

James: Permanent Servant of Jesus

James 1:1

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to the book of James in the New Testament right after Hebrews as we begin a study of this great book together. I want to say a couple of things by way of introduction as we begin this study, and the first is to draw your attention to the author of this book. The author of the book of James is, in all likelihood, James who is the brother of our Lord, the one who moderated the first General Assembly of the Church as recorded in Acts chapter 15. There are a variety of reasons for believing this. One is the most prominent other James in the New Testament was James the brother of John, and as you may remember from Acts chapter 12, he was one of the first martyrs of the Church. Probably before the time that this letter could have been written, James the brother of John had gone on to be with the Lord having been martyred. And there was nobody else in all of the early church who could have simply signed his name to a book "James" and have everybody instantaneously know who was being referred to, other than James the brother of Lord.

I do want to remind you that James, during the most part of Jesus' earthly ministry, did not believe in the claims of Jesus Christ as to His person and work.. John, in his gospel in chapter 7 verse 5, says that even Jesus' brothers did not believe on Him. That's the language, *to believe on*, that John usually uses to indicate faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, and so he is indicating that there was no saving faith in Jesus Christ on the part of His own kith and kin during much of the days of His earthly ministry.

Somewhere along the line God changed James' heart. Nobody knows when but we do know this: by the time that Jesus has been crucified, as the disciples are huddled together in the upper room praying after the event of the crucifixion James and his brothers are found there crouched with them in prayer asking God for help and grace. And soon thereafter, after the days of Pentecost, James emerges not only as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, but as one of the key leaders in the life of the early Christian church. In fact, it would be James, perhaps more than any other single individual, who helped keep the early Church together in the days when there was so much controversy being hurled against the apostle Paul for his teaching about the Gentiles and their role in this young

Jewish Christianity. It would be James who would welcome Paul to Jerusalem. It would be James who would pronounce at the General Assembly in Acts chapter 15 that Paul was right in what he was doing, reaching out to the Gentiles with the gospel and not requiring them to keep the ceremonial law, although all we know about James is that he was one who was very, very particular about keeping the ceremonial ordinances. And so James was a man of tremendous stature in the days of the early Church. That's the first thing I want to draw your attention to.

The second thing is to draw your attention to the content of this letter. You will notice, just perusing this letter, that this letter is about ethics. To be more specific, it's about Christian living. It is a very practical letter, but that doesn't mean it's an easy letter to read. It's very easy to understand, but James is so plainspoken that he steps on our toes. And we need that. We need God, by His divinely inspired word, to step on our toes, to enter into our comfort zone, to make us uncomfortable with our sins, to convict us of it and to spur us on to righteous living. And that is precisely what this little book does. It is a moral exhortation. It is an exhortation to Christian living not only as individuals but also in our light in the community, in the family of God. One author has put it this way, "There are those who talk holiness and are hypocrites; those who make profession of perfect love and yet cannot live peaceably with their brothers; those who are full of pious phraseology, but they fail in practical philanthropy. This letter was written for them. It may not give them much comfort but it ought to give them much profit. The mysticism that contents itself with pious frames and phrases and comes short in actual sacrifice and devoted service will find its antidote here. The Antinomianism that professes great confidence in free grace but does not recognize the necessity for corresponding purity of life needs to ponder the practical wisdom of this letter. The quietists who are content to sit and sing themselves away to everlasting bliss ought to read this epistle until they catch its bugle note of inspiration to present activity and continuous good deeds. All who are long on theory and short on practice ought to steep themselves in the spirit of James. And since there are such people in every community and every age, the message of this letter will never grow old." Amen. That is true. And that is why it's so important for us, even as a complement and a follow up to our study of the free grace of God in the epistle to the Romans, to study God's word to us through his servant James.

Let's turn to James chapter 1 verse 1 and hear God's word:

"James, a bond servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad, greetings." Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, show us today how a salutation, a word of greeting, not only is Your inspired, inerrant word, but is Your profitable, sufficient word for us.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

In one sentence James teaches us four things that we as Christians need to know today. In one word of greeting and introduction, in one word in which he identifies himself and identifies his audience, he teaches us four things that we need to know as Christians. He shows us the proper humility that Christians ought to have. He shows us the glory of the Savior. He shows us the unity of the plan of God and the unity of the Church. And he shows us the life situation that every Christian ought to expect. Now I'd like to explore those four things with you this morning.

