

Introduction to the Epistle of James

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The Book of James. Now, as that section that Steve read out showed us, James is a book of admonition. It's a book that, as it were, takes its finger and prods us.

Wake up. Make sure you're not doing this. Make sure you're doing that.

Make sure that your attitude is humble and meek. It's a book of practical Christianity. In some ways, it's an odd book.

And it doesn't mention Jesus very much. Twice. It doesn't, mention the gospel per se.

There are some things that are omitted from it, but they are taken for granted. They're woven into the fabric of it. And so, because it's a book of admonitions, kind of there is a loose theme, or loose themes that are brought up, faith is often brought up, rich and poor are brought up quite a bit.

The tongue is brought up doing things in accordance with the word is brought up. But because it's kind of like that, it can appear to be a bit of a jumble of a book. And it's hard to discern a way through it.

Like, where's the pathway? Where's the sustained reasoning and argumentation in the book? And the fact of the matter is that it's not really written in that way.

It's written in a sense of presenting us with scenarios, presenting us with realities, of living in this world, as a believer, and showing us that these things are just, it's just the things that we have to deal with, and it's the way that we deal with them, which is the test of our spirituality. Even though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in the book. It's a book about spirituality.

It's a book about, Who are we? Deep down, in view of the fact, that we've received Jesus. In view of the fact that we've been changed.

By the Holy Spirit. Who are we? And that is often brought out in our demeanor, in our attitude towards others, and also in our works.

So, Because, particularly because of the faith works chapter in chapter two, Martin Luther, the great reformer, had trouble with James. You did. He called it a right story epistle.

And if you read Luther, that's very Luther, okay? He's very blunt and he's, you know, just says what he thinks. You should read his sermons sometimes.

Might surprise you. But yeah, he says, this is an epistle of straw. In other words, it's not the substance that you find in Paul is not in James.

Well, that's, I suppose, true, but only in a superficial sense. James is, as I said, he's oriented towards, you know, what identifies us from the outside? What are we?

As Christians. It's a book of admonition. Let me give you some basic details, though, of the book.

This is an introductory sermon. We'll be getting into the text starting next week, Lord willing. Notice, 1st of all, the 1st verse.

James, a bond servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the 12 tribes, which are scattered abroad. Greetings. James sees himself, as Paul did, as a bond servant, somebody who was completely owned by the benevolent God, who sent Jesus Christ into the world.

And that is how we need to see ourselves if we're Christians and we own the name of Christ. You know, the word can be translated slave. And really, there can't be much objection to us understanding ourselves as slaves.

As long as we understand, that we're not a slave that is, as it were, in shackles. We're not a slave, that is ordered around and has no free will or no ability to make our own decisions, we're free in Christ. You understand that.

We have liberty in Christ. In fact, Paul admonishes us to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. So we have that, but freedom, and bonds, being a bondservant of God, are actually not against each other.

They're not opposite things. They're not clashing concepts. When we, as it were, yield ourselves to God completely, that's when we're most free.

Because that's when we're most what we ought to be before God. It's when we tie ourselves to our own, flesh, when we, tether ourselves to the world and its fancies, that's when we're in bondage. That's when we're real slaves.

That's when we don't have the real freedom. And so there's nothing wrong with calling ourselves bondservants of God because we want to be closer to God. We want to obey God in all things.

But then he says this. Two, the 12 tribes which are scattered abroad. What on earth does he mean?

Maybe we should just kind of hop over that. Maybe we should just things, well, well he's written to he's writing to Christians. Okay, so let's just kind of skip over that bit.

But James is writing his epistle to the 12 tribes, in the diaspora, in the Jewish tribes that had been spread throughout the Mediterranean world of the day. And we ought not to just simply read it and read on. We ought to read it and pause.

And ask ourselves, why is he writing to the 12 tribes? Why is he writing to Israelites? Now, certainly he's writing to Israelite Christians, to believers.

But why to the 12 tribes. Well, I'm not going to answer that question completely in this introductory message, but it is something that we need to consider because there is a prophetic aspect to this book, particularly in the last chapter.

