

JAMES 1:1
WHAT JAMES CAN TEACH US

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
“To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
“Greetings.”¹

Whenever we read the letters of the New Testament, we are likely to hurry through the opening words treating them as unimportant formal details. Letter introductions in the ancient world usually contained more than mere names. They describe the writer and recipients in ways that provide us with clues about the nature and purpose of the letter. Reading carefully, we will be able to learn something about the writer, about the recipients and about the situation each faced and their abilities to address problems.

James makes it clear that he is writing a letter—not a narrative or a theological treatise. Understanding that this is a letter, we are better equipped to evaluate what is written. When we learn who the recipients are, we will be able to assess their situation and needs as they are addressed in the body of the letter. Because this is a letter, the writer will move rapidly from one subject to the next. Understanding these truths, we will be able to apply more accurately the teaching of the letter to modern readers.

Several questions immediately suggest themselves as I read these introductory words of James’ letter. These questions, when properly answered, may well lead to rich blessings that would be otherwise missed. First, it is appropriate to ask the identity of the writer of this letter. Then, we will want to know whatever we can learn about his life and service among the people of the Lord. We will also want to know to whom the letter was addressed. Are the things included in this letter valuable for us who read it today? Are there instructions we need as we review this letter? These are legitimate and practical questions for everyone reading the letter.

In order to understand more fully the message of James during the coming weeks, I believe it beneficial for us to study carefully these opening words of the letter at this time. Join me, then, in weighing the opening verse of the Book of James. As we consider the words James penned, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, I urge us to pray, asking the Master to guide us to discover eternal truths to the praise of His glory.

IDENTIFYING JAMES — “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,” is the introduction the writer of the letter employs. James (*‘Iākōbos*, or Jacob) was a common Hebrew name. There are multiple individuals bearing this particular name in the New Testament. Among the individuals bearing this name were James the son of Zebedee [MARK 1:19, 20], one of the Twelve Apostles and brother of the Apostle John, James the son of Alphaeus, who was also one of the Apostles [MATTHEW 10:3], James the Younger [MARK 15:40], James, the father of the Apostle Judas [LUKE 6:16], and James the half-brother of Jesus, a son of Mary and Joseph [MATTHEW 13:55].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Determining which of the various individuals wrote this letter is not particularly difficult. Whoever “James” was, he was sufficiently well known that he did not need to identify himself beyond giving his name. James the younger is mentioned only in passing, more by reason of the fact that he was the son of Mary, the wife of Clopas, who was present at the crucifixion. And James the father of Judas is named primarily to distinguish his son from Judas Iscariot. This effectively reduces our search for the author to one of three individuals known to us from the New Testament by the name “James.

James, the son of Zebedee, was the first of the Twelve to be martyred for the Faith. He was beheaded in 44 A.D. by Herod Agrippa I [ACTS 12:1,2]. He, together with his brother John, had presumptuously asked the Master for a position of prominence in the Kingdom. They were first cousins to Jesus, their mother being the sister of Mary, and perhaps they thought they deserved by virtue of relationship positions of honour.

When they made their request, Jesus gave them what must have been a surprising prophecy concerning their futures. He asked them, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?” Without thinking, they blustered, “We are able.” They Jesus said, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised” [MARK 10:35-40]. Indeed, the violent death of James fulfilled the dark prophecy Jesus gave. As an interesting aside, an account by Clement of Alexandria (c. 155 to 220) states that when James went on trial for his life, his steadfast testimony led to the conversion of his accuser who, the story goes, was carried off with him to his execution.²

Dying so early in the history of the churches and not being recognised as having accomplished anything of significance beyond the immediate environs of Jerusalem, it is highly unlikely that James the son of Zebedee was the writer of the letter before us.

Nothing certain is known of James the son of Alphaeus. Beyond the Gospels, he is not named. Levi (Matthew) is identified as “the son of Alphaeus” [MARK 2:14], so it is possible that he and James were brothers. For the purpose of our study, it is highly unlikely that this James was the writer of the book before us for the coming weeks.

