**Introduction to the Epistle of James**

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**An introduction to the Epistle of James**

Faith … *feeble* faith … *false* faith

Examine yourselves … Jesus – false profession

Matthew 7:21 **“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven**, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.

2 Corinthians 13:5 **Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!** Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?

2 Peter 1:5–8

:5 Now for this very reason also, applying all **diligence**, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your **moral excellence**, knowledge,

:6 and in your **knowledge**, self-control, and in your **self-control**, perseverance, and in your **perseverance**, godliness,

:7 and in your **godliness**, brotherly kindness, and in your **brotherly kindness**, **love**.

:8 For **if these qualities are yours and are increasing**, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Likewise, the Book of James is ***an examination of faith***.

But … is this book for us? **Is this book for Christians?** Non-Jewish believers in Christ?

It's kind of interesting, looking back now, having just celebrated 20-years of ministry here. Time flies – and with it many difficult memories. I recently went through a file that mentioned some of our early challenges – believer's baptism, doctrines of grace, a belief in a literal hell, leadership by a plurality of elders. Again, and again people looking for a ground-floor opportunity to shape a church to their own liking. One of the most fascinating things that happened is that we sometimes were challenged by completely opposite theological perspectives. We not only came face-to-face with Reconstructionists, but on two occasions we dealt with what are called Ultra-dispensationalists. These people insisted that I only preach from Paul's epistles. For them, the Sermon on the Mount, and really anything except the epistles of Paul, were unimportant to non-Jewish converts

The Epistle of James is a book about faith, and the right exercise that faith. Faith is the one, great overarching theme – the word 'faith' occurs 16 times in this short letter. It is not a book for Jewish Christians *only*. It **IS** a book for Christians, whether they are of a Jewish heritage or not.

**Just a few words about the history of this book …**

While God has providentially hidden the precise date of James' writing, his letter was one of the very earliest Epistles written. We can determine that it must have been written …

**1)** only after difficulties and sinful patterns had been established in the Churches,

and **2)** sometime after the Council at Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15, where James is still early in his role as a leader (about AD 50).

But **3)** prior to AD 70, the destruction of Jerusalem, since James is, at the writing of this letter, one the key leaders of the Church in that city. James must have written his Epistle sometime between AD 50 and 70.

And historians tell us **4)** that James was martyred in AD 62, which leaves a window of about 12 years in which James might have written his epistle.

But even though James was one of the first books of the NT written, it was one of the last books received into the NT canon.

[ The word, *canon*, originally referred to a reed used as a unit of measurement – about the length of a man's arm. The word eventually came to refer to books – or letters – that *measured* up to the Standard of Scripture – that a writing was divinely inspired and authoritative. God, of course, as the ultimate source of truth, and the One who reveals truth, knew that a writing was Holy Scripture the moment it was provided. It is vital to understand that the Church did not *grant or bestow* authority on the Books of Scripture. Rather, the church merely *recognized* the writings for what they already were – Divinely given, authoritative Revelation. So, when we speak of a book of the Bible being part of the 'Canon' of Scripture, we acknowledge the process of the Human recognition of Scripture. ]

History shows no knowledge of this little letter of James until late in the second century – 180 BC. A likely explanation for this is that this Epistle was originally sent to a broad base – a number of *Jewish*-Christian Churches. And it was not written by an Apostle. So, as the decidedly Christian and strongly Gentile Church began collecting – first Paul's Epistles and the Gospels – a letter like this, written by James would have had questionable appeal. It was almost unknown in the Gentile-Christian Churches.

Nevertheless, early Church Father, Origen, held the Epistle of James to be genuine and quoted it as Scripture. One-hundred years later, Church Father, Eusebius, acknowledged the usefulness of James' letter – quoting from it as Scripture. And yet another hundred-years later, Jerome, the one who translated the Bible into Latin, included the epistle of James in his Latin Vulgate. Augustine likewise championed its official inclusion into the NT Canon – the official list of the received writings. That was in AD 397, at the Council of Carthage.

