

# James: Practical Christianity

## TITLE

The epistle of James is named after the author, who identifies himself as “James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).

## BACKGROUND

James is usually classified as a “general epistle” (perhaps *the first* general epistle, depending on who wrote Hebrews). “General” means not written by Paul and not addressed to specific congregations or individuals. Paul’s epistles are named after the recipients; the general epistles, after the authors.

Apparently the author was well-known and thought that calling himself “James” was sufficient identification. We determine which James by the process of elimination. There are only four Jameses mentioned in the New Testament. Two can be eliminated because they were *not* well-known (Lk. 6:16; Mk. 15:40). A third James, the apostle who was the son of Zebedee, was well-known, but he died a martyr’s death before A.D. 44 (Acts 12:2). This leaves James the Lord’s half-brother (Mary was their mother, but Joseph was James’ father and God was Jesus’ father; see Mt. 13:55, 56).

At first James did not believe in Jesus (Jn. 7:3-5), but a resurrection appearance (1 Cor. 15:7) changed his life. He emerged as a figure of prominence in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 1:13, 14; 12:17; 15:13ff.; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9). He was called James “the Just” because of his sincerity and honesty. It is said his knees became as calloused as those of a camel because of his constant kneeling in prayer. Ultimately, he incurred the wrath of the rich, corrupt leaders of the Jews. Using the excuse that he was a breaker of the law, they threw him from the temple, stoned him, and then ended his life with a club. It is said that he died with a prayer on his lips for his murderers.

If James the half-brother of the Lord is the author, this tells us something of the time, place, and situation of the writing. The place of the writing would probably have been 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 when this James died. (This means that the Book of James could be the first written of all the New Testament

books.) This was during the period of oppression under the high priest Ananias and the Roman governor Felix, when famine was impoverishing the area (Acts 11:27ff.).

The letter is addressed “to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad” (1:1). The phrase “twelve tribes” can refer to the Jewish people as a whole (Acts 26:6, 7); through the years the Jews had been scattered by many oppressors. James, however, is not referring to all Jews. Fifteen times he identifies his readers as “brethren” who had the “faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1). This fact, plus the use of Jewish terminology throughout the book (1:1; 2:2, 11, 21, 25; 5:17), makes it probable the book was written to Jewish Christians who had been scattered because of persecution (Acts 8:1ff.).

The book is a powerful little volume on practical Christianity. It has been called “the Christian book of Proverbs” because it moves quickly from one topic to another. It achieves continuity by the use of a literary device, often repeating a word from the end of one clause at the first of the next clause.

## OUTLINE

GREETING (1:1).

- I. TRUE FAITH IS STRENGTHENED BY TRIALS (1:2-18).
- II. TRUE FAITH IS EXPRESSED (1:19-27).
- III. TRUE FAITH IS IMPARTIAL (2:1-13).
- IV. TRUE FAITH IS ACTIVE (2:14-26).
- V. TRUE FAITH CONTROLS THE TONGUE (3:1-12).
- VI. TRUE FAITH KNOWS THE WISDOM FROM ABOVE (3:13-18).
- VII. TRUE FAITH AVOIDS WORLDLINESS AND STRIFE (4:1-12).
- VIII. TRUE FAITH ALWAYS CONSIDERS GOD’S WILL (4:13-17).

IX. TRUE FAITH AVOIDS THE DANGERS OF RICHES—AND LEARNS PATIENCE (5:7-12).

X. TRUE FAITH KNOWS THE POWER OF PRAYER (5:13-18).

XI. TRUE FAITH IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE LOST (5:19, 20).

## LESSONS FROM JAMES

Even though James is Jesus' half-brother, he refers to himself simply as "a bond-servant . . . of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). Perhaps this is an expression of humility, or perhaps James is reflecting Jesus'

statement that a spiritual relationship with Him is more important than a physical relationship (Mk. 3:31-35).

