

Introduction

James is the first of the seven general or catholic epistles. That is, James did not write to a particular congregation, but collectively to believers in his day. By way of introduction, various aspects of the epistle should be noted.

The Writer

As is true of all scripture, the author of the book is the Holy Spirit, who inspired James to write what he did and how he did it. In the study of this epistle, therefore, we must regard it as being the infallible, perspicuous, and authoritative word of God.

The writer is James, the half brother of Christ. In the New Testament this name refers to seven different people who shared it. This is understandable, since “James” is the Greek equivalent of the common Hebrew name “Jacob.” The writer is not to be confused with James the son of Alphaeus, or with James, the brother of John and the son of Zebedee, who was killed by Herod in AD 44, or with any of the others who shared his name. James and his brothers did not believe in his brother Christ during his ministry because of their mistaken idea of the Messiah (John 7:5). Jesus appeared to James personally after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7) and James believed at that time. Very early in the history of the New Testament church, James, together with Peter, assumed a position of leadership (Acts 12:17). At the council in Jerusalem, he gave advice regarding the circumcision of the Gentiles, and his advice was followed (Acts 15:13–29).

Although the date of his writing cannot be fixed precisely, most commentators agree that it was about AD 40, only ten years after Christ’s death and resurrection.

The Addressees

James writes to the twelve tribes (James 1:1). This should not be understood literally, since the tribes of Israel no longer had definitive and distinctive existence. Rather, it implies that he writes in general to Jewish converts to the Christian church.

James further defines the twelve tribes as those who are scattered abroad. Literally these are the Jews of the *diaspora*, or dispersion. This can be understood in more than one sense.

First, the expression “Jews of the dispersion” refers in a general sense to the nation of Israel that was scattered throughout the known world at the time of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, hundreds of years prior to the time of Christ and James. Thousands of Jews could be found in virtually every nation of the extensive Roman empire of James’ day. Many, perhaps most, were secular or ethnic Jews only, although many still held to the hope of the Messiah in accordance with God’s promise.

Second, following the death and resurrection of Christ, many believed on the Messiah. This made them the objects of persecution on the part of those who rejected him. The center of the church was initially located in Jerusalem, and when the persecution of the believers became increasingly severe there, they fled throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1), as well as to Phenice, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 11:19).

Third, from the general vicinity of Palestine, the gospel spread to the regions of Galatia, and from there throughout the rest of the Mediterranean world. The members of the early church who fled from Jerusalem and the surrounding area because of persecution soon discovered that opposition followed them wherever they went. The Roman empire ruled the world of that day and did all in its power to destroy the church. The Christians were despised, deprived of their jobs, and robbed of their properties. Some were imprisoned and killed. Besides, the unbelieving Jews, their brethren according to the flesh, bitterly hated and oppressed them. This implies that James writes to the very early believers, who were scattered throughout the world.

James' epistle is unique in scripture in the way that it addresses its readers. He uses widely varying language in addressing them. On the one hand, he rather rudely addresses them as "adulterers and adulteresses" (4:4). On the other hand, he lovingly calls them "my brethren" (1:3 and 2:1) and "my beloved brethren" (1:16). Why he does this should be a subject of discussion.

The Purpose of James

The primary purpose of the book of James is to define the relation between justification and the law.

On the one hand, there were those among the early Jewish converts who were reluctant to continue to keep the Old Testament traditions of works-righteousness in addition to or because of their faith in Christ. Thus James instructs these new converts concerning the correct relation between the keeping of the law and doing good works. Like Paul, he teaches that the keeping of the law is not meritorious, because justification is by faith only. Nevertheless, the works of the law are the evidence and fruit of a living faith.

On the other hand, some in the early church went to the other extreme of antinomianism. They rejected completely the keeping of the law and denied the necessity of doing good works, asserting that doing good works contradicted justification by faith alone. James therefore defines the correct relation between faith and works.

