-20), which were Gentile territories. These scattered Jewish believers faced many hardships and difficulties as they sought to survive. James encouraged them to overcome these trials with faith that perseveres (1:3-4,12). Also, he exhorted them to ask God's wisdom, and not fall into doubt (1:5-8). He urged them to be patient until the Lord's coming (5:7).

James also challenged them to practice what they knew. Jewish Christians were culturally trained to obey the Law. So even though they believed in Jesus, they kept the law. It was easy to live a religious life without bearing the fruits of Christian faith in their practical lives. James addresses some problems evident among them. These included: studying the word of God, but not doing what it says (1:22); showing favoritism toward the rich and powerful (2:1-4); ignoring others' practical needs while blessing them with words (2:15-16); praising God and slandering other people with the same tongue (3:9); quarrelling and fighting with each other and coveting (4:1-2); being friends with the world (4:4); judging each other (4:11); boasting about their wealth, and visions for business (4:13). Especially, James warned the rich, who exploited workers while living a luxurious life (5:1-5). In a word, the believers were susceptible to hypocrisy. It was not a matter of doctrine but practice. James wrote this letter to help them have genuine faith which was followed by deeds (2:15-26).

Main Theme

James strongly emphasizes that believers must do what the word of God says, not just hear it. He goes so far as to say that faith without works is dead. He mentions several areas in which believers need to apply their faith to practical life: depend on God in trials; ask God's wisdom with faith not doubt; do not be deceived by sinful desires; do not show favoritism; tame

the tongue; pray with a pure motive; be humble; do not boast about tomorrow; be patient in suffering, and so on.

Characteristics

Trials: When trials come, James urges believers to consider it pure joy (1:2-4). It is because trials test and refine our faith, produce perseverance, and result in us becoming mature and complete, not lacking anything. We should be patient until the Lord's coming (5:7) and learn Job's perseverance (5:11).

Wisdom: James mentions wisdom in 1:5 and 3:13-17. In 1:5 James urges believers to ask God for wisdom in times of trial. This wisdom is practical help to overcome problems in life. In 3:17 James mentions that this wisdom comes from heaven and is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. This wisdom helps us to grow to maturity and live as godly people (1:4; 3:13). On the other hand, worldly wisdom is earthly, unspiritual and demonic. It is associated with bitter envy and selfish ambition, which produces disorder and every evil practice (3:15-16).

Prayer: Throughout his letter, James encourages believers to ask God and to pray (1:5-8; 4:2-3; 5:13-18). In 1:5-8, he tells what to ask for and how to ask. We should ask for wisdom with faith in God's love and generosity, and not doubt. In 4:2-3, he explains why we do not have. It is because we do not pray. When we pray, we do not receive the answer because we pray with wrong motives. In 5:13-18, James urges that if we have trouble, we should pray. If there are sick people, we should call the elders of the church to pray over them. Faith that prays is very effective to bring about forgiveness of sins and healing of the sick. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, as the example of the prophet Elijah illustrates.

Temptation: When tempted, believers should not blame God (1:13-15). It is because God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. But each person is tempted through their own sinful desires. Desire conceives sin and sin leads to death. We should not be deceived by temptation, believing that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father in heaven (1:16-18).

Faith and Deeds: The words “faith” or “believe” are repeated 16 times (1:3,6; 2:1,5,14[2],17,18[3],20,22[2],24,26; 5:15). The words “deeds,” “do,” “did” or “action” appear 17 times (1:22,23,25[2]; 2:14,17,18[3],20,21,22[2],24,25,26; 3:13). It is helpful to note that James and Paul use the same Greek word for “deeds” or “works.” However, their emphasis is different. While Paul describes the works of the law done to establish self-righteousness before God, James refers to deeds done by believers as the fruit of their faith. They should not merely listen to the word, but to do what it says (1:22), look after widows and orphans in their distress, and keep themselves from being polluted by the world (1:27). If someone claims to have faith but has no deeds, that faith cannot save them (2:14). Even demons believe--and shudder (2:19). Genuine faith is always followed by deeds, as the examples of Abraham and Rahab illustrate (2:20-25). James concludes that just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead (2:26).

