

James

What do the books of Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John and Jude have in common.

None of them are explicitly claimed to have been written by Paul. Many people in the early church believed that Hebrews was written by Paul and it might well have been, but we are not told that explicitly in the letter.

Hebrews

Hebrews was written to Christians who were of Jewish origin and in the face of trial and difficulty were being tempted to turn once again to Jewish ways. The writer therefore has one key message – Jesus is the best. He is all that you need for salvation.

In doing this the book splits down into four sections where the author compares Jesus with:

- Angels
- Moses
- Priests & Melchizedek
- Sacrificial system of the OT covenant

The writer then shows how Jesus is better than all these things. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God. Jesus provides an eternal rest for his people. Jesus is the eternal high priest. Jesus is the perfect, once for all sacrifice.

The final chapters of the book then apply this teaching to practical Christian living in the face of difficulty and opposition.

Peter

1 & 2 Peter were written by the apostle Peter from the city of Rome. They were circular letters sent to various churches in Asia Minor. They were written to encourage the believers in the face of persecution (1 Peter) and false teaching (2 Peter). **[Go through big headings on pictures].**

John

Then we have the letters of John. These were written by the apostle John of gospel and Revelation fame. 1 John is written to a specific (unidentified) group of people who John knows personally and has a very close relationship with. It is written to combat false teaching and to set out what the marks of a true follower of Jesus are.

The letter contains two great statements about God – God is light and God is love. In view of that Christians are those who have a proper belief in the persona and work of Jesus Christ as sent by God; they are those who love each other as Jesus loves and they are those who obey Jesus commands.

2 John is addressed to “the elect lady and her children”. Some see this as a specific individual others as a local church. It is very similar in teaching to 1 John and warns against the same false teachers. John tells the readers to have nothing to do with these false teachers. Stick to the truth and do not welcome them.

3 John is written to a named individual, Gaius – a dear friend of Johns. Gaius is suffering from a petty rivalry in the church at the hands of one of the church leaders called Diotrephes. John encourages Gaius to continue to be Christlike in the way he opens his home to welcome missionaries.

Jude

Probably a brother of Jesus as per vs.1 of the letter. Appears to have been written to ethnic Jews who had become Christians. Jude charges his readers to contend for the faith in vs.1-4. He then tells his readers why they are to do this in vs. 5-19. It is because of the false teachers who have begun to have influence in the church.

What was it that the false teachers were guilty of? They were abusing the grace of God and using it as a licence for sexual sin. Jude then sets out historical examples of rebellion against God's law and the dreadful impact they have. Jude then gives two warnings – one ancient and one modern – to show that these people are anti-God and must not be accepted.

Jude then says that to ensure they contended for the faith they had to build their lives on God's word and on prayer

These are very simplistic overviews of the books just because we do not have time to go through them in more detail.

James

For the rest of this session today I want us to focus on the book of James. But before we turn to James itself look at this verse from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 2vs16: "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

Do you believe that? This is a cornerstone of reformed doctrine – justification by faith alone in Christ alone. And Paul is absolutely explicit – stating the truth positively and negatively for emphasis.

Let's put another verse up – James 2vs24: "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."

Do you believe that? Of course we do it is in the Bible. But on the face of it there is a direct contradiction between these two verses and it is a direct contradiction on one of the core tenets of theology that we hold so dear.

This has led many people to have a problem with the book of James. In fact, James is the most controversial book in the New Testament. None other than Martin Luther called it "An epistle of straw" in his first translation of the Bible into German. He did in fact remove this comment in later editions. But for someone like him who was involved in full scale warfare against the Roman church which advocated a works-based salvation he struggled with James.

Others have struggled because the book makes no direct reference to the death or resurrection of Jesus. In fact in its 108 verses there are only two references by name to Jesus in 1vs1 and 2vs1. There are a further two references to the "return of the Lord" in 5vs7-8.

A further problem that people have with it is that on the face of it there is no natural flow to the letter. Rather it seems to just jump around hence some writers refer to it as the "Proverbs of the New Testament" as if it were a collection of various wise sayings that have been brought together in no particular order.