Of the people named in the earliest books of the New Testament, this leaves James, the son of Mary and Joseph and half-brother of Jesus. There are only two references to James in the Gospels [MATTHEW 13:55; MARK 6:3] where he is named with his brothers. If the order of naming the siblings is indicative of age, James would have been the eldest of the half-brothers of Jesus. He likely was not more than a year or two younger than Jesus, and would have grown up in the home.

During His life in the flesh, the brothers of Jesus did not believe in Him. John writes, “not even His brothers believed in Him” [JOHN 7:5]. Perhaps it was the result of sibling rivalry or perhaps familiarity had dulled His brothers to the need to listen to what He said, but the tragic truth is that being raised in the presence of the Son of God had no immediate effect on Jesus’ half-brothers.

After His resurrection, however, Jesus appeared to James [1 CORINTHIANS 15:7]. It is likely that this appearance resulted in salvation for James. Since “His brothers” are specifically said to have been present in the Upper Room [ACTS 1:14], it is possible that James had been instrumental in bringing each of his brothers (Joses, Jude and Simon) to faith in Jesus as the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

² J. D. Douglas, “James (Person),” article, in Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, **Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 1988) 1090

Sometime after his conversion, James became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem. When Peter was miraculously released from prison, he instructed those meeting for prayer in Mary's home to inform James, together with the brothers, of his release [ACTS 12:17]. It was important that the Pastor of the congregation know what was happening. At the Jerusalem Council, it is James who provides the summary statement [ACTS 15:13-21]. The entire account leads the reader to understand that it is James presiding over the Council and providing direction in the deliberations. Later, when relating his various personal interactions with the Jerusalem church, Paul identifies James as an Apostle [GALATIANS 1:19; 2:9], perhaps in recognition of his leadership. Clearly, Paul saw James as a pillar in that congregation.

James apparently regarded himself as having a special ministry to Jewish Christians. This becomes evident when we see Paul interacting with him in the final journey he would make to Jerusalem. In ACTS 21:17-25, we read, "On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one-by-one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality."

James earned the designation "the Just," according to Hegesippus (c. A.D. 180).³ He received this appellation as the result of his faithful adherence to Jewish Law and his austere lifestyle. Josephus relates that James suffered martyrdom in A.D. 61, when he was stoned under the authority of Albinus following the death of Festus.⁴

So, the writer is James, the brother of Jesus. James identifies himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." I think you will agree that he shows great humility in this introduction. He could have introduced himself as the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem, as an Apostle of the Lord (as Paul acknowledged), or even as the Brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why did he not identify himself as such? James likely was showing that his authority had nothing to do with his physical relationship, but that he was rather appointed because of his spiritual relationship to Jesus.

James introduces himself first as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." His letter will be about this servant-Lord relationship in which all Christians are to persevere. Along the way, true servants of the Lord will have to put their servanthood into practice in the midst of suffering, in choosing their relationship with material wealth, in controlling how they speak and in other life issues James will address.

³ Douglas, *op. cit.*

⁴ Flavius Josephus, Translated by William Whiston, **The Works of Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews**, Book 20, Chapter 9, Section 1 (Hendrickson, Peabody, MASS 1987) 200

At the very start of this letter, James identifies himself as having self-consciously accepted this humble way of life for himself. He is not asserting his position; his identity is already known among the churches. It is only his servanthood to the Lord Jesus Christ that matters to him here, for this is the theme of his letter: How shall we live as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ?

James identifies himself as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Unfortunately, we cannot actually recognise the import of what he wrote because of the dynamic nature of language with the passage of time. In modern English, we make a distinction between “servant” and “slave,” but between these two poles was the concept of a *doûlos*, a bondservant, one who has voluntarily sold himself into slavery.

There are at least four implications in the designation James appropriates to himself. To be a bondservant implies *absolute obedience to the command of the master*. The word of the Master of the bondservant is law and there is no questioning of His commands. To be known as a bondservant implies *absolute humility*. The word speaks of one who thinks not of privileges but of duties, not of rights but of obligations. A bondservant is one who has lost his self in the service of God. Identifying oneself as a bondservant implies *absolute loyalty*. It is the word of the man who has no interests of his own, because what he does, he does for God. His own profit and his own preference do not enter into his calculations; his loyalty is to Him whom he serves.

