

Intro to the Book of James

James 1:1

January 15, 2023

For more than four decades now I have sought to follow Jesus and live in a way that reflects His love to others. Over that time, I have received lots of training and benefited from many experiences.

And yet when I think of all that I have received I can easily identify the one thing that was most influential in helping me do what Jesus did—finding a good model, someone whose example I can follow.

The model might come from a biography or a friend or someone I am serving with. It might even be a well-crafted character in a movie or TV series. Once I get to know this person and understand a little of why they do what they do, I am able to adapt their example into my context and personality.

While I can memorize the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, I don't really understand it at a heart level until I see it nurtured and displayed in someone else. Observing someone who follows Jesus well helps us learn how to follow Jesus well.

To me, the Book of James can become that kind of model for us. The things he wrote are a picture of how he lived and what he did. When we read his letter, we are seeing his example.

James was the half-brother of Jesus. He grew up with our Lord. Somewhere along the way James became a devout follower of Christ, someone Jesus valued enough to seek out and visit after His resurrection.

When we learn a little about who James is and think thoughtfully about what he says, we find a practical and specific model for what a life of faith looks like. It is a challenging and insightful book.

Let me be as clear as I can from the start. This is not a book of rules we are supposed to follow. This is a letter from one who knows Jesus showing us how love responds to love. At a very practical and emotional level he is showing us how we can respond to the love we have received by passing it along to others.

I need to offer a warning too. I have learned that every person who models some aspect of Christ is like a window to us. When we look through the window, we can see a new world of how life could and should be. But when we look at the window, we find ourselves looking at a mirror that shows us how we actually are.

And, truth be told, when I see who I actually am and compare that to the Royal Law of Love James will mention later...well, it can be a sobering moment. When it gets hard, and

it will for every one of us in the weeks ahead, we always want to intentionally run back into our Lord's gracious embrace.

Looking at my reflection and comparing it to what I see in others makes it hard to accept myself so I need to remember that, while I have trouble accepting who and how I am, Jesus does not. He fully accepts me as I am and is working to make me the person He wants me to be.

My goal today is to help us get to know James and to provide a perspective that helps us better understand the lessons and themes we will examine in the weeks ahead. And by God's grace, maybe James could become a model to us all of what a loving response to Jesus looks like.

And it all begins with the very first verse.

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.
I am writing to the "twelve tribes"—Jewish believers scattered abroad.
Greetings!

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are several people named James found in the New Testament. What we know about this James is that he was so prominent that he didn't have to use a clarifying statement after his name. James the less. James the son of Alphaeus, or the like.

In the New Testament there were only two men named James who carry that much name recognition. There is James, John's brother who was part of Jesus' inner circle. And James the younger half-brother of Jesus. For several reasons I believe the author of this letter is Jesus' brother, James.

Now, if you were to talk to someone from a non-English speaking country about this letter, they will likely call this the letter from Jacob...because in the Greek Jesus' brother (and every New Testament person named James for that matter) is actually named Jacob.

The reason is traced to a centuries-old translational choice that is hard to pull away from at this point. We will postpone this rabbit trail for Wednesday's Facebook live.

Let's begin by getting to know James a little.

Eusibius was a fourth century church leader and historian. He tells us that James was known for his piety and prayers. In fact, James spent so much time worshipping and praying at the temple that his knees became hard, like those of a camel.

Now, I'm not certain that "Camel-Knees" ever became a nickname, I am certain that he was known as James the Just, because he sought the justice seen in the prophets and

preached in the Sermon on the Mount. For these reasons, James was respected by both Christians and Jews for his devotion to God.

Though not one of the original 12, James was considered an apostle. He met with Saul just three years after Saul's conversion (Gal 1:19) and became an influential leader in the Jerusalem church, serving faithfully there some 20 years before he was murdered by the high priest around 62 to 64 AD.

Over those 20 years this Jewish Christian congregation was scattered by persecution and continued to grow by conversions of Jews from all walks of life—common folk, priests and religious leaders. These members professed trust in Jesus as Messiah and so they lived under the judgment of Jewish leaders and the pressure of friends. They were accepted by the church community but rejected by the culture. It was a difficult place to be.

James led this congregation through the emotional turmoil of accepting Gentiles as part of God's chosen family (which was probably more difficult than trying to lead through the COVID pandemic). He led through hard financial times, including the long trial that came during a famine that brought hunger and more economic hardship.

James had a profoundly deep faith and a love for God. He is called a pillar of the church and a peacemaker who led with wisdom and courage. James was a model many could follow. It is no surprise that he identified himself as "a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." In so saying, James acknowledged his willingness to be at the Lord's disposal and live according to the way He taught.

This dear man said, "I am writing to the twelve tribes—Jewish believers scattered abroad." My guess is he was writing both to members of his congregation—people who had been scattered by persecution, famine or other hardship—as well as other Jews who had come to faith. By calling them the twelve tribes, he was using an Old Testament prophetic term, declaring them to be the long promised, restored people of God.

