

James: Faith in Action

By David Feddes

Today we begin a study of the book of James. James is perhaps the most practical, action-oriented book in the Bible—a book that focuses on what it means to actually live by faith and live for the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're going to focus on James, and first of all, just note that James is one of what's sometimes called the Catholic Epistles or the General Epistles. It's called that because, like several other letters of the New Testament, it is not written to any place or church in particular. There are some letters that are written, say, to the church in Rome—and that's Romans. There are two letters written to Corinth—and so that's First and Second Corinthians. The General or Catholic Epistles are not written to any particular city or area, and that's why they're called general. They're just addressed to whatever reader needs to hear this letter. So James, First and Second Peter, First, Second, and Third John, and Jude are the books that are often known as the General Epistles.

When we begin the book of James, he begins with a greeting—a very brief greeting. He doesn't say hi to lots and lots of people in general at the beginning or at the end of his letter. He just gets right down to it and has greetings right away: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”

Let's begin with the first word: James. Who is James? Well, some of you may remember a rhyme by Dr. Seuss: there once was someone named Mrs. McCave who had 23 sons, and she named them all Dave. “I am Dave.” She named a lot of kids Dave. When I was at a place of work, there were four different Daves working in close quarters with each other, and so it got a little complicated. If somebody said, “Dave,” four people would say, “What?”

Now James is a name a little bit like that. There are several key people named James, and people got named James for a reason. James is just another version of the name Jacob. If you were to read it in Greek, it would say Iakobos—it's Jacob. And you can see why a lot of people are named Jacob, since the father of all the Israelite nation was Jacob himself.

There are three major Jameses in Jesus' close circle. There's someone called James the Younger, often understood to be the son of Alphaeus. He appears in the New Testament in lists of Jesus' twelve apostles. Not a lot of other detail is given about him. Sometimes he's titled James the Less, which could mean James the Shorter—maybe there was big James and little James. It could mean James the Younger, and the other Jameses were known to be a bit older than him. It could be James the Less Important, and there were some other more important Jameses. But anyway, he's known as James the Less or James the Younger. He's probably not the author of this letter, partly because the author of this letter just says “James” and kind of expects people to know who's writing—somebody of major stature. And though James the Younger is one of the twelve and certainly a very important person, we know almost nothing else about him.

Another James is also one of the twelve, but not just one of the twelve—he's one of the inner circle of three. You sometimes read about Jesus taking Peter, James, and John to be with him—

that little circle of his three tightest, closest friends who would be with him in his most intimate settings. This James was one of them. He was the son of a man named Zebedee. He's the brother of John—John the author of the Gospel of John, of the General Epistles of First, Second, and Third John, the writer of Revelation. That James would be the brother of John. Jesus once called them the Sons of Thunder—they were guys with that kind of personality.

This James, though, is probably not the author of this letter because one thing we know about James the brother of John, the son of Zebedee, is he was the first of the apostles to die. He was killed on the orders of King Herod. He was killed with the sword. You read about it in the book of Acts, chapter 12, and the letter of James is almost certainly written after Acts chapter 12 and the events related there. So this James was very important, and he shines as the first of the twelve apostles to be killed for being a follower of Jesus. But being killed for being a follower of Jesus also means that he's probably not the author of this book.

The most likely author of the book—the one that almost all of the church fathers and others refer to as the author of the book—is the person called James the Just. James the Just is a son of Joseph and Mary, likely born after Jesus was born. So he's Jesus' half-brother, along with Jude and Simeon and Joseph. The Bible mentions four brothers of Jesus, and Jesus also had some sisters. So he's a blood relative of the Lord Jesus through Mary, and he's nicknamed James the Just.

Now James was not a believer in Jesus right away. Most likely, we know from the Bible that Jesus' brothers originally at times thought he was crazy and didn't fully believe in him. That's kind of a warning again—that when you grow up and you're familiar with certain things about Jesus, that doesn't guarantee that you're all on fire about him or excited about him. Sometimes familiarity breeds contempt. But we also know that though he may have been an unbeliever for a time, he certainly came to believe in Jesus as the risen Lord, because the Bible says specifically that Jesus appeared to Peter and to the twelve, and he also appeared to James—specifically to James. So we know that he appeared to James, and certainly that put an end to any lingering unbelief that James might have had. He knew that this person was not just his half-brother, but that he had been crucified and dead and buried and had come to life again in power and glory. And that certainly, if not anything earlier, certainly made a believer out of James.