Yet, at the back of it, this word implies a certain *pride*. Being a “servant of God”—because it is God, the sovereign of the universe whom one serves—also carries great honour. In the Old Testament, this title is applied to the great leaders of the people of Israel, such as Moses [DEUTERONOMY 34:5; I KINGS 8:53], Joshua and Caleb [JOSHUA 24:29] and David [JEREMIAH 33:21]. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are called servants of God [DEUTERONOMY 9:27], as also was Job [JOB 1:8], Isaiah [ISAIAH 20:3], and the prophets [AMOS 3:7; ZECHARIAH 1:6; JEREMIAH 7:25]. Likewise, Paul [ROMANS 1:1] and Peter [2 PETER 1:1] identify themselves as God’s servants. By taking the title *doûlos*, James sets himself in the great succession of those who found their freedom and their peace and their glory in perfect submission to the will of God. The only greatness to which the Christian can ever truly aspire is that of being the slave of God.

Throughout biblical history, divinely appointed servants of God led the people of God. Since an attitude of service is what distinguishes biblical leadership, there is no contradiction between service and leadership. Underscore in your mind that leadership is distinguished through service. Biblical leadership is not through demonstration of power nor in pursuit of power, but it is displayed through seeking opportunity to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Although James’s service was rendered to “God and to the Lord Jesus Christ,” the text could bear the sense of affirming the deity of Christ. It is grammatically possible that James was saying he served “Jesus Christ who is God and Lord,” which would be one of the great affirmations of the deity of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

IDENTIFYING THE TWELVE TRIBES IN THE DISPERSION — James addresses his letter to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” Since James had received a ministry among the Jewish believers, it should not be surprising that he writes to Jewish Christians. Some people have speculated that he is writing to Christians in general as “the Israel of God” [e.g. GALATIANS 6:16]. Others believe he was writing to Jews scattered especially in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire.

I believe the explanation for the recipients of the letter is simpler than that. The mad Rabbi, Saul of Tarsus, initiated the first great persecution against the churches. Following the death of Stephen, the members of the Jerusalem church were scattered. We read, “There arose . . . a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” [ACTS 8:1]. At the time of the first persecution against the church, the estimated membership in the congregation has been estimated to have been in excess of 20,000. All these were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria; but as the persecution spread, they were driven farther and farther away from familiar surroundings.

Wherever these first Christians travelled to escape the ferocious persecutions, they delivered the message that the Messiah had come and that salvation was offered to all who received Him as the One who was to deliver mankind from sin. The Word explains that “those who had been forced to scatter went around proclaiming the Good News of the Word” [ACTS 8:4].⁵ They were partially obedient, just as contemporary Christians are selective obedient to the Word when it comes to evangelising.

Obedience to the command of the Master was wanting at the time. Jesus had commanded His disciples prior to His Ascension, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” [ACTS 1:8]. For almost fourteen years the Jerusalem congregation had obeyed incompletely. Jerusalem and Judea were filled with the knowledge of Jesus the Messiah, but Samaria was ignored and the Gentiles remained unevangelised. Partial obedience is disobedience, and the church was disobedient.

The first great persecution scattered the Christians, compelling them by circumstances to spread the good news of Christ Jesus to the world. Philip, a Deacon appointed to serve in the Jerusalem church, “preached the Good News about the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ” in Samaria, where many people believed the message he declared and were baptised [ACTS 8:12]. Peter and John were summoned to review the work in Samaria, and after confirming all that Philip was doing, they also preached “the Gospel to many villages of the Samaritans” [ACTS 8:25]. At last, the church was moving into the regions God had commanded.

The evangelism was not perfect, there were far too few people such as Philip, for the Word informs us that “those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the Word to no one except Jews” [ACTS 11:19]. These were Jews, and though they had committed themselves to the message of life in Jesus as the Christ, they were trapped within their cultural straitjacket and unwilling to speak to the Gentiles. Nevertheless, “some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene,” upon “coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus” [ACTS 11:20].

