

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 86: The Book of James

Introduction:

With an "in your face" style James confronts the ethical lapses of his readers. Christianity must not only be believed. It must be lived. *"What use is it, . . . if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that (kind of) faith save him?"*(2:14)

The proof of genuine faith is a changed life!

The Book of James is a practical, no nonsense, letter about what happens when faith is tested in the crucible of everyday life. Salvation is by grace. through faith alone, but true faith breeds action, as we saw in Heb. 11.

Author:

All studies of the Book of James begin with the question of who wrote it. Just look at any commentary, study Bible, or get the tape of Dale's intro. Let me try to summarize the thinking:

There are four men named James in the New Testament.

1. James, the Less, son of Alphaeus mentioned in Matt 10:3; Acts 12:2.
2. James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot), from Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13.

These two have been put aside because they were not well enough known in the early church to have been recognized by only their first names.

3. James, son of Zebedee and brother of the Apostle John(Matt. 4:21) was certainly well known, but he was martyred by sword under Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) in AD. 44, before this letter was even written.

That leaves . . .

4. James, the half-brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3), was also the brother of Jude (Matt. 13:55) who wrote the letter of Jude.

The argument raged on in the early church with those who believed it was written by James the brother of Jesus, accepting the letter, and those who did not, wanting to throw it out of the Canon. In the Church Councils at Rome in AD. 383 and at Carthage in AD. 397 delegates confirmed that the book was written by James the brother of Jesus, and belonged in the Canon.

That decision has been confirmed by a study of vocabulary and style comparing the Epistle of James with the letter James wrote to the church in Acts 15, after the Council at Jerusalem. They are identical.

We know a number of things about James. He did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah while He was alive (John 7:2-5). His conversion came when Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection (Acts 1:14; 1 Cor. 15:7). When he recognized the risen Lord, he became a new man, *"a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:1).

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He was known by the early church as "James the Just" because he showed great sensitivity to God, the Apostles, and other believers. He was recognized for his piety, and his prayer life. Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, says he was called "Camel Knees" because of the calluses he developed while kneeling to pray.

James was obviously important in the church at Jerusalem, in fact, he was probably the pastor (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:12). He is named as a "pillar" of that church along with Peter and John (Gal. 2:9) and was a leading figure in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), writing the decision that was circulated among the other churches.

According to the history written by Josephus in the first century, James was accused of heresy and stoned to death by the high priest and Sadducees in AD. 62.

Audience:

The use by James of "*the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad*" (1:1) indicates that the readers were Jewish Christians living outside of Jerusalem. He uses the term "brethren," a common epithet among first century Jews, 15 times. He also makes more than forty allusions to the Old Testament and more than twenty to the Sermon on the Mount. The Greek word translated "assembly" (2:2) is the word for "synagogue."

All these facts suggest that he wrote to Jewish believers who had left their native homeland. They were most likely scattered, first, as the result of Stephen's martyrdom in AD. 30-34 (Acts 7), but also due to increasing persecution under Herod Agrippa I in AD. 44 (Acts 12).

Date:

Several factors indicate that the letter was written early in church history:

There is no mention of the important Council of Jerusalem (AD. 49-50). Only elders are mentioned indicating early organizational structure. There was a passionate expecting of the return of Christ present only in the first generation.

These factors and the use of the Greek words for "brethren" and "synagogue," indicate a date of AD. 45-49, making it the earliest written book in the New Testament.

Purpose:

James wrote to a people scattered, away from home, and facing growing persecution. They were professing their faith in Christ, but their actions were sometimes speaking louder than their words. And, as Dale has pointed out every Sunday, these are tests of a living faith by which we may know that we are saved, so the tough questions must be asked.

James is a pastor, a New Testament prophetic voice, crying out for them to give evidence of their faith through a consistent and righteous life-style. Genuine faith will always produce good works, just as a healthy tree will always bear fruit.

The Book of James is a potpourri of practical truth and, therefore, hard to outline. I thank John Philips for his work in *Exploring the Scriptures* which helped me to organize the material into seven chunks as opposed to the twelve or thirteen pieces as in most outlines.

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Bible Survey Lesson 87: Outline of the book of James

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF JAMES

I. BELIEVER'S BATTLES (1:1-16)

A. Testings (1:1-12)

James starts by introducing the proper response to trials. Since the natural response is to be upset or angry, this takes a conscious commitment, by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit. We can only do this if we realize that trials have a vital and overriding purpose.