And there are things in this book which I'll try to bring out, at least meditate on towards the end of our series here. But I just want you to recognize that he is speaking to Jews, and therefore, there's a Jewish kind of mindset to the epistle which might describe, by the way, or might explain why there's this kind of roughness to the language, this kind of, sometimes there's some language here that makes us think, wow. You know, that's a sharp contrast that he's roaring there.

Is that a little bit too much? Is that a little bit over the top? Well, it because the book of James reflects some Old Testament language and the way of speaking.

Who wrote the book? Well, the book was written by James, the Lord's brother. Half brother, obviously.

He wasn't virgin born, like Jesus was. But he was, James was born after Jesus in the family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary. James, as the rest of his household, when we meet them in the gospels, as an unbeliever.

He's not a follower of Jesus at all. In fact, Jesus can say when his family is outside and he's doing works inside. He says that he's told, or who is, you know, my, he's told, your family's outside.

He says, well, who is my mother and my brothers? Those that do the will of God. Well, it's nice to know that at least 2 brothers, James, and then Jude, who wrote the Epistle of Jude, not only became Christians, but became prominent Christians in the early church.

In fact, James was a very prominent Christian in the early church in Acts chapter 15 at the Jerusalem assembly there. He is one of the main speakers, and it's obvious that he is regarded very highly, and he is given a hearing. He's listed with John and Peter as being of the most eminent of the apostles by the apostle Paul.

So James, was an extremely important leader in the early church, and this letter is possibly the earliest book of the New Testament that we possess. There are several contenders for that. The Gospel of Matthew, I, and many others believe, that the Gospel of Matthew was written in the early 40s AD. And in fact, it's interesting that although that was the understanding of the early church right up until the 19th century, and then the critics got to work, and the Gospel of Matthew was put into the 60s, 70s, 80s AD, that now there's a swing coming back, and more people are using their common sense, as I might say, and identifying Matthew as a very early.

Gospel, the earliest gospel in fact. Jude. Jude was thought to be a very late epistle, but again, the consensus is swinging around to see that Jude must have been written early, 40s or 50s AD. James has always seemed to be an early letter.

It just has that characteristic about it. And so I think we can safely place James in the early to mid 40s AD. So this is just 15 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, very early letter. One of the things that has persuaded critics and persuaded scholars about the early date of James is how much it reflects the gospels, things from the gospels.

Particularly from the sermon on the Mount. There are themes in James that are taken directly from the Sermon of the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7. And this tells us that rather than somebody coming along in the 80s or 90s, you know, 50, 60 years, as it were, after the time of Jesus, this is much more likely that James has taken up these themes, because they were the themes that we're being spoken about, that were being preached about in the early, early church.

And so there's a lot of reflection in James, of themes that you find in the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount, an immensely practical discourse. And it's one that we should keep returning to.

It's one that we should keep reminding ourselves of. It talks to us about our disposition. It talks to us about our priorities.

It talks to us about true faults, true faith as over against hypocrisy. It talks to us about standing on the word. It talks to us, about how to pray.

These basic things, that we have to continually come back to, because that is the basis, the foundation of everything else that we are as Christians. And so James is also good to come back to, to remind us of what we ought to be as Christians. It's a book of action.

James is one of these who says, you know, don't tell me you're a Christian. Show me you're a Christian. We need more preaching like that in our churches today.

We need more admonition. It's not as if we don't find admonition throughout the New Testament. There's a whole bunch of it telling us, prodding us, exhorting us.

To not just say that we're Christians, not just sweet, say sweet nothings about God, but to actually be, what we claim to be. Let our faith have some traction in our lives. James is all about that.

Sometimes he's brutally honest. In confronting us with what we are, as over against what we ought to be. Well, that tells me that we need that.

That tells me that I need that. I need to be kicked up the backside sometimes. And so do you.

And as your pastor, I get the opportunity, when I go to James, to kick you up the backside sometimes, and I hope that you will receive it in love. Because it's through me, it's meant in love from God, it's meant in love. We need it.

