

“Be Happy!”

James 1:1-4

An Expository Sermon

by David Roper

Through the years there have been varied reactions to the book of James. Some have not cared for the book. It contradicted Luther’s doctrine of “salvation by faith only,” so he called it “a right strawy Epistle, for it has no true evangelical character.” Some modern critics have dismissed it as a Jewish work, crudely altered by dishonest Christians in the second or third century. And, for reasons not completely clear to me, it has been one of the most neglected books in the New Testament—even by our own brethren.

But it is a marvelous book. Barclay says that when he started his commentary on James, he approached the book as a duty and found it a joy. J.W. Roberts called it “one of the finest and richest works of the New Testament.” A.T. Robertson said that it is “a little gem in conception and expression.” George W. Bailey notes that it can be read in a few minutes but thought of for a lifetime.

When one begins to study the book, he finds there are many interesting things about it. For instance, there is its style. It has been called “The Christian Book of Proverbs,” since it moves quickly from one topic to another. Further, it achieves continuity by the use of an interesting literary device.¹ A word at the end of one clause is repeated at the first of the next clause (see 1:2-6). Then there is its distinctly Jewish flavor because it refers to such things as the twelve tribes (1:1), the synagogue (2:2), the Law (2:11), and Old Testament worthies (2:21, 25; 5:17), while it still remains Christian to the core, with at least fifteen direct and indirect references to Christ and dozens of cross-references between James and the other writers of the New Testament.²

Of course the *most* interesting thing is that the book of James *is inspired of God* and given by Him to help *us* (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). I hope you enjoy our study together.

I. JAMES WANTS US TO BE HAPPY (1:1).

The first verse is introductory: “James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion, Greeting.” To make our lesson practical, let me summarize the verse by saying, “James wants us to be happy.” The verse contains three parts: the author, those to whom it was written, and the salutation.

The author does not identify himself beyond calling himself “James.” Apparently, he was well-known and felt that this was sufficient for identification. Assuming this to be true and that he would, therefore, be mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, we determine which James he was by the process of elimination.

Only four James are mentioned in the New Testament. Two can be eliminated because they were *not* well-known: James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot) (Luke 6:16) and the apostle James, son of Alphaeus (Mark 15:40)—also called James the Less. A third James—the apostle who was the son of Zebedee and brother of John—was well-known, but can be eliminated because he died a martyr’s death under Herod Agrippa I very early—before the year A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2).

So who is left? James, the Lord’s half brother, who became a “pillar” of the church at Jerusalem, is the writer. As you go through the book of James, everything *fits* with what we know of this James. I should probably hasten to say that identifying the exact James has nothing to do with the authenticity of the book or the fact that it is from God, but it is a matter of some interest. For the reasons I have given, most conservative scholars believe that the book *was* written by James, the half brother of Jesus, and that will be our assumption from this point on.

James, the Lord’s half brother, would have written from a unique vantage point. Stay with me for a few minutes as I survey his life. It is a thrilling story as he moves from unbelief to faith.

The little home at Nazareth was well-filled. Later, when Jesus came home, the people asked: "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?" (Matthew 13:55, 56).

Joseph, Mary, Jesus, four brothers, and at least two sisters—that made at least nine people in that humble home. Of course, James and the other brothers and sisters were only *half* brothers and half sisters of Jesus since they had the same mother (Mary), but not the same father (God was Jesus' father; Joseph was the father of the rest).

Since James is always listed first in the list of Jesus' half brothers, he was probably the oldest, next to Jesus. So think of him as just a little younger than Jesus and growing up in the same environment: the synagogue school, the visits to Jerusalem, the carpenter shop. It also might not be out of the way to think of that touch of resentment that the second oldest often feels for the oldest.

Basically, however, there seems to be congeniality in the family circle, even when Jesus left home to start preaching (for instance, John 2:12 mentions the family circle at Capernaum). *But then* reports started filtering back that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and He claimed to perform miracles. "My big brother has gone crazy!" was the thought that entered James' mind and the minds of others of Jesus' family and friends (Mark 3:21, 31). The family traveled south to find Him and bring Him home. So in Mark 3:31-35, we read:

And there came his mother and his brethren; and, standing without, they sent unto him, calling him. And a multitude was sitting about him: and they say unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answereth them, and saith, Who is my mother and my brethren? And looking round on them that sat round about him, he said, Behold, my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.

