

"THE EPISTLE OF JAMES"

by Mark A. Copeland

Introduction

AUTHOR: James, who identifies himself as "a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). There are four men who bear this name in the New Testament:

James, son of Zebedee and brother of John - A fisherman called by Christ ([Mt 4:17-22](#)) who later became an apostle ([Mt 10:2](#)). Together with John, they were nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" because of their impulsiveness (cf. [Mk 3:17](#) with [Lk 9:51-56](#)). He was killed by Herod in 44 A.D. ([Ac 12:1-2](#)).

James, son of Alphaeus - Another one of the apostles ([Mt 10:3](#); [Acts 1:12](#)), about whom very little is known. He may be "James the younger," whose mother, Mary, was among the women at Jesus' crucifixion and tomb ([Mt 27:56](#); [Mk 15:40](#); [16:1](#); [Lk 24:10](#)). In [Jn 19:25](#), this Mary is called the wife of Cleophas, perhaps to be identified with Alphaeus.

James, father of Judas the apostle - Even more obscure, one of the few references to him is [Lk 6:16](#).

James, the brother of our Lord - A half-brother of our Lord ([Mt 13:55](#)), who did not believe in his brother at first ([Jn 7:5](#)). He became a disciple following the resurrection ([1Co 15:7](#); [Ac 1:14](#)) and gained prominence in the church at Jerusalem ([Ga 2:9](#)). As evidence of his prominence, Peter sent him a special message following his own release from prison ([Ac 12:17](#)). James also played an important role in the conference at Jerusalem ([Ac 15:13-33](#)), and Paul brought him greetings upon arriving at Jerusalem ([Ac 21:18-19](#)).

"**James, the Lord's brother**" ([Ga 1:19](#)) is most likely the author of this epistle. Tradition describes James as a man of prayer, which may explain the emphasis on prayer in his letter. It was said that he prayed so much, his knees were as hard as those on a camel. He was martyred in 62 A.D., either by being cast down from the temple, or beaten to death with clubs. It is reported that as he died, he prayed as did Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

RECIPIENTS: The epistle is addressed to "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (1:1). This naturally leads one to think of Jews ([Acts 26:6-7](#)) living outside the land of Palestine. Since the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, many Jews were scattered throughout different nations ([Ac 2:5-11](#)). While Jews, the epistle makes it clear that they were also brethren in the Lord, i.e., they were **Jewish Christians**. Nineteen times James calls them "brethren" and at least one time he

definitely means those who were brethren "in the Lord" (2:1).

It appears many of these Jewish Christians were poor and oppressed. Being Jews, they would often be rejected by the Gentiles. As Jewish Christians, they would also be rejected by many of their own countrymen. The letter indicates that most were poor, and some were being oppressed by the rich (2:6-7). Because it was not addressed to a single church or individual, it has been categorized a "General" or "Catholic" (universal) epistle along with 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude.

TIME AND PLACE OF WRITING: With no mention of the Jerusalem conference recorded in Acts 15 (A.D. 49), and the use of the word "synagogue" (assembly, 2:2), **A.D. 48-50** is the date commonly given for this epistle. This would make it the first book of the New Testament written. If James, the Lord's brother, is the author, then he probably wrote it in **Jerusalem**.

PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE: The epistle deals with a variety of themes, with an emphasis upon practical aspects of the Christian life. Some of the subjects include handling trials and temptations, practicing pure religion, understanding the relation between faith and works, the proper use of the tongue and display of true wisdom, being a friend of God rather than a friend of the world, and the value of humility, patience and prayer.

While these may appear unrelated, they are crucial to the growth and development of the Christian. For this reason, I suggest that James' purpose was:

**TO INSTRUCT CHRISTIANS
CONCERNING TRUE AND PRACTICAL RELIGION**

In this epistle is a call to be doers of the Word, manifesting a living faith through one's works. In 108 verses, there are 54 imperatives (commands), prompting some to call James "the Amos of the New Testament."

KEY VERSE: [James 1:22](#)

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

BRIEF OUTLINE OF JAMES:

SALUTATION (1:1)

I. TRUE RELIGION ENDURES TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS (1:2-18)

- A. WITH JOY AND PATIENCE (1:2-4)**
- B. WITH WISDOM FROM GOD (1:5-8)**
- C. WITH A PROPER PERSPECTIVE (1:9-11)**
- D. WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF TEMPTATION (1:12-15)**
- E. WITH AN AWARENESS OF THE FATHER'S GOODNESS (1:16-18)**

II. TRUE RELIGION CONSISTS OF DOING, NOT JUST HEARING (1:19-2:26)

- A. ONE SHOULD BE SWIFT TO HEAR (1:19-20)**
- B. ONE SHOULD NOT BE HEARERS ONLY, BUT DOERS (1:21-27)**
- C. ONE SHOULD NOT SHOW PERSONAL FAVORITISM (2:1-13)**
- D. ONE SHOULD SHOW THEIR FAITH BY THEIR WORKS (2:14-26)**

III. TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS WISDOM, NOT JUST SPEAKING (3:1-18)

- A. THE DANGER OF THE TONGUE (3:1-12)**
- B. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY WISDOM (3:13-18)**

IV. TRUE RELIGION BEFRIENDS GOD THROUGH HUMILITY (4:1-17)

- A. HOW TO BE AN ENEMY OF GOD (4:1-6)**
- B. HOW TO DRAW NEAR TO GOD (4:7-17)**

V. TRUE RELIGION BLESSED THROUGH PATIENCE, PRAYER AND LOVE (5:1-20)

- A. THE CURSE OF RICH OPPRESSORS (5:1-6)**
- B. THE BLESSING OF PATIENCE (5:7-12)**
- C. THE BLESSING OF PRAYER (5:13-18)**
- D. THE BLESSING OF LOVE FOR THE ERRING (5:19-20)**

REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE INTRODUCTION