

James Who?

James 1:1

I have appreciated the number of you who have asked me in recent weeks what I will be preaching on next, after Genesis. I appreciate that question so much because it communicates to me your ongoing interest in the detailed study of God's word, to say nothing of the fact that the question means that you are thinking about your study of God's word week by week, throughout the week, looking forward to weeks to come, and thus are prepared in your mind to listen to a sermon each week in which that word is proclaimed. That level of interest in God's word is very motivating to me as I prepare to preach to you each week, for you remind me of that great calling from God which I sensed upon my heart so suddenly and so irrevocably as a very young college graduate, a calling of which I had had no thought before then but which has now defined my life for 38 years. This is that calling, in the words of Paul to his young disciple Timothy,

2 Tim. 4:2 "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching."

Or, as the NIV translates the end of that verse, "with great patience and careful instruction." So that's what I do. At this point in my life I can basically say, that's all I have ever done. It is certainly all that I have ever done these past nine years, as this coming week marks that milestone of the beginning of my ministry here in Mount Airy. Preach the word! With great patience and careful instruction.

We have done that on Sunday mornings for the past two years with reference to the book of Genesis, from the words of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," to the final verse of chapter 50, "So Joseph died, being one hundred

and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt."

Whenever I am asked about what books I choose for my preaching, my initial answer is always "balance." A balance between the Old Testament and the New. A balance between the gospels and the epistles, between the historical writings and the prophetic books, between the pentateuch and the poets. Even more generally, a balance between the law and the gospel, between those books that have more of an emphasis upon the duties of God's law for the Christian and the plain declaration of the promises of the gospel by which we have life and relationship with God. Thus, with an extensive series of sermons on Genesis just completed in the morning worship service, I was always certain that I would move to a New Testament book next. And with the focus of the fulfillment of God's covenant promise to his people of the Old Covenant nation of Israel, a promise of grace which is so plainly and clearly fulfilled in Christ, I decided to focus now upon the book of James, a book with an obvious and well-documented emphasis of how we should go about living as the people of God.

So this will be a very practical book, a book very closely connected to the personal affairs of our own lives as Christians. But the first question to consider is the obvious one, James who?

I. JAMES

Who wrote this book? Clearly it is not James the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples, for he was killed by Herod according in AD 44.

Acts 12:1 "Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the church. 2 Then he killed James the brother of John with the sword. 3 And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also. Now

it was during the Days of Unleavened Bread. 4 So when he had arrested him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to keep him, intending to bring him before the people after Passover.”

There is also James the son of Alphaeus, another of the twelve disciples,

Mat. 10:2 “Now the names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; 3 Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Lebbaeus, whose surname was Thaddaeus; 4 Simon the Cananite, and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed Him.”

In Mark’s gospel, we read further about James the younger, and Luke’s gospel identifies James as the father of the disciple named Judas. However none of those men named James figure prominently in the history of the beginning of the church. Thus the most obvious identification of the author of this letter is James the son of Mary and Joseph, the younger brother of Jesus, step-brother we might say in terms of human relationships.

Mat. 13:53 “Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these parables, that He departed from there. 54 When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, “Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? 55 Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? 56 And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?” 57 So they were offended at Him.”

So Mary and Joseph had other children, making rather ridiculous the Roman Catholic declaration of her perpetual

virginity, as if Joseph had another wife by whom he had those children. Clearly that is not what Matthew teaches, and James was the natural born son of Joseph and Mary, the younger brother of Jesus. It is certainly possible that this James, brother of Jesus, was also the brother of Jude, referred to in,

Jude 1 “Jude, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James.”

The point to be made here is that James, this James, the author of this letter, did, in fact, become a leader in the early church. He is numbered among the apostles. Though initially, during Jesus’ own life on earth, James remained an unbeliever. John tells us this,

John 7:1 “After these things Jesus walked in Galilee; for He did not want to walk in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him. 2 Now the Jews’ Feast of Tabernacles was at hand. 3 His brothers therefore said to Him, “Depart from here and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may see the works that You are doing. 4 For no one does anything in secret while he himself seeks to be known openly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.” 5 For even His brothers did not believe in Him.”

