

Introduction

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Date: 09 February 2020

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me this evening to James chapter 1 and verse 1. It's our great privilege to engage in a series of studies in this magnificent New Testament book.

James chapter 1 and verse 1. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, greetings.

Faith at work. That's the way most modern commentators describe the message of the book of James. Faith at work.

It isn't enough that we call ourselves Christians, or that we made a decision for Jesus, or that we know all the doctrines of the Christian faith. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

It is always accompanied by good works. Faith at work. I want to suggest that the Christian church in the West suffers from two great crises.

[1 : 16] The first is that it does not know what to believe. And the second is that it does not know how to live. Of course, the two are connected.

Because Christians do not know what to believe, they do not know how to live. And likewise, because Christians do not know how to live, they no longer know what to believe.

I wonder whether we are confused about either of the two in Glasgow City. What to believe, how to live. Well, the book of James, which God willing will study over the next few months, will help us in both these areas.

But just as the message of James is faith at work, so James will help us understand both what to believe, and how to live.

So this evening, I want to introduce the book of James by considering three things from the first verse. The writer, the receivers, and the writing.

[2 : 17] Who wrote it? To whom did he write it? And what's the book about? First of all then, this is just really simple stuff. The writer, the writer.

The letter begins, James, a servant of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ. James wrote this letter. So what do we know about James, such that we can draw inspiration from him?

Well, from this passage, we know three things. First of all, he was a brother. Second, he was a servant. And third, he was a worshiper. He was, first of all, a brother.

A brother. Everything we know from the Bible, and from church tradition, tells us that the James who wrote this letter was the biological brother of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we read together in Galatians 1 verse 19, that the apostle Paul, having returned to Jerusalem, says, I saw none of the other apostles, only James, the Lord's brother.

[3 : 23] In 1 Corinthians 15 verse 7, we read of our Lord's resurrection from the dead, that he appeared to James. Isn't that simply the most wonderful thing?

That though from the other gospel records, we know that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him during his life, that he chose to appear to James, his brother, after his resurrection from the dead.

Now, I want us to think about this for a moment. James was the biological brother of Jesus. So how it must have affected him when he lost his brother Jesus to the tortuous crucifixion, and how it must have changed James when he saw Jesus risen from the dead.

James went on to become a very prominent figure in the early church, and went on pretty safe ground by saying that he became the first bishop of Jerusalem. But he never stopped being Jesus' brother.

Shading a brother's memories, a brother's love, a brother's heritage. And as I said in my prayer, that means that James' brother is at the right hand of God in heaven today.

[4 : 46] Now, why I'm mentioning this is not to educate as much as it is to elevate. The thing is, James never mentions his family connection to Jesus.

He could have started this letter by saying, James, the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, and used his family connection with Jesus as the basis for his authority in defining what it means to live as a Christian.

But he does not do so. Listen to this. The most meaningful relationship James ever had with Jesus was by faith, not by flesh.

And that relationship did not begin when James was born into Jesus' family, but when James believed in Jesus' name. So James begins, you see, where we must begin as well, with faith in Jesus Christ.

We must never think we can use our family relationships to gain advantage in the kingdom of heaven. So tell me, where are the descendants of Thomas Chalmers and William Cunningham and Hugh Miller and Andrew Boner, the architects of the Free Church of Scotland?

[6 : 05] Where are their descendants? It's our faith, not our heritage, not our family relationships, which is primary. The basis on which we are saved is not that we are related to men and women of the faith, but that we are men and women of the faith.

So the very fact that James does not mention his family connection with Jesus is a challenge to us to ensure that we ourselves have faith in Jesus Christ, just like James.

He was a brother, but he was also a servant. James, a servant of God. If James does not derive his authority for writing this book from his family connection to Jesus, then he does from his status and position in the church.

As I said, if tradition is to be believed, James was the first bishop of Jerusalem. He earned the title James the Just because of his righteous life.

