

“A Right Strawy Epistle”

James 1:1

September 19th, 2021

Who doesn't like getting a letter from a friend or loved one? While I was stationed in England in the early 1980's, the daily walk from my dormitory to the mailroom was a highlight. The anticipation that a letter might be in my mailbox was a lift to my spirits. Jan was a prolific letter writer; she probably wrote 3 letters to every one I would write. (That was a time before there was an Internet and cell phones. The two years I was stationed in England, I made 4 phone calls to my family - 4 calls in 2 years!) So you had to write in order to stay connected to loved ones.

How different things are today - my texts are typically paragraphs in length, and Jan's are short and to the point. Friday afternoon she drove to Bloomington. Here's what she texted when she arrived "Just got here." *My response?* "Praise the Lord, glad you made it. Thanks for letting me know. Say hi to Moll!"

Today, we begin exploring another book of sacred Scripture - the New Testament epistle entitled James. Several of you over the years have shared with me that James is your favorite book of Scripture. I really enjoy knowing what your favorite parts of sacred Scripture are whether your favorite book, chapter, or verse. Certainly, James is compact, yet hard-hitting. James doesn't pull punches; he's often very direct in much of this letter.

Over the course of 19 sermons, we will explore these 108 verses before us. It's a very practical book; in fact, I've entitled this series *James: Practical Theology*. Often, the most popular courses in seminary are those under the heading "practical theology." That covers such things as how to lead worship, how to administer the Lord's Supper or conduct baptisms, visiting congregation members at home or in the hospital, and what to do when you show up at a crisis situation. Real meat and potatoes stuff. I suspect its practicality is why the book of James is popular among many.

Even if you haven't been a Christian for very long, you've probably heard about James. He's the author of the letter Martin Luther called "a right strawy epistle." In Luther's assessment it seems not to have been written on a solid foundation of gold, silver, or precious stones, but instead it was fashioned on wood, hay, and **straw** as the Apostle Paul puts it in **I Corinthians 3:12**. To support Luther's claim, James doesn't mention the cross, the atonement, the death or resurrection of Jesus, or much of the gospel vocabulary like justification by faith, redemption or reconciliation. In fact, the name "Jesus" appears only twice in the entire letter - today's text and in **James 2:1**.

The book - just 5 chapters in length - addresses many contemporary topics life trials, poverty and riches, favoritism, the tongue, worldliness, boasting, planning, prayer, illness, and even more. Here's a sampling of some well-known verses in this book:

- 1:22 - "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."
- 2:14 - "What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?"
- 4:3 - "You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend *it* on your pleasures."
- 5:16 - "Confess *your* trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."

James 1:1:

"James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings."

Just 20 words in this first verse, in the *NKJV* anyway. *What can they teach us?*

This morning, we'll explore the name and personage of the one claiming to write this letter. We'll also get a glimpse into this man's character, and his allegiance to his Lord. And we'll learn the audience of this letter.

The name "James" in the original Greek is *Jakobos*. In the Hebrew tongue, it is "Jacob." The names James and Jacob mean the same thing - supplanter (which means 'substitute'). A supplanter is something or someone who takes the place of another. A person who takes someone else's place in line for the cash register is an example.

The name James has reigned over almost every other boy name since 1900 according to the Social Security Administration's rankings. Even when it wasn't *numero uno*, it occupied the second, third, or fourth rankings.

"James" is so popular, in fact, that it has been among the top 10 boys' names every single decade except for two, from 1993 to 2013. Even then, it was still hugely popular, and remains in the top 10 today in part due to a new trend with parents opting to name their *daughters* James.

Six US presidents have the first name James - *do you know them?* Madison, Monroe, Polk, Buchanan, Garfield, and Carter. Singers such as James Brown and James Taylor; actors such as James Earl Jones, James Stewart, and James Dean; some prominent people even have last names of James, like LeBron, Kevin, and Jesse. Then, there's the James Gang, King James, and Jamestown. James, James, James!

The James who wrote this epistle is the same James that was prominent in the Jerusalem Council we read of in **Acts Chapter 15** (the first General Assembly).

According to **Galatians 1:19**, this James is the Lord's brother. Church history remembers him as "James the Just" or "Old Camel Legs," Because of his habit of always kneeling in intercessory prayer for believers, his knees became calloused like a camel's, thus the name.

James sees himself as a "bondservant" (*NKJV*). If your Bible is a different version than mine, it may have the word "servant" or "slave" in place of "bondservant." In any case, the Greek word is *doulos*, which means "one who gives himself up to another's will." (biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/doulos.html) A bondservant is a person bound in service without wages; in other words, a slave.

