

Brother of Jesus, Slave of Jesus—James 1:1
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Have you ever received a letter from someone (or an email, or a phone call) that just infuriated you? Maybe the person was communicating some kind of constructive criticism or a loving rebuke. But you didn't want to hear it, at least at first. You felt like the rebuke was unfounded. I don't need critique. I don't need correction. I'm doing very well on my own, thank you very much! But then you begin to think about those words more carefully, and humbly, and you remember that the person who wrote them or spoke them, is someone who loves you very much. And then the words begin to have their effect. Even though it's painful to receive that reproof, you know it was given in love for your good. And therefore you begin to take it to heart.

The letter of James that we are beginning to study together, is a letter that is filled with things that are going to be difficult to hear. Our prideful self-righteousness will cause us to be infuriated at some of things written in this letter. We'll want to disregard it, ignore it, say that it's for someone else to hear. My hope and prayer, though, is that we will see that these things were written out of love for us. They were written for our good. And we are foolish to look at this letter and not take it to heart.

We need to realize that as James wrote this letter, he did it out of love for those who would read it. And more importantly, as God spoke through James, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, He speaks to us in love, wanting us to flee from sin and pursue holiness.

This morning I want us to learn some things about this letter that we have before us. This letter that may infuriate us in ways, but hopefully will then sanctify us. I want us to learn about this man James, who wrote the letter. I want us to learn about his relationship to the Lord. And I want us to learn about the original recipients of this letter. And so I'll address three questions. First of all, who is James? Secondly, who does he belong to? And finally, who received this letter?

James 1:1 "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."

In this short introduction to his letter, James identifies himself, identifies his readers, and extends a warm greeting.

Who is James?

Our first question, then, is "Who is James?" Who is *this* James? We have to ask this question because there are 4 (possibly 5) men by the name of James in the New Testament. Three of them are named in one verse alone, in Acts 1:13, "And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and *James* and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, *James* the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of *James*." The last James mentioned in that verse, the father of Judas, is only mentioned in order to distinguish that Judas from Judas Iscariot. He is not the writer of this letter. James the son of Alphaeus, although one of the apostles, was not well-known and therefore would have needed to identify himself further if he had written a letter to the churches. He is also referred to as James the younger in Mark 15:40, although some scholars think that is another James.

That's why I say there are 4 (possibly 5) different men named James in the New Testament. So far we've eliminated 2 (or 3) as the possible author of this letter.

James the son of Zebedee, who is the first James mentioned in that verse, is someone we might expect to write a letter like this. He was part of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Peter, James and John were the privileged ones to witness the transfiguration (Mark 9:2), and they were the only ones allowed in to see Jesus raise Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37). This James was certainly well-known among the early Christians. However, he was martyred by Herod in Acts 12:2, relatively early on, and it's unlikely that this letter was written before then.

This leaves James the brother of Jesus, who was a key leader in the early church. Paul refers to him as the Lord's brother in Galatians 1:19. He is mentioned in the context of Jesus' earthly ministry, when Jesus' brothers still did not believe in Him (John 7:5). But then Jesus appeared to James after His resurrection. Paul tells us this in 1 Corinthians 15:7. And then James became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church. He spoke at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and participated in sending a letter from that council to the Gentile believers. There are even some literary similarities between James' words recorded in Acts 15 and the letter of James, which also suggest that this James is the writer of the New Testament letter that bears his name. This James was so well-known that, even though his was a common name, he could identify himself simply as James, and the churches would have known who the letter was from.

We might wonder, though, Why doesn't he mention that he's the brother of Jesus? That might have been helpful, in case there was any doubt in their mind about who the letter was from. And it also would seem to be the trump card that would settle any issue that someone might have with James' teaching. James could have bolstered his authority if he began his letter by identifying himself as the brother of Jesus.

But James didn't refer to his *physical* kinship with Jesus because that's not most important. What matters is a person's *spiritual* relationship with Jesus. It didn't matter that James was from the same physical family as Jesus. What mattered was his spiritual relationship to Jesus.

Do you remember at the end of Matthew 12 when Jesus' mother and brothers were looking for Him and Jesus said, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" At that point James was a physical brother of Jesus, but not yet a true brother. There was a physical kinship, but not a spiritual kinship.