But that changed. We don’t know when. We don’t know the circumstances, but we certainly know what became of James the Lord’s brother. He became,

A. James the apostle.

When Peter was freed from prison, we read,

Acts 12:16 “Now Peter continued knocking; and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 But motioning to them with his hand to keep silent, he declared to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, “Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.” And he departed and went to another place.”

Further, at the Jerusalem Council, following debate, it was James who spoke as the representative voice of that assembly, Acts 15:12 “Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written.”

Luke then tells us in, Acts 21:17 “And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”

With reference to James’ identity as an apostle, we have Paul’s witness of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to the church,

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.”

And most clearly of all, Paul’s own testimony in, Gal. 1:18 “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother.”

Further, Gal. 2:9 “...and when James, Cephas, and John,

who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

So James was a recognized leader of the church, numbered with the apostles, and throughout this epistle that bears his name, his status in the church is unmistakable and undeniable. It seems all but certain he is James the Lord’s brother.

But what does he say of himself here in our text this morning, this first verse? What do we know about,

B. James the man.

He calls himself a bondservant. A slave. James shows us such godly humility. He doesn’t use a title for himself. Nothing to emphasize his place of importance in the church. Nothing even to identify himself as the Jesus’ own brother, which is why some have doubted that Jesus’ brother James is not the author. Nothing here about his status. Nothing about himself at all. He is simply a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bondservant could well be translated slave, bond slave. It is the word which describes a man in the literal bondage of belonging to another. A slave was the property of his owner, he owed absolute submission to his master. The master’s ownership meant absolute authority. So James was a slave. And that was his calling! That was his first and primary self-identification as he writes this letter.

So the leader is the servant. That’s the life-changing pattern that Jesus himself established. Remember Jesus said of himself, Mat. 20:24 “And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to

Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

There is much to be learned in that for us, especially for anyone who exercises authority today in the church. The ruler, the leader, is to be the servant. “Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

That’s James, and the exact word he uses for “greetings” actually means “rejoice!” Such is the personal nature of this letter. Before we go on and talk about the recipients of the book, let me note something of an introduction to the book as a whole, particularly with reference to the dispute early on with regard to whether or not this book should actually be included in the Bible. So what should you know about,

C. James the book.

Further we can figure out that he wrote between AD 44 and 62, corresponding to the time beginning with James’ leadership role in the church began to the time when he himself was killed. Since there is no mention of the controversy that brought about the council of Jerusalem in the year 49 or 50, we can presume he wrote before then. So this book is dated between AD 44 and 49. The church seems to be at the very early stages of its development.

Early on, however, it was not included in the first lists of the

so-called canonical books—books rightly judged to be included in the canon of Scripture as the word. It is very important to note that the church didn’t determine which books should be in the canon. Rather, the church sought to recognize which books bore apostolic authority as the Word of God and thus were to be included in the Bible. Again, the church didn’t determine which books were the inspired word of God; rather the church recognized which books were. And very early on, there was substantial agreement. There is a listing from 175 AD which recognizes 22 of the 27 books included in our New Testament, but James was not included.

There are references to its inclusion within the canon by the third century, however, and several of the church fathers began to make reference to it as such, beginning with Origen in the early 3rd century and then a hundred years later Eusebius did the same. The Council of Carthage in 397 AD officially recognized James as canonical, attributing apostolic authority to James, the brother of Jesus.

Historically, you may also know that Martin Luther questioned the book of James as well, for theological reasons, believing that James’ definition of justification contradicted Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther famously called this book an “epistle of straw.” Nevertheless, there is no dispute within the church at large that this book bears all the marks of the Scripture, and I preach it to you with the fullness of that conviction as well. This is the word of God, and we know and believe that...

