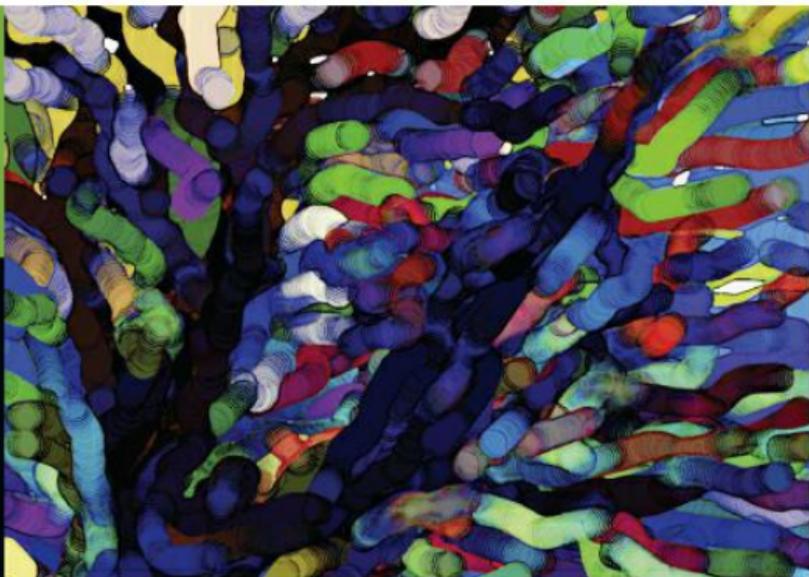


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J. A. MOTYER

The Message of **James**

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of James

The tests of faith

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

To Geoff and Phyllis Brown

Author's preface

In 1970, Inter-Varsity Press kindly published some studies of mine on James under the title *The Tests of Faith*. Little or nothing remains here of that earlier book. Everything has been re-written, much has been added, and at a number of points I have changed my mind. This is as it should be, for the Word of God is an endless treasure and an ever-fresh teacher.

I have been greatly helped throughout by the perceptive and detailed help given by Dr John Stott, the Series Editor. It is a pleasure to record his kindness and to express my gratitude for it.

ALEC MOTYER

Chief abbreviations

- Adamson James Adamson, *The Epistle of James (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, Eerdmans, 1976).
- Alford H. Alford, *The Greek Testament, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Rivingtons, 1880).
- AG William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (University of Chicago Press and Cambridge University Press, 1957).
- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
- Barnes A. Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, vol. X (Blackie, n.d.).
- Blanchard J. Blanchard, *Not Hearers Only: Bible Studies on the Letter of James*, 4 vols. (Word Books, 1971–74).
- Calvin J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh, 1855).
- Davids P. B. Davids, *The Epistle of James (The New International Greek Testament Commentary)*, Paternoster, 1982).
- Knowling R. J. Knowling, *The Epistle of St James (Westminster Commentaries)*, Methuen, 1904).
- Laws Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (A. & C. Black, 1980).
- LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century BC.
- Mitton C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle of James* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966).
- NEB The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2 1970; OT 1970).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (NT 1974; OT 1979).
- Plumptre E. H. Plumptre, *The General Epistle of St James (The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges)*, Cambridge University Press, 1901).
- Ropes J. H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St James (International Critical Commentaries)*. T. & T. Clark, 1978 reprint).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2 1971; OT 1952).
- RV The Revised Version of the Bible (1885).
- Stevenson H. F. Stevenson, *James Speaks for Today* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966).
- Tasker R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries)*, Tyndale Press, 1956).
- Ward R. A. Ward, 'James' in *New Bible Commentary*, Third Edition (Inter-Varsity Press, 1970).

Introduction

As soon as we read through the letter of James we say to ourselves, ‘This man was a preacher before he was a writer.’ He addresses his readers as a preacher addresses his hearers, directly, pointedly. *Do not be deceived*, he says (1:16), or *Do you want to be shown?* (2:20), or *Know this* (1:19). He is capable of rounding on those whose errors he wishes to expose (4:13; 5:1); he calls attention with many a ‘behold’ to things he does not want them to miss (3:4–5; 5:4; *etc.*). Imaginary (but very relevant) objectors make their appearance (2:18); rhetorical questions keep attention alive (2:4–5, 14–16; 5:13); homely illustrations abound—horses, rudders, fires (3:3–6), springs of water, gardening (3:11–12) and farming (5:7)—and startling statements jolt the congregation awake: *Count it all joy when you meet various trials* (1:2); *You do well. Even the demons believe* (2:19). And over and over again in the warmth of the vital relationship between preacher and congregation is maintained as the word *Brethren*, *My brethren* and *My beloved brethren* come through the lips straight from the heart (*e.g.* 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 5:7, 9, *etc.*).¹

We cannot help asking ourselves, therefore, if a spoken original lies behind the letter as we have it, and if this is not the explanation of the often curious abruptness with which James seems to swing from one topic to another.² A preacher with his striking abilities must often have faced the questions frequently enough addressed to lesser practitioners of the art: Had you thought of publishing your sermon? Don’t you think this material ought to have a wider audience and influence? We must not, of course, walk too far along the road of imagination, but there is no doubt that the ‘letter’ reads like sermon notes in which the preacher wrote down the main outline he wished to follow and the main paragraphs of material which he wished to present, but waited for the inspiration of the moment to develop each point and to build bridges between the individual topics he was handling. We shall note many examples of this possibility in our studies of James, but for the moment we must concentrate on this, that like every good sermon, James’ letter was constructed with a clear plan, with an introduction, a well-subdivided central section and a conclusion designed both to bring the sermon back to the point where it started and also to take account of the teaching which has emerged en route.

