

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Like the Hebrew letter, this one is also written to Jewish believers. It begins “*to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*”, that is, to Jews living outside the land of Israel. There is some argument as to which James wrote this epistle. There was a James amongst the 12 apostles. He was the brother of the John who wrote the gospel, and sadly was martyred by King Herod early in the history of the gospel, before the great work of preaching to Gentiles began (see Acts 12:2). Then there was James the brother of Jesus. This James had a private visit from Jesus after the resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:7), and later became an important leader of the Jerusalem church. For example, he had the last word at the great conference held to decide whether or not Gentile Christians should keep the Law of Moses (see Acts 15:13-21). Either man could have been the author. The style is forthright, and reminiscent of the teaching of the Master himself, with memorable lessons.

In the first chapter James says we can ask God for wisdom, and it will be given to us, if we have faith to believe him. There are many situations in life where we do not know what to do for the best. James is saying we must ask God for advice, and then be prepared to follow the lead he sends, without doubting.

He then makes an important statement about human nature. We cannot blame God when we sin, he says. Temptation springs up inside us, and our evil desire grows in our hearts like a baby in a womb. Eventually, unchecked, the baby is born as sin. The infant then grows up, and as an old man brings us down to death.

What is pure religion, James asks (James 1:27)? This is an important question. Does it require cathedrals or mosques, long pilgrimages and holy days? No, he says. It is very simple. It means to care for the poor, and keep yourself unstained from the world.

He addresses his readers as ‘brothers’, which shows they were believers, but he admonishes them for being unequal in their treatment of their poorer brethren. God, he insists, has generally chosen to work with the poor, not the rich. We have to show practical love by caring for those less well off than we are. It is not enough to pretend to have faith in God, if we do not back it up with deeds of love.

His third chapter warns of that most dangerous organ of the human body – the tongue. A few waggles of that pointed piece of flesh, and men find themselves executed, or married, or saved. Taming the tongue is a tough task for the Christian. It lets him down so often with its hasty words, and yet it can bring such blessing and joy when put to good use.

We cannot be sociable with the world, James says, if we want to be God’s friends. We need to come near to God in humility, and make all our plans with the words “God willing”, putting our lives in his hands.

The last chapter hits out at wealthy Jews who cheated their employees. It inculcates patient endurance in times of trial, and concludes with the thought that we should pray, not just for our own needs, but for others.

© Copyright David Pearce, used with permission.