

The Epistle of Saint James

Introduction

It seems that the Epistle of James according to Father Farley has been outshined by the epistles of Paul. When Paul's letters come to mind, many have assumed that an epistle should be replete with theological and doctrinal teachings while addressing many of the philosophical rivals in that period of time. Again, according to Father Farley, many have looked upon the Epistle of James with great disappointment and have ignored this most important epistle. The greatest example of dismissal and devaluation was that of Martin Luther, he denounced James as "an epistle of straw," the work of a mischievous non-Christian Jew, more than likely for the reason that he was unable to find his main teaching, **"justification by faith alone."**

Certainly Luther is not the only person to possess a misunderstanding or devaluation of this epistle. This epistle should not be read through biased lenses, but it should be allowed to speak and teach for itself. This most important epistle is filled with great treasures that shine with a great need for today's Orthodox Christians in relation to prophetic and pastoral teachings. It is a book about the application of our faith and the importance to learn and grow in Christ. By bringing our faith towards maturity, we are able to apply our Christian character and conduct in relation to others.

James provides the readers with practical knowledge that is to be utilized in their daily lives. Many of the secular philosophers in those times believed that we are called to gain knowledge for knowledge's sake. They sincerely believed that knowledge alone was the way to spiritual enlightenment. James combats this dangerous mindset which was starting to come about in his time and this belief has taken root in many of our churches today. James teaches a knowledge that is translated into being doers of our faith. He calls us to a true faith that commands us to grow, learn and mature resulting in a life of excellence that glorifies our Lord. In essence this epistle can be considered a how-to-book on Christian living. What awaits us in our study is confrontation, challenge, and a call to

commitment. Now let us launch our study by answering some important questions about this most important epistle.

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 (**Mk 3:17; Luke 9:51-56**). He was killed by Herod in 44 A.D. (**Acts 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; Mark 15:40; 16:1; Luke 24:10**). In **John 19:25**, this Mary is called the wife of Clopas, perhaps to be identified with Alphaeus. Many writers identify Clopas as Alphaeus, Saint John Chrysostom being one of them.

James, father of Judas the apostle— Identification is very obscure, one of the few references to him is (**Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13**).

James, the brother of our Lord (Galatians 1:19*) — Tradition ascribes the epistle to James, to the brother of our Lord. He presided over the mother church in Jerusalem as its first bishop (**Acts 12:17; 15:13**), and since Jerusalem exercised a central role in coordinating Christian missions, James' pastoral authority extended well beyond the flock within Jerusalem. Just as all Jewish Christians in the first century looked to Jerusalem as the mother church, they would also look to James for moral leadership. We observe in the Epistle of Jude, that Jude refers to himself as "the brother of James," so that he is able to establish his own authority and legitimacy. After James faithfully served as bishop to the Christian community in Jerusalem he was eventually martyred approximately 62 A.D. James was thrown down from the temple and clubbed to death as he preached to the people about Jesus.

Tradition describes James as a man of prayer, which may explain the emphasis on prayer in his epistle. It was said that he prayed so much, his knees were hard as those on a camel. He presided over an essentially Jewish Christian flock. There were Jews who saw in Jesus the fulfillment of their national and ancestral hopes, and there were also other Jews who regarded Jesus as a blaspheming deceiver. The Christian Jews, who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, still thought themselves as being good Jews and therefore would have still followed the Jewish customs, i.e., Sabbath, circumcision, temple worship, and dietary laws. However, there was still a great division between the believing and non-believing Jews and there was persecution of the Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. This was evidenced by the stoning of Stephen and the subsequent scattering of the Jerusalem church (**Acts 7:54-60; 8:1-4**). The persecution was also seen in the Epistle of Hebrews (**Heb. 10:34**) where it speaks of believers being arrested and having their possessions seized.

The recipients of James' epistle were very familiar with persecution and trial (**James 1:12; 2:6-7**). It was certainly tempting then as it is for many of us Christians today to just go along with worldly pursuits and ways to avoid suffering hardship and ridicule as followers of Christ. It was to these people to whom James addressed his epistle. In his epistle he offered both pastoral words of rebuke and encouragement. This brings us to the very essence of his epistle. He insists that true Christian faith is actualized in works. He provides us with a harmonious blend of both faith and works. We must emphasize that James is not teaching us that we are saved by works, but that a faith without works is a dead faith. A faith must be visible and grace does not invalidate personal responsibility (**antinomianism**).

