

2. James' Address to the Churches

*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.
(James 1:1)*

A Practical Letter

Having looked at some passages in Scripture that identify James as the brother of the Lord, we will focus now on the letter of James itself. This letter has fascinated the church for centuries because of its practical nature. James does not expand on deep doctrinal themes as others do, such as Paul in some of his letters. James keeps his letter simple and if he emphasizes anything at all, it is that faith must go together with deeds.

One commentary on the book of James carries the title, *Faith That Works*.¹ The concept of faith that works has also been applied to a mission program called FaithWorks, in which members of our churches also participate. Participants travel to various places and help the poor with things such as housing. The emphasis lies on doing something in the Lord's service for the neighbor in need.

Whenever there is what we may call an evangelical revival (I use the term here loosely, without any specific judgment) or a renewed spirit of activity in the church, people often turn to the letter of James for guidance and encouragement. There is a kind of activism in evangelicalism, the idea that we have to *do* something and be involved in kingdom work. The emphasis in the letter of James lends itself to such a scenario: no theoretical doctrine, but religion that functions.

¹*James, Faith That Works*, R. Kent Hughes, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1991.

The practical nature of this letter may stem from the fact that it was initially a sermon, written to be read in the various churches. This may explain the direct and powerful style, as well as the broad range of topics.² In any case, it is clear that James has much to say in a relatively short letter and that every passage should be further scrutinized and understood.

In 1:1 James introduces himself, identifies the hearers or readers, and gives his initial greeting. We already learn a number of important aspects from his address to the churches. James' address gives evidence of his sincere humility. In light of the letter's severity, this is very important.

We see in this address how the Lord Jesus presents James to the churches in his servility, his sensitivity, and his simplicity.

Bond-servant

The letter begins with the words, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." The North American Standard Bible (NASB) reads, "James, a *bond-servant* of God." I mention this because the word with which James describes himself can be translated literally as "slave". Then the passage would read, "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The word "slave" has connotations that we cannot easily accept today, and therefore the translation "servant" has become generally accepted. I would not make much of this, except that in the case of James I find the word choice particularly significant.

We must remember that James in all likelihood is the brother of the Lord Jesus, born after the Lord as the second child of Joseph and Mary. He is also a leader of the church at Jerusalem, which is certainly an important position. From this we conclude that James is quite well-known and is considered a man of authority and status in the church. In his letter, Jude (also a brother of the Lord) introduces himself as a "brother of James," and this is considered sufficient to establish his credentials.³

²See *The Letters of James and Peter*, by William Barclay (Revised edition), Daily Bible Study series, The Westminster Preee, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 27-30, especially the use of *charaz* in ancient preaching.

³See *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, R.V.G. Tasker, Kent, England, 1969, p. 39. It is noteworthy that also Jude makes no reference to being a blood-brother of the Lord Jesus.

We recall at this point that, initially, Jesus' brothers did not believe in him and even mocked his messianic aspirations. That situation drastically changed, as evidenced by Acts 15 and these letters of James and Jude. The brothers had come to recognize and accept Jesus as the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not read in the Bible when or how this happened, and therefore any attempt to reconstruct the events in this respect is pure speculation.

There is one passage that might give some direction. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is listing the many people who saw the risen Christ, and in verses 7-8 he writes, "Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." The James mentioned by Paul as eyewitness of the risen Christ must be the same one who wrote this letter.⁴ It is remarkable how the Lord Jesus appeared especially to a denier (Peter), a doubter (Thomas), and an unbeliever (James). We note also at this point how the brothers and mother of Jesus already gathered with the Christian congregation before Pentecost.⁵

James' important position in the church at Jerusalem is further illustrated by the way Paul describes him as one of the "pillars" (of the church) along with Peter and John. Earlier in his letter to the Galatians, Paul had identified James as "the Lord's brother."⁶

When a man with the status and function of James writes a letter to the churches, one might expect that some of his important credentials are listed. The address would then read as follows: "James, brother of the Lord Jesus, son of Mary, witness of the risen Christ, pillar in the church, and chief elder in the church at Jerusalem, endorsed by Peter and John and Paul, to the twelve tribes." If credentials are important, then certainly James has them. Yet he does not mention any of these.