No doubt James felt this rebuff keenly. Then, following this, Jesus "had the nerve" to come to Nazareth (where James would have been still living) and claim to be the Messiah (Matthew 13:54-58)! When the people didn't believe Him, Jesus left, but James would have had to live day after day with the taunts about his lunatic brother. Perhaps it is not surprising that the younger

brothers (James as the oldest would probably have been the spokesman) taunted Jesus one day about showing off His "powers" in Judea (John 7:2-4). John 7:5 says plainly, "For even his brethren did not believe on him." Intimacy does not always breed understanding, and familiarity often does breed contempt.

What a sad scene it was when Jesus on the cross did not feel that He could commit the care of His mother to the next oldest, James (see John 19:26, 27), probably because James was so totally out of sympathy with all Jesus stood for.

Then something happened! We speak of the dramatic conversion of Saul and turnabout in his life, but the change in James is no less dramatic. What is the turning point? When Paul is listing the *resurrection* appearances of Jesus, he mentions the appearance to the five hundred, and then says, "Then he appeared to James; . . ." (1 Corinthians 15:7). James must have been very special to Jesus.

From that point on, James' progress in the faith is remarkable.

When the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, James and his brothers joined their number (Acts 1:13, 14). Don't you know they received the heartiest of welcomes?

As time went by, James grew in the faith. At some point, he married (1 Corinthians 9:5). Finally he emerged as a figure of prominence in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17).

Three years after Paul's conversion, Paul spoke of visiting with "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19). Fourteen years later, James was referred to by Paul as one of the "pillars" in the church at Jerusalem: "And when they perceived the grace that was given unto me, James and Cephas and John, they who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that we should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision" (Galatians 2:9).

At the so-called "Jerusalem Conference," James was one of the principal spokesmen (Acts 15:13ff.). In the New Testament, James is *not* referred to as the bishop of the church at Jerusalem, but he *did* become a very influential member (Acts 21:18).

Something of James' later years is given by various historians—some near to the time of

James and some far away, some sympathetic and some hostile. Much of what they say has to be taken with a grain of salt, but the following is probably near the truth.

James came to be known as a man of great piety, commanding the respect of Jews and Christians alike. He was called James “the Just” because of his sincerity and honesty. It is said that his knees became as calloused as those of a camel because of his constant kneeling in prayer.

Ultimately, however, he incurred the wrath of the rich and corrupt leaders of the Jews and they sought to discredit him. They called on him to deny that his half brother was actually the Messiah, the Son of God; but instead he boldly and loudly confessed the faith that he once denied. This enraged his tormentors, and using the excuse that he was a breaker of the Law, they threw him down from the temple, stoned him, and then finished him off with a club.

According to one writer, James died with a prayer on his lips for his murderers.

An exciting story!

But, to return to more mundane things, if James, the half brother of the Lord is the author, this also tells us something of the *time, place, and situation*, of the writing.

The place of the writing was probably Jerusalem.

The time of the writing would be between A.D. 44, when this James came to prominence (after the death of James, the son of Zebedee), and A.D. 62, the approximate time this James died. *The book of James may well be the first written of all the books in the New Testament.*

The situation is the oppressive period under the high priest, Ananias, who had a rule-or-ruin policy, and under the Roman governor, Felix, who was one of the most corrupt men to ever sit on that throne. Famine had impoverished the area (Acts 11:27ff.), and the poor were sore oppressed. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Keep these facts in mind when we get to the text.

To go back now to verse 1, note that James calls himself simply “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” Assuming that we are correct in identifying the author as the half brother of Jesus, is it not interesting that he does not thus identify himself? Perhaps it was because every-

one knew him anyway, perhaps it was because of modesty, *and perhaps it was because of what Jesus had said earlier: “For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, . . .”* (Mark 3:35; italics mine). George W. Bailey has said, “It is more important to be Christ’s brother *in the faith* than *in the flesh.*”

It is also interesting to note that James does not refer to his esteemed position at Jerusalem, but rather refers to himself as “a *servant* of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The word translated “servant” is *doulos*—bond-servant or slave. James says, “I’m just a *slave* of Jesus.”

The problem with translating the word as “slave” is that “slave” generally carries the idea of *unwillingness*, but James had *voluntarily* submitted to Jesus as King. Do you ask what a blood relative thought of Jesus? James says He is “the Lord Jesus Christ.”

One writer notes that in that day it was not uncommon for a slave to wear a band of iron about his neck, a band that was the sign of his slavery, a band that he could not remove. But, the writer continued, those of us who are slaves of *Jesus* have about our necks (and hearts) the band of *love*—and *we* retain the key.

So in the first part of verse 1 we have: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Here is the first part of our summary sentence: “JAMES [the half brother and voluntary slave of Jesus] wants us to be happy.”