I need it. What about an overview of the letter? As I say, I hope that you'll get into the book of James.

Only 5 chapters. It's quickly read. You know, just make yourself a cup of coffee, a cup of tea or something and just sit down and read it.

By the time the coffee is drinkable, you'd have read half the epistle. As you 1st read it, it seems to be a little disjointed. Okay?

You're trying to look for a kind of a main theme, and you'll find that you really want, you can't find one. So understand, as you set down to read the book, that, You just let it speak to you the way it wants to speak to you. The things, the themes and the different tests that it speaks about and so on.

Just, just, just take them one by one as they come to you and consider them individually. It's kind of like the proverbs in that way. And James is the great wisdom book of the New Testament.

So in chapter one, and I'm just doing a basic overview here. In chapter one, it speaks of trials, and it speaks of our mature response, or immature response, to those trials, those tests that come to us, the tests of life. There is a certain popular presentation of Christianity that presents itself as if we're a true Christian, we rise above the trials and troubles of this life.

We're on a different plane than everybody else. We're on this spiritual plane, and therefore, you know, worldly troubles and so on don't harm us, or at least they shouldn't really hurt us, not if we're walking with God the way we all we should be. So the test in that kind of a presentation of the Christian message, which is a false presentation, by the way is that if you're doing well, If you're thriving, if the things are bouncing off you and there's not many problems in your life, then you walk in with God.

And if you're not, well, obviously you're not walking with God and you need to repent. That's a very superficial and very human way of looking at things. And it's totally unbiblical.

The fact of the matter is, trials come upon Christians just as they come upon non-Christians, and sometimes trials come upon Christians because they're Christians. James says, count it all joy when you fall into various trials. I'm not going to expound that right now, but do you see what he says?

Various trials. Tests, temptations. Or where do these tests and these temptations come?

Of course, some of them come from our own flesh. Some of them come from the world. And some of them come from the devil.

Or his minions. And so we don't just treat these lightly. We don't treat these without sobriety.

We treat them as real things that can come and perturb us and hurt us and causes grief. So chapter one deals with that. Chapter 2.

Again, these are generalisms because there's no real plan or formation in the books as such. Chapter 2 talks about what genuine Christianity looks like and how that works itself out in what we do and how we serve God. We claim that we have faith.

We claim to be Christians, so we claim to be saved, we claim that we have faith. All right? So what?

What's the currency of that faith? What's the fruit of it? How do I know that you're really a Christian?

And James says, faith without works is dead. If you believe in Jesus and you believe that the Holy Spirit is within you and you believe the Father is watching over you, providentially, then what are you doing? What is that, that faith, that dynamic that's within you, what is it doing?

So he deals with that in chapter 2. In chapter 3 deals mainly with the tongue. The tongue.

This propensity that we have to use words in the wrong way to communicate information that we shouldn't be divulging, to hypothesize about other people and their motives and what's driving them. To use the tongue to tear down instead of to edify. That world of iniquity that is our unrestrained tongue.

Chapter 4. It talks about different types of what we might call dissensions, things that cause irritation, things that cause, you know, frustration, things that are clearly unfair, even within the church. And chapter 5 speaks to us about patience and steadfastness and faith.

And again, prayer to God in the midst of difficulty. It may be in, it seems as though, you know, there's no faith around. But we have to be faithful in the midst of that.

So chapter 5 deals with that. Obviously, there's a mixture of all of these things, and I could take things from what I've said about chapter 5 about patience and steadfastness, and I could put them into chapter 3 or chapter one. But this is the main kind of emphasis that we see in the epistle.

Okay. Some quick examples of tests or, or trials that we have to endure in a Christian life. First of all, faith and works in the Christian life have already mentioned these things.

But, You know, this, this understanding of Christianity as simply a subjective thing. Oh, I believe in God. Oh, I believe in Jesus.

But It's like, that's all you get. There's no, there's no taking that belief and looking at a person, seeing if that has changed them or anything. That, knowing Jesus Christ is your savior, knowing that he's up there interceding for you, and he's alive, and through his resurrection, you're going to be raised forever, that should do something to you.