James became a leader in the Jerusalem church. According to the early histories, it seems that when James the brother of John was killed by Herod, another person named James—namely, the half-brother of Jesus—stepped in and became one of the twelve apostles. In fact, he became the most prominent leader of the Jerusalem church itself. If you read in Acts 15, you find there's a big church council. At that church council, they're trying to decide how much of the Old Testament law is going to be applied to people who believe in Jesus who aren't Jewish by background. There are various things that happen in the discussion, and Paul and Barnabas talk about their mission work, and Peter talks about what he believes ought to be done. And then last of all, James speaks. And when James is done speaking, the decision is made.

James was a good man to speak on this topic because he's known to be so devoted to the law that God gave. He was a Jew of Jews, and he was known as James the Just or James the Righteous because he was so obedient and he loved God's law so much. Yet he also understood that many

of the details of that law were no longer binding on people, and certainly not binding on non-Jewish people. So it was part of his leadership at that council that those of us who are non-Jews did not have to follow all the rituals and ceremonies that had been given, because the church understood those had been pointing ahead to Jesus. And in the coming of Jesus, they were fulfilled, and people did not have to follow them anymore.

When you read this book of James, you'll hear a lot about the law that gives freedom and the Word of God, and yet you won't hear even a peep about the various ceremonies that are necessary for people to do. Because you'll hear about the kind of life that Jesus brings.

At any rate, he was a leader in the church. He presided over that great council. He was nicknamed “the Just” or “the Righteous.” That tells you something about the kind of person he was. He was known to be a man of tremendous character and integrity and obedience. He was, in fact, sometimes said to have had camel knees.

Now why would anybody have camel knees? Well, he was said to have kind of hard, leathery knees because he was on his knees so much, praising and worshiping God and praying for people who had fallen into sin. That's how he's described—a man whose knees were leathery from praising God and from praying, especially praying for people who needed to be saved or rescued from their sin.

In 62 A.D. most likely is the year that James died, and he did not die a peaceful death. According to one of the early church writers, James was pushed out on the pinnacle of the temple and was told to tell the people around him to stop following and believing in Jesus as the Messiah. Instead, James declared that Jesus is the Messiah and that they would see him coming again on the clouds of heaven. That was not exactly what the scribes and the Pharisees were hoping for, and so they pushed him off the pinnacle of the temple.

He fell a long way to the ground down below. When he fell, he still was not killed by the fall, and he began to pray. He said, “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” Then somebody clubbed him, and others pelted him with rocks until he was dead.

That's the author of this letter. And so, you might want to take him seriously when his first words are, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of various kinds.” He did not have an easy life or an easy death. But he was a man with camel knees, a man known as the Just—somebody who knew Jesus intimately, growing up with him, and knew him as the risen Lord. This is the author of the letter that we're going to hear.

He says he's James, a servant of Jesus. He doesn't try to pull the brother card or say, “I've got a blood relationship with him, and that gives me more of an in,” because the most important thing about James is that he serves Jesus Christ. His spiritual relationship to Jesus—not the relationship that's based on his genetic relationship.

And who is Jesus? James doesn't say very much about Jesus. You'll only read Jesus' name mentioned a few times in the letter of James. You might think that's kind of odd. He says less about Jesus than almost any other New Testament author. But something else needs to be said:

he sounds more like Jesus than almost any other New Testament author, because when he speaks, you hear echoes again and again of the Sermon on the Mount and the other teachings of Jesus, and about the way of life that Jesus teaches.

And what he does say about Jesus is certainly worth paying attention to. He speaks of himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Sometimes that's translated that way—that he's a servant of God, understood to be God the Father, and also a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Greek can simply mean also “a servant of God and Lord Jesus Christ.” In that case, he's saying that Jesus is the Christ and that he is God, and that he's Lord. So that's obviously the highest thing that can be said about Christ: he's the Messiah, the one who was sent in fulfillment of God's promises; he is the Lord. That much is certain—that James is saying he is Messiah and that he is Lord. He might also be saying that he is God. Now, he obviously does believe he's God—the only question is whether he's talking here about God the Father or whether he's talking about Jesus as God.