The second part of verse 1 has to do with those to whom the book is written. The book of James comes under the general classification of a “general epistle (or letter).” It is called “general” because it is not written by Paul and not addressed to a specific congregation or individual. It is rather addressed “to the twelve tribes which are of the Dispersion.”

The phrase “twelve tribes” is used by Paul to refer to the Jewish people as a whole (Acts 26:6, 7). It might be noted in passing that the phrase is “*twelve* tribes.” The Bible knows nothing of the so-called “ten lost tribes.” Some Jews may have been “lost” as a result of the Assyrian captivity, but prior to that time, those from the ten northern tribes who were faithful to the worship of Jehovah, had migrated south (2 Chronicles 11:16, 17). When the temple was rebuilt after the return, sacrifices were made for *all* of the tribes (Ezra 6:17). The “twelve tribes” continued to be

a synonym for the Hebrew nation.

But the reading audience is further identified as “the twelve tribes *which are of the Dispersion.*” Through the years, the Jews had been scattered by the Assyrians, by the Babylonians, and by conquering nations between the Testaments. Others had migrated to other locales on their own. Thus, on the day of Pentecost, Jews gathered from “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). And wherever Paul traveled in the civilized world, he generally found a synagogue or at least a small group of Jews gathered for worship.

But the question is this: Is this phrasing used literally or figuratively?

It seems rather obvious that James is *not* writing to all Jews everywhere, believers and unbelievers alike. Fifteen times he refers to his readers as “brethren” and these were “brethren” who had “the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (James 2:1). So to whom *is* he writing?

The phrasing *can* be applied to Christians as whole. In Galatians 3:29 Paul notes that Christians are the true children of Abraham, the real Jews. Peter refers to *Christians* who were “of the Dispersion” in 1 Peter 1:1. My personal opinion, however, is that James was writing to *Christian Jews*. We have already noted that the flavor of the book is distinctly Jewish, and we have read Galatians 2:9, where James expressed his intention of going to “the circumcision” (i.e., the Jews). James is invariably identified with the Jewish people.

The point I want to make right here is that it really makes no difference, for the Holy Spirit preserved this book *for all of us*. Many of the New Testament writers slanted their writings to one group or another (under the guidance of the Spirit), but those writings were preserved under God’s providence because they were applicable to all men in all ages.

So we come to the second part of my summary sentence: “James wants US [regardless of who were the specific ones addressed] to be happy.”

This particular salutation “greeting,” is used only two times in the New Testament by Christian writers—both times by James (see also Acts 15:23).³

The word *greeting* is translated from the root word for “rejoice.” It means “to rejoice, to be happy.” It can be used just as a standard saluta-

tion without any particular meaning,⁴ but I believe James *did* mean exactly what he said. Note that he picks up the theme of happiness in the very next verse: “My brethren, count it all *joy*, . . .” (Italics mine.)

As we note that James wishes his readers happiness, this will probably be a good time for us to ask, “What is the *purpose* of the book?”

Since James covers many topics in a short space, one must of necessity use some *general* phrase to cover the whole. One writer called the book “The Gospel of Common Sense.”

George W. Bailey picked up the phrase, “If any man . . . seem to be religious,” in James 1:26, and used that as the beginning point for each division. Burton Coffman likes the idea of “Christian Perfection—and How to Attain It.” An outline of the book can be centered around the topic of *faith*.

In our lessons *I* will be identifying the purpose of the book as “*Practical Chistianity.*” McNeile said: “The main thread upon which [many sections of the epistle of James] are strung is the obvious but important truth that a man’s faith, . . . is . . . worthless . . . , if it does not *work* practically in life.”⁵

The question being asked by all men concerning the religion of Christ is this, “Does it really *work*?” James answers the question effectively, demonstrating the truth that the religion of Jesus is applicable in any age, in any situation! James gets down where we live! So here is the third part of my summary sentence: “James wants us to be HAPPY.”

To illustrate both the practicality of the book and the fact that James *does* want us to be happy, let us look at verses 2 through 4, which introduce the first topic of the book.

II. JAMES WANTS US TO BE HAPPY EVEN WHEN TROUBLES COME (1:2-4).

It is not hard to be happy when all is going well—when we have good health, plenty of money, good friends, success, the praise of men, security. The real challenge comes when the roof falls in—when we lose our health, we are broke, our friends desert us, we are failures, we are criticized, and there is no hope for the future!

Christian Jews knew that challenge. They had all the problems that all humans have, plus the persecution that came to the Jews, plus the

persecution that came to Christians! But note what James says: "Count it all *joy*, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold [or various] temptations" (James 1:2; italics mine). The word translated "temptation" can refer to inward temptation or outward trial. Later in the chapter it seems to refer to inward temptation, but in this context, it seems to refer to outward trial. The book of James lists some of these trials: being sick (5:13ff.), being oppressed by the rich (2:6), having their wages kept back (5:1ff.), being dragged into court (2:6, 7), having the threat of death (5:5).

