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What You Need to Know About the Book of James

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BOOK OF JAMES

INTRODUCTION: Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Theological Seminary often said that when one reads this book, he or she has the uneasy feeling that James had been reading his/her mail! Be that as it may, here is a quick overview of this intensely practical epistle.

This book offers sound advice for practical Christian living, examining such issues as prayer, steadfastness in trial, impartiality, demonstrating one's saving faith in God by one's service for God, proper control of the tongue, overcoming worldliness, and finally, exhortation to practice patience while awaiting the return of Jesus!

BOTTOM LINE SUMMARY

This New Testament book is the "Proverbs" and "Amos" of the Old Testament.

The book of James aptly fits this description:

- The book of Proverbs, because of its pithy, practical, and pointed counsel regarding the importance of harmonizing one's walk with one's talk!
- The book of Amos, because of its uncompromising "in your face" rebuke of sin and hypocrisy!

FACTS REGARDING THE AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK

1. Who? **James.** He was Jesus' half-brother (Matt. 13:55), an unbeliever (Jn. 7:5) until the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), who later pastored the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:13- 21; 21:17, 18), and authored the first New Testament book.
2. What? The book of James
3. When and where? 45 A.D., from Jerusalem
4. Why? To properly sort out works and grace
5. To whom? "To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"

KEY EVENTS

1. Trusting God in the midst of trials; the wonders of God's Word
2. Godless favoritism and godly faith
3. The blessings and blight of the human tongue
4. The pollution in and solution for the human heart
5. Warning the rich and exhorting the rest

KEY INDIVIDUALS

1. **James**, younger half-brother of Jesus, pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and author of the Book of James

2. **Abraham**, who offered up Isaac, referred to by James to illustrate that one's faith in God if genuine will be demonstrated by one's fruit (works) for God
3. **Rahab**, who sheltered two Israelite spies in Jericho, referred to by James to illustrate that one's faith in God, if genuine, will be demonstrated by one's fruit (works) for God
4. **Job**, referred to by James to illustrate the importance of godly patience
5. **Elijah**, referred to by James to illustrate the importance of earnest prayer

KEY PLACES

1. **Mt. Moriah**: the place where Abraham offered up his son Isaac, referred to here in James to emphasize the importance of good works to validate one's true faith
2. **Jericho**: home of Rahab the harlot, referred to by James to emphasize the importance of good works to validate one's true faith
3. **Mt. Carmel**: where Elijah's prayer for rain was answered, referred to here by James to emphasize the importance of earnest prayer

UNIQUE FEATURES

1. James' epistle is perhaps the earliest in the New Testament, dated around A.D. 45. The synagogue is mentioned as the place of meeting, rather than the church (see 2:2). It was thus written when the church was still in the circle of Judaism.
2. It is the most Jewish book in the New Testament. M. F. Unger writes: "If the several passages referring to Christ were eliminated, the whole epistle would be as proper in the canon of the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. In fact, the epistle could be described as an interpretation of the Old Testament law and the Sermon on the Mount in the light of the Gospel of Christ" (*Unger's Bible Handbook*, p. 783).
3. The Greek language of James is of the highest quality.
4. It is the only New Testament book specifically addressed to the 12 tribes (1:1).
5. James gives God's present-day plan for healing (5:13-18).
6. The epistle provides the most graphic discussion regarding the power of the tongue for good or evil in all the Bible (chapter 3).
7. The absence of key great doctrines in James such as the death and resurrection of Christ caused some to question its right to the canon for awhile. Martin Luther referred to it as "a right strawy epistle."
8. James condemns the greedy rich in some of the most scathing terms found in the Bible (1:10, 11; 5:1-6).
9. He also warns concerning
 - The uncertainty of this life (4:13-15)
 - Partiality (2:1-13)
10. James, like Jesus, loved to use Old Testament characters and the realm of nature as illustrations. Note:
 - Old Testament characters
 - Abraham (2:21)

- Isaac (2:21)
- Rahab (2:25)
- Job (5:11)
- Elijah (5:17)

Realm of nature

- Wind-tossed waves of the sea (1:6)
 - Withering grass and fading flowers (1:10-11)
 - Fire (3:5)
 - Fountains of water (3:11)
 - Figs and olives (3:12)
 - Sowing and harvesting (3:18)
 - Early and latter rains (5:7)
 - Drought (5:17)
11. Some have imagined a contradiction between James and Paul. Martin Luther believed this, and referred to the book as “a right strawy epistle!” James wrote: “*Ye see, then, that by works a man is justified and not by faith only*” (2:24). Paul wrote: “*For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works: lest any man should boast*” (Eph. 2:8-9). Luther and others were, of course, wrong on this conclusion. There is no contradiction here. Note:
 - Paul speaks of justification before God
 - James describes justification before people
 - We are justified by faith, says Paul
 - We are justified for works, says James
 - Paul is interested in the root of justification
 - James is concerned about the fruit of justification
 - It was John Calvin who said: “Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.”
 - Furthermore, on occasion Paul stresses works (1 Tim. 6:18; Titus 3:18; Eph. 2:10), while James emphasizes faith (James 2:5)
 12. The terms *religion* and *religious* appear only five times in the entire Bible. Of these instances, three are found in James’ epistle:
 - James 1:26 (twice)
 - James 1:27
 13. The usage of religion in 1:27 is the only reference in Scripture where it is used in a positive way.
 14. James was the oldest half brother of Jesus (Mk. 6:3; Mt. 13:55). He was the full brother of Jude, who wrote the book of Jude.
 15. James was an unbeliever prior to the Resurrection (Jn. 7:3-10).
 16. James then appeared in the Upper Room awaiting Pentecost (Acts 1:13).
 17. He became the first pastor of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 12:17; 15:13; Gal. 2:1, 9-10, 12). “He was known as an unusually good man, and was surnamed ‘the Just’ by his

countrymen. It is said that he spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they became hard and callused like a camel's knees. He is thought to have been married" (1 Cor. 9:5). (*Halley's Bible Handbook*, p. 657).

18. Like Jude, James does not "pull his rank" by pointing out the physical relationship between himself and Christ. He simply refers to himself as a "servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).
19. James met Paul during his (Paul's) first trip to Jerusalem after his Damascus Road conversion (Gal. 1:18-19).
20. He also conferred with Paul during the Apostle's last trip to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18-25).
21. Tradition says that shortly before Jerusalem was destroyed, when many Jews were accepting Christ, Annas the high priest assembled the Sanhedrin and commanded James publicly to renounce Christ as Israel's Messiah. Upon his refusal, he was thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple and stoned to death as he lay dying from the fall.
22. James was one of two Bible authors before whom the resurrected Christ made a personal appearance. Peter was the other (see 1 Cor. 15:5, 7).

COMPARISON WITH OTHER BIBLE BOOKS

1. Proverbs:

- Though James is a letter, with its many wise sayings its tone is similar to that of Proverbs.

2. Hebrews:

- Both are written to Jewish Christians. Hebrews emphasizes doctrine; James emphasizes the deeds that grow out of doctrine.

TITLES FOR AND TYPES OF JESUS

1. Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)
2. The Lord of Glory (2:1)
3. Lord (5:8)
4. The Judge (5:9)

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