

## Lesson Two — The Epistle James Wrote

*Day One — The Circumstances*  
*Day Two — The Book of James*  
*Day Three — Specific Information*  
*Days Four and Five — Key Thoughts*

Last week we glimpsed a quick history of the first ten to fifteen years of the Church. The Church began at Jerusalem with a flurry of growth and initial activity. Peter and the other apostles had become quite bold and excited in sharing the good news about Jesus Christ, Who was now resurrected and ascended. Many people were being added to the church daily.

This fervor concerning Jesus Christ did not find favor with the Jewish leadership and after several warnings to this band of followers of Christ, the leadership of the Jews began persecuting the Church. (We read about this in the first several chapters of Acts last week.) A horrible day came when a faithful and spirit-filled Jewish believer named Stephen was stoned to death. The young zealot, Saul, watched the event in total approval. This began a severe persecution of believers in Jerusalem. Saul, who later became known as the beloved Apostle Paul, seemed bent on chasing these early Christians out of their homes, dragging them to be flogged or killed for their having aligned themselves with Christ.

This persecution caused a *dispersion* of the Jerusalem believers into the surrounding countryside and cities. Although they had scattered, they were still undergoing trials and testings brought about because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Finally Saul, “the persecutor of the brethren,” was on his way to Damascus in order to bind up the scattered followers of Christ and bring them back to Jerusalem for flogging. It was this journey when suddenly a light from heaven flashed around Saul, and falling to the ground, he was struck blind. Jesus Christ spoke to him personally, and Saul put faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 9). The one who had given hardy approval for Stephen’s stoning, had come to believe in the Christ. Yet the persecution in and around Jerusalem continued. Finally, James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, was martyred (Acts 12). How sad it must have been for the followers of Christ!

With his new-found faith, Paul began his first journey, while James, the half brother of the Lord Jesus Christ, continued to lead the church at Jerusalem. Finally, James, with the heart of a pastor, writes a letter of encouragement and exhortation to the Jewish followers of Christ who had been scattered to the surrounding country side because of the ensuing persecution. At this time the Church was mainly made up of Jewish believers who had accepted the fact that Jesus was the Messiah. It was so early into the history of the Church that Gentiles were not yet being added in any numbers to the Church. Hence, the address of the letter — “to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.”

## Day One — The Circumstances

Begin in prayer.

Though James was the half brother of Jesus Christ, it seems he didn't desire to be recognized as Jesus' brother, but rather as the bond-servant of Christ (Jas.1:1). His passion for Christ and the ministry is evidenced in the fact that James became the leader of the church at Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place where the Church began and the center of Christian activity in those first few years following the ascension of Jesus. The first few chapters in Acts tell of thousands of people who came to be believers in Christ during these early years. Though there were bits of persecution here and there, the persecution didn't become terrible until Stephen was stoned to death in Acts chapter eight. Then the persecution became so intense that the believers in Jerusalem dispersed. James remained in Jerusalem as a leading elder of the church at Jerusalem, which met in houses throughout the city. Yet, he still felt responsible for the believing Jews who had been scattered due to the persecution by Jews who had not become Christians.

Hence, we have the letter of James. James, with the passionate heart for these dispersed Jewish followers of Christ, wrote this letter to the individuals who were formerly in the Church in Jerusalem but who had been scattered abroad. He wrote to encourage them toward good works, and to admonish them against falling away from these works while under persecution. He wanted to encourage these scattered Christians to withstand the testing of their faith; to be careful not to fall into sin; to keep on performing good works toward each other; and to watch their tongue.

This week we will begin to observe this letter. James addresses the letter to the *twelve tribes* (i.e. Jews) dispersed abroad because, at the time of his writing, there simply were not many Gentiles who had become believers. Believing Gentiles are not mentioned until Acts chapter ten. At the time of the writing of this epistle, Gentiles as a whole, were not yet being offered the gospel and, therefore, were not yet being added to the church in great numbers until Paul was on his first journey. James had probably not heard of the Gentiles being converted in great numbers until *after* he wrote his letter.

Eventually, due to Paul's travels, Gentile conversions began taking place in various cities where Paul visited, there arose a great conflict between the Jews who were believers and Paul and Barnabas concerning whether or not Gentiles would have to be circumcised in order to be saved. This issue is what the Council at Jerusalem addressed in about 49 or 50 AD (Acts 15). Paul and Barnabas took the issue to Peter and James and the other leaders of the church at Jerusalem for the determination to be made. It was determined that the Gentiles *did not* have to be circumcised in order to be saved and that the church at Jerusalem should write their Gentile brethren a letter of encouragement and admonition to "abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:19ff). A resulting letter was sent to the new converts, but this **was not** the letter which is the Epistle of James. And because this issue is not even mentioned in James' letter from Jerusalem to dispersed believers, it is generally believed that the Epistle of James was written just **prior to** this Council at Jerusalem.

Thus, you have the historical setting of the letter and the authorship of the letter. Now we are ready to begin observing **what** James wrote. Today and tomorrow, we will spend time observing the **whole** of the letter. In following weeks, we will be looking at the letter in parts. As we close for today please be in prayer for your own personal understanding of James, as well as the understanding of your discussion group. Remember to also pray for your discussion leader.

The Epistle of James is printed in full in the Appendix of this workbook. It is printed in double-space format and in such a way that you can make marks in the margins. Remember, the best way to observe a

large portion of God's Word is to read it over and over again. This is what we will do. Today, read the entire epistle at least one time through. Don't stop to make any marks, just read it straight through.

After reading the Book of James, do you have any initial impressions, thoughts, or comments?

## **Day Two — The Book of James**

Your assignment again today is to turn back to the Appendix and reread the entire Book of James again. You may want to begin making your observation notes (i.e. underling repeated words or phrases and making notes in the margins). When you are finished, write out any further impressions, thoughts or questions concerning the book below.

Perhaps you could even read the book through again?

See you tomorrow.

## **Day Three — Specific Information**

Today you will re-read the Book of James looking for specific information. As you read, fill in the following:

Information the author says about himself —

Information the author gives about the recipients —

At this point, what do you think is James' intent in writing this letter? What is his main purpose?

## Days Four and Five — Key Thoughts

The more times you read through this letter, the more familiar it will become to you. The more familiar you become with the contents, the better you will be able to properly interpret it. The more you are able to properly interpret this portion of Scripture, the more correctly you will apply it to your life. And the more correctly you apply Scripture to your life, the more pleasing you will be to your Father Who is heaven. Isn't that your goal in life?

Remember to always read Scripture prayerfully. As you read through the five chapters today and tomorrow, write the key thoughts of every chapter. Key thoughts come from repeated words. Mark repeated words and their synonyms, then write out the key thoughts in every chapter below. **Don't feel you need to spend too much time in this, as we will be observing in more detail in the weeks to follow.** Work through the book once today and again tomorrow.

### James 1

**James 2**

**James 3**

**James 4**

## **James 5**

Is there anything you would want to write in the way of a SUMMARY of what you have learned this week from your observations of the Book of James?