

A Study in James
Part 1 – “James, the Bondsman”
James 1:1

Before we get too deep in the study of this book some introductory notes must be examined. Because of the format of the early writings in the first century it was not uncommon to see the beginning of the letter contain the author's name. Thus he identifies himself:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. (James 1:1 ESV).

Due to the format of a scroll, it was necessary for James to affix his name to the beginning of the letter. This accomplished two things: first, it identified him; and, second it motivated his readers by providing a summary of what he wanted to say. Many unscrupulous men made it their practice of writing under someone else's name. James wanted to make sure his readers knew it was from him and no other before he wrote anything else. All the epistles of the New Testament follow this pattern except Galatians.

It is generally accepted among modern scholars that the writer is James the brother of Jesus. He was not an apostle; in fact, he appears to not have believed in Jesus until after the resurrection (cf. John 7:5). Following his conversion James exercised great influence among Jewish believers (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13ff; 21:18). He was likely the head of the Jerusalem church, at least from 48-62 AD. Paul considered him a “pillar of the church” (cf. Galatians 2:9). His fellow Jews recognized him as a righteous man, and tradition has given him the title of “James, the Just.” He died a martyr's death in 62 AD.

Of greater importance is how he describes himself. Since The Epistle of James has long been a controversial book, not having been considered as a part of the New Testament until the Fourth Century by many of the Church Fathers, it is important for us to understand why? The early Church debated whether it should be canonized. Protestants like Martin Luther thought it was a “book of straw.” No doubt this is due in large part to the seeming contradiction it has compared to the Apostle Paul's writing. However, when we begin to understand the basis upon which James writes, specifically that he is first and foremost a *doulos* (bondslave) of Jesus Christ, we understand more of how he emphasizes the vertical indicative the precedes and prompts the horizontal imperatives of life. This description is a testimony of faith and a commitment of life that we all need today.

Harry Ironside, one of the great Biblical scholars of the 19th Century tells an interesting story of how he helped his widowed mother as a boy working during vacations, Saturdays, and when he was out of school for a Scottish cobbler who was a devout Christian. He posted Bible verses all over the shop so that everywhere one looked, he would see the Scripture. No package went out to a customer without a tract or a word of testimony. Many returned with testimonies of salvation. Ironside's job was to pound leather for shoe soles. A piece of cowhide was cut to size, soaked in water, and pounded until it was hard and dry. After endless poundings, he was understandably weary. One day he recalls watching another cobbler not pounding the leather but merely nailing the soles on while still wet. He asked for an explanation and was told, “This way they come back quicker.” He talked with the Christian cobbler he worked for about this method, which was certainly easier, and was told, “I do not cobble for 50 or

75 cents from customers. I do it for the glory of God. In heaven I expect every shoe returned to me in a pile, and I do not want the Lord to say to me, 'Dan, that was a poor job. You did not do your best.'"

James must have had this same attitude when he came to the writing of this letter. He was not resting on his past physical relationship to Jesus, but working in his present spiritual relationship with Christ the Lord. **There are two specific truths to be learned as we begin our study:**

First, It Is a Testimony of Faith.

Regardless of whether James, the brother of Jesus, or another wrote this epistle, the question must be asked, "What caused his reversal of faith?" He is obviously orthodox in his Judaism. Yet he forsakes all of that in favor of a firm faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah. Undoubtedly it had to be the resurrection that melted his skepticism over the crucifixion and the claims of Jesus. He recognized the victory won by Jesus to guarantee our freedom from the bondage of our nature.

The Apostle Paul certainly underscores this cry: *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7:24-25a ESV). He describes for us our greatest enemy to victory and the solution in these simple verses. Our challenge is not principally the devil, nor the pressures we face in this immoral, godless world; it is our self!

We are our own worst enemy. We are our own greatest problem. Of all the four letter words, SELF is the worst. If we can squarely face that truth we can draw nearer to real victory. **Before we can experience the glories of God we must be under his Lordship. Now, that means something quite different to the moralist and I want us to be very clear from this point forward.**

1. **First, notice the choice of self.** In the very beginning, when God created Adam and Eve, he gave them choice. God limited himself and allowed Adam and Eve to choose either his way or their way. They choose to be self-sufficient and independent. Man's greatest enemy was not the serpent, but themselves. We bear in our bodies the consequences of that choice. James wants to be very clear that his choice was Jesus.
2. **Second, notice the character of self.** Satan embodies the character of self. It was because he had made "I" his focus that he became a prince of darkness instead of an angel of light as God had intended for him. **Isaiah makes this clear:**

You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." (Isaiah 14:13-14 ESV).

Satan thought only of himself. It is our downfall as well. His character was fatally turned inward instead of Godward. Do not be deceived. The character of self cannot be domesticated, nor can it be disciplined. It cannot even be dedicated. It must be destroyed on the cross. Jesus did that!

3. *Third, notice the course of self.* Self is committed to an unchanging course of godlessness. The course of self is pre-plotted. It will look at everything with an eye as to how it will be affected. It will always magnify itself. It is touchy, sensitive when not recognized, and always struggles for the position of highest honor and praise. It cannot bear to be rebuked or corrected. It is full of self-defense. It pushes its claims and petty notions on other people. It is destructive and deadly.

Second, It Is a Willing Commitment of Life.

A bondsman was someone who belonged to another completely. His will was in complete subjection to the will of another. Men usually became the bondsman of another because of an unpaid debt. They were pressed into service because they owed a debt they could not pay. James understood he owed such a debt because of his nature. He also understood that Jesus paid the debt in full on the Cross and won the victory in the resurrection.

In trees there is a special kind of tissue called the xylem. This tissue is made up of cells used to bring minerals and water to the various parts of the tree from the soil. The unique thing about these cells is that they are of no use until they are dead! In a living cell there is cytoplasm and the nucleus which makes up the cell nature. As long as this nature lives it blocks the flow of life-giving substances necessary for the tree.

Likewise, until the Christian makes this kind of commitment, he is of no use to God. We cannot live completely to the God nature as long as we continue to live to our own nature.

THE BIG QUESTION THIS LETTER ANSWERS IS HOW? Let me simply say that it is through faith in Christ which begins the relationship to Him that gives us the power to rise from our dead nature to life.

Suppose for a moment that I had a teakettle full of hot water and several tea bags with me. The water is not the tea and the tea is not the water. They are two separate things. However, when the tea is placed in the hot water, a marvelous transformation takes place. The water changes both color and nature. It becomes "indwelt" by a new and dominant nature. The rich caramel color of the tea swirls around in the cup until the fluid is tea, not water. For the water to exist now is for the tea to exist. The water could say, "It is no longer I that lives, but the tea that lives within me."

Not many people I know drink hot water. There isn't much demand for it. But, if that water, heated in preparation, can become a wholesome and stimulating drink, then it is desirable and worthwhile.

This is what we will find in this brief epistle to the Jews of the Diaspora! It is the description of "tea"... a transformed life by the grace of God in Christ!