But that's not the status and position to which he appeals. I am the bishop of Jerusalem. I am James the Just. Rather, he calls himself a servant, more literally, a slave.

[7 : 32] The appeal to authority does not reside in his prominence in the church of Christ, but in his service for the church of Christ.

In the world of the James' day, a third of the world's population were slaves. They were the property of their masters. They were not their own to do as they wished, like we are.

All these slaves in their heart of hearts wished they could be free, and rightly so. They, like we, believed in the dream of rags to riches when eventually they would win or buy their freedom and themselves become great men and great women who perhaps would own their own slaves.

So for them, the path to greatness lay upward. But in the kingdom of God, the path to greatness lies downward.

Jesus himself said, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. In so many ways, the Christian path is one of riches to rags.

[8 : 45] progression in the Christian life does not consist in winning or buying our autonomy from Christ, but increasingly living under the lordship of Christ.

There are no sirs in the kingdom of God. There are only servants. No sirs, only servants. So again, the very fact that James calls himself a servant is a challenge to us as Christians to ensure that the trajectory of our growth as believers is downward.

But then thirdly about James, he's a worshipper. He's a worshipper. In first inspection, there's nothing particularly unique about James saying of himself that he's a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, we could sweep past these words without thinking anything of them. were it not for the fact that for a righteous Jew like James the just, the mere thought of laying the name God, Theos, alongside and on the same level as the Lord Jesus Christ was blasphemy and punishable by death.

A righteous Jew like James would never have written this way unless he himself had become convinced that the Lord Jesus Christ was equal with God.

[10 : 25] Add this to the fact that James was Jesus' biological brother and you've got something which goes way beyond the norm. this righteous Jew James speaks as though his earthly brother is on the same level and is alongside Theos God.

This brother James worships his older brother Jesus as though he was God. That's amazing.

By virtue of his family relationship we tend to put James up on a pedestal when in reality he related primarily to Jesus as saviour not brother as a servant of Jesus but more than anything else as a worshipper of Jesus.

In other words we recognise in James someone who is like us in every way and who relates to Jesus in the same way we relate to Jesus and therefore the message of this book faith at work isn't preserved for the spiritual elite the so called saints whoever they are if it's for James then it's for every Christian who relates to Jesus in these ways James does not trace his salvation to his genetics but to grace we too also trace our salvation to grace which makes the book of James all the more relevant for us the writer then secondly the receivers the receivers you know the world of James day wasn't really so different from ours we tend to assume that

Christians in 2020 Scotland are far more advanced than Christians in AD 55 Jerusalem and that we now have successfully solved the problems they could not to all intents and purposes we are a different species a higher species let's be honest on the surface of things things might have changed but on the inside we are still very much the same we still need help to know how to put our faith into work we still face similar temptations we still fail in similar ways we still fall into similar sins so this letter is as much for us as it is for those who first receive it the so-called 12 tribes scattered among the nations I want us to notice two things about the receivers of this letter first of all they are children of Israel but second they are not in Israel they are children of Israel first of all the first receivers of this letter were the 12 tribes

[13 : 28] I don't think we need to think too hard to realize that James is writing to the people of Israel to those who are descended from the 12 sons of Jacob the so-called 12 tribes James the ethnic Jew the bishop of Jerusalem is writing to other Jews who like him have become Christians many people harbor suspicions about the difference between the way Paul writes and the way James writes that somehow James is less concerned with faith and more concerned with works but this difference is almost entirely equalized when you realize that they're writing to different audiences with James's target audience in his letter being ethnic Jews who had become Christians and so James writes in a way that appeals to a particularly

Jewish Semitic mind in the last 10 years or so New Testament commentators have come to understand the book of James as the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament book of Proverbs the Bible's book of wisdom for some of us I know James is our favorite book of the Bible I don't know if that's the way it was for the early Jewish believers but it was most certainly a book to which they could easily relate because it was written in their language so James is writing to ethnically Jewish Christians remember that's who composed the early church not Scots not Americans but Jews and that's one of the reasons that today we are so passionate about mission to ethnic Jews because they first gave us the gospel at the coronation of King George VI Her Majesty's Father in 1937 the great