1. Purpose (2-11)

We can count it all joy when trials come because trials have a purpose . . . *"the testing of your faith produces endurance,"* and endurance is the perfect way to make us complete or mature.

And if we have trouble understanding and applying the knowledge of that purpose, we have only to humbly ask God for the ability to see how it works out and He will generously give us that wisdom without embarrassing us.

2. Profit (12)

Those who face trials with perseverance receive a crown of life from God, as a reward for that stamina. This can be rendered "the crown that is life" meaning eternal life, which God promises to the persevering believer.

B. Temptations (1:13-16)

Since trials develop maturity, which is good, a man might think that temptation (which is a solicitation to evil) comes from God.

1. Source (13-14)

The Bible never allows us to blame others for our sin, especially not God, because man *"is tempted when he is carried away by his own lust"* (v 14). Any attempt to excuse yourself shows a basic ignorance of the nature of God and the dynamics of temptation.

2. Course (15-16)

Just to make it perfectly clear, James spells it out. When a temptation presents itself we have an opportunity to obey God and mature, or to disobey God and fall. We are tempted when we are "carried away" or lured, not by the temptation, but *"by our own lust,"* our desire to feed the flesh. *"Then when lust has conceived it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished it bring forth death."*

You've heard of a slippery slope. Sin is not a spontaneous act but the result of a process. This is why we have no one to blame but ourselves, especially not God..

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II. BELIEVER'S BIBLE (1:17-27)

To the contrary, God only gives *"good things and perfect gifts"* because he never varies in His character.

A. Bible a Gift (1:17-18)

The most precious of those good things is our re-birth which comes from the perfect gift of His son, and is accomplished through His Word.

B. Bible a Graft (1:19-22)

Since we have this great gift we need to be *"quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger."* We need to eagerly accept, even pursue knowledge of the Word, letting it have an effect in our lives which is not just mouthing it, but living it.

The Word of God is not just to be imparted or given to us, we are to *"receive the Word implanted"* or grafted into our everyday lives, because it is powerful. So, *"prove yourselves doers of the Word and not merely hearers"* (v. 22).

C. Bible a Glass (1:23-27)

Next, James likens the Word to a mirror. The purpose of a mirror is to show us our dirty faces so we see our need to wash. And what is the evidence that we truly looked and saw? It changes our tongue, response to the needy, and our involvement with the world system (v 27).

III. BELIEVER'S BRETHREN (2:1-13)

James rebuked his readers for showing favoritism to the rich who attended their assembly while ignoring, even sublimating the poor.

A. Conduct (2:1-9)

The church was made up of mostly poor people, so when an obviously rich man entered it was natural to shower attention on him. Paying attention to the rich guy wasn't the problem.

The problem was why. They had *"become judges with evil motives."* There are four indications of impure motive in their favoritism: Their value system was wrong (v 3); they failed to honor the poor whom God honors (v 5); it wasn't logical, since the rich were their oppressors (v 6); since it was breaking the law, it was sin (v 9).

B. Consequence (2:10-13)

One sin, small or great makes a man a sinner and brings him under the full judgment of the law. One who shows no mercy for people demonstrates that he never responded to the great mercy of God. One who shows mercy, however, demonstrates that he has understood and responded to God's mercy, and so is ready for the Day of Judgment.

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IV. BELIEVER'S BELIEFS (2:14-26)

Verse 14 has caused many to believe that James teaches salvation by faith plus works rather than by faith alone. The problem rests with the phrase, "*Can that faith save him?*" (v. 14).

A. Truth Declared (2:14-17)

James is clearly saying that a non-working, non-fruit producing, spurious faith is a dead faith. Paul and James agree that faith is an active, living, productive trust in Jesus. Genuine faith cannot fail to bring works. Better said, "*Can that type of faith save him?*"

An example of dead faith is a faith that speaks kind words to the poor without offering them compassionate relief (vv. 15-16). ". . . *faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself*" (v 17).

B. Truth Debated (2:18-20)

If your belief in God does not produce good works, it is no better than the belief of the demons, i.e. "*faith without works is useless*" (v. 20).

C. Truth Demonstrated (2:21-26)

Just as Abraham and Rahab demonstrated their belief in and obedience to God by works, we need to show our faith by works. Paul would say, justification is by faith alone, and Abraham believed God and it was put as righteousness to his account. James now says, justification is shown by righteous acts, by faith Abraham offered his son, Isaac.