At any rate, again, Greek is a little tricky: *doulos theou kai kyriou Iēsou Christou*—a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Word order means nothing in Greek, so it gets interesting. Or in chapter 2, it's translated, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism.” In the original, it just means “of Lord our Jesus Christ, the glory,” or “the glory,” but it's translated, “Our Lord of glory Jesus Christ” or “Our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” So those are the two times that he actually mentions Jesus by name.

But when you call someone “the Lord of glory,” the Lord of the *Shekinah*, the Lord of the great cloud that appeared, and the glory that's revealed, you're saying just about everything about the Lord Jesus Christ—that he's not just a man, he's not just my half-brother, he is the Lord of glory.

So you don't read a lot about Jesus in the book of James. You instead hear the voice of Jesus speaking again and again about how the Lord is directing us to live. And certainly, what is said about Jesus makes it absolutely clear that James reveres and worships Jesus as Lord, Messiah, and Savior.

Who's he writing to? Well, we already mentioned that the General Epistles are in one sense written to nobody in particular. They are not written to a particular town or particular church located in a town of the ancient world. It's written “to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” or literally “to the twelve tribes in the Diaspora.”

The Diaspora is the Jewish dispersion—the Jews that were scattered in many different countries around the world. Now, when he says “the twelve tribes,” that could mean that he's just writing to his fellow Jews as his main target audience. But it can also mean just all of God's people, because again and again in the New Testament, all of God's people—even if they're not of Jewish background—are called the Israel of God. And the Bible says that people of faith are children of Abraham by faith. Those in the Diaspora can refer to those who are Jewish people scattered in various nations, but it could also just refer to the fact that all followers of Jesus aren't really at home.

There's a sense in which we don't belong. As the apostle Paul might have put it, "Our citizenship is in heaven," or the apostle Peter says we're strangers and sojourners here—we're living as exiles and foreigners in unfriendly nations. And James knows, when he's writing to believers at that time, that whether they're Jewish in that scattered situation or whether they're Gentiles, most people are not saying of them, "Oh, aren't they wonderful? Aren't they fine citizens?" They're considered strange, weird, alien. Even if they're living among their own people, they don't really belong there.

And so when you listen to James, he's writing to you as what is sometimes called "a peculiar people," which is a funny way of saying oddball, maybe—but the people who don't quite fit, who don't quite belong. If you were to jump to the end of John's first letter, he would say, "We know that we are the children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one." That sounds like a very, very strong statement—and it is. But part of the New Testament mentality is that when you belong to Jesus Christ, you don't quite fit in anymore, and your job is not to fit in, but to be different.

So that's who the apostle is writing to.

Now I'm going to do something a little different here, because James is a letter. What do you do with a letter? Do you take one paragraph and ponder it and talk about it for half an hour and then move on to the next one? Well, we're going to do that eventually. We're going to preach through it and see what it is like in more detail. But originally, a letter was read aloud to the people or the groups that were receiving it, and they would hear the whole letter. So I want you simply to listen to the whole letter. Let's pray for God's guidance.

Prayer

Lord, you've promised that if we lack wisdom and ask you, you will give generously without finding fault. And so we pray that as we listen to this letter written through your servant James, that you will speak to our hearts and that we may indeed be people who have faith that works—faith that's put into action. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.

Dr. Feddes then recites the entire book of James.

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- 1, 2 Peter
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Greetings

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Which James?

- **James the younger**, son of Alphaeus, one of Twelve apostles
- **James, son of Zebedee**, brother of John, first of Twelve to be martyred
- **James the Just**, Joseph and Mary's son, Jesus' half-brother

James the Just

- Unbeliever, then saw risen Jesus
- Leader in Jerusalem church
- Presided at first great Council
- Called "the Just," had "camel knees"
- Thrown from pinnacle of temple, clubbed, and stoned to death

Who is Jesus?

Messiah, God, Lord of glory

- God and Lord Jesus Christ (1:1)
Θεοῦ καὶ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ δοῦλος
- Our Lord of glory Jesus Christ (2:1)
τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς δόξης

Written to whom?

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations (1:1)

- Twelve tribes: can mean Jews or all of God's people
- Diaspora: living as exiles and foreigners in unfriendly nations