In these pages he offers the wisdom he has gained over his years of loving God in practical ways. This letter is not about teaching new doctrine. His words are about applying what we already know and much of what he says comes right out of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

The challenges James faced were not just inside the church. Famine had left many with food insecurity which only increased the rising tensions among different classes as the poor became poorer while the rich increased their wealth.

Politically, the seeds of revolution that would soon destroy the temple were being watered by the angry things people said and did. The nation was in a long season of relational, economic, political and social uncertainty as people were polarized between extreme positions. (Does this sound familiar to anyone?)

James writes about how those who follow Christ are to live in this kind of world. Now, it is easy for us to read these words as things we need to do. Don't fall into this. If we let this letter become a list of rules we need to follow, we will miss the point and miss the power of what James is telling us.

Let me show you one lens that helps me gain a new perspective on everything else in this book. It comes as the very first thing he says. James 1:2-5.

² Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.

James knows that life is hard, but he also knows that our trials don't have the last word. He tells us that God does an amazing work inside the struggles we face and the suffering we endure. He says that these things help us become "perfect and complete."

These two words are about wholeness. They point to a day when we will experience a full integration of our entire being. We are currently disintegrated, but God is using the broken things of this world as a catalyst to heal us into His integrated, perfect and complete, people.

Currently we are dis-integrated. In other words, one part of us does one thing and another does something totally different. It is our dis-integration that causes our tongues to bless God at one moment and then curse a person made in God's image the next.

Our lack of wholeness is what causes our tongues to be untamable so that it becomes a "restless evil full of deadly poison." It is our lack of being complete that leads us to show favoritism of one person over another or get into arguments and to display anger that does not achieve the righteous purposes of God.

Everything James will say in this letter flows from our dis-integrated self that God wants to heal into wholeness. The healing will be full and complete when Christ returns. Until then we are to be about the task of trusting our Lord's promises so that we see more and more of His life flowing into and through us to others.

It helps me to think of it this way.

We all operate within one of three levels of conviction—public, private and core convictions.

We have **public convictions**. These are things we don't believe but we say we do in order to get what we want. It is Herod telling the magi to tell him where the new king is so

that he can go and worship too. Or it could be me backing away from something I think is true so that I sound more in line with the thinking of the day.

Alongside public convictions are **private convictions**. These are things we think we truly believe but when the pressure is on, we act in ways contrary to what we say. It is Peter at the last supper declaring that all others may desert Jesus, but he never will. Then just a few hours later, when confronted by the mob in the garden, he ran like all the others. He thought he believed it, but his actions revealed what was true.

The final level is **core convictions**. This is the level of belief that actually changes the way we think, act and feel. It is like the belief in gravity. My belief in gravity is so strong that it impacts how I exit a building or even how I feel standing close to a steep ledge.

Through His Spirit in us, Jesus is working to make His teaching our core convictions.

God will use the circumstance of this life to move us from dis-integration to integration, from public or private convictions to core convictions, so that what we believe is clearly expressed in the way we think, feel, respond and act. We are more fractured than we care to admit but God is on a mission to restore us to wholeness.

In speaking to a Jewish audience, James said this all begins with wisdom, wisdom that God gives to those who ask in faith. In speaking to a Greek audience, Paul said it all begins with the renewing of your mind.

James tells us to ask God for wisdom. Paul tells us to not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. They are both saying the same thing.

God has revealed for us his wise pattern for life in His kingdom. Out of love for Christ and what He has done, God's people will live out of what God says is true more than what the world says is true. They will align their lives with the pattern God reveals and not the pattern offered by the world.

The book of James offers a practical model of what God's pattern for life looks like. God is the one who gets to define how we think, feel and relate to one another. So, this book is about so much more than faith without works is dead. This is book about what living a life of love looks like, with God at the center.

As we get into this in the days ahead, the thing to remember here is that this letter is not about the work we do for God. Rather, this is all about the work God does in us so that He can do work through us. Our job is not to try harder; our job is to more fully surrender to the love that he has for each of us by doing what He leads us to do.

Today we start a journey through the book of James. My goal today is to help us get to know the author a little better and to provide a perspective that helps us better understand

the lessons and themes we will examine in the weeks ahead. And by God's grace, it may be that James becomes a model to us all of what a loving response to Jesus looks like.

Prayer

Help us hear your invitation in these words, your invitation to more fully embrace the life you have for us as you empower us to live out your Royal Law of Love.

Help us learn what it means to ask for and receive your wisdom and to work toward and experience a renewed mind. As we learn what it means to surrender to you, help us respond to the love we've received by sharing it with others.

We are your servants, your slaves, and so we surrender to you and ask you to rule in our lives today, and always.

Benediction

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, ²¹ equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.