

An Introduction Is In Order

James 1:1

Today we are starting a study in the book of James. Beginning with this book, there are in total seven letters that are considered general letters. Early church historian Eusebius writing in the late 3rd or 4th century referred to them as the Catholic letters. By Catholic he meant universal. They are said to be universal because they aren't written to any one particular church or person like Galatians or Ephesians or Timothy or Titus. Although some consider the letters of 2nd and 3rd John to be addressed to an individual, they consider them to be an extension of 1st John sort of as a ps. and pss. to the letter.

Of additional importance is that most of these general letters were at one time considered disputed books of the canon of Scripture for a number of reasons. But since AD 397 the Christian church has recognized the canon of both the Old and New Testaments that includes these seven letters.

With your Bibles turned to **James 1**, we are going to consider the opening verse as way of introduction. Right away the opening word provides some challenges for scholars, all be it minor, as to the author of this letter and part of the reason the letter for three centuries was not accepted. Here we consider the controversy about the author is erroneous.

I. THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT THE AUTHOR IS ERRONEOUS

There are at least three people identified in the New Testament with the name James, so which one wrote this letter? Like Mary, Martha, and even Jesus, James was a common name. It means supplanter or one who takes the place of another.

There is of course James the older brother of John who were the sons of Zebedee. This James became one of Jesus's disciples and part of His inner circle. Along with his brother they were nicknamed the sons of thunder.

This James was the first apostle martyred at the

hands of Herod Agrippa around the year A.D. 43 or 44 because Herod died in A.D. 44. This James never sought power or fame and as far as Scripture is concerned, we have nothing in writing from him. Because of the timing of the death of this James we can conclude that he was not the author of the book of James, which was written between A.D. 44-49.

The second James noted in Scripture is James the son of Alphaeus. He was also one of Jesus' disciples. He was sometimes called James the less or James the little to distinguish him from James the son of Zebedee. The nickname James the less or James the little probably refers to his stature being short rather than his influence or position as one of the disciples.

We can also rule out James the son of Alphaeus because little is known about this disciple and after the opening chapters of Acts, he fades into obscurity. Nothing else is written about him.

That leaves us with James the half-brother of Jesus as the person identified in the opening verse. But even at that very little information is given to identify him as the author other than what is described for us in this book.

It would have been helpful to readers down through the centuries for him to have begun his letter a bit differently.

James, from the tribe of Judah and the house of David.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary.

James, the leader of first church in Jerusalem.

The lack of a title or other identifying components in the letter cause some to believe that this James was well known by his audience, someone who had the authority to write this letter. A title would have helped us identify him more easily. What we see instead in the opening salutation is a man of genuine humility, one not given to dropping names or claiming status.

There is some debate that James, the half-brother of Jesus couldn't be the author of this book because

they argue that a simple Galilean, wouldn't have such a command of the Greek language. This letter is written in an exceptional Greek style. Yet there are those who counter that James, like Jesus, would have been fluent in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Nazareth was positioned on a busy trade route and would have frequent travelers stopping where an understanding of the Greek language would be of great benefit. James the half-brother of Jesus was also the leader of the first Church in Jerusalem and would have need of knowing the Greek language to converse with the Hellenistic or Greek Jews who came to Jerusalem.

Another reason this book was rejected is that it lacks doctrinal teaching. About half of each of Paul's letters are devoted to something doctrinal. For example, salvation doesn't come by keeping the law, but by grace through faith. He taught about the importance of the resurrection of Christ and about the essential nature of the gospel that Christ died, was buried and rose again. Doctrine is absent from James and so a reason why it was initially rejected. Martin Luther called it a "right strawy epistle" meaning it didn't have much substance.

Some rejected the book because they believed it contradicted Paul's teaching on salvation by grace while James seems to advocate salvation and works. But a closer look at the two shows that Paul taught salvation from God's point of view writing about inner saving faith and James wrote from man's point of view that inner faith is then demonstrated by outward works. How do you know a person is saved by faith? You tell by what he does and in how he lives.

While there has been controversy early on even in some circles today, the Christian church has accepted James, the half-brother of Jesus, as the author of this letter. But how is it that James came to write this letter and hold such a position of authority in the early church? That's where we consider the character of the author is exemplary.

II. THE CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR IS EXEMPLARY

How would you have liked to live in the same house as Jesus? Every day you heard the same thing. "Why can't you be like your brother Jesus?" He was never rude or angry or critical or argumentative.

He never had to be told twice to do something. He never got into a fight with His siblings. He always did what He was told and probably did things without being asked.

Chuck Swindoll puts it into perspective when he writes "No second born son or daughter can possibly fathom what it must have been like to suffer second child syndrome with an older brother who never sinned. But James did. Can you even imagine? Jesus always came when His mother called Him the first time. He always washed His hands properly before supper. He always did His chores quickly and with delight. He always obeyed. Then there was James, born with a sinful nature like the rest of us, living in the shadow of a big brother who was God in the flesh. Being far from perfect, younger brother James had a built-in problem right from the start."