In the context of good works, James admonishes believers as to how they are to live in the world by doing good works as the fruit of justification by faith. He discusses many aspects of how they must conduct themselves, notably regarding the use of the tongue, as well as many other aspects of the Christian life.

Thus James' epistle is very practical.

The Issues

Four main issues regarding the epistle should be addressed and discussed.

First is the apparent contradiction between James and Paul regarding the doctrine of justification. James apparently teaches justification by works. This is the reason that the Roman Catholic Church appeals to this epistle to justify its erroneous doctrine of works-righteousness. Paul teaches the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in direct contradiction to the teaching of Rome. Harmonizing these two ideas is essential to the correct understanding of the truth of justification.

Second, the book is practical in that it addresses various aspects of the Christian life. On the surface it is perhaps the least doctrinal and most practical book in scripture. Some have criticized this apparent lack of balance and express the fear that this practical character then reduces the Christian life to a legalistic list of dos and don'ts. However, more careful study will reveal that his objection is not valid. In making his practical applications, James links them to an attribute or activity of God (1:5, 17; 2:5, 19; 3:9; 4:5–6, 8, 15; 5:11, 15).

Third, most readers want to know the main idea(s) of what they read, and they look for a logical progression of thought. This is difficult to do in James. The epistle seems to consist of loosely connected ideas, and it is hard to grasp the continuity and purpose of what he writes. Yet the book is coherent, both as to its ideas and by means of connecting words, although it is unnecessary to produce a complex structure into which everything must fit. The epistle is the word of God, and it must be accepted and treated as such, whether or not every problem can be solved and all connections perfectly understood.

Fourth, the book has been criticized for its apparent lack of Christ-centeredness. "The Lord Jesus Christ" is mentioned only twice in the epistle, while "God" or "the Lord" are mentioned repeatedly. Perhaps the reason is that James is aware that his predominantly Jewish addressees are more familiar with these names. In any event, there can be no doubt that James' teachings are in harmony with those of his brother Jesus.

The Methodology

This is a study guide, not a commentary. It therefore does not take a statement or an explanation format, but a question

format, which is intended to help God's people define and understand James' concepts and terms, as well as their relationships to one another. I have deliberately asked the difficult "why" and "how" questions in order to foster an understanding of this scripture. As much as possible the questions are intentionally leading, interspersed with helpful remarks, with the goal of encouraging discussion and assisting in the understanding of James, whether in Bible study societies or on a personal level. To the extent that the questions are accurately answered in the light of scripture, the student of James will gain an understanding of the epistle.

To help organize the various subjects that James discusses, I have chosen to follow the letter's divisions into sections used almost identically by Kistemaker, Bird, and Tasker.

Study Resources

Herman Hanko, *Faith Made Perfect: Commentary on James*, Reformed Free Publishing Association.

Anthony E. Bird, *Practice Makes Perfect*, EP BOOKS INC. Webster, New York.

Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: James, 1–3 John*, Baker Book House.

Robert Johnstone, *A Commentary on James (Geneva Series)*, Banner of Truth Trust.

R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James: Introduction and Commentary*, Eerdmans.

James 1:1

Greeting

1. James gives a brief introduction. He calls himself a servant, literally, “a slave.”
2. Why does James call himself a slave? What does this term imply?
3. What does it mean that he is a servant “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”?
4. Does the term “twelve tribes” have a symbolic meaning (Matt. 19:28; Acts 26:7)? Are we also included in the twelve tribes? If so, in what sense?
5. The word *greeting* comes from the same word family as *joy*. Why does James use this word?

James 1:2–4

Trials and Temptations

1. In verse 2 James speaks of temptations, and in verse 3 of trials or testings. The Greek uses the same word for both, but they are different as to author, purpose or motive, and outcome. In what ways is this true?
2. Is “temptations” the correct translation in verse 2? Why or why not?
3. How are temptations and trials related? How can trials and persecution be temptations? How can temptations be trials?
4. What are divers temptations? What are some that James mentions in this epistle?
5. What does it mean to “fall into” them?