The introduction and conclusion balance each other in this way:

Introduction (1:2–11)

The need for **patience** (1:2–4)
and
prayer (1:5–8)

in all the contrasting circumstances of life (1:9–11)

Conclusion (5:7–20)

The need for **patience** (5:7–12)
and
prayer (5:13–18)
and
care (5:19–20)

in all the contrasting circumstances of life.

The theme of ‘care’ (5:19–20) arises from the major teaching on that subject in chapter (2) in the same way as the conclusion’s re-emphasis on the danger of an unguarded tongue (5:9), (12) looks back to the topic of (3:1–12). But the coincidence of subject-matter between the introduction and the conclusion is striking: here are truths significant enough to come first in the letter and important enough to be repeated at the end—patience and prayer.

The central content of the letter (1:12–5:6) carries the *theme* of the *birth* (1:13–19a), *growth* (1:19b–25) and *development* (1:26–5:6) of the Christian. Not all growth is true growth; true Christian growth can be assessed by noting whether certain specific developments are taking place:

- a. Recapitulation of the introduction (1:12): through *trials*, by *patience*, to the *crown*.
- b. **Birth** (1:13–19a): though the old nature remains active (13–16) the Father has brought us to new birth by his word (17–19a);
- c. **Growth** (1:19b–25): we grow by hearing (19b–20), receiving (21) and obeying (22–25) the Fathers Word;
- d. **Development** (1:26–5:6): there are three notable developments which are the characteristics of true Christian growth:

1:26
The controlled tongue

1:27a
Care for the needy

1:27b
Personal purity of life



Detailed study of:

Care for the needy (2:1–26) Control of the tongue (3:1–12) Personal purity of life (3:13–5:6)

We shall see later why James states the three lines of Christian development in one order (1:26–27) and then studies them in detail in a different order (2:1–5:6). At present we are (so to speak) examining the wood, not the trees. As we do so, we see what a wonderfully thorough, painstaking teacher James is—and how very realistic!

The ‘conflict’ theme

The Christian is literally ‘born for battle’. Before James tells us about the miracle of that birth which comes to us by the Father’s will, through the Father’s word (1:18), he reminds us that, Christians though we are, the old nature is still virulent and active within us (1:13–16). The new birth does not solve the conflict, nor give us an automatic victory. Nor does it put us beyond the reach of temptation or of the possibility of falling; the new birth in fact brings us into the arena where the old nature and the new nature battle it out. It is for this reason that James follows his teaching on the new birth (1:18) by explaining growth, making it clear that this is a prolonged struggle, a fight against odds.

Furthermore, the enemy within, the old nature, is not our only problem: there are also all the various ills, trials and temptations of life. The church is not only still in the world but is dispersed throughout the world (1:1). Christians are a special people, but not a protected species. Indeed, there is a sense in which they ought to expect even more than their share of the buffetings of life. This is because patient endurance of all sorts of tribulations is, in fact, God’s appointed way forward for his people to the maturity (1:4) and crown (1:12) he wills for them. Ask James, ‘Does the road wind up-hill all the way?’ and hear him reply, ‘Yes, to the very end.’

In all this James is no different from all the other teachers God has given us in the Bible. But he is different from teachers who have arisen and still arise, saying that there is an easy way to holiness—an experience, a technique or a blessing which will waft us effortlessly, even if not necessarily painlessly, to permanent loftier heights of living. All such teachings are not only without scriptural foundation—and so very plainly contrary to the teaching of James—but they are in fact recipes for disaster. They disappoint for this very reason, that there was never any hope that they could succeed. They are not God’s way. ‘Begin as a baby,’ says James (1:18). Grow from infancy and babyhood through adolescence to adulthood (1:19–25). Make sure your growth is a true, Christian development, and remember that it is by leaping life’s hurdles that you get to the tape.

A Christian life-style

The holiness to which James calls us is a holiness which is lived out in this world, but which marks us off from it (1:27b). When he develops this theme (3:13–5:6) he calls us (3:13) to the *goad life*, but he speaks more characteristically when he warns that *friendship with the world is enmity with God* (4:4).

Those who can look back through thirty or forty years of Christian experience will recall that teaching about separation from the world used to be far more prominent than it is today. Those who became Christians at any point up to the mid-1940s were carefully (and with loving intent) made aware by their seniors what was proper for a Christian not to do, where not to go, how not to dress. We must not doubt the serious and pure intention which lay behind this teaching, nor mock what was so plainly meant for our good; yet we were fundamentally misled. We were drilled in a reactive holiness: whatever happened to be the current fashion in the ‘world’ (*i.e.* society outside the Christian fellowship) must be contradicted by the Christian. We were called simply to react against surrounding social norms.

As we look around us today, however, the abandonment of the old reactive separation from the world has led to a forgetfulness of the concept of separation, and for very many Christians what goes in the world goes in the church. If everyone does it, why should not the Christian? We need to discover and live by positive Christian standards—not reacting against the world around us, but responding obediently to the Word of God within the world around us. James wrote his letter just for us.

