STUDY GUIDE

Introduction to the book of James in the New Testament

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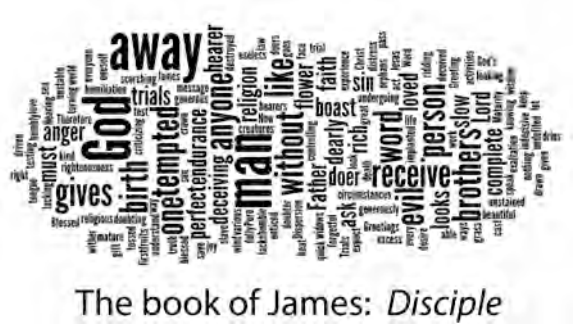

Author: Who Is James?

James 1:1 identifies James as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." The most likely author is James, the half- brother of Jesus. James was a leader in the Jerusalem church and was the authority to whom others reported about their ministry (see Galatians 1:19; 2:9 & 12; Acts 12:17; 15:13 and 21:18)

Biblical scholars identify James, the half-brother of Jesus, as the author of this book based on the remarkable similarities in the language of James' speech at the Council of Jerusalem (see Acts 15), and based on the tone of the book, suggesting that it was written by one in a position of authority.

Who is the Audience for the Book of James?

James 1:1 identifies the audience as "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." This indicates Jewish Christians, as the church at this time was predominantly Jewish. Some were probably scattered after the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54 – Acts 8:3). Others were scattered after Herod Agrippa I killed the apostle James in 44 A.D. and harassed the Church (Acts 12:1-3).

What is the Purpose of the Book of James?

James was written as a sermon for public reading. As the leader of the Jerusalem church, James felt responsible for and concerned about the personal and spiritual growth of Jewish Christians who were scattered beyond Jerusalem. It is written to exhort early believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life, toward a faith that is demonstrated in their lives. Consider James 1:22: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The epistle deals with every area of life –what we are, what we do, what we say, what we feel, and what we have.

James and the Idea of Christian Discipleship

As we study the book of James, we will focus on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple is one who follows another. As Christians, we follow Jesus. The word "follow" implies that the ideas, teachings, behavior, and outlook of the one being followed are all accepted and believed and they shape our own commitments and actions. Being a disciple entails:

- Putting Jesus first (Matthew 10:32-39, Mark 8:34-38, Luke 14:26-27, John 21:15-19)
- Following Jesus' teachings (John 8:31-32)
- Showing fruit (John 15:5-8)
- Loving others (John 13:34-35, I John 3:23)

The disciples of Jesus were first called Christians in the very early church at Antioch (see Acts 11:26). The Bible clearly teaches how people are saved. Once saved, then discipleship begins. James is a book that teaches how we can live to walk with God. This is how we can be known as disciples of Jesus.

What is the Historical Context of the Book of James?

Most likely, James wrote the book just before 50 A.C. As the book was written, Jews, Christians and Gentiles remained under Roman rule. In Judea, the regional ruler was Herod Agrippa I and later his son Herod Agrippa II. The former had sided with the Jews against the Christians, resulting in the harassment of the Christian church. This harassment led Jewish Christians to leave Jerusalem for other cities. James had become the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem, and thus was responsible for the growth and nurture of the Jewish Christians, who remembered all too well the harassment by Herod Agrippa. Throughout the book, James spoke directly to the trials and tribulations that the Jewish Christians had experienced.