Scottish author John Buchan addressed the people of Canada with the following words we can pay our debts to the past by placing the future in debt to us we can pay our debt to the past by placing the future in debt to us let me change that phrase slightly and say we can pay our debts to the Jews of the first century for sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with us by sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with the Jews of the 21st century if we want to thank James and all these early Christians to whom he's writing for sharing the gospel with us Gentiles we can so do by sharing the gospel with ethnic Jewish descendants today but there's more here yes there were 12 tribes in Israel but you will know that during the reign of King

Rehoboam that's King Solomon's son Israel was divided into two nations the southern kingdom of Judah had two tribes and the northern kingdom of Israel had ten tribes and these two nations never came together again the legacy of King David was that of a divided kingdom the burden of many of the later prophets in the Old Testament was that Israel would one day become one nation again that the ten tribes would be reunited with the two tribes under the lordship of the Messiah the so called shepherd of Israel of whom we read in Ezekiel 37 for example this never happened in Old Testament times but it did happen when Jews from the ten tribes and Jews from the two tribes came to a living faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour only then under the lordship of

Jesus Christ and by faith in him could the nations be reunited united even as they were under the kingship of David the true Israel James is saying to us the true twelve tribes only comes to fruition under Jesus Christ so these original receivers you see were ethnically Jewish believers perhaps that helps us explain some of the differences between the way James writes and the way Paul writes so before we dismiss the book of James because we are not ethnic ethnically Jewish let's remember we're children of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ and that the same James who wrote this book was we believe in Acts 15 present at the council of Jerusalem where the church accepted Gentiles into the church on the same footing as Jews namely faith in

[18:37] Jesus Christ in other words the book of James is for us also all of us here it's the story of faith at work so they are children of Israel but they are not in Israel they are not in Israel the history of Israel is not altogether dissimilar from the history of our own nation of Scotland for the last thousand years our people have been moving emigrating today the Scottish diaspora spreads all the way around the world you only have to go to America or Australia to see how profoundly these nations have been impacted by the Scots the same was true for ethnic Israelites ethnic Jews for one reason or another there was a Jewish colony of one size or another in every major town in the Roman Empire and the number of Jews living outside of the borders of

Israel far outnumbered the number who lived inside the borders of Israel so James is writing here to ethnic Jews who are Christians but they are not in the land of Israel they are the Jewish diaspora many many of them had left Israel because of the terrifying persecution of Christians under Herod and spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus these Jewish Christians had been forced to move far away from home and country they were scattered as it were among the nations they are Jewish expats who left not because they could but because they were forced to leave they had written the book on what it meant to suffer for the name of Christ so James is writing to a wandering people very far from home and he's helping them to understand how in their own alien environments they can live in such a way that brings glory to the name of

Jesus Christ how to make their faith work in Syria or in Asia Minor or in Egypt wherever they are and I guess that helps us all the more to identify with this book because not only are we the nations among whom these ethnic Jews were scattered but we also have this unsettling feeling of not being entirely at home in this world that somehow for us and our Christian faith this is an alien environment but we too want to live in a way that brings glory to the name of Jesus Christ we too want to know how to make our faith work in a world which increasingly is not our home I hope I'm managing to convince you that the book of James far from being an irrelevant antiquarian document dating from

AD 55 or so and has nothing to say to us is as contemporary as the day when James first put pen to paper and wrote James the world in which we live is surprisingly similar to that in which James lived the people to whom he was writing aren't really all that different from us after all we're all saved through faith in the one Savior Jesus Christ and the gospel message of how faith works is exactly the same so for that reason among many we want to explore James and learn from him over the next few months how to put our faith in Jesus into practice and in so doing address those two great crisis of the 21st century western church so we have the writer then the receivers and then finally and briefly we have the writing the writing now you know it's very tempting when reading a letter like James to skip through the pleasant introductions so that we can get straight into the meat but for the eager interpreter of scripture to skip through the introductions is a mistake because it's often in the introduction we're given the key to understanding the message of the whole book without which we're going to be scrabbling about in the darkness looking for all kinds of meaning for James for James the introduction consists not just in him as writer and the ethnic Jews