The recovery of the local church

One of the outstanding ways in which the difference shows between Christians and the surrounding world is in the quality of fellowship which should mark the local church. The church is God’s family, in which all members are *brethren*. If this word sounds to us sexist, then we must look beyond the maleness of the word to the reality of the family relationship which we have to each other as children born of the same Father (1:18). Rather than be offended because James uses the

masculine word, let the loveliness of the repeated *brethren, my brethren, my beloved brethren* sink into our minds and hearts until there is born in us a determination that *our* church will be like that. Let it be a fellowship of rich and poor (1:9–11), who alike consider their faith their greatest wealth (2:5); a fellowship of care where brother or sister never goes away in need (2:15), where the tongue is guarded lest it disrupt (4:11–12; 5:9) and where heavenly wisdom in all its peace (3:17) produces that soil of true oneness in which righteousness can come to harvest (3:18). Though James writes as one who can, with authority, address the universal church (1:1), the only actual authorities he mentions in his letter are the Word of God and the elders of the local church (5:14). We need to recover this ‘local’ vision. If the world around us saw the problems of its own animosities, divisions and deprivations solved in the microcosm of the local church, we would need no more special evangelistic efforts, for the life of the church would be like the light of a city set on a hill which cannot be hidden.

‘Not a needy person among them’

James was a member of a church which was so exercised about the needs of brothers and sisters that it could be said that there was ‘not a needy person among them’ (Acts 4:34). Nothing was held back in the face of the prior consideration of lifting another’s burden. The right to hold private property was never disputed (*cf.* Acts 5:4) and there was no attempt to institute a ‘Christian commune’, let alone a Christian communism, but one great rule operated: they sold possessions and goods and (lit.) ‘used to distribute to all, *as any had need*’ (Acts 2:45 and 4:34). Their aim was not to dispose of goods, but to meet needs. Out of this setting came James’ letter—and, as we shall see, it came out of his heart too.

The theme of the poor and the rich recurs in the letter (1:9–11; 2:1–7, 14–17; 4:13–17; 5:1–6). James re-echoes what Jesus said about the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom. He does not hide the fact that affluence can breed arrogance, can assume the right to special treatment and even be deceived into thinking that wisdom comes with wealth; neither does he hide the fact that the poor are the special targets of the love of God and that the fruits of poverty in spiritual terms can be great. But his great call is that all believers should hold whatever of this world’s good they possess in trust for the needy.

We should rejoice that in our day a concern for a world of want has to such an extent revived. James, however, might want to ask us two questions. First, has our concern to meet need yet reached the point noted in Acts, where nothing was held back if it could be used to dispel need from the fellowship? Very many Western Christians are far and away better off financially than their wildest dreams ever led them to expect—but if giving is measured not quantitatively (how much given?) but in terms of the poor widow who gave all, in Mark 12:44 (how much left?), we have no reason to be proud. Secondly, James might ask, Did you in fact realize that the meeting of needs is not peripheral, nor optional, but central and obligatory to your faith? If only we can hear James’ testimony on this point, what a commitment to meeting the needs of others must follow! Right at the heart of our salvation stands the Father who *of his own will brought us forth* (1:18). This means that spontaneously, without any commanding or compelling, he was moved by forces within his own heart and nature to reach out to us in our need. Compassion is the outflow of his nature. If this is so, then concern for the needy is not, so to say, an external duty which we seek to impose on ourselves; it is part of the Father’s likeness in us his children, and in this way it is proof of the work of grace in our hearts.

The unsuspected factor

There is another proof of the work of grace in our hearts. Like a doctor who comes to a patient and says, ‘Let me see your tongue,’ James examines our tongues, not only as an index of spiritual health but—and this is the surprise—as a key to spiritual well-being. Of course, in this too he is not innovating but bringing out in a particularly striking way an emphasis which runs right through the Bible. Peter, for example, says, ‘He that would love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile’ (1 Pet. 3:10). But he is quoting Psalm 34:12–13—in other words, this is something on which the whole Scripture is agreed.

James has his own way of saying this, by means of his illustrations of horse, ship and fire (3:2ff.): if only we can master the tongue, then we can control all the energies of our lives (the horse), we can steer our way through all the winds of circumstances (the ship), and we can set bounds around the fiery and destructive forces within our sinful natures (the fire). The tongue is the master-key to it all: this is the biblical psychology James teaches. Practical to the last, and knowing that mastery and constancy are problems which really vex us, he will not allow us to run pell-mell after some new experience or some freshly proffered remedy. The answer lies within ourselves.

It is at points like this that we need to give our most careful attention to the Bible, for it is opening up truths we would not otherwise suspect to be significant. The holy life is our direct responsibility and at its heart ... the tongue!

But who is James?

These, then, are some of the current and practical issues on which we are addressed in this carefully organized sermon-on-paper. But who is the preacher, this gentle *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1)?

There are three men called James in the New Testament: James the son of Zebedee,³ one of the inner circle of the apostles; James the son of Alphaeus, probably to be identified with James the younger or ‘little James’;⁴ and, thirdly, James, son of Joseph and Mary, the Lord’s brother.⁵ It is usually thought that James son of Zebedee was martyred at too early a date (AD 44) for him to have been the author of the letter. Even this, however, cannot be maintained for certain. Nothing in the letter absolutely forbids a date as early as James the son of Zebedee, and certainly the arguments proposed

for later dates lack impressiveness. The only reason for excluding 'little James' from authorship is the tenuous one that nothing is known about him! The same, as a matter of fact, applies to Jude, known only for his name and his letter. But long-standing tradition attributes the letter to James the Lord's brother. It was not until the sixteenth century that this attribution was disputed, but since then serious questioning has continued. The candidature of James the Lord's brother is still widely maintained by specialists, but there is at least equal support for the view that the letter is the work of an unknown author, probably working at some point between AD 70 and 130.

