



LEADER'S NOTES

For use with the discussion guides drawing on the Sunday messages.

January 16, 2005
Introducing James

OVERVIEW

The epistle of James—this is a letter that has caused confusion and debate in the life of the church. Hopefully and prayerfully that won't be the case as we journey through his writing together. This week we begin. And, in beginning, we only want to touch on two big thoughts: the identity of the author and the opening startling challenge. Take a deep breath and take a small bite out of James and lets begin!

DISCUSSION

There are a number of men named James that are mentioned in the New Testament. The consensus of Bible teachers (and our opinion!) is that the James who penned this epistle is the brother of Jesus and one of the "pillars" of the church in Jerusalem. The passages noted in the discussion guide give you some insight into this James. He is related to Jesus—but he initially didn't believe. Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection and he becomes a leader in the church.

The next few verses (from Acts), help us understand the setting for this letter. Simply put, things aren't going all that well for the church. James writes to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed" (James 1:1); understood to be a reference to the scattered Jewish Christians. Why scattered? Because of the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1. What is their condition in this "dispersion"? Anything but pleasant according to the reports of widespread famine in Acts 11:28.

With those thoughts in mind, the opening verses of James' epistle can be quite startling. After reading James 1:1-4, it seems so surprising that James only identifies himself as a "bond-servant" of God and of Jesus. With relationship, reputation, and position, the temptation might be to see oneself differently. And, perhaps more surprising, in this letter written to struggling and displaced believers, James' first word is "Consider it all joy!"

What does all this mean for us? Well, there is much to be explored and mined in this little epistle. But as we begin, there are a couple of things we might get our arms around. James, who has been in the center of things since the beginning of Jesus' ministry (first as an outsider and now as a leader of the church) finds his identity in being a servant of God. That's a pretty healthy self-image. And perhaps that is the key to understanding his first word of encouragement. If he (and his readers) really are simply servants of Christ Jesus, then their destinies and conditions are in His hands. No matter what the trouble may appear to be, a servant's role is simply to get in line with his master's plan. And, therein is the secret to joy James will unwrap for us in the weeks ahead.

BIG IDEA

It may be a challenge to us, but we have it on good authority: We can have joy!



DISCUSSION GUIDE

A small group resource for the church drawing on the Sunday messages.

January 16, 2005
Introducing James

A weekly discussion guide designed to aid you to hear the Word, understand what you hear, and take it to heart.

This week, we begin our study of the epistle of James. The James who wrote this letter is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament. What do the following passages tell you about him?

Matthew 13:53-56 & John 7:1-5:

1 Corinthians 15:3-7 & Galatians 1:19; 2:9:

The setting for the epistle is found in Acts 8:1 and 11:28. What do these passages tell you about the "life conditions" of the recipients of James' letter?

Given James' status and position and knowing the condition of those who have been scattered by persecution, what kind of encouraging word might you anticipate James would write to his friends?

Now read James 1:1-4. What strikes you about . . .

How James identifies himself?

The first issue James addresses?

The brother of Jesus, a prominent elder in the church, opens his letter to those who have been scattered by persecution and stricken by famine with the words "consider it joy." How are you going to respond to his exhortation?

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