

James - Background and Overview

“My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” James 5:19-20 NIV

“Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only” James 1:22

Who is James?

There are 4 James' mentioned in the New Testament:

1. one of the sons of Zebedee: **Mt 4:21; 10:2.**
2. the son of Alphaeus (two of the 12 apostles: **Mk 3:13-19.**
3. James the son of Mary and Cleopas, cp. **Mk 15:40; Jn 19:25.**
4. James of **Acts 12-15; 21**, “the Lord’s brother”: **Gal 1:19.**

The Lord’s brother:

James is mentioned only twice in the gospels in the list of Mary’s other children, where he appears as the next eldest to Jesus: **Mt 13:54-56; Mk 6:3.** Mary had other children beside her firstborn: **Mt 1:25; Mt 12:46-50; Jn 2:12.** At first, his brethren did not believe in him: **Jn 7:28; Ps 69:7-8.** However they were afterwards known as his disciples: **Acts 1:14.** Like Paul, James was converted by the revelation of the risen Lord: **1 Cor 15:7.** However, James never sought importance as a result of being Jesus’ half brother. He knew that God is “no respecter of persons”: **Jas 2:1-9.** He was therefore content to be known as “the bondservant of Jesus Christ”: **Jas 1:1.** He was now “a brother” because he did “the will of my Father in Heaven”: **Mt 12:47-50.** James is distinguished from “the 12” in **1 Cor 15:7.**

His Character and Influence:

His home life imbued him with a love of the law, the prophets, and particularly the **Proverbs** which appealed to his practical character. The **power of his message** is greatly enhanced when we **meditate on the Proverbs** he alludes to. Make this a priority. James is strong and forceful, earnest and sincere, yet not lacking warmth. His deep Hebrew qualities show in the Hebraic tone of his Epistles. His epistle is written particularly to Jews. Josephus records his death by stoning by the Jews about AD62.

At the time of Paul’s visit to Jerusalem (AD35-36) James is an important figure: **Acts 9:26-30; Gal 1:18-20.** His leadership in the Judean ecclesia (AD44) was recognised by Peter in **Acts 12:17.** He was called by Paul a “pillar of the ecclesia”: **Gal 2:9.** Note how Paul says “when certain came from James” implying the use of his name as an authority: **Gal 2:12.** He was the President of the Jerusalem Council: **Acts 15:13-21.** Here his summary showed understanding of the problems, his perception of the truth, and the tact in meeting Jewish objections. On his last visit to Jerusalem, Paul still singles James out as leader of the Ecclesia (AD57): **Acts 21:18.** Jude records his brother as evidence of his identity and authority: **Jude v1.**

When and to whom was James written?

Written to the *Diaspora*, the Jews scattered in every segment of the Roman Empire: **Acts 2:5-11; 15:21.** James as the leader of the predominantly Jewish ecclesia would be well informed of the condition of the Jewish Christians in dispersion who, like their Judean brethren, were “zealous of the law”: **Acts 21:20.** James makes no mention of Gentiles, either in or out of the ecclesia.

Prepared for Study Week 2012 - Listen to Live. A PDF file can be downloaded from www.studyweek.net or by email from acdangerfield@webshield.net.au. The first half of this summary sheet has been compiled using the notes by John Martin (Scripture Study Service) as a basis.

Context of writing - Reasons for the Epistle:

No mention of Gentiles, suggesting a very early date. The death of Stephen in **Acts 7** was a major event that scattered believers: **Acts 8:1.** The area in which believers were scattered, particularly Asia Minor, was generally very wealthy - a whole new trial in itself.

1. Believers facing persecution and hardships imposed by influential and wealthy fellow Jews: **James 1:2,12; 2:6-7; 5:1-6.**
2. Faults among converts, eg. evil speaking: **James 3:13; 4:8.**
3. Rich element in the ecclesia, covetousness: **1:10; 4:13-17.**
4. Tendency to think that a passive faith was all sufficient without living the truth in their lives: **James 1:26-27; 2:14-26.**

Similar expressions to those of Jesus (Metaphor / Simile)

Storms: **1:6; 3:4;** Flowers, grass: **1:10;** God’s gifts: **1:17;** Springs: **3:11;** Olive, vines, figs: **3:12;** Fruit, sowing: **3:18;** Vapours: **4:14;** Former / latter rains: **5:7;** Winds, drought: **1:11; 5:17-18.**

Comparison with the Epistle of Peter:

Peter was also writing to Jews: **James 3:13** (cp. **1 Pet 2:12**); **4:1** (cp. **1 Pet 2:11**); **5:20** (cp. **1 Pet 4:8**); **1:2-4** (cp. **1 Pet 1:6-7**); **1:18,21** (cp. **1 Pet 1:22; 2:3**); **4:6-10** (cp. **1 Pet 5:5-9**). The epistle is strongly Hebraistic and is similar to the OT prophets: **James 5:1** (cp. **Joel 1:5**); **4:13; 5:1-2** (cp. **Amos 8:5,10**).