I. The humility of the Christian.

Let's start by looking at the humility of the Christian as it is testified to in these opening words. The author's self-designation in this word of greeting and introduction tells us a lot about him. We can learn a lot by considering from whom this letter is written and how he designates himself. The humility of James' opening words of self-description and self-designation is a model for Christians. The man who wrote this book was the brother of Jesus; to be technical, the half brother of Jesus. I know some of you will have study Bibles perhaps in hand that suggest that he might have been a cousin of Jesus or perhaps some other kind of relation, but he was a half brother of Jesus Christ. He grew up in the same household. He shared the same mother. He was kith and kin with our Lord Jesus Christ, and yet he calls himself Jesus' servant. He could have introduced this letter by saying, from James the leader of the church of Jerusalem. He could have said, from James the most important pastor in the most important church in Palestine. He could have said, from James, a pillar of the church of God. That's what Paul calls him, a pillar of the church. He could have said, from James, the moderator of the first general assembly. He could have said, from James, the brother of our Lord. And that would have been true. But that is not how he introduces this letter. He says, James, a bondservant. James, a permanent, willing slave to Jesus Christ. He deliberately chooses a term to designate himself that would have indicated to his audience a person who was a willing, permanent slave. That's how he describes himself. This letter is from James the permanent slave of Jesus Christ. And I want to tell you, friends, that tells us a lot about this man's humility. John Blanchard says the mark of a great man of God is not that he thinks himself great but rather that he thinks himself utterly insignificant. And that is how James thought himself.

But there's more here, my friends, this is not only a testimony to James' personal and individual humility, it is how every Christian needs to think of himself or herself. Do you? In this word of self-introduction, you see, we have an implicit call to Christian servanthood and humility. Do you view yourself as a servant of Jesus Christ, young people? Young people who have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and who have professed their faith before the congregation. Are you

living as if you are a servant of Christ? Or on the weekends are you living like you are a child of the world? Are you indulging your carnal desires, seeking earthly and worldly satisfaction, not walking in the way of the Lord? Are you really living like a servant of Jesus? Adults, does your life show that you really believe that you're a servant of Jesus? Your priorities? Your agendas? Your desire to know Jesus, to love Him, to obey Him in every area of life? Does your wallet show that you are a servant of Jesus? Does your speech, when you are with your workmates, show that you are a servant of Jesus? You see, James not only calls himself a servant of Jesus, he was a servant of Jesus. We know that from the testimony of his life. And this very designation is a challenge to us to be real servants of Jesus Christ. That's the first thing I want you to see in this passage. James' humility shows us something about proper Christian humility.

II. The glory of Jesus.

There's a second thing though. Go on and look at the rest of that designation. "James, a bond-servant of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ." this designation not only tells us something about James it tells us something about Jesus. You can learn a lot from this description of James' role about Jesus. In fact, it's a testimony to the lordship and to the divinity of Jesus Christ. James in this designation puts Jesus on par with God. In fact, this is a testimony to the divinity of Jesus Christ and to the trinity of God. That there is one God who eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit all of them equal in power and glory and yet one God. Right here in this testimony we see an evidence of the trinity and of the deity of Christ. And we see James' willingness to identify himself as a servant of his older brother.

Can you imagine identifying yourself in a public letter as a servant of your older brother? Some of you may feel like servants of your older brothers some time, and some of you may think your older brothers treat you like a servant, but can you imagine willingly and happily and enthusiastically and joyously calling yourself a servant of your older brother? That's what James does and isn't that a testimony to the deity of Christ?

Derek was reminding me before the service that a mutual friend of ours once said that one of the reasons that I believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ is that James, who probably slept in the same bed with Him when he was growing up as a little boy, believed that Jesus was divine. And if that's not testimony. If you can grow up with a little boy and call him God and call yourself a servant, I don't know what more convincing testimony there could be to the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is James who once doubted his brother, who once did not believe his brother, who once thought his brother was crazy, saying, "I'm the servant of my God and Savior Jesus the Christ. You see, in this word of self-introduction we are having an explicit testimony to the exalted view of Jesus Christ that James has. And this word of self-introduction is a call to us to have a high view of Jesus

Christ.

Do you have a high view of Jesus Christ? Do you love Him? Do you want to know more about Him? Do you want to grow in His love? Do you want to grow in His knowledge? Can you not get enough of Him? Do you want to be conformed to His image? Do you have a high view of Christ? I realize in here there are not many people who would say, "Oh, I'm a skeptic. I don't believe in the deity of Christ." Most of us would give lip service to believing in a high view of Jesus Christ. But do our lives show that we have a high view of Jesus Christ? Are His priorities our priorities? Is His law our love? Are His commands things which we relish? Are the duties that He gives to us things which we long to do? This is a testimony of James, even in this word of introduction, to a high view of the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. The unity of God's plan and the unity of God's Church.