These Hellenists were in all likelihood Jews that had adopted Grecian attitudes, dress and mores. Some of them believed and in turn served to open the door to friends and neighbours. However the evangelism occurred, Gentiles for the first time came to faith and at last the advance of the Faith was moving outside of former cultural boundaries. Keep in mind, however, that the churches were at this time predominantly Jewish in culture, though religious Jews would have considered them at best a sect of their religion, and at the worst would have thought these Christians heretical.

⁵ **The NET Bible, First Edition**, Biblical Studies Press (Logos Electronic Edition, 2006)

James likely wrote his book about the time this expansion was taking place. Probably, the dating of the writing, as the dating of the persecution that scattered these Jewish Christians, was in the mid-forties of the First Century A.D. Consequently, because of the time of the writing of the letter, James writes to churches that are predominantly Jewish. His letter reflects a distinctly Jewish view of the Gospel and life. Therefore, he addresses the letter to “the Twelve Tribes in the Dispersion.” The intended recipients were Jewish Christians who were scattered by persecution.

James is writing to Christian Jews [“the Twelve Tribes”] who are “in the Dispersion.” The reference speaks of a literal scattering of these Christians as the result of persecution. James is beginning this letter by telling those suffering Christians: “I know you are persecuted; I know you face various trials; I know you are suffering.” All that James will have to say to his readers is said with this knowledge of their life setting. All that he will have to say to his readers is applicable in the midst of intense suffering.

Imagine the implications, drawing from the actual phrases recorded in the account provided in **ACTS 8:1-3**. Young Christians of Jewish upbringing had become the objects of “a great persecution” by the very ones who had been their leaders in Judaism. Stephen, a loved and respected leader of this Christian movement, had been stoned to death for his faith in Christ. The church “made great lamentation over” Stephen. Meanwhile, Saul was determined to destroy the church and so was “entering house after house” forcibly taking men and women to prison. With all “except the apostles” being driven from Jerusalem, James now writes from there to believers “in the Dispersion.” Certainly among James’s readers are people experiencing confusion, fear, sorrow, injustice, loneliness, poverty, sickness, loss of home and family members and livelihood—in fact, “trials of various kinds,” as he acknowledges right away in **JAMES 1:2**.

What issues were these early Christians facing when they read James’s letter. Would their suffering and uncertainty bring an interruption in their servant-Lord relationship with Jesus Christ? For example, is the fact that you face trials a reason not to be joyful [**JAMES 1:2**]? Should we permit differences in poverty and wealth to cause favoritism [**JAMES 2:1–13**]? Even when experiencing trials, shall we curse other people [**JAMES 3:9**] or grumble against one other [**JAMES 5:9**]? Is personal loss a reason to fight with each other [**JAMES 4:1, 2**]? Because we are ill or because we have other troubles, shall we cease to pray or to trust in God [**JAMES 5:13, 14**]? Even in these “trials of various kinds,” the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ is to continue living the life that James will describe. His burden in writing is this: “Don’t put off your life of faith until times get better. Right now, in the midst of your suffering, is the very time to be putting your servanthood toward Christ into practice.”

“The message of James is clearly applicable for Christians today. When we encounter trials, what do we experience? In most of us there is probably a mixture or succession of reactions: fear (‘what will become of me?’), anger (‘how can they do that to me?’), self-pity (‘won’t somebody feel sorry for me?’), envy of others (‘why aren’t they suffering like I am?’) and confusion (‘why is this happening?’). With these reactions, we often fall into precisely the problems James addresses for his original readers: a jealous focus on material wealth, a selfish neglect of others’ needs, a judgmental spirit and hurtful speech, and a bitter fighting with one another.”⁶

⁶ Cf. George M. Stulac, **James: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series** (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1993), Logos Electronic Edition

While the concept of diaspora speaks of involuntary dispersion, we must recognise that there is also a negative aspect to “the Dispersion,” exile as the result of wandering away from God. The theme of self-deception on the part of the people of God who actually contradict the truth of God is preponderant in the epistle. The Lord remained faithful to his people even in the strange lands into which they had been dispersed, but their estrangement from him caused by their unrepentant sin got them there. Through faith in Christ, believers are no longer friends of the world [cf. JAMES 4:4], but experience a kind of exile existence whether Jew or Gentile.