We can imagine that James found it a relief when one day Jesus announced that he was leaving home at the age of 30. But one day not long after He returned home claiming to be the long awaited Messiah (**Luke 4:16-21**). Remember that according to **John 7:5**, none of Jesus's brothers believed Him. At one point in His ministry as we read in **Mark 3:21**, Jesus's family went searching for Him because they thought He was crazy. It wasn't until after the resurrection when Jesus revealed Himself to James that he became a true believer. **Acts 1:14** tells us that the brothers of Jesus along with Mary, their mother, met in the upper room with the disciples to constantly pray.

Ardent prayer became such a regular habit of James that he was given the nickname "old camel knees" because his knees were hard as camel knees from kneeling so much in prayer.

What we see in the book of James is a man who had a good command of the law and obedient to the law being very devout to the teachings of the law but

who lived by strong faith. There are four direct quotes from the Old Testament and over 40 allusions to the Old Testament giving the letter a very Jewish flavor.

The book itself reveals a man of great faith and godly character, one who was well suited to become the leader of the early church in Jerusalem. When the Jerusalem church feared the recent conversion of Saul the persecutor, it was James who heard the testimony of Barnabas and welcomed him into fellowship in the Christian community there. Paul writes in **Galatians 1:19** that he sought out James in that situation and later said James was a pillar of the church.

Around A.D. 49 a dispute broke out that could have easily torn the church apart into Jewish and Gentile factions. We read about it in **Acts 15:1**. Certain Jews from Judea came to where Paul and Barnabas were teaching Gentile believers and said they needed to keep the law and be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas immediately returned to Jerusalem to get direction from the Apostles. Peter recounted his experience with Cornelius that salvation was given to the Gentiles without circumcision. But it was the council of James who affirmed that what Paul and Barnabas taught regarding salvation by grace through faith alone was regarding right and circumcision was not necessary for salvation.

About 10 years later Paul returned to Jerusalem to stand before James accused by his fellow Jews that he had turned his back on Jewish law. James encouraged Paul to participate in a purity ritual. From this we learn that James had continued to follow the Jewish laws living in Jerusalem, not because he believed it was part of salvation, but because he wanted to maintain a good testimony to other non-believing Jews in Jerusalem.

James lived to A.D. 62 when according to Jewish historian Josephus, he was martyred for his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. According to tradition, the Pharisees could find nothing in his exemplary life other than what they considered his misguided belief that Jesus was the Messiah.

Jewish historian Eusebius writes that after the Jewish council had tried to entrap Paul who was then sent to Rome by Festus, they turned their attacks against James demanding that he renounce his faith, but who instead confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior. According to Eusebius, James was then taken to the top of the Temple, thrown down and then beaten to death with clubs.

Piecing the events of what occurred in Acts and the prominent position James held in the early church, scholars believe that the letter by James was written somewhere between A.D. 45-49. If it had been written after the council of Acts 15, it is likely that he would have mentioned the results of that meeting in his letter. That it is also addressed to Christian Jews leads us to believe that it was during a time of persecution in which these Christians were scattered and before the gospel reached the Gentiles. Of the books contained in the New Testament, James is considered to be the first book to be written.

So while we can piece together from other passages what his character was like, and we have mentioned that the opening verse assumes a great measure of humility, something that is evident about his character is revealed to us in this verse. He refers to himself as **“a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

He used the Greek word *doulos* to describe the kind of servant he was. It refers to being a bondservant, a person who was the property of someone else. In this case, James says he is the property of God and of Jesus Christ. This kind of servant was deprived of all personal freedom and totally controlled by the master. He was subordinate to his master, giving absolute, unhesitating, and willful obedience. James didn't say he was Mary's son or Jesus's younger brother or the head of the church. He said he was a servant.

What a great reminder to anyone in a leadership role that we are first a servant, that we are always a servant. We are told of Jesus in **Mark 10:45** that even though He was the Son of God, God Himself in the flesh, who could have demanded to be served instead came to serve and give His life as a ransom.

We read in **Philippians 2:6-7** that even though Jesus was **“in very nature God”** He humbled Himself and became a servant.

James became the servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. This distinction is important because it places Jesus on equal terms with God and supports His deity and James was their servant, willing to obey whatever asked of him with humility, with willingness and with eagerness.

May it be our desire in the year ahead to be the servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The character of James is exemplary.

The remaining part of the verse tells about his audience, the community of the author is everywhere.

III. THE COMMUNITY OF THE AUTHOR IS EVERYWHERE

James is writing **“to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.”**

In the year 722 the 10 northern tribes of Israel were conquered by Assyria and then in 586 B.C. the southern tribes were conquered by Babylon. The custom by a conquering nation was to intermingle the people with the other nations that had also been conquered. People from one nation were spread out with the people of another nation. People from that nation were scattered among the people of still another nation. It was a way of controlling the conquered people groups so they wouldn't rise up in revolt. When Rome conquered the then known world, Jews were living throughout the Roman empire.