One question regarding authorship is raised both by those who hold that the Lord's brother was the author and by those who believe that the letter belongs to a later date: the quality of the Greek in which it is written. All agree that the author was a person of linguistic skill and sensitivity, and ask whether James the Lord's brother, with his humble background, could have risen to these literary heights. For some this is a pointer away from James the son of Joseph and Mary; for others it is a matter of sufficient importance to require some adjustment of their theory of authorship. For example, Peter Davids more than inclines to the view that the Lord's brother was the author of the original deposit of material, but that the final form of the letter as we have it ought to be attributed to a redactor who edited James' sermons. But surely this is all a debate about a non-question! Artistic skills and exceptional abilities owe nobody an explanation. Time and again they rise where least expected—though we might well ask whether they would be 'least expected' in the case of the children of such exceptional parents as Joseph and Mary, even if we take no account of the fact that the first and most dramatic gift of God to the church, the essential Pentecostal gift, was a gift of languages, the gift of intelligible communication (Acts 2:8, 11). We cannot affirm what James might have inherited from his parents, but we cannot overlook the fact that he shared the original Pentecostal outpouring (Acts 1:14) with its specifically linguistic focus. Furthermore, as Sophie Laws says (p. 40), 'it is no longer possible to assert with complete confidence that James of Jerusalem could not have written the good Greek of the epistle, since the wide currency of that language in Palestine is increasingly appreciated'.

If there are no other grounds, then, for denying authorship to James the Lord's brother than the quality of his Greek, we ought rather to congratulate him for it and be thankful. There are, however, arguments which some think point away from this James. First, when we read between the lines of the letter, we seem to see the churches living in settled conditions and themselves to be well-established. J. H. Ropes, for example, thinks that this must refer to the middle period between AD 70 and 130, long enough after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 for things to have settled down and long enough before the Jewish rebellion under Bar-Kokhba in AD 130 for it not to cast its shadow before it. But this argument cannot stand by itself. There are far too many periods, early and late, when a letter to widespread but distinct communities could give the impression of settled conditions.

Secondly, there are arguments which depend on the relationship thought to exist between this letter and the writings of Paul. J. H. Ropes, again, contends that the letter must be later than Paul, 'of whose formulas he disapproves without understanding their real purpose'. The point of this most unfortunately worded contention is that 'James' did not agree with the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith and wrote his letter in a controversial spirit to put the church right. The traditional date, however, for the death of James of Jerusalem is AD 62. By that date both Galatians and Romans had been written and Paul had doubtless formulated and publicized his doctrine of justification well in advance of writing those letters—well within the lifetime of James. This aspect of their relationship cannot, then, require a late date for the authorship of the letter.

But J. H. Ropes' more than arrogant words cannot be allowed to pass without further comment. Are James and Paul at variance? The answer depends on the meaning of the key passage, 2:14–26, and we must not repeat here the details which will concern us later. The view taken in this present book is that disagreement between James and Paul is in fact artificially produced by wrenching James' words out of their context. Paul and James are no more in contradiction than are Articles 11 and 12 of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England. Article 11 reads: 'We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith.' Article 12 reads: 'Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith ... are ... pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith.' Paul and James respectively could not be more succinctly expressed. To Paul the question was, 'How is salvation experienced?' and the answer, 'By faith alone.' To James the question was, 'How is this true and saving faith recognized?' and the answer, 'By its fruits.' The supposition that Paul and James are at variance is a false trail. Both actually faced the same problem: people were saying that, if salvation is all of grace on God's side and solely by faith on ours, then how can it matter what way we live so long as we have 'simple faith'?^[6] To this both gave the same answer but in different words. Paul answered it by pointing out that saving faith brought us into union not only with the Jesus who died, but also with the Jesus who rose from the dead; if we truly died with him, then we must just as truly live with him.^[7] James answered the question by examining the nature of faith itself, and showing that a true definition of faith must include the subsequent life, with those good works which 'do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith'.^[8]

Thirdly, there are arguments against linking the letter with James the Lord's brother arising out of the relation between it and Acts 15. The Council of Jerusalem is generally dated AD 48. It was obviously an issue of enormous importance to the early church whether and on what terms Gentiles could come into membership, and James played his part in the conclusion reached. Yet there is no reference in the letter to either the Council, or the controversy, or the decision. John Robinson^[9] is prepared to understand this as implying that the letter was written before the Council; J. H. Ropes understands it as requiring that a long enough time had passed since the Council for the dust of controversy to settle and cease to be an issue. Neither position carries any necessity about it.

Life is always stranger than theory. We read in Acts 16:1–3 that Paul came hotfoot from the Council, where he had toiled energetically and successfully against the requirement of circumcision for admission to the church, and circumcised

Timothy out of regard for the Jews living around. Even as quickly as that did the dust of controversy settle! For Paul—and for James too, as we shall see—other factors could be more important. The non-mention of the Council, then, has no bearing on the date at which the letter might have been written, and certainly constitutes no argument against authorship by James of Jerusalem.