Can you imagine growing up in the same home as Jesus? Some of us may have had "perfect" siblings (at least in our parents' eyes), but in this case it was really true. James grew up with an older brother who was sinless and perfect. But, still, he couldn't see it. He couldn't see that—mystery of mysteries and wonder of wonders—the long-awaited Messiah, the God-Man, was dwelling with him under the same roof. Doesn't this show us our depravity and our spiritual blindness? People may say, If I was there to see Jesus walk on the water and feed the 5,000 . . . If I was there to see Him come out of the tomb, then I would believe. No you wouldn't! Not unless God opens up the eyes of your heart to see the truth of the Gospel. James grew up living in the same home as Jesus, and he didn't know what was going on. Until Jesus revealed Himself to James after the resurrection.

This is also a reminder that no one should assume they're a Christian simply because their parents are Christians, or they have a brother or sister who is a Christian. God doesn't have any grandchildren, or nieces or nephews, or sons-in-law or daughters-in-law. He has sons and daughters who have a personal spiritual relationship with Him. James doesn't mention his physical relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, because that was insignificant in light of his spiritual relationship to the Lord. He doesn't identify himself as the brother of Jesus. Instead, he says he is "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Who does he belong to?

This leads us to the next question, "Who does he belong to?" We figured out who this James is. But what else does he say about himself? How else does he identify himself? What does he say about who he belongs to? He writes very simply and profoundly, that he is "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Last week I talked about the significance of the fact that he calls himself a slave. He acknowledges that he belongs wholly to God and to the Lord Jesus Christ. This morning I want to say more about this God and this Lord to whom James belongs.

Let's look through the letter, first of all, at some of the references to God. Let's see what James says about God, and what God, Himself, is revealing to us about His own nature. In 1:5 we see that God generously gives wisdom to any who ask for it. In verse 12 God has promised the crown of life to those who love him. In verse 13 we learn of God's holiness, that He is not tempted with evil, and He tempts no one. Verse 17 tells us that everything good comes from the Father, and it also speaks of His unchanging nature. In the next verse it's by His own will that we are born again. Verse 20 reveals that God has a righteous standard: "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires." In 2:5 we see God's love for the poor: "has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" Later in chapter 2 James affirms the truth that God is one. This is a fundamental truth of Christianity, that there is one God, and only one God.

In chapter 4 James boldly rebukes us, "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (v. 4). This may be a difficult verse to understand, if you think that God has no enemies. God does have enemies, and if you are buddy-buddy with the world, if you love the world, if you are living like the world, then you are one of God's enemies. And God will judge His enemies. God is the Judge, as 4:12 tells us, and he "is able to save and to destroy." God is just and righteous and holy, and He will punish sin.

And He is also gracious. Verse 6 of chapter 4 says, "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" God is gracious. He will not destroy everyone, even though everyone deserves to be destroyed. He showers His grace upon the humble. He draws near to us when we draw near to Him (verse 8). He exalts those who humble themselves before Him (verse 10). He is compassionate and merciful (5:11).

There is so much that we learn about God in this letter, and this all informs our understanding of James' opening line: "a slave of God." This is the God to whom James is enslaved. A holy and righteous God, who is unchanging, who is a just judge, and who is also gracious and compassionate and merciful.

But James doesn't identify himself as a slave of God only, but also "of the Lord Jesus Christ." He, of course, is referring to the man who was known as Jesus of Nazareth. But James calls Him "Lord" and "Christ." We have to remember that Christ is not Jesus' last name. It means Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises concerning this Anointed One who would come to rescue God's people. Peter makes a similar confession in Acts 2:36, where he says, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

James refers to Jesus again in 2:1, "our Lord Jesus Christ," and then he adds, "the Lord of glory." In several other places James uses "Lord" to refer to God the Father, but in 5:7-8 he speaks of the coming of the Lord, meaning Jesus Christ. And in verse 9 of that passage he refers to Jesus as the Judge who is standing at the door. So there's an interesting thing going on here. God the Father is the Lord and Judge. And Jesus Christ is also the Lord and Judge. It's in statements like these that the mystery of the Trinity is revealed. There is one God. And we're also seeing here that Jesus Christ is God, just as the Father is God. And as we look at biblical revelation as a whole, we understand that there is, indeed, one God. And there are three persons within the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is one of the wonderful and unique mysteries of the Christian faith, and it is alluded to here in James' statement that he is a slave both of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The full deity of Christ is such a crucial truth, and I don't want to assume that everyone here knows this. The full deity of Christ means that Jesus is God. He is not God, Jr. He is not a deity on a slightly lower level than God. He is not just some kind of Superman. Jesus Christ is very God of very God, as the Nicene Creed says.