But there's a third thing to learn here. Not only the humility of the Christian and the glory of the Savior, there is also the unity of God's plan and the unity of God's Church. The author identifies the recipients of this letter in Old Testament terms. James addresses the church. He addresses Christians in Old Testament terms in this introduction. Notice what he calls them. To "the twelve tribes." And we learn something here, not only when we consider from whom this letter is written, but to whom this letter is written.

Now, scholars debate the particulars of that issue all the time, but it is very clear that the twelve tribes here is a designation not of Jews or even of Jewish Christians only, but of Christians. And more specifically of the Christian Church. James is taking the language of the Old Testament and applying it to the New Testament Church. And, in fact, he is taking a very old title for Old Testament Israel that stems from the time that Israel was in the days of the patriarchs and even in the wilderness. And he is applying it to Christians. Stick that in the back of your mind, because we're going to come back to that in a second.

This application of Old Testament language to the Church shows, among other things, that the Church is the continuation or fulfillment of Israel. It's not *plan b*. It's not a great parenthesis. It's not disconnected to the old covenant Israel. It is the fulfillment, it is the fruition of God's plan with His people of old. And that realization impacts us in at least two ways. It impacts us in the way we look at the old testament. And it impacts us so that we appreciate our part in the plan of God.

Let me talk with you about that for a minute. The New Testament Christian values the Old Testament. The New Testament Christian doesn't say, "Oh, well, that's not for me. You know the Old Testament, that's old. We like the New Testament, it's new." The New Testament Christian looks at the Old Testament

and he sees that it is his book. When Paul said, "All Scripture is given by inspiration and is profitable," he was speaking primarily about the Old Testament. A New Testament apostle saying the Old Testament is inspired and it's profitable. Well, James' very address to Christians as the twelve tribes, you're the twelve tribes, reminds us that that book, that history, that era, that's ours. That's our family. That's our story.

Remember how your grandparents used to say to you, "Those are our folks. Those are your people, son." Well, those are your people. That story, that Old Testament story, that's not a story that's non-Christian, that's the Christian story. Your genealogy in the Bible doesn't start with where the marriages and deaths are recorded in your family in that opening presentation section; it's right there, between Genesis and Malachi. That's your story. That's your genealogy. The Old Testament's your story. That's your book.

And, of course, being reminded of that reminds us of the second thing. When James calls us the twelve tribes, he reminds us that God's plan doesn't have two peoples, two ways of salvation, two plans. There's one people. One way of salvation. One plan. God's plan began when he called out a people to himself in the old covenant. And those old covenant people are intertwined into one people with the people who have been saved in the days since Christ in Pentecost. That's the whole point of Ephesians chapter 2, that the two peoples have been brought into one building, one temple. We are one family. One vine. We belong to one another. God doesn't have some *plan b* and we're part of that *plan b*. He has one plan, plan a. It always works and we're part of that plan. Israel. The church. All wrapped up in this glorious plan of God. The Church is part of that one people of God in all ages. And so even the terms that James uses in verse 1 to address the Church remind the Church of its heritage of the glory of the Old Testament teaching for it, it's usefulness and profitableness, and our part in the one plan of God and the one people of God in all ages.

IV. James' use of the OT language for Israel in the wilderness sets the tone for the context and the letter.

One last thing we see. The author's words of introduction in verse 1 give us an indication of our present life situation in this fallen world. The author indicates to us, in the terms that he uses, the life situation of the church. We are God's chosen and covenant people but we live dispersed as pilgrims in a fallen world. James, again, uses Old Testament language for Israel in the wilderness.

Remember, I asked you to keep it in the back of your mind? James uses Old Testament language for Israel in the wilderness and it sets the tone, not only for the context which is immediately going to follow, but for the rest of the book. What does he call them? To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad. What does it make you think of? The wanderings of the wilderness. The pressures of

the wilderness, the testings of the wilderness, when Israel was wandering without a land that belonged to her. Or maybe it makes you think of the exile when Israel was out of her land. She wasn't in that place which was her abode. But this language, this Old Testament language for Israel the pilgrim, Israel the wanderer, Israel the dispersed, sets the tone for the context.

What's the next thing that James is going to talk about from verse 2 almost to the end of the chapter? Trials. Now what better image, what better verbal picture could he have painted for the trials that he expects Christians to face than that of the wandering, dispersed tribes of Israel. He says, that's who you are. James uses this language of the twelve tribes to draw attention to the pressures and persecutions of this life. Think of Israel in the desert. That's who James says you are. Alec Motyer puts it this way, "They are the Lord's twelve tribes. And they are dispersed throughout a menacing and testing world. Their homeland is elsewhere. And they have not yet come to take up their abode there. Their present lot is to feel the weight of life's pressures, the lure of this world's temptations and an insidious ever present encouragement to conform to the standards of their pagan environment. They are the Lord's people indeed but not yet home." And I couldn't say it better than Alec Motyer, except maybe to change from the third person plural to the second person plural. You are the Lord's twelve tribes. And you are dispersed throughout a menacing and testing world. Your homeland is elsewhere. And you have not yet come to take up your abode there. Your present lot is to feel the weight of life's pressures, the lure of this world's temptations, and an insidious, ever present encouragement to conform to the standards of your pagan environment. You are the Lord's people indeed, but not yet home.