6. Are not the words *joy* and *trials* an oxymoron? How can trials be met with joy?

7. What is the patience (literally: perseverance) mentioned in verses 3 and 4?

8. What does letting “patience have her perfect work” mean? Does perfect mean without sin?

9. Verse 4 literally speaks of being “mature and complete.” What does this mean?

James 1:5–8

Obtaining Wisdom

1. James moves from “lacking nothing” in verse 4 to “if you lack” in verse 5. Is this a contradiction?
2. What is wisdom (Prov. 2:6)? How are knowledge and wisdom related? Can a person have knowledge without wisdom or vice versa?
3. In what respect can we lack wisdom?
4. What is the solution to a lack of wisdom (v. 5)?
5. “Upbraideth not” is literally “without finding fault” (v. 5). What does it mean that God gives without finding fault?
6. How must we ask God for wisdom (v. 6)?

7. If we waver (“doubt”), what will be the result (v. 6)?

8. How would you describe a man who is double minded (“two-souled”) (v. 8)?

9. What is the resulting instability?

James 1:9–11

Rejoicing in Poverty and Wealth

1. James draws a contrast between the poor (“low degree” or “humble circumstances”) and the rich. Although both are members of the church, why does he refer to the poor man as a “brother,” but does not do this regarding the rich (vv. 9–10)?
2. James is not concerned with riches, but with those who possess riches. Are riches wrong in themselves? What does Jesus say about the rich in Matthew 19:23?
3. The brother of low degree is admonished to rejoice or take pride in the fact that he is exalted (v. 9). What does this mean? How should he do this?
4. In what sense must the rich man rejoice in that he is made low? What reason does James give for doing this (v. 10)?

5. Under what analogy does James write concerning the brevity of life (v. 11)?

6. Why is it important for the rich to remember the brevity of life?

James 1:12–15

Trials and Temptations—Again

1. James returns to the subject of trials (testings) and temptations about which he has spoken previously. Since the Greek uses the same word for both, which word is meant in verse 12?
2. In what sense is the word used in verse 13?
3. What does it mean to endure?
4. Of what does the “crown of life” consist? Who receives it? What is the relation between enduring temptations and receiving the crown of life (v. 12)?
5. Why does James give the admonition of verse 13?
6. Why is it wrong to say that God is the author of temptation?

7. What is the source of temptations (v. 14)?

8. In verse 15 James implies the figure of pregnancy and giving birth. How does lust bring forth sin?

9. How does sin bring forth death?

James 1:16–18

Perfect Gifts

1. Why does James admonish his readers not to err (“be deceived”) (v. 16)?
2. In what sense are God’s gifts good and perfect (v. 17)?
3. What attribute of God is described in the last part of verse 17?
4. What is the first work of the Father of lights in the hearts of the elect sinner (v. 18)?
5. What word in verse 18 indicates this truth?
6. What is God’s will? In his choosing of his people, what truth is implied?

7. What truth is meant by “begat he us” (v. 18)?

8. “That we should be a kind of firstfruits” is the purpose of regeneration. The reference is to the Old Testament feast of firstfruits. What is the meaning of “firstfruits”? How are God’s people firstfruits?

James 1:19–21

Receiving the Word

1. James introduces a new subject by “wherefore” and by calling his readers his “beloved brethren.” Of what truth is “wherefore” a consequence or conclusion?
2. James gives three admonitions in verse 19: be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. What does it mean to be quick to hear? Why is it important to be quick to hear?
3. Why is it necessary to be slow to speak?
4. We must be slow to anger. Why? What is meant by the righteousness of God? How does one work the righteousness of God? How does wrath fail to work the righteousness of God?
5. “Wherefore” in verse 21 indicates the conclusion that must be drawn from verse 20. What is the filthiness from which we must rid ourselves?

6. What is “superfluity of naughtiness” (“a superabundance of evil”)?

7. What is “the word”? What does it mean that the word is engrafted or planted in us?

8. What does it mean to accept the word? In what manner are we to do this?

9. How does the implanted word save our souls?