And this is essential to our salvation. Don't ignore this, thinking it's just some abstract theological point. The fact that Jesus Christ is fully God is essential to our salvation. Let me tell you why. If Jesus is anything less than God, then He is not able to atone for our sin. Only the God-Man could die as the substitute for sinners. He had to be infinite in order to bear God's wrath against sin, because sin is an infinite offense against God. This is why unforgiven sin is punished in hell, not for 1,000 years or even 100,000 years, but for eternity. Therefore, it is utterly impossible for anyone less than an infinite being to be the substitute for sinners.

This is why the Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults and false religions are totally bankrupt, because they deny that Jesus Christ is equal with the Father. And as soon as you deny the deity of Christ, you deny the truth that Christ can fully atone for sin. And then it becomes a system of works. If Christ can't pay the full penalty for my sin, then somehow I have to make up the difference. And so it becomes a works-based religion.

But Jesus Christ IS God! He is the perfect God-Man, fully God and fully man. And He died on the cross and suffered the infinite wrath of God against sin. And He rose on the third day, triumphant over sin and death. And for all who trust in Him, their sins are forgiven—completely forgiven. Not partially, not 99%, but entirely. So cling to this truth of Christ's deity. Marvel at it. And when you're talking to a Jehovah's Witness, or someone of another religion, help them see that their only hope of salvation is the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

Who is the letter written to?

We come to the second half of this greeting, and James identifies who he is writing to. “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” It’s debated whether this is a literal reference to Jewish Christians who had been scattered outside of Palestine, or if it’s a metaphor referring to all Christians who are exiles in the world (which is how it’s used in 1 Peter 1:1). I don’t think it’s necessary to choose one and deny the other. I think it most likely is a reference to early Jewish Christians who had been dispersed because of persecution. The twelve tribes is a way of referring to the Jewish people, and the Dispersion is the nations outside of Palestine. Acts 11:19 records, “Now those who were scattered (that’s the same root word as “Dispersion”) because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch . . .” So we’re talking about Jewish Christians who had to flee from Palestine because of persecution. James writes his letter to these saints who were undergoing hardships and trials and were seeking to remain faithful to the Lord in various ungodly places.

But the letter is not only applicable to those Jewish Christians of the early church. It has application for all those who make up the church, the people of God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. This is what the twelve tribes refers to ultimately. And in a spiritual sense we have been scattered throughout this foreign land called, “the world.” And as we read and study this letter, we will apply it to our lives in so many ways. Like those early believers who feared persecution, we also will be encouraged to remain steadfast under trial. Whatever the trial is that you are going through right now, there is great reason to “count it all joy.” And like those early believers who faced temptations and were in danger of being friends of the world, this letter will warn us and rebuke us and spur us on to greater holiness.

As with any biblical book, it’s helpful to understand the letter of James in its original context. And from there we can make application for ourselves. God’s Word is such an amazing gift! It was written so long ago, but the truth it contains is not limited by time or culture. And it will have its impact on our lives just as it did on the lives of those early Christians.

In this greeting James identifies himself, and then identifies the recipients of the letter. And then he gives a one word greeting. The Greek word is *chairein*. It’s from the verb *chairō*, which means “rejoice” or “be glad.” In the infinitive form it is a standard greeting. I point this out because there’s a link between the greeting and the instruction of the letter that begins immediately in the next verse. Verse 2 says, “Count it all joy.” The word for joy is *charan*, which has a similar sound and a similar meaning to *chairein*, “Greetings.” Next week we’ll consider that passage on joy in the midst of trials.

I hope you see that this is a letter from someone who loves you. James had a great deal of compassion for his fellow believers as he penned these words, and the reason he is so bold in many places is because of his love. More importantly, God is showing His love for us by sending us this letter. He has not left us to ourselves. He has revealed Himself and His will and His commands, so that we can know Him and know how to live for His glory. These instructions will hurt. They may infuriate us at times. But they come to us in love, for our good. May we receive this letter humbly and truly take it to heart.