There are two other items of evidence from Acts 15 which ought to be considered. First, there are verbal parallels between words used at and by the Council and wording in the letter. Some of these parallels concern commonplace matters and cannot be allowed significance,¹⁰ but there are a few to which weight might be attached. James begins his submission to the Council with the words ‘Brethren, listen to me’ (Acts 15:13) and our memories flit to the identical call, *Listen, my beloved brethren* (Jas. 2:5). He quotes from Amos about ‘the Gentiles upon whom my name has been called’ and both thought and words are matched in 2:7. If James had a hand in the writing of the communiqué which the Council issued (as surely he must), then the reference to ‘our beloved Barnabas and Paul’ bears on it the mark of the loving ways of the author who uses again and again the words *brethren, my brethren, my beloved brethren* (e.g. 1:16, 19; 2:5). It is unfair of Sophie Laws to dismiss this evidence on the (unprovable) ground that ‘the historical accuracy of Luke’s report is debatable’, for she proceeds to place absolute reliance on the portrait of James in Acts 15 and Acts 21 and on her own understanding of it. James, she believes, is a devotee of the old law: does not Luke portray him here as presiding over a Council concerned with observances, and succeeding in enforcing some? Does he not suggest to Paul (Acts 21:18ff.) the advisability of engaging in ritual purifications? Such an attitude to the law is not consistent with that of the author of the letter. It is difficult to see what the problem is. Let us suppose for a moment that the letter is by James of Jerusalem and indeed written in the immediate aftermath of the Council. James himself may very well have been devoted to many of the ways of the old law in which he had been nurtured, as tradition says he was, but as a signatory to the Council’s communiqué what would he say to the church as a whole? He would certainly not represent as essential for them what the Council labelled as non-essential, nor would he urge on them practices which his proximity to the temple allowed him to enjoy, but which would have had no practical possibility in their case. He would have brought out, on the contrary, the abiding and central moral thrust of the law—which is just what the letter does, for it is a ‘law book’ in a deeper and more pervasive sense than any other single writing in the New Testament.

But was devotion to the law James’ motivation in Acts 15 and 21? There is no need to think so. His behaviour at the Council is that of a great conciliator. His intervention in the debate aims to provide a common ground on which all may unite. Likewise in Acts 21 he does not take sides, but stands between two sides which, if nothing is done, might well pull apart from each other. His persuasive ways are evident in that Paul followed his advice, and if he fell foul of the Jews in doing so this was not germane to James’ purpose, which was to provide common ground for different views and emphases among Christians.¹¹ Such a James is essential as author of this letter, with its central insistence on harmony and the composing of differences.

It can be urged¹² that if James were the Lord’s brother then, surely, there would be more reference to the Lord Jesus than the letter contains. But who can tell? One might well reply that, if the letter were by an author wishing to pass himself off as James, he would have made it unambiguously clear which James he wished to personate. But, again, who can tell? Certainly there is nothing in the letter which speaks against authorship by the Lord’s brother and, as we have suggested, much that speaks in its favour. If we ask another question it may help. What James do we know of in the New Testament, after the death of the son of Zebedee, the apostle James, who could simply sign his letter ‘James’ and expect everyone to know who was meant? None but James, son of Joseph and Mary, brother of the Lord.

The one thing on which the letter itself insists is that its author was named ‘James’. This is as much part of the inspired testimony of the Word of God as anything else in the letter. It is inadmissible, therefore, to search for an anonymous writer, for the author’s name has been revealed, and in so far as we have pointers to follow, they point to only one James.

1. Setting the scene (1:1)

If James were to post his letter today it would be marked 'Return to sender' on the ground of being insufficiently addressed. He names no names and specifies no place as destination: *twelve tribes* contain a lot of people and *the Dispersion*, in its special sense of the scattered people of God, was in principle world-wide.

Yet, at first sight, is any great problem really involved? *Twelve tribes* reminds us of the Old Testament people of God, the children of the twelve sons of Jacob (e.g. Ex. 1:2–5). Even in the New Testament Paul can still speak of 'our twelve tribes' (Acts 26:7), referring to those who can trace their descent back to the twelve patriarchs. *Dispersion*, too, is a term with a clear meaning. From the time of the return from exile in Babylon, the people of God were in two sections: those who had come back to live in the promised land (e.g. Ezr. 1:2:1ff.) and those who remained living among the nations. The latter group were seen as 'dispersed' throughout the world, and the word 'dispersion' came to be used both of the scattered people and the world-wide area, outside Palestine, where they lived.

But no sooner do we feel our problem is clarifying than fresh difficulties arise. There are two. First, by the time of James, the physical descendants of the people of the Old Testament had long since become 'the Jews'. James, however, writes as a Christian to Christians. Both he, the writer, and they, the readers, acknowledge Jesus as Lord. James is *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1); they are his 'brethren' (1:2) whom he further describes (2:1) as united with himself in 'the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Secondly, as James sees it, the whole of *the twelve tribes* are in *the Dispersion*. The words have lost their characteristic contemporary use among the Jews; they no longer contrast some who are 'abroad' with others who are 'at home'. Every one of the tribes addressed is away from the homeland, dispersed in the world.

