

James

James is one of my favorite New Testament books. It is so practical and full of truth about every-day life. I always feel like James makes Christianity seem so livable. Let's look at the author and audience so we can get a little background on the book.

READ: James 1:1

The first question we want to look at is who is this James? There are a couple of James' who appear in the New Testament. Two of these James' were part of the 12 disciples. These two, however, are identified more specifically as James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18) and James the son of Zebedee who's brother was John (Mark 1:19). The writer of the book of James does not identify himself as either of these two men. However, his identity is widely known and his authority accepted at the time of the writing because he does not go to any lengths to introduce himself to his audience.

This leaves the most likely author of 'James' as James the brother of Jesus. We know Jesus had brothers as they are mentioned a couple of times during his ministry. Once, Jesus' mother and brothers show up to one of his meetings asking to see him (Mark 3:31-35). He refuses to meet with them at that time saying that anyone who believes in him is his brother. This would seem to indicate that his natural brothers did not believe in him. When Jesus tried to teach and minister in his own hometown he was unable to do any miracles because the people of the town did not believe in him saying, 'isn't this the carpenter? Mary's son?' (Mark 6:1-6). In this passage it gives the names of four of his brothers: James, Joseph, Judas & Simon. Another time, his brothers seem to taunt Jesus trying to get him to perform miracles at an upcoming Feast as some kind-of carnival act. Possibly they were looking at him as a source of money & fame. Whatever their motive, the Bible makes clear again that they did not believe in him (John 7:1-5).

So, how did James the brother of Jesus go from mocking brother to committed follower? The Bible does not give specifics about when or how James came to believe in Jesus. It does leave clues. The major one being that James, his brothers and their mother Mary were all at the ascension as Jesus left the earth after his resurrection. They returned to Jerusalem with the rest of the disciples to wait in the upper room as Jesus had instructed them (Acts 1:12-14). They would have been there on the day of Pentecost and heard Peter's first sermon to the milling crowds on the street below. At some point in all of the dramatic events of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, right through to the day of Pentecost, James believes that Jesus is who he said he was and counts himself as a follower of him.

Let's stop and look at this for a minute. Honestly, I can understand James' initial doubt about Jesus. Here is a guy you grew up with. No matter how much you might love your sibling, looking at them as someone in authority over you is another matter. You've grown up together. Sat at the same table for dinner. Fought over whose turn it was to do a chore. This is the same person you annoyed and who annoyed you on family trips. How can you be expected to give spiritual and life-changing significance to someone you know so well?

I know that none of us have a sibling who may turn out to be the savior of humanity. (You may have one claiming that or with that kind-of complex but that's another matter!) But the issue of spiritual authority is one we also deal with. The Bible clearly gives us some areas that God wants us to be obedient to. Dare I say it? Even submissive to! Submissive in the sense of putting our right to assert our own will underneath a spiritual authority that God has placed in our lives. YIKES Americans! This is counter-culture to us as our entire way of thinking is built on a 'no one has power over me' philosophy. Think about the journey James had to have made to introduce himself as a servant of Jesus. He himself uses the word submissive in 3:17 when describing wisdom and in 4:7 when instructing how to defeat satan. Submission to God's ways and will is a spiritual discipline.

What comes to mind or how do you feel when someone brings up the word submission?

Learning to be submissive can be a journey for any of us, and not necessarily an easy one either! It is one thing to learn to submit to God and his Word but even harder to submit when the rules or obligations are coming from people. Especially people we know well. It can be hard to remember that we are choosing to submit as an act of obedience to God not turning ourselves into a doormat for another person.

So who or what do we submit to? A simple answer is we as Christians are to submit to authorities that God has specifically given in His Word. Sticking with the authorities that are based in Scripture will keep us submitting in healthy and safe ways. God has been specific in the major areas of our lives.

Spiritual Submission: Here we can only submit ourselves to the authority of God's Word – the Bible – and Jesus Christ. We do not ever submit ourselves to any claim of godliness or spirituality that does not originate in and agree with Scripture. (James 4:7; II Timothy 3:16-17)

Societal Submission: Here we are taught in Scripture that God has given governmental authority and he expects us as Christians to be obedient to the governments over us. This even includes paying taxes! (Romans 13:1-7; I Peter 2:13-17)

Employee Submission: Here we are taught that God does not want us as Christians participating in rebellion or the undermining of those over us in our workplaces. There are many times in Scripture where slaves are even instructed to obey their masters as obeying the Lord. This is really tough for us as Americans to stomach after all wouldn't God be anti-slavery? Yes, I believe he was and is. So why tell slaves to be obedient? You have to consider slavery from a non-American viewpoint. Instead of a great societal injustice, consider it more as a lord and serf relationship. Slavery for centuries was an economic system. It still is in many parts of the world. If you find yourself living within this terrible system, God expects Christians to obey those over them in an employee type situation. (I Peter 2:13-21; Hebrews 13:17; Colossians 3:22-4:1)

An interesting question can be raised about Societal and/or Employee Submission; Are there ever times where it is appropriate to rebel against a government or employer or to break the laws of a government?