Though slow to be received into the NT Canon, the Epistle of James went unchallenged … until the time of the Reformation. Martin Luther (wrongly) doubted its legitimacy because he believed that James contradicted Paul's Justification by Faith. His sentiments were so strong that he referred to it as an *'epistle of straw.'*

However, even Luther quoted from James frequently, regarding it as God's Word. And finally, at the Council of Trent in 1546, James was officially *affirmed* – again – as Holy Scripture. Regarding its legitimacy, Robert Johnstone said …

'Something would be wanting, had we not James in the New Testament … simple and natural … in form … called forth evidently by reports which had reached the apostle regarding serious faults that had shown themselves in many of the Jewish Christian Churches, particularly bigotry, bringing with it angry dissensions and [criticisms], and worldliness …' Johnstone

**Categorization – 'General' / 'Catholic'**

The Epistle of James, the two Epistles of Peter, three of John, and Jude, are grouped together into a collection of letters commonly referred to as the General or Catholic Epistles. Please understand, that 'Catholic' here has no reference whatsoever to the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, the word is being used according to its literal significance – meaning universal or general. These letters are called such because they are not addressed to specific people or particular churches – but were distributed with a wider, more general, intent.

**The style of this Epistle**

We learn a great deal about James just from the style of his writing – his tone, his use of words, his phraseology, his passion, his creativity. One reading of this Epistle and the reader knows that this is unlike almost any other NT letter. Even the minute details bear this out – James uses more than seventy words that no other NT writer employs, and many phrases found nowhere else. As one scholar portrayed, James writes with 'the power of the expert craftsman in language.' (Adamson). The Epistle of James is not only 'lively,' it is intense. The writer imports, and even seems to create – on the fly – a number of graphic images to illustrate his points and perspectives. He has, as one commentator said, 'the eye and imagination of a poet.' (Johnstone). Consider these James-isms …

'one who doubts is like the surf … driven and tossed by the wind'

'the rich … like flowering grass … will pass away'

'a man who perseveres … will receive the crown of life'

'when lust is conceived it gives birth to sin

'a hearer … not a doer … is like a man who looks … in a mirror'

the tongue is likened to a horse's bit, to a ship's rudder, and to a flame in a forest

worldliness and selfish ambition is likened to adultery

perseverance in grace is likened to a patient farmer

Metaphors such as these, as well as the entirety of this epistle, led one student of this book to commend James as a writer, saying …

'A keen observer, he was alert to the operations of nature … and also an attentive observer of human nature … "He knows the fashions of the world, and he notes with unerring clearness and humorous shrewdness the characters of men; he sees their superficial goodness, their indolent selfishness, their vulgarity and the mischief of their untamed thoughtlessness."' Hiebert, with Carpenter

**"An Examination of Faith"**

**Tools for the examination of Faith**

**1. A Man**

**:1 James,**

**a bond-servant of God**

**and of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

**:1 James,**

The name, 'James,' was a very common name in Jesus' day. It was literally the name – in Hebrew – of one of their great Patriarchs, ***Jacob***. So, it was a very popular name among the Jews. Accordingly, men with this name are referred to frequently in the NT. And even though the name is cited 42x in the NT, those occurrences refer to fewer than a half-dozen men. And with regard to the letter that bears the name, the option as to the author's specific identity are easily narrowed to one.

There are only a few real possibilities – one of which can be quickly set aside. There was the Apostle James, the son of Zebedee, the Apostle John's brother, both of whom were among Christ's earliest disciples. But this James cannot be the one who wrote the Epistle, because he was one the first of the Apostles to suffer martyrdom. He was killed far too early to have written this letter.

But there is another James that does stand out, fitting precisely as the author of this letter.

* *This* James is mentioned repeatedly in the book of Acts.
* Paul also refers to *the same James* again and again.
* *This* James is seen as a significant leader of the Church in Jerusalem.
* He is well-known among believers – especially those converted out of Judaism.
* And *this James* was also a sibling of Jesus'. Scripture indicates that Jesus had four brothers (half-brothers, by Joseph) – James, Joses, Jude, and Simon; and two unnamed sisters. It seems that James might have been the oldest of the brothers – when they are introduced, he is mentioned first.
* It is also *this James* was affectionately called "James the Just" – being an exceptionally righteous and God-fearing man.

***This* James is the writer of the Epistle that bears the name, 'James.'**

**James – his life and background …**

Even though much of James' early life is providentially obscured, hidden by God Himself, we are able to build a helpful sketch of this man. John's Gospel informs us that James was not initially a devoted follower of Christ …

**John 7:5 For not even His brothers were believing in Him.**

But we can justly conclude that James did eventually come to faith sometime after the Resurrection, which was made all the more real to him by a face-to-face encounter with Christ. Paul alludes to this amazing meeting with tantalizing brevity …

**1 Corinthians 15:7 then He appeared to James,** then to all the apostles

It is reasonable and likely to assume that Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to James was the flashpoint of salvation and transformation in his life. We have to read between the lines a bit – at one point he's not a follower of Christ, then he is graciously confronted by the Savior, and the next thing we know, James is serving and leading other believers in Jerusalem. Such is the remarkable transforming Grace of God. There doesn't appear to have been a probation period at all. He was saved, transformed, and immediately drafted into service and unquestionably received by the Apostles and the Church. The Book of Acts allows us only a glimpse but encourages us to likewise receive James' transformation. **Please turn to the book of Acts for a moment …**

In Acts 1:14, only forty days after Christ's resurrection and just prior to His ascension, there is an almost casual mention of Jesus' family …

Acts 1:14 These [that is, the Eleven] all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and **with His brothers**.