We would seem, therefore, to be back in square one! Who are these *twelve tribes*? To answer this question we must follow another line—the straight line from the Old Testament into the New. Our Lord Jesus chose out twelve apostles (Mk. 3:13–14) and looked forward to the day of his own glory when they would sit on twelve thrones ruling the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:28). In doing this he was not creating a 'new' Israel (either alongside or replacing an 'old' Israel!); he was leading the Israel of the Old Covenant on into its full, intended reality as the Israel of the New Covenant, the apostolic people of our Lord Jesus Christ, those whom Paul calls 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16). In a word, 'Israel' is the name of the people of Jesus; it is the true and inalienable title of his church. Because of this Paul teaches that Christians are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7) and that Abraham is our father (Rom. 4:11, 16). He does not qualify this relationship by saying, for example, that we can think of ourselves as if we were children of Abraham, or that we might find it helpful to draw an analogy between ourselves and those who are Abraham's children, or anything like that. He asserts a fact: those who have put their faith in Jesus for salvation are Abraham's children and the Israel of God.

Peter brings us a step even nearer to James. He writes his first letter (1:1) to 'the exiles of the Dispersion' and goes on (1:2) to define them as people who know God as the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who have experienced the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ. Old Testament terms again describe New Testament people; they are God's exiles of the Dispersion. No adjustment of meaning is made, no compromise with truth, for they are God's Israel.

James brings these lines of Bible truth together and so sets the scene for his letter. Better than any other description could, *the twelve tribes* places the church firmly within the pressures and persecutions of this life. We can think of our ancestral tribes in the storm and stress of Egyptian slavery (Ex. 2:23), redeemed by the blood of the lamb (Ex. 12:13), on pilgrimage with God through 'the great and terrible wilderness' (Dt. 8:15; cf. Ex. 15:22), battling to enter into what the Lord had promised (Jos. 1:2) and struggling ever after to live in holiness amid the enticements of a pagan environment. These are the experiences through which James would have his readers understand their pilgrim path. 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, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb himself—but not yet home.

First priority

James has a name for being the pre-eminently 'practical' man among the New Testament writers. It is a true reputation. The scene he has set in verse 1 demands that he address himself in a down-to-earth fashion to people whom he has so firmly placed right in the realities of this earth's life. So what will he put first? What is the first thing the Lord's people on earth need to be told?

To find the answer to this question we must, for a moment, stand back from the letter and look at it as a whole. James' practical letter finds its focus in one set of topics: it is a letter about relationships. He calls us, for example, to care for orphans and widows (1:27), to be impartial in our courtesy and care of others (2:1); he emphasizes the duty of love for our neighbour (2:8), speaking of it as 'the royal law'; he scorns a profession of faith which fails in love and compassion (2:15–16) and applauds the life that risks itself for the sake of those who are at risk (2:25); he warns against feelings which imperil fellowship (3:14) and words which denigrate a brother (4:11); we are to discharge our honourable debts (5:4), guard our reactions (5:9), minister to the sick (5:14), share with the distressed (5:16) and urgently pursue those who stray from Christ (5:19–20). His letter is quite a catalogue, quite a sustained emphasis on this single set of topics.

But this focus is absent from the whole of the first section of the letter (1:2–25) following upon the opening greeting (1:1), making a most marked contrast. The opening section is all about the individual: the one who lacks wisdom (5), who

is not totally committed (7), the *brother*, poor or rich (9–10), the one who receives the crown (12). The terms of verses 13–14 could not be more individual and personal: *I, each, his own desire*; and the same is true of the birth described in verse 18. We could continue in the same vein through to verse 25: a self-ward, individual concentration.

James, in fact, puts first the duty of self-care in the things of God. Who would have thought it? The Christian looking after Number One! Yet Paul said the same thing to the elders of the Ephesian church: ‘Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock’ (Acts 20:28)—*yourself* first, then *all the flock*. James writes in the same spirit and to the same point. Before we care for others we must look after ourselves. The ever practical James puts his finger right on the spot. It is all so personal, so self-ward, that it can be faced only in first person terms. In verse 4 he teaches about a path which leads to Christian maturity: before I can lead anyone else along that path or assist a brother or sister caught in life’s toils, I must ask am I on that path myself? Am I holding fast through the testings of life and so growing to maturity? Verse 12 promises a crown to the one who loves God and walks the way of endurance: how can I hold another Christian to such demands unless I am accepting their discipline myself? In verse 18 James uses the illustration of first-fruits. In the agricultural community of Old Covenant days the first of the crop was the Lord’s and specially holy: am I such, notably holy, something special for God? According to verse 25 there is a particular doorway into blessing, through hearing and doing God’s word: is that my daily experience? Am I enjoying the blessing? For I cannot point others this way unless I am walking the road of obedience myself.

It is at these points of priority that James meets us: forget about others for a bit! What is your life with God like?

Jesus is Lord

Just suppose for a moment that this letter was written by James, the brother of the Lord Jesus—not, as we have seen, an extravagant supposition. James loves the word *brother*. He writes to *my brethren* (1:2; 2:1, 14; 3:1; 5:12, 19), to *brethren* (4:11; 5:7, 9, 10) and to *my beloved brethren* (1:16, 19; 2:5). He expects Christians to think of each other as brothers and sisters (1:9; 2:15; 4:11). But when he writes of one who was in fact a brother within his own family, he calls him *the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1).

