

JAMES

AUTHENTIC FAITH

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Pastor Michael Breznau

FAITH WORKS.

How does genuine faith integrate into our everyday, run-of-the-mill lives? Does your faith *work*? Here's how one author sums up the convicting truth from James: "Faith without works cannot be called faith. Faith without works is dead, and dead faith is worse than no faith at all."³

DEMONSTRATING TRUE FAITH THROUGH GRACE-WORKS

THE "STRAWY EPISTLE"

Throughout the history of Christendom the epistle of James has been often misunderstood, abused, and ignored. Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, labeled this book "a right strawy epistle" and subsequently tucked it away in the appendix of his 1522 edition of the New Testament.¹ Yet this pithy letter holds significant truth and instruction for all believers, especially in a time of spiritual complacency and apathetic faith.

HISTORICAL SETTING

For the Jewish believers scattered throughout the *Diaspora* (see illustration on pg. 2) in the first century A.D., severe trials and difficulties were likely the norm (1:2-4). Governmentally sanctioned persecution leveled against Christians was heightening. Economic loss and social ostracizing were becoming the common experiences of these early followers of Christ. As a result, their faith was being intensely tested in the smelting

pot of the greater Roman Empire. Discouragement was setting in. The outward demonstration of their belief system was being squelched by fear, apathy, or socio-national concerns. James wrote his circular letter to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1). But more specifically, his message likely went to those scattered north and east of Jerusalem, toward Mesopotamia and Babylon.²

THEME AND PURPOSE

James was inspired by the Holy Spirit to exhort believers to demonstrate their faith by their works before a watching world. They were to "show off" their belief in Jesus Christ not by sitting idle on the sidelines, but by jumping full force into the grace-empowered service of the Christian life. The temptation to be quiet about their faith in both word and action was certainly enormous. However, James points out that genuine faith has real effect on the life. John Calvin understood the argument

this way:

"Faith alone justifies but the faith that justifies is never alone."

In other words, the causative agent is faith and our works are the effect of that faith. Both these aspects of genuine salvation are complementary not contradictory.

TAPPING A RAW NERVE

Both faith and the following works of the Christian are part of God's inseparable work of salvation in the believer's life. Therefore, both the works and the faith are only performed by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit. This perspective might rattle the cages of modern evangelicalism. It may well have done the same for our fellow believers centuries ago. Yet regardless of our emotional status, the book of James taps on a nerve that extends to every fiber of the spiritual life.

WALKING DEAD?

The letter of James is like a reverse-osmosis water filtration system, designed to clean out the impurities and inconsistencies in our lives. Each pithy line penned by James describes authentic *and* inauthentic faith. Is your faith alive or dead? How can we know? What should characterize a man or woman living in relationship with Christ? James addresses all these questions and more in one of the most intensely practical books in the Bible.

JAMES WHO? AUTHOR AND DATE

Unlike most other New Testament books, the author of this epistle is not immediately apparent. James was an incredibly common name in the first century A.D. and at least four different men named James are mentioned in the New Testament:

1. James, the father of Judas (not Iscariot) (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13)
2. James, the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Acts 1:13; also likely called James, "the Younger" or "the Less")
3. James, the son of Zebedee (Matt. 4:21; 10:2; 17:1; Mark 3:17; 10:35; 13:3; Luke 9:54; Acts 1:13; 12:2)
4. James, the half-brother of the Lord (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12)

The first two listed are quite unknown outside of a few brief references. In contrast, the greeting and overall tone of James' epistle implies the author is respected and widely known by the scattered Jewish believers. James, the son of Zebedee, would seem to be a likely candidate as a close disciple of Jesus. However, his early martyrdom at the hands of Herod Agrippa in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2) makes it highly improbable that he penned this letter.

James, the half-brother of Jesus is, therefore, the most likely author. Several reasons point toward this conclusion. First, he was the leader of the church in Jerusalem and well known throughout the believing Jewish community. His authority would be immediately recognized. Second, striking similarities in language are found between this epistle and the letter sent from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (cf. Acts 15:13-17 and James 1:27; 2:5, 7).² Third, numerous allusions to the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus are found in the book, indicating first-hand knowledge from the writer. Fourth, early Church tradition also strongly favors James, half-brother of the Lord, as the author of this epistle (so Origen, Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Augustine, and others).⁴

James served faithfully in bringing many Jews to the saving message of Jesus the Christ, the One with whom he was raised. He penned his sermon-like letter between 43-48 A.D., prior to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, indicating it may be the earliest writing of the New Testament. He would ultimately suffer the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of Gospel through a gruesome martyr's death, just prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.³



James wrote to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad" (1:1b). The various scatterings of the Jewish people are depicted above, geographically and chronologically.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

- I. Authentic Faith Endures Testing (1:1-18)
 - A. Introductory Greeting: 1:1
 - B. Joy in Trials (1:2-4)
 - C. Perseverance under Trials (1:5-11)
 - D. Resisting Temptation (1:12-18)
- II. Authentic Faith Lives the Word (1:19-27)
 - A. Doers of the Word (1:19-25)
 - B. Pure Religion (1:26-27)
- III. Authentic Faith Shows no Prejudice (2:1-13)
 - A. Disbanding Favoritism (2:1-7)
 - B. God's Royal Law (2:8-13)
- IV. Authentic Faith Produces Works (2:14-26)
 - A. Faith: Dead or Alive? (2:14-17)
 - B. Demonic Faith (2:18-26)
- V. Authentic Faith Bridges the Tongue (3:1-12)
 - A. Small Part, Giant Consequences (3:1-5a)
 - B. Blessing and Cursing (3:5b-12)
- VI. Authentic Faith Displays True Wisdom (3:13-18)
 - A. Wisdom from Earth (3:13-16)
 - B. Wisdom from Heaven (3:17-18)
- VII. Authentic Faith Avoids Sin (4:1-17)
 - A. Submit to God (4:1-10)
 - B. Stop the Talking (4:11-17)
- VIII. Authentic Faith Waits for Christ's Return (5:1-20)
 - A. Repent of Greed (5:1-6)
 - B. Endure with Patience (5:7-11)
 - C. Persistent Prayer (5:12-20)

TAKING THE TEST

This brief epistle packs a powerful punch as it offers a full exam on the authenticity of one's faith. Yet it is not meant to cause believers to continually fret about whether or not they are God's children, but rather to allow God's truth to holistically evaluate all their attitudes and actions, bringing conviction and life-change for God's glory.

NOTES FOR TODAY:

Selected Bibliography

¹ Luther, Martin, *1522 Edition of the New Testament*, Preface. As cited in D. Edmond Heibert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), 174. Interestingly, Heibert also notes, "later Luther recognized James' contribution."

² Blue, Ronald J. "James" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: an Exposition of the Scriptures*. New Testament ed. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983: 815-816.

³ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk through the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 463-465

⁴ Carson, D.A., and Douglas J. Moo. An Introduction to the New Testament. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005: 622-627