I think that it is reasonable to believe that James, here, is a saved follower of Christ. The next we see of James, all the way in chapter 12, he has become a significant Leader of the Jerusalem Church.

Acts 12:17 But [Peter] motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And he said, "**Report these things to James and the brethren**." And he departed and went to another place.

James' strong leadership on display at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 …

Acts 15:13 And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

Ultimately James takes the initiative to write down the conclusions at which they had arrived.

Acts 21:18 And now the following day **Paul went in with us to James**, and all the elders were present.

**Turn – quickly, if you would, to Galatians** for Paul's assessment of James …

Galatians 1:18–19

:18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

:19 But **I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother**.

Paul here clearly seems to allude to James as an apostle – and that poses a bit of a problem. James does not claim that for himself – neither here in this epistle, nor anywhere else. Officially, ***Apostles*** were those twelve who had been particularly chosen of the Lord for such service, had walked with him during his earthy ministry, and had witnessed the resurrected Christ. Although James grew up with his brother, Jesus, he was not even a disciple during Christ's ministry – let alone an apostle. He was, however, a special witness to Christ's resurrection. So, when Paul alludes to James as an 'apostle' here, it seems best to take this as a wider use of the term – 'a sent one.' From a standpoint of godliness, influence, and authority, James was very *nearly* an apostle – but not officially so.

But beyond this initially vague allusion to James as an apostle of sorts, Paul follows with a very clear reference informing us that – upon his next visit to Jerusalem some 14-years later – James had become a very important figure there in the Jerusalem Church. He is the first among three significant leaders that Paul mentions …

Galatians 2:9 … **James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship …**

So James was a significant leader, even if not an apostle, he certainly was at least one of the Elders in the Church at Jerusalem. And all of this, his family relation to Jesus, his character, his service to the Church in Jerusalem would all position him for great influence as well-respected commentator, D. Edmund Hiebert, describes …

'As Jews, the readers had been accustomed to look to Jerusalem for religious leadership … to look for and accept doctrinal instruction and practical guidance from James, the recognized leader of the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. The spiritual care of these Jewish Christian congregations would, in a special way, fall to James … [AND] James would come into contact with representatives of these congregations … his concern for their spiritual welfare soon disclosed disturbing conditions … [prompting James to write this Epistle].' Hiebert

**James – his death**

Though Scripture is silent about *this* James' death, history declares that he suffered death as a martyr. According to Jewish Historian, Josephus, James met his end in AD 62. Historians tell us that James 'met with a violent death through the hatred of some influential Jews who were virulently opposed to Christianity.' (Johnstone). And some historians go into graphic detail on the circumstances and manner of his execution. Early Church Father, Clement of Alexandria, Josephus, and Church Historian Hegesippus, all record that the High Priest, Ananus, brought James before the Sanhedrin just like they had done to his brother, Jesus, so many years before. They then commanded James to proclaim from temple that Jesus was not Messiah. As puritan commentator, Thomas Manton tells it,

'… they would have him persuade the people to abandon the doctrine of Christ, which, when he refused, and pressed the quite contrary …

[John Fox, Foxes book of Martyrs, passes along a traditional report that James replied, *"Jesus [is] the Son of God and Judge of the World"]*

he was thrown down from a pinnacle of the temple …' (Manton). When *that* didn't kill him, they stoned him and beat him to death with clubs.

:1 James,

**a bond-servant of God**

Note that, in addition to identifying himself simply as 'James,' he does not play up any ecclesiastical titles, nor does he even stand upon his association with his half-brother, Jesus. You see, once James saw Jesus Christ for what He really was – not just his half-brother, but his Lord and Savior – earthly, physical, family associations faded to the background. The important thing was his spiritual standing with Jesus His Savior.