Favoritism: James says that believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism (2:1). He especially warns against favoring the rich over the poor. This is breaking the royal law. It is sin, like the sins of adultery and murder (2:8-11).

Understanding the Law: The word “law,” in Greek form, appears 12 times (1:25[2]; 2:8,9,10,11,12; 4:11[4],12 ESV). James is not referring to the ceremonial law. The purpose of the law is not salvation, but sanctification of believers who are born again by “the word of truth” (1:18), which is the gospel. The law is referred to as “the perfect law that gives freedom,” and “the royal law.” “The perfect law” refers to the Old Testament Law as it has been interpreted and fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Mt 5:17). This is “the law that gives freedom” when it comes along with the gospel. This is “the royal law” because it is given by God and as the way of life for believers. Believers should respect the law but be merciful, not legalistic. Mercy triumphs over judgment (2:12).

Taming the tongue: James mentions the power of the tongue (3:1-12). Though the tongue is small among the members of the body, it has great power to affect the entire being of an individual and the whole society. With

the same tongue, people praise God and curse their brothers and sisters. The tongue cannot be controlled by anyone. Our tongues need to be sanctified by wisdom from heaven (3:13-18).

The poor and the rich: In the eyes of the world, the rich are honored and the poor are despised. But the view of James was different. God has chosen those who are poor to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom (2:5). Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position (1:9). James warns the rich: that their wealth is fleeting like a wildflower and is rotting (1:10-11; 5:1-6); not to exploit workers by withholding their wages; not to live a luxurious life and be self-indulgent; and not to condemn or murder innocent people.

Purpose of our Study

Christians are called to live according to the word of God. God wants his people to be genuine and authentic, not hypocritical. The gospel should be proclaimed with actions as well as words. When Christians do not act according to what they preach, God's name is blasphemed by people of the world. Hypocritical lives hinder the spread of the gospel. This is a most significant aspect of effective evangelism. We want to learn how to live as genuine Christians in this so-called post Christian world.

Outline

- I. Sender, receiver, greetings (1:1)
- II. Wisdom and perseverance in trials and temptations (1:2-18)
 - A. Joy in trials (1:2-4)
 - B. Ask God for wisdom (1:5-8)
 - C. The rich should be humble (1:9-11)
 - D. Promise of the crown of life (1:12)
 - E. Temptation, evil desires and sin (1:13-15)
 - F. Every good and perfect gift comes only from God (1:16-18)
- III. Doing, not just listening (1:19-25)
 - A. Get rid of human anger, moral filth and evil (1:19-21)
 - B. Doing, not just listening (1:22-25)

- C. True religion (1:26-27)
- IV. Don't show favoritism (2:1-13)
 - A. Don't show favoritism (2:1-7)
 - B. Practice the law of love (2:8-13)
- V. Faith without deeds is dead (2:14-26)
 - A. Action accompanies faith (2:14-20)
 - B. The examples of Abraham and Rahab (2:21-26)
- VI. Taming the tongue (3:1-12)
 - A. Not many of you should be teachers (3:1-2)
 - B. Taming the tongue (3:3-12)
- VII. Heavenly wisdom versus earthly wisdom (3:13-18)
- VIII. Submit yourself to God (4:1-12)
 - A. Pray with a right motive (4:1-3)
 - B. Be humble before God (4:4-6)
 - C. Submit yourself to God (4:7-10)
 - D. Do not judge your neighbor (4:11-12)
- IX. Warnings to those who boast and rich oppressors (4:13-5:6)
 - A. Do not boast about tomorrow (4:13-17)
 - B. Warning to the rich who live in luxury (5:1-6)
- X. Be patient until the Lord's coming (5:7-20)
 - A. Be patient (5:7-12)
 - B. The power of prayer (5:13-18)
 - C. Save those who stray from the truth (5:19-20)