Jewish Christians of the dispersion as receivers but in the opening greeting he begins his letter with that word greetings now on the one hand this this word helps biblical scholars to date the book of James greetings as being very early in the Christian era since by the mid to late first century greetings had been replaced as the standard introduction of a letter by grace and peace as we often find in the letters of Paul however on the other hand it helps us to understand something far broader about the book of James the word greetings in the original language was derived from the Greek word for joy charing greetings came from chara joy incidentally the Greek word for grace charis isn't all that different again but but James' primary focus is on the joy it brings the Christian by putting his faith into practice in his life

[24 : 45] James' primary focus is on the joy it brings the Christian to put his practice put his faith into practice in his life so we mistakenly think of the book of James as a set of mere commands or as a book of wisdom well it is important to live according to the word of God it is vital that we pursue the path of wisdom in life but the point of James' greeting here is that the path to genuine joy in your Christian life lies in obedience and wisdom that in putting our faith into practice in making grace work there's true enjoyment of life intellectually of course I would hope that we've all known this in our Scottish reform tradition from childhood we were taught the question and answer to question one of the shorter catechism what is the chief end of man man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever however we've not always understood how this answer works in practice because for too many of us obedience has been painted in dark solemn tones and spoken of in terms of relentless duty wisdom is the long face of sad experience gloomily reflecting on all the mistakes one has made in life the truth is that according to James here our highest joy lies in glorifying

God our highest joy rests in obeying the word of God and in pursuing the wisdom of the gracious Christian life in other words in putting our faith into work wonder sometimes whether we could rephrase question one of the shorter catechism by saying man's chief end is to enjoy God by glorifying him obedience laughs and wisdom smiles James James' primary focus is on the joy it brings to the Christian to put faith into work in his life in putting the grace which we have experienced through Christ in salvation to work so that whilst it becomes true that the grace by which we are saved is by faith alone the faith it saves is never alone I think

I'm right when I speak of these two great crises of the Christian church in the west not knowing what to believe not knowing how to live such crises are evidenced evidence almost a complete lack of joy and obedience and an apathy concerning any kind of godly wisdom I wonder whether James' introduction has whetted your appetite any like it has mine to dig deeper into this marvellous book because in this book of the Bible the favourite of many even I know sitting here today we're going to learn not just what to believe about the grace of glory of Christ we're going to learn how to put that faith into work in our lives in a way that's going to bring us deep lasting joy we're going to learn the right way to view trials in our lives the right way to view our money and possessions the right way to use our speech to bring glory to Christ among many other things faith at work that's the message of the book of James but of course this message assumes that its readers already have some level of faith in Christ that means surely that the best way we can prepare for this series of studies in the book of James is by ourselves putting our faith and trust in

James' brother and saviour Jesus Christ himself and so with this I close have you obeyed his call to believe in him are you pursuing the path of wisdom in life and true lasting joy by trusting in Jesus Christ let us pray our God and father we thank you for the book of James we thank you for its message of joy in putting our faith into practice in life that obedience has a smiling face Lord as we come to you we pray that you would help us to understand Christ on the same level that James did that the greatest relationship he had with his brother Jesus was not genetic but by faith in him and that

James was an eager worshipper of his brother Jesus Christ who we believe is at your right hand in heaven today carrying the same genetic code well 25% of it anyway of his brother James so if we come to you tonight oh Lord we pray that you would help us to consecrate ourselves to submit ourselves to dedicate ourselves devote ourselves to putting faith into work this week we ask these things in Jesus name Amen Amen