He writes instead that he is a servant, a slave, of God. The word "slave" can mean "servant" but it also implies that a person is completely the possession of another.

⁴See *Paulus Eerste Brief aan Corinthe*, F.W. Grosheide, Bottenburg, Amsterdam, 1932 ed., p. 496, 497.

⁵Acts 1:14. The NIV notes there, "These brothers would include James who later became important in the church."

⁶See Galatians 2:9 and Galatians 1:19. The inference is that James recognized the apostolic office of Paul. This lent more credence to Paul's mission work, although Paul did not build on human approval (cf. Galatians 2:6).

This is why the NASB employs the word “bond-servant”, to show that someone cannot just walk away from his task. He is bound in that position as a servant.

A Servant of the Lord Jesus Christ

To be a servant, a slave of God, is not a hard matter. This pertains to everyone, and especially to God’s office bearers. We are all merely servants, bound to a certain duty by God. In James’ address to the churches, however, it is quite telling that he also mentions his servility to Jesus. He writes, “a servant of God *and of the Lord Jesus Christ*.”

Note the titles that James uses here. He does not write that he is a servant of Jesus, his brother, but he calls his brother “the Lord”. Therein he recognizes the full and complete sovereignty of Jesus over his life. He is essentially saying, “He is my Lord, the one who bought me with his precious blood and who governs me, to whom I am responsible.” James follows this title with the personal name, Jesus. But immediately after, he adds the official title of the Lord Jesus: the Christ. Therein James recognizes the Lord Jesus as the anointed and holy One of God, the promised Messiah of the house of David, who reigns forever as king over all things. “Jesus, my Lord and my Messiah, my King and my Savior.” That is James’ confession.

The apostle Paul also calls himself a “slave” of the Lord Jesus, but since his office was constantly under attack, he often added the word “apostle”. He never defended himself personally, but made clear that his office was directly received from the Lord Jesus. James does not make any such assertions. He focuses only on Jesus, the Lord and Christ. He has come a long way, and we acknowledge that this is not his own doing, for only the Spirit of God can lead a person to say that Jesus is Lord.⁷

Servility

We see in the letter’s address what I have termed the *servility* of James. The word “servility” has some negative connotations to modern readers. Being servile is like groveling, always bowing and bending, and as such it sounds condescending.

⁷Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:3: KURIOS IHSOYS, the name used in the Septuagint for JAHWEH, the LORD.

Yet I choose this word here because it brings out clearly and strongly that we are but slaves, bond-servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this case, servility means the willingness to serve in a given office, and to do so humbly and unconditionally. Such willingness is undoubtedly now shown by James, who initially did not even believe in the Lord, his own brother.

The word “servility” does not mean that we must be without a backbone, not daring to stand up and state our case. In the 108 verses of the entire letter of James, there are almost 60 imperatives (commands). James is servile to the Lord, but he certainly dares to admonish the churches in the service of the same Lord! According to one explainer, James is a “late bloomer, but he flowered well.”⁸ He is not afraid to use strong language. He often addresses his readers as “brothers,” even “my dear brothers,” but he also calls them foolish [men], adulterous people, and sinners.

How can we ever face all the admonitions given by James in this letter, unless we do not with heart and soul also confess that we are bond-servants, the slaves of Jesus Christ? There is no partiality or favoritism, and James especially warns against these things (cf. 2:1-13). He may be a blood brother of the Lord Jesus, but that will get him nowhere. The only thing that counts is a living and active faith. We may have been born in the church, and that is a great gift of God’s grace, but we must then live in accordance with that privilege or be considered all the more liable.

Are we willing to serve? I am sure that everyone will answer “yes” to this general question. Of course we are willing to serve! Yet as soon as specifics are mentioned, it is so tempting to bow out or back off. Often people claim they have no gifts or no time to serve, but there are certain implications when we call ourselves a slave or servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Honored to be a Slave of Christ

Being a servant in the manner in which James uses the word means that we give absolute obedience to the Lord Jesus. He is never to be questioned or doubted, but always obeyed. It means absolute humility. A servant does not focus on his rights, but on his duties and obligations. It also means absolute loyalty. We think not only of our own interest, but of the Lord’s interest and that of others. We subject our preferences to his prescription.