So instead, James identifies himself fully with the common, lower-tier worker of his day – a bond-servant. This designation was a common one – an identifier with which anyone would know – that of a lowly, humble slave, The word was used in context with rulers of all kinds – Caesars and kings and their obedient subjects; masters of all kinds – business and land-owners with reference to the slaves that labored under their authority; and even in religious contexts referring to individuals that were consecrated – indentured servants. In the Christian context – as Paul and James use it, it encompasses all of those – a devoted, yielded, and obedient servant before God as his master. It became an appropriate word to represent the relationship between a believer and God, since we are utterly dependent upon our God. And so it is telling that James uses this humble designation for himself. For him, this is a glorious position – not a lowly one. For him any kind of service to God is a privilege. King David said it this way …

Psalm 84:10 For **a day in Your courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness**.

Likewise, one faithful student of Scripture said,

'The holiest of men is no more than this … God graciously gives His people many titles of honor … kings and priests … children … heirs … but the spirit of 'a servant,' simple willingness to obey Him, underlies all such relations. Whatever else we may be, we are servants.' Johnstone

But James was not only a servant of *God*, he had yet *another* Master …

:1 James,

a bond-servant of God

**and of the Lord Jesus Christ,**

James here does not vacillate between two Masters – he is a bondservant of God. But he is also a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself declared that no man can serve two Masters. And that is true except that He and the Father are both divinely unified as God.

By utilizing these three grand titles – **Lord Jesus Christ**, James expounds the fullness of the nature of His Master. 'All three names serve to unfold the true nature of this Master … when he refers to Him as **'Lord,'** he acknowledges His sovereign rule. By **'Jesus,'** he points not merely to his God-given name – but the name which indicates His mission as savior. And when he names the name of **Christ**, he articulates to every Jew the fulfillment of God's great promise of a Messiah.

So, James here states only his name and his place, his role – a mere servant. He doesn’t identify himself as an apostle, or as a leader of the Jerusalem Church, nor even as a brother of Jesus. Just his name and his role. He didn't even need to distinguish himself between others who shared his popular name. The people that he addressed needed no further introduction. His basic identification was enough. They knew of his character. They knew of his standing. They knew of his usefulness to God. And they no doubt knew of his family ties. He didn't need a title or references or commendations. He was well and affectionately known.

**"An Examination of Faith"**

**Tools for the examination of Faith**

1. A Man

**2. A People**

:1 James,

a bond-servant of God

and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

**to the twelve tribes**

**who are dispersed abroad,**

**to the twelve tribes**

James immediately identifies his *primary* audience. I say 'primary' because here **we** are *reading* and *preparing to study* this epistle. Only religious extremists would say …

* that James is a book only for Jews …
* that Gentile converts to Christ shouldn't waste their time …
* that *their* epistles are the epistles of Paul

That approach is utterly unreasonable. This Epistle is every bit a part – not only of the NT, but the Bible as a whole.

And so, James calls out his *primary* audience – the Jews, and he does so in an intimate fashion – to the twelve tribes. He could have just said, 'Look here, I would like to speak to you Israelites, you Jewish people, Hebrews.' But he uses a phrase that was immediately familiar to them – twelve tribes. That would have immediately elicited thoughts of a utopic, unified Israel. But as quickly as it might have stirred *those* thoughts, it introduced another – that **in a real sense they already had a greater unity before God than they ever had as a Jewish nation. They were one in Christ**.

Historically, there have been a number of different views of the significance of this phrase, three different views …

1. To all Jews who were outside of the region of Palestine

2. It is only 'figurative' – James is only addressing Christendom in general, utilizing OT terminology

**3. To Jewish people who had come to faith in Christ, who were living outside of the region of Palestine**

James is writing – primarily – those Jewish people who had come to faith in Jesus Christ – likely hundreds and even thousands scattered around the region.

Written to 'religious people' – Christians with a distinctively Jewish background – and even that background had a great amount of diversity, given the twelve tribes from which they came.

Much as we, with our varied backgrounds … *Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist, Amish, Presbyterian, Independent Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, Brethren,* Not to mention *Unitarian, LDS*, and outright *Heathen*.

**Various religious backgrounds – now all professing the same Christ, who must now reflect that 'One Lord, One faith, One baptism' of Christianity.**

:1 James,

a bond-servant of God

and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

to the twelve tribes

**who are dispersed abroad,**

So, James says that his letter is not only to the twelve tribes – but even more particularly – to the tribes who are dispersed abroad. This word 'dispersed' was an agricultural word – referring to the scattering of seed. But it was used in Scripture to speak of the people of Israel – scattered about like a farmer's crop-seed.