There are many parallels between the Epistle of James and the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 1:2 and Mt. 5:10-12; 1:5 and Mt. 7:7-12; 1:19, 20 and Mt. 5:22; 1:22 and Mt. 7:24-27).

"Salvation by faith only" is a popular doctrine. The only place the phrase "faith only" is found in the KJV is 2:24, which says, "Not by faith only."

A theme returned to again and again in James is the subject of *the tongue*: 1:26; 3:1-12; 4:11, 12; 5:12. Controlling our tongues is one of the hardest struggles we have!

## ————— *Saving a Soul From Death (James 5:19, 20)* —————

James has just said there must be concern for the sick, whether physically or spiritually (5:15, 16). In the last two verses of the book, his primary concern is for the *spiritually* ill. Let us examine these vital lessons.

### I. IT IS POSSIBLE FOR A CHILD OF GOD TO GO ASTRAY.

A. Some deny that it is possible for a child of God to sin and become lost. This attitude is contrary to the teaching of both the Old Testament (1 Chron. 28:9) and the New Testament (1 Cor. 9:27; 10:12; Gal. 5:4; Heb. 10:26). No passage is more powerful on this point than 5:19, 20.

1. The individual under consideration is not an alien sinner, but an erring brother in Christ: "*Brethren, if any among you. . .*"

2. The Greek word translated "err" means "to wander, to go astray," as on a mountain peak or away from a path. The thing they had wandered from was "the truth" (Jn. 8:32; 17:17; 1 Pet. 2:22).

3. The destination of this one if not brought back: "*death,*" spiritual death (Is. 59:1, 2; 1 Tim. 5:6; Rev. 20:15)!

B. If we fully appreciate this truth, we will make a greater effort to keep this from happening!

1. We will continue teaching people after we baptize them (Mt. 28:19, 20).

2. We will do all we can to bring back those who have wandered away!

### II. IT IS POSSIBLE TO BRING THE ERRING CHILD BACK.

A. The main thrust of these verses is not negative, but positive. The emphasis is not that a child of God can be lost, but that there is *hope*: "If any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner . . . will save his soul from death" (vv. 19, 20).

B. We cannot restore every unfaithful Christian, but there are many who will be receptive if we show love and concern. The phrase "will cover a multitude of sins" seems to be taken from Proverbs 10:12: "*Love covers all transgressions.*"

1. *Show* you are interested in him personally. Get

involved in his life.

2. *Talk* to him about his spiritual needs (2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 10:24). Love seeks the best for the loved one. If my brother is in danger of being lost and I do not talk to him about it, I do not love him. Some just need to be encouraged; others need major teaching (Heb. 5:12).

3. *Pray* for him (5:15, 16)—and let him know you are praying for him.

### III. IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO TRY TO BRING THE ERRING CHILD BACK.

A. The passage begins, "*Brethren, if any among you. . .*" The one involved in bringing back the erring is another child of God (Gal. 6:1ff.). The unfaithful have responsibility; each must give an account for himself. Still, the faithful are commanded to try to bring the erring brother back.

B. There are many reasons why we should *want* to restore the erring:

1. He is our brother, one for whom Christ died.

2. We could become unfaithful: "If any among you strays from the truth" (see 1 Cor. 10:12). Would we want someone to be concerned if *we* wandered away? (See Mt. 7:12.)

3. God has hidden our multitude of sins. We should want that for our brothers.

4. The erring can have a negative influence.

5. Helping a brother come home brings joy.

6. Our efforts may determine whether he is saved or lost.

a. What a blessing to have one's sins covered and forgiven (Ps. 85:2; see Neh. 4:5)!

b. Our sins are covered by the blood of Christ (1 Jn. 1:7, 9).

7. Our attitude toward the lost can be a vital factor in *our own* salvation! God help us not to be like "the elder brother" of Lk. 15! Let us save ourselves *and* our wandering brothers (1 Tim. 4:16).

## CONCLUSION

James ends his letter without greetings, benedictions, formal closings, or farewells. To the end James is practical, pertinent, and challenging. Let us take his words to heart!