⁸*James, Faith that Works*, R. Kent Hughes, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 1991, p. 16.

All this implies that we take a certain pride in who we are. In James' world, where slavery was common, slaves had a certain "pride". This pride lay in belonging to a loving, caring, and powerful master. To belong to the Lord Jesus Christ is not a burden, or something to be ashamed of, but an honor.⁹ Our Lord said it himself: "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets" (Luke 6:22-23). We are in good company if we suffer as a servant of Christ. That is why the "slaves" of Jesus left the Jewish Sanhedrin "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of the Lord]" (Acts 5:41).

James, who once scoffed at his brother, is now quite willing to suffer and even die as his servant. Being prepared to do this himself, he dares to ask the same of all the members of the churches among the nations. He writes about it specifically: "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord" (5:10). The prophets of old were also called the servants of God. Think of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Caleb, and Isaiah, all called specifically "servants of God". Think of the Lord Jesus who took upon himself the form of a servant, humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Brother James had seen it happen, and marveled still when he wrote this letter. So it is true: the only greatness to which a Christian can ever aspire is to be a slave, a servant of Jesus Christ.

Sensitivity

When James presents himself as a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ, he does not do so in a triumphant manner, as if he and the members of the churches do not have any problems and that all battles have been won. We may share in the great triumph of Christ, but there is no reason to be triumphant, as if there is not a great conflict raging all over the world.

James addresses his letter "to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." I call this a "sensitive" approach, for with this expression James shows that he is quite aware of the situation in which the church of Christ finds itself in the last days.

⁹Cf. Barclay, o.c. p. 35ff.

There is an interesting theory put forward by the NIV translators that by using the title “to the twelve tribes,” James is writing to *Jewish* Christians in the Roman empire. These Jewish Christians were predominantly former members of the church at Jerusalem, which had been dispersed and scattered when Stephen was executed (Acts 8:1). As pastor of the church at Jerusalem, James of course has much interest in addressing these Christians, former members of his flock. This would also explain the many references to the Old Testament.

Perhaps it is true that many of the first recipients of James’ letter were Jewish Christians. After all, many Jews had spread out into the Roman Empire from Egypt to Rome, and the first persons addressed by the apostles were always the Jews. The majority of the early churches, however, also contained many members of Gentile origin. It would not be edifying for James to address only certain churches (Jewish ones) or only certain members (Jews) in the Christian churches. The general epistles are meant for all the churches and for everyone in these churches.

The Twelve Tribes

Why then does James address the believers as “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”? Here we see how James writes in a very sensitive and discerning manner. There is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The Christian church is not racially oriented or dominated, but *catholic*, and so there is unity in diversity.

James uses the expression “to the twelve tribes” to indicate the spiritual unity of all Christians throughout the Roman empire. They may be of Jewish, Roman, Greek, or African background, but they all belong to the people of God, those who live under the lordship of the great Son of David, Jesus Christ.

James’ use of the expression “the twelve tribes” indicates that the apostles and the leaders of the Christian church saw the church as the true continuation of the people of Israel, the new covenant people of the Lord. All the blessings and privileges that once belonged to Israel now belong to the Christian churches everywhere. Paul writes about this in Ephesians 2 where we read how strangers became sojourners, aliens became citizens, and the wall of hostility was broken down.

James is very sensitive to the fact that all of these different people in various churches all over the world are one in Christ. They are one people sharing in all God’s covenant blessings and obligations, though as richly varied as were the twelve tribes of Israel. This is how he will approach, admonish, urge, and comfort them. Together they form the one body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Israel of God

James knows very well that the position of these churches and these Christians is not the same everywhere. In some places they are tolerated while in other places they are persecuted. In certain areas they are rich and in other parts they are poor. There may be many differences in culture and background (and there is much work to be done so that these Christians may all grow in the unity of faith), but they are together the people of the Lord.

