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The Man and His Message (James 1:1)

1

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. (1:1)

Counterfeiting is a major problem in our society. Forged money, credit cards, jewelry, works of art, and virtually everything else of value are passed off as genuine to deceive the unwary. Consequently, valuable commodities must be carefully examined to determine their genuineness.

That is also true of the most valuable commodity of all—saving faith. A right relationship to the living, holy God of the universe with the promise of eternal heaven is incomparably priceless. Those who think they have it should carefully examine and test it to determine its validity. To be deceived by counterfeit money or a counterfeit work of art results only in temporal loss; to be deceived by a counterfeit faith results in eternal tragedy.

The master counterfeiter of saving faith is Satan. Disguising themselves as “angels of light” (2 Cor. 11:14–15), he and his servants deceive the unwary through false systems of religion, including false forms of Christianity. Thinking they are on the narrow path leading to heaven, those who are trapped in counterfeit religion, or who simply trust in their personal concept of salvation, are actually on the way to eternal damnation.

That deception extends to those within biblical Christianity who are deluded about their salvation.

To be deceived about one's relationship to God is the most dangerous and frightening delusion possible. Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount our Lord graphically portrayed that tragedy:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (Matt 7:21–23)

Because of the ever-present danger of counterfeit faith, God's Word continually calls for professed salvation to be tested for validity. In Psalm 17:3 David declared the results of God's testing his faith: "You have tried my heart; You have visited me by night; You have tested me and You find nothing." In Psalm 26:1–2 he pleaded, "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Examine me, O Lord, and try me; test my mind and my heart." He echoed that plea in the familiar words of Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way" (vv. 23–24). Amid the chaos and desolation following the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah cried out to his fellow Israelites, "Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40).

Through Ezekiel, the Lord says of the genuinely repentant man: "Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die" (Ezek. 18:28; cf. Ps. 119:59). Through the prophet Haggai, the Lord exhorted His people, "Consider your ways!" (Hag. 1:5, 7).

The New Testament also repeatedly stresses the necessity of testing faith. John the Baptist challenged the religious leaders of his day to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). Describing his ministry to King Agrippa, Paul related how he "kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). He admonished the Galatians, "Each one must examine his own work" (Gal. 6:4), and the Corinthians, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Cor. 13:5).

The intended and inevitable result of saving faith is a life of good works, and it was for that very purpose that Christ redeemed the church.

After declaring that salvation is by grace alone, the apostle Paul reminds believers that “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10). “For the grace of God has appeared,” Paul wrote to Titus, “bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12; cf. v. 14). The writer of Hebrews warned his readers: “Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it” (Heb. 4:1; cf. 12:15). The fearful possibility of missing out on salvation calls for stringent self-examination. When the writer of Hebrews illustrated the essence of saving faith, he described the courageous obedience of Old Testament believers who demonstrated their salvation in lives of loyalty and faithfulness to God (11:1–39).

The first epistle of John mentions many marks of genuine faith. It must go beyond mere verbal profession (1:6–10; 2:4, 9) and must include obedience to God (2:3, 5–6; 3:24; 5:2–3). The redeemed are marked by not loving the world (2:15), by living a righteous life (2:29), by forsaking and avoiding sin (3:6, 9), and by loving fellow believers (3:14; 4:7, 11).

But no passage of Scripture more clearly presents the tests of true and living faith than the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus sets forth an extensive series of tests aimed at showing self-righteous Jews—typified by the proud, boastful, self-satisfied scribes and Pharisees (see 5:20)—how far short of genuine salvation they fell. By so doing, He unmasked their false religion, hypocrisy, and counterfeit salvation.

The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12), which delineate the attitudes that are to accompany genuine saving faith. Those attitudes include meekness, mercy, joy in persecution, humility, a sense of sinfulness, and a deep longing for righteousness.

The next section (5:13–16) reveals the outworking of Beatitude virtues in the lives of the truly redeemed, who are as “salt and light” in the evil, dark, fallen world. Instead of being an influence for evil, they influence the world with God-given righteousness.