Note that they "fell into" these problems. They didn't "walk into" them. They didn't seek them out, nor were these problems a result of their failure to live right or prepare for the future. These were troubles that came *in spite of* their best efforts to avoid trouble.

When these trials *did* come, James said *this* should be their attitude: "Count it all *joy*." In other words, "Be happy; look on the bright side!"

Both Jesus and Paul said to rejoice when problems come (Matthew 5:10-12; Romans 5:3). Another put it this way: "Be like the teakettle which sings even when it's up to its neck in hot water!"

Why have a good attitude when problems arise? Several reasons will be given in the first chapter, but in the first few verses, the reason given is this: If we have the right attitude, problems will *develop our character*. Verse 3 says, "Knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience."

The word *proving* means "testing." Notice that it is our *faith* that is tested. If a person has faith, when problems come that person will be made stronger. If a person doesn't have faith, then problems in his life will make him weaker. Someone has said that a person's faith is like a *tea bag*; he will never know how strong it is until he gets it in hot water.

If one *does* have faith, trials in his life will produce *patience*. The Greek word translated "patience" refers to "endurance, steadfastness." To the Jews, who had to endure so much through the years, this was the queen of virtues. It might also be noted that the *English* word *patience* comes from the Latin and is a compound word meaning "to suffer *with sense*." In this context, it would mean to suffer with an understanding of

the purpose of suffering in the overall plan of God.

Whether we like it or not, the truth is that that which makes us stronger is successfully meeting the challenges of life—and, yes, even suffering. The coach who puts his team through a grueling schedule is not being mean; he is trying to make the team strong for the contests ahead.

The young preacher told the older preacher that he lacked patience and asked the older man to pray that he would have more patience. The older preacher went to his knees and began to pray that the younger man would have all kinds of problems. The young preacher interrupted him, "No, no, I don't want more problems: I want more patience." "But that's the way you *develop* patience," was the reply.

Paul wrote: "We also rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation worketh steadfastness [patience, KJV]; and steadfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope: and hope putteth not to shame; because the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us" (Romans 5:3-5).

Coming to verse 4 of our text, we have every reason to be happy when problems come because the end result can be *maturity* in our lives. It says, "And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing."

"Let patience have its perfect work" means to continue to endure so that the end result or finished work of patient endurance can be seen. And what is that finished or perfect work? It is "that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing." This does not refer to sinless perfection (see James 3:2) but rather refers to spiritual *growth*. "Perfect" can mean complete or mature. "Lacking in nothing" refers to our being equipped to meet whatever life may bring! J.B. Phillips puts it this way: "And you will find you have become men of mature character, men of integrity with no weak spots."

When we put it all together, James is telling us that if we keep on keeping on, regardless of the trials we confront, the end result will be that we will be even *better* able to meet the challenges of the *future*.

Like it or not, facing troubles with the help of God is the primary way that we grow up!

CONCLUSION

The book of James is a book on *practical Christianity*. To borrow a few lines from George W. Bailey, James is a book that stresses these ideas:

If Christianity means *anything*, it must mean *everything*.

We must be concerned not only with *our appearance before men*, but also our *approval before God*.

We don't just want a religion that is *professed on Sunday*, but one that is *possessed on Monday*.

Explanation in words is good, but *exemplification in works* is better.

The *key* to all, of course, is having the kind of *faith* that can meet problems head on. Do you have that kind of faith? Has your faith expressed itself in *obedience*?

FOOTNOTES

¹This is called variously anadiplosis or duadiplosis.

²I do not belabor this point because most of our hearers will believe that the Book of James is a Christian, not a Jewish, writing. If further proof is needed, see Burton Coffman and other writers.

³This is another indication that the same James wrote both letters.

⁴It is like many words of today which have lost their original meaning (i.e., *good-bye* originally meant "God be with you").

⁵J.W. Roberts, *A Commentary on the General Epistle of James* (Austin, Tex.: R.B. Sweet Co., 1963), p. 27.

Visual-Aid Notes

A simple chart might be developed on cardboard, cloth, or flannelboard to illustrate the main points of this lesson:

James 1:1-4

James . . .	JAMES
To the twelve tribes . . .	Wants US
Greeting	To be HAPPY
Count it all joy, when ye fall into manifold temptations . . .	Even when TROUBLES come.

This chart should be *developed* with only a section revealed at a time.

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