It's not just a piece of information about like who won the World Series. It should change your orientation. It should change your life.

It should change your priorities and your values. It should issue forth in a particular kind of life that people can see. I read about a week ago.

That, and I, who, who believes these, these, you know, these statistics, when they come up. But anyway, one set of statistics came up and it's like half of self-proclaimed evangelicals say that they've read the Bible once all the way through, half of them. You want to hear my response to that?

Ha, ha, ha. They're lying. They're lying.

Come on, most Christians haven't read the Bible through once. Many of them, certainly, the majority haven't read the Bible through twice, and certainly when we get to 3 or 4 times, forget it. That's the reality, okay?

If we're honest with ourselves, it's like, you know, another survey that came out, what's the most important thing to you as an evangelical Christian? about choosing a church. What does everybody say?

They say the preaching, the preaching of the word. Do you want to know my response to that? Ha, ha, ha.

That is not true. They don't even know themselves. They don't even examine themselves and their values.

We know don't we? The evidence is there that most people choose their churches based on the consumer mentality. Just like going to Costco.

Oh, I like that? Oh, I want that and so on. Yes?

That's how they choose the church. The last thing that they're interested in is the standard of The pulpit. What they want to hear is what they choose to hear.

Oh, I don't like that. It's too negative. That's too, you know, that's getting involved with my life.

That's telling me off all the time. I don't want that. I want something that affirms me.

That's modern Christianity. I'm talking generally. There are many good people in pulpits throughout the nation.

Don't get me wrong, but for the majority of Christians, They don't even, they're not even honest with themselves. They say, oh, the preaching. And that you go to the church or you hear, you know, what the church is preaching and it's, it's all fluff.

It's all, you know, good time. God loves us, isn't everything wonderful? God will bless you, and go out with, you know, a song in your heart.

Whereas the reality of life, which is hard, which is difficult, which is sometimes painful, which involves sobriety and thinking, is often not met with in the modern church. Well, James kind of is a lesson for us, to think, bring some realism into our Christianity. We're very easy.

They're persuading ourselves and other people that the evil in the world's not really there. Well, it is. Let's not be like the 1st who fell into a pit of rowsnakes and just pray to God, Lord, you know, help me believe they're not there.

Well, they are there. So change your prayer, so it comports with reality. So you've got wisdom to deal with the problems that come to you.

Rich and poor. This is where James really gets going. I mean, he, he's pretty, ruthless going after the rich, and we'll explore why that is.

But rich versus poor. He brings it up twice in this epistle. You know, you think he's dealt with you about the, you know, riches and covetousness and so on in one part of the epistle and he brings it up at the end as well.

Just in case. And as I said also, there's this prophetic aspect to the book which speaks about, particularly using Elijah, and his prayer, which seems to take us into tribulation territory. And I'll explain that more later on in the series.

So, this is an introduction to the blue. James is written to give us practical advice and admonition about how we are to live, and to confront us, as he does in chapter one, with the mirror of the word of God, so that we can see ourselves as we really are and change. James offers hope and guidance, but he also can get under our skin.

And so, please expect, not that I will do this deliberately or on purpose, but please expect that in this series, this book and what it says is going to poke you in the ribs. It is going to make you a little bit uncomfortable as well as comfort you. But sometimes we're not ready for comfort from God because we haven't woken ourselves up.

And we're not facing reality. We're living in a kind of dream world. I hope that through this series and by the end of the series, none of us will be in Dreamworld that we would all see that we have a duty before gardener, duty to each other, as what we claim to be, Christians.

And pray. Dear Heavenly Father, I pray that you would use this series to speak to me, and speak to everyone here, Father, all this gathering of people. Speak to them and to provoke them, Lord, to consecrating themselves anew to you to looking out for one another.

For living their lives in the light of your reality in your presence. Pray, you bless this church by this series and that you would receive praise. The praise that you are due as our creator and savior.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.