Paul writes in Galatians 6:16, “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” This is a benediction. If the expression “Israel” here literally meant the Jews, Paul would have written, “Israel according to the flesh.” That is his standard phrase for the Jewish people. The “Israel of God” means the entire Old and New Testament church, gathered in the unity of the true faith, the continuity and fulfillment of the covenant people of old.

When James addresses his audience as the “twelve tribes scattered among the nations,” he does so to encourage them. Among the nations, they may be few and far between. They may not have much of a place or a position. Politically, they make no impact on the affairs of state. They are being severely tested and tried, and James will write about this in the next verses. Yet they are the people of God, members of the holy catholic church. They are to take comfort in God’s covenant of love and be encouraged in the fact that they have one Lord in heaven and a brotherhood throughout the world. We are never alone, with a Father above and fellowship all around. We must never forget this because it is vital for our existence and functioning as Christians and as churches of Christ in this world.

Where did James learn this “sensitive” language? He learned it, of course, from the Lord Jesus Christ who came to save the spiritual Israel by his one sacrifice on the cross. This is the same Jesus who said, “I have other sheep who are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” The Lord spoke these words shortly after James and his other brothers had mocked Jesus and said to him, “...show yourself to the world” (John 7:4). The Lord Jesus certainly did so! James indicates how well he now understands these words and very carefully applies this understanding in his letter: “To the twelve tribes scattered among all the nations,” one flock and one Shepherd.

A Simple Greeting

One simple word makes up the next part of the address: “greetings”. This seems to be a rather nondescript type of a greeting, one that is not “Christian” at all. It could very well be a secular or worldly greeting such as “hello”.

This greeting does not necessarily have to be interpreted as being secular, but it is indeed simple. It is also a standard greeting form. I find it remarkable that the Council at Jerusalem, which had to deal with the place of Gentile Christians in the church, wrote a letter to the churches with the exact same heading: “Greetings” (Acts 15:23). That letter was also closed with a simple word: “Farewell”. Hello and goodbye. Not surprisingly, James was the chairman of that council and perhaps also the author of that letter.

A simple greeting is also used in the letter of James. James is apparently not one to get into elaborate introductions and lengthy greetings. Actually, this characterizes the whole letter. Like its greeting, its contents are clear and straightforward. James does not say one word too many, and he chooses his words simply but effectively. He tells it as it is and therefore the address typifies the entire letter in its amazing simplicity. The focus is never on James, but always on the Lord Jesus Christ. There is even a remarkable similarity between James and Jesus in their choice of words and arrangement of topics. Some have said that it is reminiscent of the “Sermon on the Mount”, Christ’s basic and most memorable sermon, if we may say so.

This simplicity indicates that James is a man who goes to the heart of the matter. He showed this in what he said at the so-called “Council of Jerusalem”. At this council, there was much discussion and debate about how the laws of Moses should function in the Christian churches. The participants heard the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, and everyone fell silent. Finally, James spoke. He summarized the whole matter in the light of the Scriptures and he kept it simple and straight for everyone: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” No one should go beyond what God has ordained. No more, no less.

We find the same style in James’ letter. He does not beat around the bush in any way. Sometimes the expressions are very strong, and could be misinterpreted if taken to the extreme. Martin Luther, as mentioned earlier, did not accept the letter of James as canonical. This may have had something to do with the fact that Luther and others did not understand James’ simplicity of style. When properly used, simplicity becomes forceful. There is no way to get

around the naked truth of a simple statement that is based on fact, even if it can be twisted.

It all comes together. By the grace of God, James submitted himself fully to the Lord Jesus Christ. He needed much humility to do so and this was given to him. He appreciated the fact that the life of Christians everywhere is sometimes very difficult and he was able to address this need. In this letter, and in its sensitivity, the Lord Jesus shows his care for his suffering church. The strong simplicity of the letter is a source of encouragement for Christians everywhere. If things are stated simply and clearly, God's people will hear and be encouraged in the Lord.