The question arises as to who James is writing to. Was he writing to all Jews or writing only to those Jews who were Christians? Throughout the letter James repeatedly calls them brothers. Because they were all part of the same Jewish heritage, they could rightly be called brothers. But then brother is a term that has been used because of our family ties as part of the body of Christ.

There is also the tone and nature of the letter, which

gives us a better clue that James is writing to Jews who are Christians. If he was writing to all Jews, knowing that some did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, it stands to reason that he would have made some reference to that for them to consider.

The letter has a distinct Jewish flavor which also tells us that the audience are Jewish Christians. He uses terms that Jews would be familiar with from their own religious background, words like “firstfruits”, “synagogue”, “Gehenna”, the term used for hell, and “Almighty God.” It's my belief that James is writing to Jewish Christians who had been scattered around the nations, some scholars even suggest that they could have been believers who were forced out of Jerusalem during an early persecution of the church.

There are some scholars who believe that James had a targeted group of dispersed Jewish Christians. They contend that Peter wrote to Jewish Christians who were scattered to the west, while James wrote to those who were scattered to the east in places like Babylon and Mesopotamia.

Paul ends the salutation with the word “greetings”. There are two words in the Greek that have this translation in English. One means to welcome or salute. It's like saying hello. When we meet with friends, we might extend a hand to shake theirs or when we could and sometimes still do, we give a hug. Or sometimes it's a shoulder bump. It's just an informal greeting. Now we wave or bump elbows or do a little fist bump. It's a term that is used when asking about someone's welfare.

James doesn't use this Greek term to offer greetings. He uses the other term. It's the word *chairō* (xairō). As a greeting, this term is only used three times in the New Testament and means to rejoice. Given the nature of the letter that has so much to do with how Christians are supposed to handle trials, the greeting is well taken in that he invites these believers to rejoice in their trials. The same word is used in **Romans 12:15** where we are told to **“Rejoice with those who rejoice.”**

Matthew 2:10 says that the Magi rejoiced when

they had seen the star.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs His audience to **“rejoice and be exceeding glad”** (**Matthew 5:12**).

Matthew 18:13 says that the shepherd rejoiced more over finding the lost sheep than the other 99 who were safe back in the pen.

And to the Thessalonians Paul simply says **“rejoice evermore”** (**I Thessalonians 5:16**).

That is how James leads us into this letter. Yes, there has been some controversy about who the author is, but the best and most reliable come through the character of the leader of the church in Jerusalem who also happens to be the half-brother of Jesus. He is writing to a community of Jewish believers who are scattered outside Judea. Let me close with a few thoughts showing us that the concern of the author is extraordinary.

IV. THE CONCERN OF THE AUTHOR IS EXTRAORDINARY

About James, D. Edmond Hiebert writes, “This epistle sternly insists upon Christian practice consistent with Christian beliefs, heaps scathing contempt upon all empty profession, and administers a stinging rebuke to the readers’ worldliness. Its stress upon the gospel’s ethical imperative makes the epistle as relevant today as when it was first written. The presence of this practical epistle in the New Testament canon is a magnificent monument to the moral sensitivity and concern of the Christian church.”

Chuck Swindoll adds some additional perspective with his comments. “First-century Jewish Christians struggled with persevering through hardship, maintaining good works, promoting peace in their churches, and living patiently in anticipation of the Lord’s return. They knew Jesus as the Way of life but needed a travel guide for walking in that Way through life. So do we! In the midst of the struggles of everyday life, we can all use a dose of James’s hands-on Christianity.”

And so that will be the journey we will embark on

in this book, to discover practical Christian living in a way that will challenge us and change us. As James so simply put it – show me your faith without works and I’ll show you my faith with works. Eventually we will come to his very brief but pointed challenge to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. James shows us the path to daily godly living and spiritual maturity through what Walvoord and Zuck describe as a **“confident stand, compassionate service, careful speech, contrite submission and concerned sharing.”**

If there was one overarching theme to the letter it would be this: real faith produces genuine works. Along the path to maturity there are several essentials.

You must be born again.

You must examine yourself along the way (**Psalms 139:23-24**).

You must obey the Word of God (**James 1:22**).

You must prepare for testing (**Romans 5:3**).

You must measure your spiritual growth by the Word of God (**Ephesians 4:13**).

Maturity helps us to be stable in our faith; it helps us demonstrate intentional love; it produces authentic humility; and creates true patience. That’s where we are headed in our study and what I pray we will learn to apply to our lives.

If there is a takeaway for us as we close our message and consider our study in this book over the weeks to come, it would be my prayer that we learn from the character of James, to follow his example of being a person given to godly living and who was committed to fervent and earnest prayer. Let’s be ready to have our faith challenged and our lives changed.