So much for the problems with the letter. Let's turn our attention to it now.

Author

1vs1 introduces us to the writer – “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” That is all we are told and there has been quite a lot written about which James this refers to. The early church and the general consensus now (although it is not unanimous) is that this James is the brother of Jesus.

This is not James the apostle who was martyred in Acts 12. He was the first of the apostles to be martyred. Rather, James the brother of Jesus is the James referred to in Acts 15 as one of the elders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas make their report to the Jerusalem Council about the work of the gospel amongst the Gentiles and in vs.13 it is James who answers on behalf of the Council indicating his prominence.

It is from Paul’s letter to the Galatians that we know he was Jesus brother. In Galatians 1 Paul is recounting the trip he had made to Jerusalem to speak to the Council. We read in vs.18 – “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother.

When Jesus had been engaged in his earthly ministry James had not been one of his followers (John 7vs5). But he had later become a believer probably after Jesus made a special post-resurrection appearance to him (1 Cor. 15vs7).

Recipients

1vs1 then goes on to tell us who the recipients of the letter were – “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”

The letter was an open letter to converted Jews. That these are the intended recipients fits with the letter having been written by a prominent elder of the church in Jerusalem. He was writing to people who were at one time in the church in Jerusalem – either for a brief time having been converted at Pentecost or as members of the church. These would have been people therefore that James had cared for.

Structure

There are as many different suggested structures as there are commentaries written on the book and many of them fit so what I have laid out here is just one possible suggestion.

The letter opens in 1vs2-12 with James writing about the need for patience and prayer in the face of suffering and trials. In chapter 5vs7-20 the book closes with James once again writing about the need for patience and prayer in the face of all that life has to throw at you. He also adds to this the need to care for each other.

This coincidence of subject matter between the introduction and conclusion is striking. Here are truths significant enough to come first and important enough to be repeated at the end – patience and prayer.

And again that makes absolute sense. To a people suffering trial and persecution from a hostile empire and rejection from their own people of course as a caring elder/pastor you are going to exhort them to patience and prayer.

In the face of suffering and hardship the temptation to give up on your confession of Jesus Christ as saviour and lord must be huge. We see something of that in the problems that face our Turkish

brothers and sisters here in this church. So in 1vs13 James turns his attention to the issue of temptation. And James pulls no punches. His pastoral style is lovingly direct.

He then reminds them that as Christians they have been born again as new creations – 1vs17-18: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

In 1vs.19-27 James then reminds them that as they are new creatures by God’s gracious will this means that they will be different. New life means a new lifestyle. James isn’t saying that if you really lived this new life your suffering and trials will disappear. On the contrary, what he is saying that if you practice patience and prayer – a peaceful trust in God the Father this will then evidence itself in the counter-cultural sort of life you will lead.

And it is worth mentioning at this point that there are great similarities between the content of the letter of James and that of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus sets out his kingdom manifesto which is completely counter-cultural to the way society operated. So it is with the teaching of James.

And in these verses James highlights three particular areas of life where this will be particularly evident in God’s chosen ones:

- Control of the tongue
- Care for the needy
- Personal purity of life

Control of the tongue – vs.19: “Know this my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” The way the vast majority of us display our anger is through unguarded speech.

Vs.26: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.”

Care for the needy – vs.27: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.”

Personal purity – vs.19: “be...slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

Vs.27: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this:...to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

And in the middle of all this to drive the point home James has this amusing Proverbsesque picture – “If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in the mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

The rest of the book then expands on these three areas with more detail and practical application.

Ch.2vs1-26

Care for the needy. James highlights two specific examples which are just as relevant to us today as they were to his own readers. Firstly, he highlights the situation where the poor are despised and mistreated at the expense of the rich and influential. An important person would come into church and immediately everyone is all over them to make sure they are looked after and treated well. Meanwhile those who are poor are treated completely differently – despised and held to be of no account.

James then quotes the Levitical summary of the second part of the ten commandments – “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

The second picture shows rather how these poor and needy should be treated. Vs.15 – “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?”

It is in this section that we come across the section where James talks about the relationship between faith, works and justification [**READ 2vs14-26**].