Seeing the verse this way sharpens our awareness of what early believers thought about the Lord Jesus, and this point can be made irrespective of the identity of the writer. Many agree that the Letter of James is a very early piece of Christian writing.¹ Sufficient time had not yet elapsed for that process, dear to some who write on the incarnation, by which the ‘poetry’ which hailed Jesus as son of God ‘hardened into prose and escalated from a metaphorical son of God to a metaphysical God the Son’.² Early as it is, the Letter of James betrays no hesitation on this point, no sense of groping after a new theology or of expressing a doctrinal innovation about Jesus. The words have an assured ring and he uses them as stating something which his worldwide readers will endorse.

We have become accustomed to the standard English translation, *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. But the Greek could equally well sustain the rendering ‘a servant of Jesus Christ who is God and Lord’. Commentators tend³ to step back from this translation though without arguing a case, but we can put it this way: James was a master of the Greek language. James Adamson, for example, writes of his exercising ‘the power of the expert craftsman in language’ and again of ‘the expert classic who wrote the Greek of the Epistle of James’.⁴ Even, therefore, were it the case that he intended the meaning which the English Versions express—that God and the Lord Jesus are co-owners of their ‘slaves’—yet it cannot have escaped his notice that his words were equally capable of ascribing deity to Jesus. But he did not alter them. Some, today, find themselves satisfied ‘to say ... *He is “as-if-God” for me*’.⁵ But there is no ‘as if’ in James: Jesus Christ is *the Lord*.

The corollary of this divine Lordship is that James is his slave—‘not a term of special humility, nor ... to be understood as involving a claim to the rank of a prophet or distinguished leader ... simply ... to belong to Christ as his worshipper’.⁶

To belong to Christ, to acknowledge him as Lord and God, to worship him—but surely, in addition, a slave is there to serve, to do his lord’s bidding. Like James, Paul saw himself as the slave of Jesus (*e.g.* Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1), but he became a slave the day he said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ (Acts 22:10). For though to be the slave of such a Master is a glorious and privileged relationship, it is far from being ornamental. We in turn look up to Jesus: What shall we do, Lord? If we see the letter of James as the inspired reply to this question, then we have the same practical and earthy approach to reading these five chapters that James had in writing them.

2. The life-giving trial (1:2–4)

The all-too-dedicated mother, the seven-days-a-week parson, the workaholic tycoon can all justify their life-style by saying, ‘My family needs me’, ‘My church needs me’, ‘My business needs me’. But what happens if the end of all this selfless wear and tear is breakdown? The needs of family, church and business remain unaltered, but the indispensable helper is no longer there.

These are not James’ illustrations, but possibly he would not disapprove, for they do point up the balance of teaching which we have seen in his letter. The first priority for the church in the world, under the Lordship of Christ, is that Christians must look after themselves, for the life which issues in the caring ministries of 1:27 is the life which is itself moving forward to maturity.

On to maturity

This is the note which James strikes right away. There is a goal of maturity: *that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* (4b); there is a pathway to maturity: *testing ... produce steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect ...* (3b–4a); and there is a terrain through which that pathway must go: *Count it all joy ... when you meet various trials* (2). To us this may all sound quite amazing, but to James it is the clue to the meaning of life. He is nothing if not realistic: life is a tale of *various trials*. The Greek here is more vivid than the English word *various*. In classical Greek *poikilos* means ‘many-coloured, variegated’, and from this basic meaning it came to be used for ‘diversified, complex, intricate’. Matthew (4:24) uses it to describe ‘any and every kind’ of sickness dealt with in the healing ministry of our Lord; Paul (2 Tim. 3:6) uses it of the limitless shapes which human desires take; and Peter (1 Pet. 4:10), of the endless ways in which the grace of God is proved to be sufficient for our needs. As he writes, James throws his main emphasis on *poikilos*: ‘... when you fall in with trials—no matter what form they may take.’ What a true picture of life! The man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho and ‘fell in with’ (the same word) a band of robbers was neither expecting it nor prepared for it. It came to him as one of the ‘changes and chances of this mortal life’. And any day, at any time of day, some experience of *trial* is, as it were, lying in wait ready to leap on us so that we cry out in surprise, ‘What is this?’, and in perplexity, ‘Why has it happened to me?’

It may well be that we are sometimes guilty of saying to others, ‘You must not worry so’, while our hearts are telling us that the particular trial they are enduring contains every reason for anxiety. Too often there is this element of loving (or maybe cowardly) duplicity in our ministry to the distressed. It is not so with James. The *realism* with which he faces the fact that life brings trials of every shape is wedded to his *perception* of the inner meaning of all experience. Interestingly, however, he does not say ‘I have discovered a secret’. The meaning of life is not a clue unveiled to James, but a truth common among Christians—at least as he sees it—for he says *you know* (3). He appeals, therefore, not for the adoption of a superficial gaiety in the face of life’s adversities, but for a candid awareness of truth already known.

The clue to life: progress through trial

What is the clue, then, the vital truth, with which we are to face our trials? We shall follow through James’ teaching in verses 3–4 with the help of three statements.

First, in the trials of life our Christian faith is being *tested for genuineness*. *The testing of your faith* means ‘the experience of having your faith put to the test’. James takes it for granted that ‘the natural effect of (trials) is to imperil persistence in faith’ (ROPES), and how true this is. We have all met people who, though with different terms suited to their differing experiences, would concur with the sad words of one elderly man: ‘I used to go to church, but five years ago my wife and my only daughter died within six months of each other, and after that it didn’t seem worth the bother.’ It is hard to use such a bitter experience as an illustration without seeming either to criticize the speaker for not being more resolute in the face of calamity, or to minimize the sharpness of his human sorrow. But no such criticism or insensitivity is meant: it is an only-too-often repeated fact that such faith as we possess collapses before the storm of sorrow, or pain, or disappointment, or whatever it may be. We say that we believe that God is our Father, but as long as we remain untested on the point our belief falls short of steady conviction. But suppose the day comes—as it does and will—when circumstances seem to mock our creed, when the cruelty of life denies his fatherliness, his silence calls in question his almightiness and the sheer, haphazard, meaningless jumble of events challenges the possibility of a Creator’s ordering hand. It is in this way that life’s trials test our faith for genuineness.