So prevalent was this scattering of the Jewish people, that they had a name for the vast region of Gentile communities throughout which these people had been scattered – it was called 'the Dispersion.'

There were a variety of causes of the Jews being spread so far and wide – dispersed. Often, when Israel was beaten in battle, the survivors were taken away captive. Other Jews – for many different reasons – work, family, health, – would eventually leave voluntarily. Still others, as Christianity began to flourish, were forced away by any number of persecutions.

'… within a very few years of the ascension of the Lord, there were many Jewish Christian communities in 'the Dispersion.' And those moral defects upon which the Epistle dwells are precisely such as might arise in churches of this class in an extremely short time … likely to show themselves in Christians who had been brought up in Judaism.' Johnstone

**"An Examination of Faith"**

**Tools for the examination of Faith**

1. A Man

2. A People

**3. A Letter**

:1 James,

a bond-servant of God

and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

to the twelve tribes

who are dispersed abroad,

**greetings.**

This one little word – 'greetings' – is actually one of the proofs that James is the author of this Epistle. The only other time this very unique salutation is used is in the Letter that James crafted to communicate the decision at which the Church had arrived following the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. It is James' special way of beginning a written correspondence.

When we consider the Epistle as a whole, the challenge of outlining it is well-known – 'notorious,' as one commentator put it. Some see as few as two major sections, some as many as two dozen. It is so challenging, that one very capable scholar said …

'A superficial glance at this Epistle may easily leave the impression that every attempt to outline it must fail.' (Hendriksen).

Many pastors, scholars and commentators view this Epistle as one running disconnected and disjointed collection of thoughts. As one such critic put it, James is 'a series of exhortations without any concern to develop one theme or line of thought …' (Songer). That is a harsh oversimplification of the Epistle of James – even if it is not uncommon. There is a unity of thought woven throughout this open letter. To grasp it, the careful student of scripture must remember James' special place in God's service. If we believe that James was a leader – if not the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, it is plainly evident why he especially would be concerned about the spiritual condition of the Jewish believers in his purview. As a shepherd of this great flock, his foremost desire would have been their growth in Grace, so that they might become a beacon of God's light – to their countrymen and to the Gentiles. But, as James observed these plentiful and untamed lambs, he quite obviously began to observe sinful tendencies – thoughts and actions that displeased God – specifically, as one commentator highlighted …

'… the great degeneration of faith and manners, and the growth of libertine doctrines, as about God's being the author of sin, the sufficiency of empty faith, and naked profession …' Manton

And another …

'His great object in writing it was evidently **to impress on his readers the fact that Christianity is not a faith merely, but, through the power of faith, a life; and, in connection with this, to point out to them some special dangers, and reprove them for some special and already notorious defects**.' Johnstone

Well, with the backdrop of James operating as a faithful shepherd, desiring to stir the hearts of his people to godliness, the overall theme of this Letter becomes soon evident. James, just as Paul and Peter – urges the people under his watch to a wholehearted pursuit of godliness. You see, James was wrong about this little epistle. James wasn’t writing in contradiction to the doctrine of Justification by faith. He's not preaching the Gospel. He's not talking to unsaved sinners. Rather, he is writing to those who have professed faith, those who already have been justified by faith – believers! He is not arguing for a salvation by works. No, he is arguing that if faith is genuine, if a person is truly saved, works will be evident. Their presence is a fruit of faith. Faith, without the evidence of good works, is a dead faith, argues James. He wants not merely to *challenge* the genuineness of their faith, he desires that they would be assured by the presence of fruit in their lives. It can never be sufficient to rest on a bare profession of faith. Knowledge about Christ or even a mere profession of faith alone grants no confidence. Conviction of sin, growth in godliness, the grace of sanctification comforts the believer that their faith is legitimate. The Christian's profession will invariably reveal itself in the individual's life, and affections, and speech, and behavior. There is an old saying, one that I first heard in the context of sports – what a person does should speak so loudly that people don't have to hear what they say. It is a 'walking of the talk' – evidence of Christian profession. Genuine Christian faith shows itself – without fail – as vibrant, active, and fruitful.

'The Epistle of James demands that Christian faith must be functional. A living faith is a working faith. **The author's central aim is to challenge the readers to test the validity of their faith**. Their acceptance of the faith is assumed, and the Epistle does not elaborate on the doctrinal content of that faith, but **they must realize that the Gospel makes strong demands for resultant transformed living in daily conduct** … Christian practice consistent with Christian belief … the Epistle … heaps scathing contempt upon all empty profession and administers a stinging rebuke to the readers' worldliness.' Hiebert