He identifies himself as "a slave - a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." He could have described himself as the brother of Jesus, or the Moderator of the Jerusalem Council, or "old camel legs" This identification brings to mind the words of Jesus in the gospel accounts of **Matthew 20:28** and **Mark 10:45** where explains that He didn't come to earth to be served, but rather to serve others, and to give His life a ransom for many.

It's interesting if we look back to the last two New Testament letters we've studied and how the writers saw themselves. The most recent was Jude, the second to last book in the Bible. In **Jude 1**, we read "Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ," James identifies himself as "a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Before Jude, we studied the New Testament book of Romans. Listen how the author the Apostle Paul describes himself in **Romans 1:1**, "Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ,"

James, Jude, and Paul, all men who saw themselves first and foremost as slaves to God in Christ. They didn't attempt to grasp control of their lives or the lives of others; they realized that Christians are people in submission to Jesus Christ and the Church. James was therefore a humble man. To serve Jesus is to submit to His lordship in your life. There's no evidence these men took pride in their insubordination. In that light, we must consider what this says about us and how we see ourselves. James was not his own authority; he was a man in service of others, and that first and foremost was "God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,"

So, dear ones - if you remain outside of the family of God, you are being called to come home. You must believe in the Person and works of the Lord Jesus Christ, and give up your previous selfish and self-serving ways, and trust Jesus; obey His Word. Become a slave of Jesus Christ. See me or one of the elders if you need to talk.

If you are among the members of the family of God, then get busy making disciples. Pray for those who seemingly walk contrary to Christ; turn them over to God, and ask Him for opportunities to share Christ with them. You'll be amazed when you do that, those opportunities will take place because God delights to answer such prayers.

James' audience in its close sense is "to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: " This is a reference to the 12 sons of Jacob, the revealing of which takes place in the Bible's opening book, Genesis. *Do you remember these men?* Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Isaachar, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtili, Joseph, and Benjamin. These 12 tribes of Israel were scattered throughout the Gentile nations. This is sometimes called the Diaspora, because the tribes had been dispersed.

The dispersion or "scattering" of the 12 tribes began in 722 BC when the Assyrians deported the 10 northern tribes of Israel. Later the southern tribes (Judah) suffered the same fate when the Babylonians took them captive in 586 BC.

James addresses us - the scattered church.

Finally, the last word of **James 1:1** is "greetings." It means 'be glad', 'rejoice', 'chairō', 'thrive', 'be well', and 'salute. "Greetings" is a common secular greeting used frequently. But what James is going to give his readers should gladden their hearts, because it should verify the genuineness of their salvation.

Letters are what we began this message with, and a letter is at the close of this message.

In August 1982, a prominent American wrote a remarkable letter to his father-in-law. The father-in-law was a neurosurgeon and an atheist who was dying of cancer. I've condensed the letter.

Dear Loyal,

There is a line in the Bible — "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name there will I be also." Loyal, I know of your feeling — your doubt - but could I just impose on you a little longer? Some seven hundred years before the birth of Christ the ancient Jewish prophets predicted the coming of a Messiah. They said he would be born in a lowly place, would proclaim himself the Son of God and would be put to death for saying that.

All in all there were a total of 123 specific prophesies about his life all of which came true. Crucifixion was unknown in those times, yet it was foretold that he would be nailed to a cross of wood. And one of the predictions was that he would be born of a Virgin.

Now I know that is probably the hardest for you as a doctor to accept. The only answer that can be given is — a miracle. But, Loyal, I don't find that as great a miracle as the actual history of his life. Either he was who he said he was or he was the greatest faker & charlatan who ever lived. But would a liar and faker suffer the death he did when all he had to do to save himself was admit he'd been lying?

The miracle is that a young man of 30 years, without credentials as a scholar or priest, began preaching on street corners. He owned nothing but the clothes on his back and he didn't travel beyond a circle less than one hundred miles across. He did this for only 3 years and then was executed as a common criminal.

But for 2,000 years he has ... had more impact on the world than all the teachers, scientists, emperors, generals and admirals who ever lived, all put together. The apostle John said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that who so ever believed in him would not perish but have everlasting life."

Loyal, you and Edith have known a great love — more than many have been permitted to know. That love will not end with the end of this life. We've been promised this is only a part of life and that a greater life, a greater glory awaits us. It awaits you together one day and all that is required is that you believe and tell God you put yourself in his hands.

Love, Ronnie...Reagan, as in President Reagan!

Nancy Reagan later said "Two days before he (my father) died, he asked to see the hospital chaplain. I don't know what the chaplain did or said, but whatever it was, it was the right thing, and it gave my father comfort. When he died the next day, he was at peace, finally. And I was so happy for him. My prayers were answered."