

Book of James – The Troubling Book of the New Testament

Introduction:

The Book of James is very practical (like Proverbs of the Old Testament). There is very little doctrine in the book of James, but it is full of imperatives (things you must do). In fact, of 108 verses 60 contain some kind of imperative! “While James does not discount the “believing side” of the Gospel, his chief interest is obviously the “behaving side.”¹ This book highlights how Christians ought to live to fulfill the law of love in their lives. One of James’ favourite adjectives in the word “perfect,” which John Wesley picked up in his teaching on Christian Perfection.

Martin Luther, the celebrated catalyst of the Protestant Reformation, famously took issue with the book of James. He didn’t think it expressed the “nature of the Gospel,” it appeared to contradict Paul’s statements about justification by faith, and it didn’t directly mention Christ.

“Therefore St James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.” —Martin Luther

It’s often said that Luther was so opposed to the Book of James that he suggested it didn’t belong in the biblical canon.² He suggested a Jew wrote this to contradict Christian belief on life by faith. Is Luther correct? Hopefully in the next few weeks we can learn enough about this book to answer that question.

Greeting – James 1:1

1. This letter is styled after ancient letter format. It starts with the author (we tend to end with the author). So, following this pattern, who wrote this book? Who is this person?

¹ W.T. Purkiser, *Beacon Bible Expositions: Hebrews, James, Peter* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1974), p. 125.

² <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/martin-luther-james-bible>, accessed October 13, 2020.

James in the NT:

- James the father of Jude, not Iscariot (Luke 6:16)
- James the less (or little) (Mark 15:40)
- James the Son of Alphaeus, one of the 12 Apostles (Mark 3:16-19)
- James the son of Zebedee, brother of John, one of twelve (Matthew 10:2-4)
- James the brother of Jesus (John 7:2-5, 1 Corinthians 15:7)

2. How does he describe himself in verse 1? What does this mean? (Compare Numbers 12:7)
3. Who is the letter addressed to (v. 1)? Who would this be?
4. What one word message does the author give to his audience (v. 1)? (This, by the way was a typical salutation in letters of that day, which comes from the root word meaning , “Be Glad!”) (Note: Since this book does not end with a usual ending for a letter, the question is asked, what genre is this? The opening remarks seem to land it squarely in the form of a letter)

Tested Faith – James 1:2-4

5. It is clear that James expects that Christians will face trials. What should be our response to trials (v. 2)?
6. Verse 3 starts to explain why we should have a different viewpoint about trials than most would have. What value do we find in trials according to James? What is being tested? (NOTE: it is important to see that faith comes first. James is not about achieving your own progress, but it is the fruit of faith).
7. The word used for “testing” is *dokimion* which was a word used to describe smelting ore. Extreme heat was used to extract impurities and produce pure metal. How does this help us understand this verse (v. 3)? He will use this term once more in 1:12-14 where it is clear he speaks about temptations, so can temptations also have value in the Christian’s life?

8. Faith that is tested can produce “what,” according to verse 3? It is interesting to note that the word “your” in this verse is plural. What does this tell us about the community of faith?
9. If the virtue of perseverance is developed in the Christian, what can it lead to (vs. 4?) Note: The word “perfect” when applied to persons can also mean “mature.” James is not saying perfect is absolute flawless, for he uses the word *teleos* which means “fulfilling your purpose for which you were created.”³ Does this definition make a difference in the way we view “perfection” or even “Christian perfection” (a favourite term of John Wesley)?

Teleos – the pen illustration.

10. What does “complete” signify to you (v. 4)?
11. When James says we “lack nothing” (v. 4) what is he referring to? Does this help: “As a result of being mature and complete, the community will not lack anything, morally or spiritually, they need to face the uncertain future with God.”⁴ ?

Conclusion:

“This passage encourages readers to learn from their trials. Everyone has trials. But when Christians face them from God’s perspective, they can endure trials with joy. Wesley emphasizes that joy is the “highest degree of patience” (2003, 810).

Trials are an inescapable reality, and faced with faith the proper outcome will be present: endurance. James sees perfection as the goal – being all that God created us to be – and endurance is the means to get there. Maybe this is why James uses the word “perfect” more than any other New Testament writer.

³ C. Jeanne Orjala Serrao, *New Beacon Bible Commentary: James* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2010), p. 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*

“For James, perfection is not just concerned with outward actions, but with the inward condition of the person. Overemphasis on the observable actions alone leads to a legalism, in which one’s spirituality is judged solely by what one does. Equally, an overemphasis on invisible, inward conditions can lead to self-absorption and a failure to appreciate that actions exhibit who one is.”⁵

It appears James believes you cannot separate the spiritual life from the way that life is lived out in relation to others. This theme will be approached again and again throughout this letter. How you live must measure up to who you say you are, by God’s help.

⁵ Ibid, p. 53.

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