Family Submission: Here we are taught how God intends for a family to work. Not surprisingly, it is entirely different from the way our own society says a family can or should work. First, there is no question whatsoever that God intends marriage to be between one man and one woman. With that established, God has given roles to men, women and children in the family unit. Men are given the headship of the family. This means they are held responsible in God's eyes for the decisions and direction that a family takes. Men are also instructed to love their wives as Christ loves the church even to the point of laying down their own lives and desires if necessary. Women are given the role of nurturing and supporting the husband in his role. Women are not meant to shoulder the responsibility of directing the family. They are to participate in the leadership of the family. (Proverbs 31)
Children are to obey their parents. Rebellion may be something that our society finds amusing or winks at. But God takes that seriously and offers the blessing of a long life to those who obey and honor their parents. At the same time parents are to discipline, teach, lead and avoid frustrating their children. God will hold parents responsible. (Ephesians 5:22-6:4; I Peter 3:1-7; Colossians 3:18-21)

What do you think the Bible means when it instructs 'wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord'?

Church Submission: God compares the church to a family and like a family he has set up the way that the church is supposed to work. He has put Christ as the head of the church. Local bodies of Christians are led by pastors as well as church elders. God has standards that these leaders must meet before they are put into these positions. Their job is similar to the husband's job in that God will hold them responsible for the decisions and direction as well as the doctrines taught in the churches they oversee.

God also expects the Christians that make up the body of Christ to be submissive to each other. This means that you don't join a group of believers intending to assert your will over others or abuse your freedom in Christ. Instead, we must all at times submit our own wills for the good of the whole. (Colossians 1:17-20; I Corinthians 10:23-24 & 16:15-16; Ephesians 4:1-13 & 5:19-21)

Why is God so determined about submission? Well, I don't know and truthfully in many cases I don't like it! I am American and I value individuality and freedom. I don't want to always do what is best for the whole. Or I don't want to listen to what my husband says because I think he's wrong. But God requires of me as a maturing and growing Christian to submit to his processes and plans even if I don't understand or like it.

If James had never submitted to Jesus' authority the church would be a different place. You and I may never have found a place in it or our place would be backseat to Jewish believers as James was instrumental in welcoming Gentile Christians into the church. There is teaching on healing, relationships, trials and temptations in James that we use in the church on a constant basis. James' submission brought life to him and continues to bring it to us today.

After his conversion, James quickly becomes a leader in the church. He is based in Jerusalem and seems to be treated with deference by the other disciples & apostles. For example, when Paul is blinded on the road to Damascus and is himself converted, he mentions that James is one of the only apostles he meets with during his training (Galatians 1:18-19). When Peter is miraculously freed from prison in Acts 12 he asks the other believers to tell James about the incident. Peter and Paul are undoubted pillars of the New Testament Church. Yet they recognize James as someone with spiritual authority. James is also shown in Acts 15 & 21 as being instrumental in ensuring that the gospel is preached to the Gentiles. He receives reports from both Peter and Paul about their missionary work and sends them back out again with letters for the new believers they are working with. Taking all of this into account, James the brother of Jesus seems to be a widely known figure in the church world at the time. He did not need to identify himself in any other way other than as simply James the servant of Jesus Christ.

The second background question to answer is to whom is James writing? James himself seems to have almost exclusively been based in Jerusalem. We don't find him appearing on any missionary journeys as did many other disciples & apostles. The first preaching of the gospel was in Jerusalem and the church was based from that city until its destruction in AD 70. Even with the church headquartered here, Jerusalem seems to have seen waves of persecution against Jewish believers in Christ almost immediately. This caused a dispersion of Jewish Christians throughout the known world.

Think about it. Your family are spice traders, wood carvers, weavers, fishermen, etc. You hear the message of Jesus and believe. Now the people who you have spent your life around, went to Torah school with, danced at their weddings; hate you! They now look at you as worthless and apostate. You have accepted as God someone that they believe is a false teacher. Remember, it was Jewish leaders who wanted Jesus dead. (Though, they did not kill him as the Bible is clear that he gave up his life willingly so blaming the Jews for Jesus' death is a misinterpretation of Scripture.) Not only are you faced with social ostracism and disapproval but arrests and the martyrdom of several of the original disciples, apostles and church leaders is taking place on the streets of your town. There is the arrest of Peter & John in Acts 4, Stephen is stoned to death in Acts 7, and Saul, later to become Paul, begins his terrorizing of believers in Acts 8.

What will you do in the face of this persecution? Stay in the city putting your family and business at risk? Wondering daily if your trust in Jesus will lead to death and ruin? Or travel to another city where there will be communities in need of your skills and even a body of believers to become a part of? Not to mention many Greek & Roman cities are more tolerant of Christians. Many Jewish Christians did just what you or I would have, they chose to leave Jerusalem during these times.

This is who James is writing to and why he addresses his book to 'the 12 tribes scattered abroad'. It is also possible that he is including in this letter Jewish people who had long ago migrated to other parts of the Roman world and had recently become Christians. Either way, James is relevant to all Christians whether Jewish believers or Gentile. And receiving instructions for how to follow Christ from James would be like you or I receiving a letter from Billy Graham. James was seen as a father of the church. Someone who had close relationship and experience with Jesus. His words carried weight then and they still do today.

James is full of practical instructions for Christians. And the very beginning of the book starts with a revelation about trials and temptation. They are not the same thing. James will spend some time telling us about the roots of temptation in our lives and that being tempted is not from God. Trials however, are God growing us up. We don't bring them on ourselves. Rather they are brought to us as a part of God's process of maturity. This is where we'll begin next time.