

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Epistle of James

(SB_James_Lsn7_Issues & Answers)

The Book of James – Issues & Answers

As a conclusion to our study of the book of James, it will be helpful to review a few issues and questions that are vital to understanding this book and its applicability to us. The historical context of each and every book of the Bible is vital to a proper interpretation of that particular book or any passage within the book. In this study, we'll review some of these items that have been addressed in this study previously.

To whom was James addressing this epistle and what were the major issues he addressed?

I have indicated on several occasions that James was addressing the believers of the church at Jerusalem and that is probably a little too general of a statement. In reality, James informs us in 1:1 that he was addressing “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad,” specifically those Jews who were believers – he specifically addresses them as “brethren” who have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (2:1). So, these were Jewish believers, but where were they located? The *Expositor's Bible Commentary* provides a good answer.

If it is correctly assumed that James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, wrote this epistle to believers who had been dispersed from Jerusalem in the persecution following Stephen's death, the occasion for writing is fairly clear. These Jewish Christians, scattered throughout the area east of the Mediterranean Sea, no longer had contact with the apostles; nor was James among them to instruct and exhort them. Difficulties--perhaps persecutions--were confronting them (1:2-4); the ungodly rich were oppressing them (5:1-6); the religion of some was becoming a superficial formality (1:22-27; 2:14-26); discriminatory practices revealed a lack of love (2:1-13); and bitterness in speech (3:1-12) and attitude (3:13-4:3) marred their fellowship. Apparently reports of such problems among the scattered brothers had reached James in Jerusalem. In response, he wrote as pastor *in absentia* to urge his people to make the needed changes in their lives and in their corporate relationships.¹

So, the audience consisted of the Jewish believers who at one time had been associated with the synagogue in Jerusalem, but who had scattered throughout Judea and Samaria right after Stephen's martyrdom that is recorded in Acts 7 & 8. The major issues that James addressed were:

- Various “trials” and “testing” were being encountered by these believers (1:2-4)
- They were becoming superficial and not demonstrating their faith in any tangible way (1:22-27; 2:14-26)
- They were demonstrating worldliness and a system of favoritism that was defined by the world's values (2:1-13; 3:14-15)
- Their lack of love for what was true was being manifested in bitterness of speech (3:1-12) and covetousness (4:1-2, 4)

¹ Frank E. Gaebel, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1989-1998), electronic version.

What was the impact (if any) of James' eschatological understanding upon our interpretation of the letter he wrote?

On several occasions in James' letter, he makes statements that relate to eschatological events.

1:12 – “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

1:18 – “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we might be, as it were, the first fruits among His creatures.”

2:5 – “Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

5:3 – Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

5:8 – You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

James does not provide us with any other details that might allow us to understand his eschatological orientation better; however, here are some facts we know and from those facts, we can develop a fairly good interpretation of these passages and the eschatological orientation they reflect.

- The only Scripture in existence at the point in time that James wrote was what we refer to as the Old Testament – Hebrew Scriptures written by Jews over more than two millennia.
- At the time James wrote, the public ministry and teaching of Jesus was still fresh in the minds of believers and was being discussed and communicated orally.
- The apostles (the Twelve Jewish disciples of Jesus including Matthias) were considered the leaders of the new believing community
- The apostles, particularly Peter and John, combined with James (not one of the Twelve Apostles) were leaders of the church at Jerusalem – the womb (Jerusalem) that held the embryo (the new Christian movement)
- Jewish believers were scattered from Jerusalem as a result of the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7-8), a persecution in which Saul participated and approved
- The central tenet of the faith and the distinguishing mark of a member of the new Jewish sect was simply belief that Jesus was the promised Messiah Who had been crucified and offered as a sacrifice in accordance with Scripture and Who was to return again to establish His kingdom
- Paul had not yet received and communicated anything new to the faith, i.e. the “mystery” doctrines related to the new, soon-to-be Gentile-centric dispensation – doctrines such as the Rapture of the Church prior to the last seven years of the Age of Israel

Based upon these clearly observed facts, we can reach certain conclusions regarding James' eschatological orientation.