True salvation will be marked by genuine commitment to the Word of God (5:17–20), by external righteous behavior that stems from internal righteousness of the heart (5:21–48), by proper worship (6:1–18), by a correct view of money and material possessions (6:19–34), and by right personal relationships (7:1–12).

Jesus concludes the sermon by describing two paths to eternal destiny—the broad one that leads to damnation, and the narrow one that leads to life, which He exhorted His hearers to enter (7:13). He warned them to avoid false prophets, who sought to divert them onto the broad path that leads to destruction (vv. 15–20), and described the fright-

ening consequences of empty profession in light of certain coming judgment (vv.21–27).

It seems clear that James was profoundly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount—the truths of which he doubtless heard in person from Jesus, either on that occasion or others—and many of its themes have parallels in his epistle. In fact, the book of James may well be viewed as a practical commentary on that sermon. Like his Lord before him, James presents a series of tests by which the genuineness of salvation can be determined.

HIS BIOGRAPHY

The first verse of this epistle introduces us to the human author, **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. As explained in the Introduction, the James who penned this epistle was the half brother of the Lord. Contrary to Roman Catholic dogma, Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born. That truth is implied in Matthew's statement that Joseph kept Mary a virgin *until* the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:25) and is explicit in Luke's description of Jesus as Mary's *firstborn* son (Luke 2:7, emphasis added). Those children were His half brothers and half sisters (cf. Matt. 12:46–47; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12). Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 list Jesus' half brothers as James, Joseph (Joses), Simon, and Judas. Paul explicitly calls James "the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19). Mark also refers to Jesus' half sisters, although not by name. That both Matthew and Mark list James first implies that he was the eldest of Jesus' half brothers.

Surprisingly, although they grew up with Him and observed first-hand His sinless, perfect life, Jesus' brothers did not at first believe in Him. John records their unbelief exhibited by challenging Jesus to reveal Himself openly:

Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. Therefore His brothers said to Him, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (John 7:2–5)

Their unbelief bore sad testimony to the truth of Jesus' declaration that "a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household" (Mark 6:4). So strong was His brothers' unbelief that they even thought Jesus had taken leave of His senses (Mark 3:21). (It is worth noting that His brothers' unbelief

disproves the apocryphal accounts of Jesus' alleged childhood miracles—as does the direct statement of John 2:11 that changing the water into wine at Cana was the “*beginning* of His signs,” emphasis added.) Their unbelief apparently lasted throughout Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

But by the time those who believed in Him gathered in Jerusalem after His resurrection, something remarkable had happened. Acts 1:13 notes that the apostles were there, and verse 14 adds: “These all [the apostles] with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with His brothers*” (emphasis added). What happened to change His skeptical, unbelieving brothers into devoted followers? Paul gives the answer in 1 Corinthians 15:7, noting that after Jesus' resurrection, “He appeared to James.” Doubtless as a result of that personal, post-resurrection appearance, James came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost and James, although not an apostle, soon became one of its key leaders. When Paul visited Jerusalem, he discovered that James, as well as Peter and John, were pillars of the church there (Gal. 2:9–12). Because the apostles were frequently away preaching the gospel, James eventually became the pre-eminent leader of the Jerusalem church. To borrow a contemporary term, he was its senior pastor. Following his miraculous release from Herod's jail, Peter ordered the astounded believers to “report these things to James and the brethren” (Acts 12:17), clearly indicating that James had become the one to whom important news was to be first reported.

James presided over the pivotal Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which had been convened to decide the momentous question of whether salvation required obedience to the Mosaic Law or was by grace alone working through faith. After much debate, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas reported God's gracious salvation of Gentiles through their ministries (vv. 6–12). James then reinforced Peter's point, handed down the council's decision (vv. 12–21), and most likely composed the resulting letter to Gentile believers (vv. 23–29). Many years later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, James again appears in the presiding role. Luke reports that “after we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:17–18). The plurality of elders did not negate James's primary leadership role, as equality of apostolic office did not negate Peter's leadership of the Twelve.