The heart and soul of James’ epistle is the Life of Christ:

The whole reason for the epistle being written is that we come to **KNOW Jesus Christ** and **LIVE** like him. Jesus is the greatest example of **endurance under trial and temptation.** When studying James, **continually compare it** to teachings of Jesus. The **greatest power** in his epistle is **how it relates to Jesus’ life** (eg. **1 Pet 2:17-24**). James has more allusions to Jesus’ sayings than all other epistles. **Examples:** **James 5:12** (cp. **Mt 5:34-37**); **5:2,3,5** (cp. **Mt 6:19**); **5:9; 4:11-12** (cp. **Mt 7:1**); **1:22** (cp. **Mt 7:24**); **2:5** (cp. **Lk 6:20**). May be up to 80 links, half being from **Matt 5-7.**

The lives of Elijah and Job are fundamental to this epistle:

Why conclude with Elijah in **James 5:17-20**? Why also conclude the Old Testament with Elijah, and speak about the same things - **conversion, repentance and forgiveness**? In **5:17-20** James refers to **1 Kings 17:1.** In **1 Kings 17** we see Elijah visiting the **fatherless** and a **widow** in their affliction. So why did God ask Elijah to go to a widow at Zarephath? Because Elijah was a teacher, an instructor of Israel - very useful, but his character was not complete. He had to learn **to become a father.** So God sends him to look after a young boy who had lost his Dad. And also to a widow who had lost her husband. This was a part of his character development. To make him more like God - a father and carer.

What better way to conclude but to refer to a man who is like us (“like passions as we are”) who learnt his lesson. We know he learnt, because when Elijah was taken in a storm, Elisha cries “my Father my Father”: **2 Kgs 2:12.** Elijah became a father to this young man Elisha. Fathers are very forgiving of their children.

So what is the lesson? To forgive others rather than condemn. This is **a major problem** James deals with in his epistle. Elijah wanted to judge Israel. He learnt that God wants to save people not destroy them. Elijah is coming again to turn people’s hearts.

The final verses of James and the OT speak of forgiveness. And also of our role in assisting that - rather than condemning. That’s the way we overcome the poison of the tongue, the wars and fighting in ecclesias, showing partiality and speaking “evil of one another”. There’s the lesson of James. Notice also that the other character in **James 5** is **Job.** As a wonderful type of Christ, Job prayed for his friends: **Job 42:5-10.** There’s **the solution** to all the problems James confronts in his epistle.

Key Theme: “Doers of the Word and not hearers only”

This is **the dominant theme** of the book, and summarised in **James 1:22.** God’s word must be the underlying force behind our actions. Fruits on a tree bear the characteristics of the tree which produced them. Jesus Christ is the vine and we are the branches: **Jn 15:1-5.** We must produce fruit: **Gal 5:22-25.** Good fruit comes as a result of deep soil, strong roots, and constant tending of the plant: **Isa 11:1-5; Mk 4:1-9; Rev 22:16.** Care for the fatherless and widows is a classic example of **living the Word.** It is the very character of God himself: **Deut 24:19; Ps 35:10; 72:4,12, 13; 82:3-4; 113:7; 146:9; Isa 10:2; 41:17; Mal 3:5.**

If we are not doers of the Word, James says we “deceive our own selves”. This literally means “deception through bad logic” or “reasoning yourselves away” (Roth). An excellent exposition on “the deceitfulness of sin” by John Carter is in **Unity in Australia (the Unity Book) p.30:** “Sin leaves its mark upon the individual... It is because sin has a peculiarly blinding effect upon us. Sin distorts the view of righteousness. Sin deceives. The more a man becomes familiar with it as performing and yielding himself to it, so he becomes less aware of the real character of sin... It is one of the most striking of the moral laws of God, that the more a man knows of sin the less he is aware of it.”

The answer to overcoming sin is given in **James 1:25** - to look into “the perfect law of liberty”. This law promises freedom from sin and death because of the mercy it offers in Jesus Christ: **Jn 8:32; Gal 5:1; Jas 2:13.** This is a **continuous** process of **self-examination and meditation** upon **the life of Jesus Christ.**

Faith and Works - The Reformation of the 1500’s:

Below is a historical account about Bible believers in the 1500’s. This summarises beautifully the radical but Scriptural nature of Christadelphian doctrine on faith and works. Many of these Anabaptists held the same beliefs as Christadelphians. The natural outworking of Christ-like faith in believers resulted in them being conscientious objectors. Faith seen in Action!

“The Radical side of the Reformation - The typical Anabaptist would agree with the doctrine of justification by faith, but would say that one’s faith should be demonstrated by one’s actions. In other words, real saving faith in Christ will demonstrate itself in tangible ways in the life of the true believer. Because they were different in how they approached their faith, and because their approach to religion was well outside what was legally recognised in Europe, the Anabaptists were subject at times to severe persecution. And, according to their own beliefs, there was nothing they could do about that persecution, other than to see it as a fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that opposition would come to those who lived for him.” **Bell & Sumner: “The Reformation and Protestantism”**