V. BELIEVER'S BEHAVIOR (3:1-4:12)

Since faith without works is dead, we demonstrate our faith by what we do. So, as believers we should be careful what we do.

A. Sin Revealed (3:1-4:4)

According to James 3:2, we all stumble in many ways, but the evidence of sin as opposed to the obedience of genuine faith he chooses, is control of the tongue.

The tongue is vital because it controls the whole body (v 3). Just as a tiny bridle controls a big horse, or a relatively small rudder controls a gigantic ship, the tongue controls the direction of our lives. It can be destructive as a fire (vv. 5-6), stubborn and untamable (vv. 7-8), inconsistent in blessing and cursing (vv. 9-12).

The second evidence of true faith or counterfeit faith is wisdom. Earthly wisdom produces envy and selfish ambition, heavenly wisdom produces merciful, considerate peacemakers.

Another evidence of dead faith is a worldly lifestyle. Quarrels, conflicts, lust, murder, envy, fighting, all indicate an artificial faith that, of course makes it impossible to maintain an effective life-style. "*whoever wishes to be a friend to the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (v. 4).

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B. Sin Resisted (4:5-12)

What hope is there, then? The answer is to have genuine faith.

1. Admit (5)

Wake up and realize the Scripture teaches that God *"jealously desires the Spirit that He has made to dwell in us."*

2. Submit (6-7)

God tolerates no rivals and wants complete commitment from His followers, but He also provides the grace to meet those demands. So there is no excuse, only pride stands in our way. *"Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."*

3. Commit (8-12)

James ends this section with a rapid succession of imperative appeals for us to commit to God and resist the world.

VI. BELIEVER'S BOASTING (4:13-5:6)

The arrogance James denounced in this portion of his letter had to do with people planning their lives without reference or any concern for God and His will or His glory. This is the ultimate expression of pride.

A. Plans (4:13-17)

Some of the high-powered businessmen in the church were traveling around the world to make a killing in business. It became a way of life, not taking into account that life is a "vapor," just a breath of air, or a puff of smoke, here now but quickly gone.

Saying "If the Lord wills, we shall" is not a secret mantra that will guarantee success in doing what we want to do. It is a way to focus us on the truth that God is in control of our destiny. Since he knows everything, and he desires our good even more than we ourselves do, shouldn't we humble ourselves and involve Him in our plans?

B. Prosperity (5:1-6)

James levels harsh warnings against the wealthy who value the dishonest accumulation of material goods over honesty and justice (vv. 1-3).

He accuses them of dishonesty (4), living in luxury (5), and criminal injustice (6). The bottom line is that *"Lord of Saboath"* The Lord of Hosts, The Lord Almighty is not oblivious nor unconcerned about those abused and will punish injustice.

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VII. BELIEVER'S BURDENS (5:7-20)

What then is expected of the genuine faith believers?

A. Perseverance (5:7-12)

James presented three illustrations to encourage a life-style of faithful perseverance:

1. A farmer that plants seeds and waits for rain to produce a healthy crop. All he can do is wait. (v. 7)
2. Old Testament prophets spoke boldly even though they saw no results and suffered persecution. All they can do is persevere. (v. 10)
3. Job, the quintessential example of endurance, and God was just, compassionate, and merciful. All he can do is trust. (v 11)

In those times of stress a believer could easily use God's name in a careless irreverent way, or to invoke God's name to guarantee truth instead of living in a way that is so consistent that oaths are unnecessary.

B. Prayer (5:13-18)

James encourages believers to pray, always.

In times of suffering, pray (v 13).

In times of joy, pray and sing (v 13).

In times of illness, pray (v 14-15).

In times of spiritual struggle with sin, pray (v 16).

Why? Because it works. Just look at Elijah.

C. Promise (5:19-29)

James was a pragmatic, practical man who operated in the realm of the real world. He makes it clear that there are professing Christians who prove, by their works, that they do not have a genuine faith.

His great promise to the true believer is that if he can just win one of those "*sinner from the error of his ways,*" he will see the sinner saved, and win blessing for himself.

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Lessons:

1. Genuine faith results in obedient actions. What we do must match what we say.
2. We cannot blame anyone else for our sin. We are responsible to stop lust before it conceives sin.
3. *"This is pure and undefiled religion (worship) in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."* --James 1:27

Homework:

Read: The Book of I Peter

Think: How does Peter's view of suffering compare with that of James.

Apply: Live this week displaying genuine faith and true religion.