In his epistle James does not address a particular church or geographical region and is therefore called a General or Catholic (Universal) Epistle as is the Epistles of Peter, Jude and John. However, just as a chief priest in Jerusalem might send out letters to the Jewish Diaspora, James as pastor of the mother church sent out his epistle to Jewish Christians throughout the region. The Church in the time of James was still mostly entirely Jewish (the gatherings of the Christians were still called "synagogues" [Gr. *sunagoge*, James 2:2] and "*ecclesia*" or "church" was not

in common use. The epistle was most likely written approximately AD 48 before Gentile Christian churches began to proliferate in the early 50's.

Some of the themes that we will be discussing in our study within the Epistle of James are: perseverance of trials (**1:2-4**) faith and works (**2:14**), pure religion (**1:27**), human equality (**2:9**), the tongue (**3:10**), wisdom and understanding (**1:6; 4:3; 3:17**), the importance of church (**5:16**) and mercy (**2:13**). We will be able to observe in our study as we review the list of problems James was addressing that they do not appear much different from the problems that beset the average church today. We have in our communities people who are suffering for one reason or another. We have members who talk one way, but walk another way. Is not worldliness a serious problem? Are there not Christians who cannot control their tongue? It seems to me that James is dealing with very up-to-date matters.

But James was not discussing an array of miscellaneous problems. All of these problems had a common cause: spiritual *immaturity*. This in essence provides us with a clue as to the basic theme of this letter: *the marks of maturity in the Christian life*. James used the word *perfect* several times, a word that means "mature, complete" (**1:4,17, 25; 2:22; 3:2**). By a perfect man James did not mean a sinless man but a man who is mature, balanced, grown up. This logically follows the Epistle to the Hebrews for one of the themes of Hebrews is *spiritual perfection*. The word perfect is found at least four times. The key verse in **Hebrews 6:1**, "Let us go on unto perfection" meaning spiritual maturity.

The letter was not fully embraced by the early Church as Scripture. As we have discussed previously this epistle was undervalued by some. People discredited it but as time went on, it gained more acceptances. It was finally recognized as authoritative in the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. The Epistle of James may have been the first written, yet the last approved and it remains in the Church as an authentic apostolic voice from the early dawn of the life of the Church.

So let the Holy Spirit guide us as we embark upon our journey towards spiritual maturity as we study the pastoral Epistle of James.

REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR THE INTRODUCTION

What four men bore the name of James in the New Testament?

Which one is most likely the author of the epistle?

To whom was the epistle addressed? (1:1)

From the epistle itself, who were the original recipients? (2:1)

What is the epistle commonly called, along with 1 & 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude? Why?

When was this epistle likely written? From where?

Based on our introduction, what is the purpose of this epistle?

What might serve as the "key verse" of the epistle? Clue: (It's in the 1st chapter).

What are some of the main points of this epistle?

CHURCH FATHERS ON THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

OECUMENIUS: "For those who have been tried and tested, trials and afflictions are the source of the greatest joy, for that is how their faith is proved."

"Why do trials produce patience? It is because trials demonstrate the purity of faith, which is made perfect by the patient endurance of affliction."

"A double-minded person is someone who is unstable and unreliable. Such a person has no clear vision of the future and no sure grasp of the present but rather drifts about here and there, grasping at whatever he can. He may be compared with the waves of the sea which are tossed to and fro, or to a flower of the field which is here today and gone tomorrow."

"Every good thing comes to us if we humble ourselves before God."

THEOPHYLACT OF OHRID (1050-1108): Humility is the distributor of all good things, and apart from it there is nothing which is good."

OECUMENIUS (6th Century): "James calls the rich man both proud and humble at the same time, because what puffs him up also brings him down."

GREGORY THE GREAT (540-604): "Because a diseased mind has no control over its own judgment, it thinks that whatever anger suggests must be right."

ANDREAS (7th Century): "If someone is a hearer of the word only and does not confirm it by his deeds, he will lose the word as well, for it will slip through his fingers and disappear."

BEDE THE VENERABLE (672-735): "James says here that even if someone appears to be doing the good works of faith which he has learned he ought to do, none of this matters unless he restrains his tongue from slanders, lies, blasphemies, nonsense, verbosity and other things which lead to sin."

CHRYSOSTOM (344/54-407): "We can become more like God if we are merciful and compassionate. If we do not do these things, we have nothing at all to our credit. God does not say that if we fast we shall be like him. Rather he wants us to be merciful, as he himself is, "I desire mercy," he says, "and not sacrifice."