James is reminding you that this fallen world should be expected to challenge us. We should expect obstacles. We should expect hindrances. We should expect pressures. We should expect evil. There is a now famous story which has been told by an evangelical theologian. It's often dubbed the *Suzanne story*. What I'm about to tell you is absolutely true. When she was 14 years old, Suzanne, which is not her real name, it's substituted to keep her privacy, had one desire in life. She desired to marry a missionary to Taiwan, serve on the field of mission in Taiwan for the rest of her life, and rear a family with that man who would be missions-minded. That was her goal. She started praying for this earnestly at the age of 14 and continued to pray. And she went off to a Christian college eventually. Soon after she got to that Christian college she met a young man who, guess what, had a life desire to go as a missionary to Taiwan. They dated for 3 years. In their senior year this young man proposed to her. Now, you might have expected her to have immediately said, "Yes." I mean, after all, this fit with her life's desire. She didn't. She suggested that they pray and fast, which they did for a period of over six months, to see if this would be the Lord's will for them to unite in marriage. They sought the counsel of their pastor. They sought the counsel of their parents and of the friends who knew them best. And after a period of time, they determined that it would indeed be the Lord's will for them to

come together in marriage. They married. They went off to missionary training school. Now this woman's dreams are being fulfilled. Her prayers were being answered. But while they were at missionary training school, he had an affair. Initially he seemed repentant. They went into marital counseling. While they were in marital counseling, he continued to go back and back and back again to the woman with whom he had first had the affair. Over the course of three years in marital counseling he had multiple adulterous affairs. And as those affairs went on he became more and more hostile and first verbally abusive and then finally physically abusive to this young woman, Suzanne. In fact, right before he left her he broke her jaw with his fist. He filed for divorce. He moved in with one of his paramours. And then she found out that she was pregnant. She went to a Christian minister. Confused. Wondering how this could have happened when she had simply tried to follow God's will when she had sought the counsel of wise and godly brothers and sisters in Christ, her pastor, her parents. How could this have happened? What had gone wrong. Here was the very unfortunate advice that she received. "Suzanne, God was just as surprised about this as you. He regrets that it has happened to you just as much as you regret it. He probably influenced you to marry this young man because He thought that it would be a good thing. But it turned out in a way that He did not expect. He will do His best to make it up to you. His plan b is sometimes so good that it often can end up looking like plan a. You need to continue to trust Him, because God doesn't know how the story will turn out, but He will do His best for you."

Isn't it sad that someone who believed what James believed about God, couldn't have taken that young woman aside and said, "We are pilgrims in a fallen world. Our God is good. He doesn't always let us in on His counsels. I have no idea what God's purposes are. But I do know this. When you're united with the Savior, you are united with the Savior not only in the glory to come but in the sufferings of the present. And for some inscrutable purpose God has given you the privilege of joining in the sufferings of your Master. Let us do so in trust in Him." Wouldn't that have been so much more edifying and helpful to that woman than rather scaling down God and His plans before her eyes.

My friends, there are a couple of reactions that we can have to a story like that. We can be here today and we can say, "Lord, thank you that you haven't called me to go through that." And there's nothing wrong with saying that. But you know, we live in a fallen world and you don't know what's around the corner. On the other hand, you may be here today saying, "I know exactly how that woman feels. Because I have been through an experience similar or just as bad." To both of you I say this, James reminds us that we are pilgrims dispersed in a fallen world. And even in this word of greetings he calls us to the pilgrimage, trusting in our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

John Bunyan catches something of this. In your hymnal, if you'll turn to number 603, his famous poem put to music "He who would valiant be." It goes something like this, "He who would valiant be against all disaster, let him in constancy follow

the Master. There's no discouragement shall make him once relent his first avowed intent to be a pilgrim. Who so beset him round with dismal stories, do but themselves confound - his strength the more is. No foes shall stay his might; though he with giants fight, he will make good his right to be a pilgrim. Since, Lord, thou dost defend us with Thy Spirit, we know we at the end shall life inherit. Then, fancies, flee away! I'll fear not what men say, I'll labor night and day to be a pilgrim. "That's what James calls us to in this letter. Will you join me in the pilgrimage? Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, make us to be pilgrim servants of Jesus the Messiah by the Spirit for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen

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