What James is saying is that faith that is not acted out is not faith at all. And to forcefully back up the point James goes on to give three examples. First we have the demons. The demons believe that there is one God. They believe it and they shudder. But their believing it makes no difference in their lives. It does not translate into repentance and action. So if you want to tell me you have faith, says James, but your faith does not show itself in deeds, your faith is no different from a demon’s. The crucial element of relational trust is missing in such “faith.”

The second example he gives is that of Abraham. Here is a man renowned for his great faith in God. James reminds us that Abraham’s faith evidenced itself by what he did. His faith and his action went hand-in-hand. His faith was shown to be complete by his action.

We know that this is what James is getting at because of the way he finishes off about Abraham in vs.23 – “and the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God and was counted to him as righteousness’ – and he was called a friend of God. It was Abraham’s absolute trust in the word of God – his faith – that was critical.

And then his third example goes along exactly the same lines. He refers his readers to Rahab, the prostitute who lived in Jericho at the time of the conquest of the promised land. Rahab showed her faith in God by what she did, not simply by what she knew or said.

Saving faith says James is not an intellectual thing only – it is not an armchair faith. It is not the faith of a person who can sit and read a religious document and say, “I believe this.” Rather saving faith is the faith that throws its whole life into living out the truth believed.

So, when we see James’ words in the context in which they are written we see that there is no contradiction with what Paul wrote. Everything always needs to be looked at in context (as we will come on to think about later on in this course).

Ch.3vs1-12

This section then amplifies James’ exhortation about speech. It is a very memorable passage because of the vivid imagery that it uses. James contrasts the smallness of the tongue with the immensity of the potential impact it can have.

When I was in my early 20's there was a chain of jewellery stores in the UK owned by a man called Gerald Ratner. He had 2,500 shops in the UK and USA and was turning in hundreds of millions of pounds profit every year. In 1991 he was giving an after dinner speech at a business leaders function and he made a silly joke about two of the products that his shops sold. He basically said they were complete rubbish. Just a few words spoken in a few seconds.

But the impact was immense. His entire business empire collapsed as the share price plummeted. He lost absolutely everything. A few ill-chosen, thoughtless words cost him and many others their livelihoods. That is an illustration of what James is saying here. "It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

Once we have said something we cannot unsay it. So James urges us to get proper control of our tongues. He says this is particularly vital for those who want to become teachers in Christ's church. If you cannot exercise control over your tongue then you are not teacher material. That is very sobering and challenging indeed, particularly for someone like me who always likes to think of something witty to say.

Again, very challengingly James points out the way we are often inconsistent in the way we speak. One minute we are blessing God, the next we are cursing people. James tells us that it is impossible to truly do both. That is deeply cutting because it tells us that our praises of God are not really praise at all – they can't be if our tongues are out of control at other times. We can only really do one or the other. That is the point about fresh and salt water; about figs, olives and grapes.

Counter-cultural living means controlling the tongue.

Ch.3vs13-5vs6

This section of James then picks up on the third area of practical Christian living that James highlighted in chapter 1 – personal purity – not being stained by the world's ways and norms. And the principal area of focus for him is jealousy, selfish-ambition and arrogance. All of these things are closely related and one will often lead to another. **[READ 3vs13-5vs6]**.

Once more James is very forthright in his assessment of these things. In 3vs15 he says that this sort of attitude and behaviour is "not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual and demonic." Ambition and pride are things that are trumpeted by the world as being healthy and good. James says they are demonic.

They are demonic he says because they put you at enmity with God. They stop you trusting in God because your plans are all about yourself. That leads to you putting others down (4vs11), boasting (4vs13-17) and abusing your power over others (5vs1-6).

James calls on his readers to be completely different – to humble themselves. 4vs6-10: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

All three of these sections are very practical, hard-hitting teaching on what faith should look like in our lives because we have been born again. And this is what we are to be like whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in. James was writing to people who were suffering trials and opposition.

Conclusion (5vs7-20)

As we said at the start of this overview, James then ends the book by once again focusing the attention of his readers on patience, prayer and care. This is the nuts and bolts of practical Christianity of faith evidenced by the works of our lives.