

The Epistle of James

What is an Epistle?

Epistles were letters, either written by the author, or dictated to a scribe who wrote them. Epistles usually have the recipient identified, although many epistles (especially those included in the New Testament were written with the assumption that they would be shared with others (churches, groups of believers).

Who was the "James" who wrote this epistle?

There were four men in the New Testament who are known as James:

- 1 - James, the Son of Zebedee and the brother of John
- 2 - James, the son of Alpheus. Mother of James (the less) and Joseph (Matthew 27:56 Mark 15:40)
- 3 - Judas, the Son of James (Mark 6:16)
- 4 - James the half brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3, Acts 12:17)

What we know about these three men known as "James"

- 1 - James the son of Zebedee was killed early Acts 12:2, most likely before this letter was written.
- 2 - We know very little about James the Less - the son of Alpheus. That does not mean he didn't write this letter, but it makes it less likely that he did.
- 3 - We know nothing of James the father of Judas. As with James the less, that does not mean he did not write the letter, but there is nothing to indicate that he did.
- 4 - James, the half brother of Jesus - this man is considered by most biblical scholars to be the most likely author of the Epistle of James. He was a leader in the early church. He was highly respected and active in daily church activity. These characteristics all point toward his authorship of the letter.

A few general notes on James' epistle:

- 1 - The book was probably written sometime from the middle 40s to the early 60s.
- 2 - It may well be the first writing of the New Testament, predating Mark's Gospel.
- 3 - James was the half brother of the Lord from Paul, mentioned in Galatians 1:19

¹⁸Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

- 4 - James was one of the three pillars of the Church Paul mentions in Galatians 3:9

⁷But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised ⁸(for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), ⁹and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

¹⁰They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do.

- 5 - He is considered to be the first Bishop of the church in Jerusalem

- 6 - He was mentioned by Paul, Josephus and Hegesipphus

- 7 - James was the author of the Apostolic Decree mentioned in Acts 15. He was present in Galatians 2: 11-14 - the incident at Antioch In Corinthians, Paul mentions him among those to whom Jesus appeared

- 8 - James the Just was martyred in the year 62 in Jerusalem

Tradition is that James angered the Jews so much that they took him to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem and threw him from the top to his death in the courtyard below.

See Jesus and Satan Matthew 4: 5-7

⁵Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written,

**'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU';
and
'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP,
SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'"**

⁷Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"

9 - It is very much a Jewish document - there is a Talmudic reference for almost every verse, except for two verses.

The two exceptions:

"Of the Lord Jesus Christ" James 1:1

"Our Lord Jesus Christ" James 2:1

10 - It is not a book of evangelism. There is very little in the letter intended to be evangelism or apologetics.

11 - This is a letter not written to non believers, but to believers; to fellow Christians.

12 - It is written to tell us how to live as a Christian. Scholars have written that the book asks the question, will we live according to the way of the world, or to God's way? That seems to be a good way to look at what James writes.

13 - James' letter contains the somewhat controversial group of verses that deal with Justification through "Faith Vs Works" (Sanctification and Justification). Much has been written to support both faith based salvation and works based salvation. In his epistle, James seems to indicate that faith is shown through works and that a life without works is a life that shows no faith.

Suggested structure of The Epistle of James, from the American Standard Translation (Chapter: verse - heading)

1: 1 - Greeting

1: 2-8 Trials

- 1: 9-11 Poverty and wealth
- 1: 12-18 Trial and temptation
- 1: 19-25 Reception of the Word
- 1: 26-27 True religion
- 2: 1-13 Social distinctions and "the royal Law"
- 2: 14 - 26 Faith and works
- 3: 1-12 The tongue
- 3: 13-18 The two wisdoms
- 4: 1-10 The word of God
- 4: 11-12 Judging
- 4: 13-17 Sinful self-confidence
- 5: 1-6 Judgment of the unscrupulous rich
- 5: 7-11 Patience until Christ's return
- 5: 12 Oaths
- 5: 13-18 Prayer
- 5: 19-20 Reclaiming the sinning brother