- James had a very Jewish-centric eschatological orientation
- James would not have known of such Church Age specific events such as the Rapture
- Like all Jewish believers of that early period, James would have expected the soon return of Jesus (see Peter's message shortly after Pentecost in Acts 3:19ff and the gospel message of Peter, Stephen, Saul, Philip, Barnabas, etc. in Acts that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God)
- The concept of the kingdom would have been heavily influenced by this perspective and would have been a reference to the Messianic kingdom of God's Son on earth – a

- kingdom in which believing Jews and Israel would be central and integral and in which believing Gentiles would participate
- The deeds of the Jewish believer and unbeliever were seen as evidence of their continued faith and as the basis for inheritance in the kingdom – a perspective very consistent with Jesus’ teaching during His public ministry. When the Lord returns, Jesus taught that there will be a judgment in association with the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. The sheep (Gentile believers) are separated from the goats (Gentile unbelievers) per Matthew 25:31-46 and Jews will also be judged – believers separated from unbelievers (see Ezek 20:33-38). Jewish believers will also be judged for the purpose of the assignment of their inheritance in the kingdom and that judgment will be according to standards that include principles that James has taught (see James 2:12-13 cf. 4:11-12).
 - The Jewish believer also understood Hebrew Scripture to teach that there would be a restoration of the earth in association with the coming of the Messiah and James taught that believers would be the first-fruits of that restoration process

James mentions the “Law” (as in the Mosaic Law) on several occasions. Does James’ epistle support the idea that the Mosaic Law remained valid after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension?

James refers to or uses the word “law” on several occasions, sometimes with an additional qualifier.

1:25; 2:12 – the “law of liberty”
 2:8 – the “royal law”
 2:9, 10, 11; 4:11 – the “law”

On a few occasions, James uses his audience’s familiarity with the Mosaic Law as a common point of reference to serve as an illustration or analogy. For instance in 2:9-11, the perfect obedience required by the Mosaic Law is used as an illustration of the fact that his readers were, through their partiality toward the wealthy, violating the “royal law” taught by Jesus – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Essentially, James is calling to mind the fact that when a Jew of the prior age failed in any aspect of the Mosaic Law, then he was guilty. In similar fashion, believers should examine the manner in which they treat other believers of little worldly means since that examination would reveal to them whether they were guilty of not keeping the royal law. If they were not keeping the royal law, then they would be judged according to the law of liberty – “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13).

So, the answer to the question is that James is not teaching believers to observe the Mosaic Law. Rather, he is holding them accountable to a higher law – the “royal law” and the “law of liberty” based upon their new-found freedom in Christ.

What is James’ view of the subject of justification, faith and works?

James uses two illustrations from Hebrew Scriptures and history to illustrate the point he is making in regard to the relationship between faith and works for justification. He uses the justification of Abraham’s faith through his works as an illustration in 2:21-23 and the justification of Rahab through her deeds in 2:25-26. His statement in 2:24 that a man is justified by his works and not faith alone is unequivocal.

The key to understanding James’ teaching on this subject is to understand that James is dealing with the daily faith of the person who is already a believer. Faith that secures one’s eternal salvation through placing one’s trust in Christ had been demonstrated by James’ audience (see 2:1). This is phase 1 faith and phase 1 justification. Faith that continues to justify the believer’s profession as a believer in the experiences of life is phase 2 faith and phase 2

justification. James is concerned about the daily walk of believers and how it affects their testimony to unbelievers as well as how it affects other believers.

Can the believer possess “wisdom” of this world and be an enemy of the Lord based upon James’ instruction?

James clearly teaches that the believer can choose to align his or her thinking with the “wisdom” of this world – a “wisdom” that is rooted in the arrogant display of a desire for independence from God first manifest by Satan. It is the “wise” of this world who can manipulate the world’s system to their selfish advantage and who often exhibit jealousy, greed and a willingness to exploit instead of assist others. The believer who operates within this sphere of power is at direct odds with God’s desires and has incorporated the world’s wisdom into his or her belief system.

James is not saying a believer can be demon possessed, but he is saying that the believer can be influenced by thought patterns that are demon influenced. We know from our prior studies of various Scriptures that Satan is the ruler of this cosmos (world). He has a system of governance and his forces (demons) are organized. Demons do not directly implant thoughts in men’s minds; however, as co-sponsors of Satan’s worldly system of governance, demons are Satan’s agents that are used to promote worldly thinking that encourages selfishness and greed that leads to jealousy, strife and division.