2 Tim. 3:16 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

So what about,

II. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE BOOK OF JAMES.

It is a general epistle, that is, not a personal letter to an individual person or even to a singular church. It is addressed to the whole church, to all the people of God. And note how they are identified, as twelve tribes.

I didn't have this connection in mind when I decided to study James immediately after Genesis, but remember what we have been so long studying in Genesis—the formation of the nation of God's people, Israel. That nation began with a covenant promise made to Abraham.

Gen. 17:3 “Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

I will be your God and you will be my people! Then that promise was extended, by God's sovereign grace, to Isaac, Abraham's son. Then the son of Isaac was chosen as the covenant bearer, Jacob. Remember it is so plain that God chose Jacob, not Esau. But with Jacob, no longer does the covenant promise extend to just one descendant. Now the covenant is with the whole family, the whole nation. And Jacob's name was changed to Israel. And his twelve sons define the covenant nation of God's people. The twelve tribes.

That identification is carried over into the New Testament, then, as referring now to the whole of the covenant people of God. The church is called “the Israel of God,” and here, with James, that church is identified by,

A. The twelve tribes.

So James is clearly referring to the covenant people of God, and in the marvelous prophecy of the book of Revelation, we read about the church in the language of the fullness of those twelve tribes along with the twelve apostles. So the reference to the twelve tribes is not merely a reference to the previous age when Israel was defined by those sons of Jacob. Rather, the twelve tribes represent the fullness of God's people in every age, both before Jesus and after. So we read,

Rev. 21:1 “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God...9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. 12 Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 13 three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. 14 Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

All of that is to say that James writes to the whole church as the covenant people of God, a church represented by the twelve tribes of Israel. And notice their identity. They are,

B. Scattered abroad.

In other words, the church is now universal in its existence. It is not just in Jerusalem. It is no longer restricted to or identified with the single nation of Israel. It is scattered, thus we can rightly use the word catholic. James is writing to the catholic people of God. I am not referring to the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, but rather to this sense of the church in every nation, which is the fundamental meaning of that word catholic. And the church is catholic because it has been dispersed, dispersed to be the witnesses of God in every place, as we read in,

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Actually, there is a more technical literal translation for this scattering. It is the dispersion, or the diaspora. In the Old Testament, that referred to the tribes of Israel being taken away into exile, the northern 10 tribes first into Assyria and then the southern two tribes into Babylon. They were dispersed. That was their identity, or, I should say, an identity lost. A nation lost. Just as Moses had warned them. This is Nehemiah’s reminder as the return from the exile began to take place,

Neh. 1:8 “Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; 9 ‘but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’

Thus we see a clear Old Testament picture of redemption—a people scattered in the diaspora, brought back together as one, the nation restored. So for James, writing to the church, to Christians, he says “you are the scattered.” What lies ahead of us is the restoration, the restoration of Jerusalem. The restoration of the twelve tribes. In the new Jerusalem, in the new heaven and the new earth, in the holy city which comes down out of heaven, the bride of Jesus.

How profitable it is to see ourselves as the church in that way. We are in the dispersion now. We are in foreign lands, under the domination of foreign kings. The nation of God’s people is not yet reestablished. And so as Peter says with this same image in mind, we are only pilgrims and sojourners, travelers just passing through, visiting. He begins his first epistle,

1 Peter 1:1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.”

Peter, too, goes on to specify that “inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for [us].”

So according to James, you are to see yourself as a Christian in just that way, as an Israelite would have seen himself in the days of the Babylonian captivity. That’s who we are now! We are the catholic people of God scattered abroad throughout the whole earth. We are the people of God dispersed throughout this world, awaiting the day when we shall again be made restored as the nation of God’s people who shall inherit and inhabit the whole earth!

And until that day comes? Well, James has much to teach us, and that will be the focus for the coming months as we study this great epistle together.