Thus the theme of “the Dispersion,” *diaspora*, governs the entire letter. Indeed, the closing verse of the letter emphasises the return to God from wandering in sin. “My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” [JAMES 5:19, 20]. But all of God’s people share together the experience of exile, where trials and temptations are characteristic of the life of faith. Only through the profound wisdom and leading of God can they and will they endure.⁷ The need to equip believers to stand firm in times of disorientation is reason enough for us to study this letter during coming months.

GREETINGS — Modern Christians lack a sound theology of suffering. James would say, “Your trial is not the time to rejoice less. Your sickness is not the time to pray less. Your loss is not the time to love others less. Rather, now is the very time to practice the joy, peace and love that we know theoretically to be the Christian life. For the Christian life is not mere theory; it is the life of the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Therefore it must have been of more than perfunctory significance to James when he told his readers, “Greetings.” The word is *chairein*: “Joy be to you.” Yes, joy! Even though you are scattered among the nations and facing trials of many kinds, do not be robbed of your joy. This joy in the midst of trial becomes the first major topic of James’s letter.

Modern Christians live immersed in a culture of privilege. We anticipate that we have some sort of divine mandate that we will never experience any negative consequences to our choices. We seem convinced that problems are never our own fault and that someone will bail us out when we have difficulties. If we build our house on a flood plain, and floods destroy our house, the government will rebuild us a new house. We live lives of excess, and when the consequences of our senescent, immoderate lifestyle results in health problems, we demand that the medical system provide a cure, restoring us to health—instantly! Many professing Christians believe that they should never hear anything negative from the pulpit; they demand affirming, saccharine, cloying sentiments that make them feel good about themselves.

Unfortunately, life is not like that. Trials do come; there are consequences to every decision. Bad things do happen to good people. When trials come, we can either respond as does the rest of the world, or we can rejoice that God has not deserted us, and that our times are in His hands. We can rejoice that He permits nothing to come into our lives that will not result in glory to His Name and ultimately be turned to our good. This is our confession, “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” [ROMANS 8:28].

⁷ See Kurt A. Richardson, **The New American Commentary: James, vol. 36** (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, TN 1997) 52

James writes a letter filled with practical theology designed to make faith real. Heeding the teaching provided by this gifted servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ equips each believer to live a holy, godly life in the midst of a world gone mad emphasising self-gratification and in which each individual places himself or herself at the centre of his or her existence. Indeed, through learning and applying the lessons James teaches, each of us will be equipped to rejoice in the midst of every trial, using even the inevitable and sorrowful dispersion of the faithful to the praise of Christ's glory.

Dear people, the Apostle to the Gentiles delivered a message that is not often welcomed, but which is absolutely necessary for steadfast living in a hostile world. The Apostle taught new Christians that "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God" [ACTS 14:22]. If I stroke your egos and tell you pleasant things, when the hard times come you will be unprepared. If, however, I tell you what is right and true, equipping you to live godly and holy lives, you will be prepared to honour the One you call Lord and Saviour.

One can almost hear the disappointment, even the disgust, in Isaiah's voice when he confronted the wicked demands of the people of his day,

"They are a rebellious people,
lying children,
children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the LORD;
who say to the seers, 'Do not see,'
and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,'
leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.'"

[ISAIAH 30:9-11]

Just as James calls himself "a servant of God and Christ," so Christians must remember that the greatest in God's Kingdom is the one who serves [see MARK 10:42-45]. Like James's original readers, we also are scattered throughout the world. We live in whatever country God has placed us in, but our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. James reminds us not to be too comfortable in the world.

I long for Christians to stand firm in the Faith once for all delivered to the saints. However, there will be no standing in the Faith if there is no accurate teaching of the Faith. Neither will there be any hope of standing firm if the foundation is not firm. Therefore, I am unapologetic in declaring that the only firm foundation for us as Christians is Christ and His holy Word.

Do you have faith in Jesus as the Son of God? Have you been born from above and into His Kingdom? Do you know that He died because of your sin and that He was raised for your justification? The Word of God calls each one to life, saying, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." It also declares, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe and be saved. Amen.