Also known as James the Just because of his righteous life, he was martyred about A.D. 62, according to Josephus.

HIS CHARACTER

a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, (1:1b)

In spite of his prominence, what stands out in the first verse of his epistle is James's humility. He does not describe himself as Mary's son and the Lord's brother, refer to his position as head of the Jerusalem church, or mention that the resurrected Christ personally appeared to him. Instead, he describes himself simply as **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. *Doulos* (**bond-servant**) depicts a slave, a person deprived of all personal freedom and totally under the control of his master. Absolute obedience and loyalty to his master (who provided him with food, clothing, and housing) was required of every *doulos*. In contrast to the *andrapodon*, who was made a slave, the *doulos* was born a slave. James had become a *doulos* by his new birth through faith in Jesus Christ.

To be a *doulos* of God was considered a great honor in Jewish culture. Such Old Testament luminaries as Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Isaac (Gen. 24:14), Jacob (Ezek. 28:25), Job (Job 1:8), Moses (Ex. 14:31), Joshua (Josh. 24:29), Caleb (Num. 14:24), David (2 Sam. 3:18), Isaiah (Isa. 20:3), and Daniel (Dan. 6:20) are described as God's servants. In the New Testament, Epaphras (Col. 4:12), Timothy (Phil. 1:1), Paul (Rom. 1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), Jude (Jude 1), John (Rev. 1:1), and our Lord Himself (Acts 3:13) all bore the title of *doulos*. By taking that title, James numbered himself with those honored not for who they were, but whom they served—the living God.

HIS MINISTRY

to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. (1:1c)

In addition to his vital leadership role in the Jerusalem church, James also had a wider ministry. The term **twelve tribes** was a title commonly used in the New Testament to refer to the nation of Israel (cf. Matt. 19:28; Acts 26:7; Rev. 21:12). Although the twelve tribes split into two nations (Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom), God's chosen people always consisted of the Jews from all twelve tribes, which one day God will sovereignly reunite (Ezek. 37:15–22). When the kingdom split after Solomon's reign, ten tribes made up the northern kingdom of Israel, and Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom of Judah. After the fall and deportation of Israel to Assyria (722 B.C.), some of the remnant of the ten tribes moved south, thus pre-

serving the twelve tribes in Judah's land. Although tribal identity could not be established with certainty after Judah was conquered and Jerusalem and temple records were destroyed by Babylon (586 B.C.), God will restore the nation and delineate each person's tribal identity in the future (Isa. 11:12–13; Jer. 3:18; 50:19; Ezek. 37; Rev. 7:5–8).

James was therefore addressing *all* Jews **who [were] dispersed abroad**, regardless of their tribal origins. In this context, **abroad** refers to any place in the world outside of Palestine. Over the previous several hundred years, various conquerors (including the Romans in 63 B.C.) had deported Jews from their homeland and spread them throughout the known world. In addition, many other Jews had voluntarily moved to other countries for business or other reasons (cf. Acts 2:5–11). By New Testament times, many Jews lived **abroad**. The Greek word *diaspora* (“scattering”) became a technical term to identify Jews living outside Palestine (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1).

From the message of the letter itself, as well as from James's frequent addressing of his readers as brothers, it is clear that he is writing to Jewish Christians. It is likely that most of those believers were converted in or near Jerusalem and may have once been under James's pastoral care to some degree. James's primary audience were those Jews who had fled because of persecution and were still suffering trials because of their faith (1:2). To give them confidence, hope, and strength to endure those trials, James gave them a series of tests (see the Introduction) by which they could determine the genuineness of their faith.

HIS GREETING

Greetings. (1:1d)

Chairein (**greetings**) means “rejoice,” or “be glad,” and was a common secular greeting. But to James the word was no mere formality; he expected what he wrote to gladden his readers' hearts by giving them means to verify the genuineness of their salvation. That, James knew, would provide great comfort to them in their trials, which Satan persistently uses to try to make Christians doubt they are indeed God's children and fellow heirs with Jesus Christ.