

JAMES - WORD IN ACTION

Welcome to our new sermon series on the letter of James with its great theme of God's word in action and its concern for wholehearted down to earth Christian living.

However before you read on please take time to read through the letter itself, it's not too long and not too difficult! As you read it try to get a feel of the letter, what do you learn about its author, about the people it was written to and about the particular issues which are mentioned, why do you think it was written and what was the author's aim? The following questions and references will help to provide some answers -

what do we know about the author? 1:1, 3:1

what about the people to whom it was written?

....their background, who were they? 1:1, 1:27, 2:21f, 1:21, 2:1

what about the issues mentioned in the letter, what do they tell you about the circumstances of those who received the letter?

1:2, 1:9,10,12 , 2:1-7, 3:10, 3:14, 4:1, 4:8, 5:1, 5:7, 5:9

You should now have a good idea about the reasons for this letter. Putting together what we've discovered in this brief look with information from the rest of the New Testament it's possible to get a more complete picture. (If you want to miss out the next two sections of background please do and move on to 'What is the letter all about?').

Who wrote the letter?

The author identifies himself merely as James (Greek - IAKOBOS) 1:1. Unfortunately he gives us no more details and there are at least 4 people of that name found in the New Testament -

James the brother of John, the son of Zebedee (Mark 1:19); James the son of Alphaeus, one of the Twelve (Luke 6:16); James the father of Judas not Iscariot (Luke 6:16), one of the Twelve and possibly known as Thaddeus; and finally James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). This younger brother of Jesus did not at first believe (Mark 6:3, John 7:5) but later became a prominent leader of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Galatians 2:9).

The simple use of 'James' suggests the author was well known among early Christians but of the four only two appear to have had a significant role. First, James, the brother of John, but he was martyred in AD 44 and it is unlikely that the letter was written quite so early. Second, James, the brother of Jesus. He seems the most likely candidate, he was well known in the early church, a leader among Christians in Jerusalem and the letter does have a significant Jewish/Old Testament style. According to the Jewish historian Josephus he was martyred in AD 62.

However we can't be sure and the good news is we can still understand God's word regardless.

Who was the letter first sent to?

Once again we can't be certain but there are a number of clues in the letter. In places the letter sounds very much like the style of the Old Testament especially Proverbs. The address 'to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' (1:1) may describe Jewish Christians forced to flee Jerusalem because of persecution though it could simply be a way of describing all Christians as the renewed Israel, God's new people. However the Jewish flavour is real. The letter also implies that many were poor and that there was considerable social tension even within the congregations. (2:1-7, 5:4-6)

Certainly we know that there was a severe economic decline in the AD 40's and famine in 46.

We also know that after the death of Stephen there was persecution of Christians in Jerusalem and many fled taking the gospel with them to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:19) but initially only to Jews.

There are two other significant clues. First James appears to be disagreeing with Paul over how we are put right with God, justified. Is it by faith alone or faith plus what we do (2:24, compare

Romans 3:28 etc.). In fact as we will see that's not the issue, Paul and James are responding to two entirely different problems and are not in disagreement at all. What appears to have happened is that some in these congregations have misunderstood Paul's teaching and come up with a sort of 'justified by faith so we can live however we want' Christianity. James rejects that insisting that real faith, which comes as God's gift through the gospel (1:18), produces a changed life (1:21). This all suggests that the letter is relatively early perhaps before James and Paul met at the Jerusalem Council in 48 or 49.

Secondly there is no hint in the letter of the controversy between a Jewish and Gentile Christianity taken up at the Jerusalem Council and an issue which seem to have been a continual problem in the early churches (ie the insistence by some that people must first become Jews embracing Jewish ritual and law before they could become Christians). This omission seems unlikely if this had already become a divisive issue in the churches.

Bringing together all those clues they point to a likely date for the letter of perhaps 45-48 AD, written from Jerusalem to scattered congregations of Christians of mainly Jewish background in Syria and southern Turkey who have suffered persecution and are enduring significant economic hardship.

That certainly fits well with the information we have but again we cannot be certain.

What is the letter all about? Why was it written?

We are on very much firmer ground asking this last question. At first reading it seems quite difficult to pick out a clear theme for the letter. It reads rather like Proverbs in places, for example 4:7-12, lots of short sayings of practical wisdom for Christian living. However looking more closely I think we can see a clear purpose. Remember their situation, they are facing trials of many kinds (1:2) and some at least are experiencing real poverty though others clearly are rich (5:1,7). How will they respond in the face of these trials; they need God's wisdom (1:5), wisdom which comes from God's word and leads to faith in action.

Sadly though James sees that that just isn't happening. Their response to these trials has been very far from mature and wholehearted. Instead they have become friends with the world (4:7), some showing a fawning deference to the rich (2:1-4), others a callous indifference to the poor (5:1-6). They are divided (4:1-3), driven by selfish ambition (3:14) which gives rise to dissensions and quarrels, to critical and damaging use of the tongue (3:9). Most important of all though this shows a double mindedness toward God which is fatal. James describes this as he talks about two conflicting wisdoms (3:13-4:3), two rival friendships (4:4) and two rival masters (4:7) but it all boils down to the same battle, the same choice, the choice for or against God, we cannot serve two masters. Yet that is just what these Christians were trying to do, they were caught in two minds, wanting what Christ promises yet unwilling to change and obey Him. Sadly it's what so many of us, despite our best intentions, continue to do, a thoroughly contemporary issue! So James challenges us to a wholehearted, confident, committed faith, whatever our circumstances and involving every part of our lives as he says

'humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you ...do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says'!!

Please pray that that will be true of all of us as we study James together.

Jan	13	In trials of many kinds (James 1:1-18)
	27	Hear and Do! (1:19-27)
Feb	10	Put some life in your faith (2:1-26)
	17	Speech Therapy Required (3:1-12)
	24	The Danger of Being Double-Minded (3:13-4:12)
Mar	20	Richer or poorer - a word for both (4:13-5:12)
	27	Powerful Prayer - in every situation (5:13-20)