Secondly, James insists that we *know* (3) that the testing is *designed to result in strong consistency*: the experience of having your faith tested *produces steadfastness* (3). There is nothing unusual about this statement. It is just good observation of life. Young couples in the first excitement of their attraction to each other readily believe that theirs will be a life-long partnership: they are meant for each other. At this point in their relationship it is, of course, no more than a matter of opinion, and much more tentative than they are in a position to realize or willing to admit. Soon, however, their belief will face tests: the counter-attraction of other possible partners, a growing experience of individual likes and dislikes which will not harmonize without serious adjustment, maybe the cool or antagonistic reaction of one or both sets of parents, and so forth. It is as testings are endured that the relationship itself becomes more durable, and along the line of this process the incipient belief that they are meant to marry becomes a settled conviction. The same process goes on into their marriage. They have pledged themselves to forsake all other partnerships for life, and in the course of their life

together—maybe by the experience of fighting off temptations or of gritty determination to save their marriage in a period of coolness, or just the shoulder-to-shoulder facing and bearing of the vicissitudes of life—their minds become irrevocably weaned away from the thought of infidelity. What began as a tentative belief ends as a fixed, unchangeable constancy of life.

The *steadfastness* of which James speaks (3–4) can thus be illustrated from life, but the reality to which he calls us is consistent living for Christ. He answers the cry of our hearts that we might be less fluctuating in our loyalty, less erratic in our conduct. His answer is this: the trials of life are God’s testings. They may come from outside, through circumstances or people, or, as we shall see in the use of the same word in verses 13–14, they may be the inner promptings of our sinful natures. But they are God’s designed way forward. It is only by meeting and passing its tests that faith grows into strong constancy.

We can now proceed to the third statement: *by persistent steadfastness we grow to full maturity*. Verses 3 and 4 are ‘sewn together’ by this word *steadfastness*. James uses it again in 5:11 and in doing so perfectly illustrates what it means—it expresses the characteristic of Job. We proverbially speak of the ‘patience’ of Job, and indeed the word is thus translated in 5:11 in the older English versions. But so much more is involved in the word, and in the life of Job, than the sort of passive acceptance of things which ‘patience’ tends to convey. James’ word (*hypomonē*) is well summed up by Sophie Laws: ‘active steadfastness in, rather than passive submission to, circumstances’. It is a word which means ‘staying power’, ‘constancy’ (or better, as it was put just above, ‘strong constancy’), ‘endurance’ and ‘stickability’. My wording of the ‘third statement’ as including ‘persistent steadfastness’ attempts to draw out the teaching which James adds in verse 4. Note that this verse begins with *and*, the word is of some importance. (NIV seeks to achieve the right stress by omitting ‘and’ and introducing the thought of ‘must’.) James is bringing in a word of caution. A believer might endure for a while, and then tire of enduring. In this case the desired growth to maturity is halted mid-way. There has to be a persistency of enduring. *Steadfastness* must *have its full effect* (4) or, as the Greek might be rendered more literally, ‘enjoy a mature work’.

The road is, therefore, hard and long, and the task is unremitting: to endure the first onset of the startling, unexpected trial, and to endure again while it persists, and then to go on enduring. It is like the Lord Jesus who ‘endured the cross’ (Heb. 12:2) right through to the point where the whole work of salvation was accomplished, and he himself entered upon the unbroken possession of eternal glory at the Father’s right hand. We are thus called to a persistent endurance. But this hard road has a glorious destination for us too: *that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* (4). James allows word to build upon word until he has created an impression of total fullness.

Perfect is a word for both the ultimate and the near future. On the one hand it is the daunting word which the Lord Jesus used when he said that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48); and, while this is ever our present target, we know that it can be our experience only when we see Jesus, and shall be like him (1 Jn. 3:2). But also it is the word Paul uses when, having acknowledged that he is himself not yet perfect,^[1] he at once addresses himself to ‘those of us who are mature’ (lit. ‘perfect’, Phil. 3:15). Without losing sight of the ultimate aim, here is our present target maturity of personality—and to this, just as to the heavenly fulfilment, the path is the same, namely, testings, endurance and perseverance. But lest we should miss the magnitude of what awaits us at the end of the road, James allows our minds to dwell on the thought of perfection by first a positive and then a negative qualification. Positively, *perfect* means *complete* (*holoklēros*), that is, possessing every part which goes to making up the complete whole.^[2] and negatively, it is *lacking in nothing*.

Prescription for health

A doctor who diagnosed but could not or would not prescribe would find his consulting rooms deserted. So far we have listened to James diagnosing. He has brought out the main lines of our condition: we suffer from *various trials*, whose nature and onset cannot be predicted in advance. He has also given in some detail the course of treatment appropriate to such a case: a course of testings, strong constancy and persistence. But, we might reasonably ask, ‘Doctor, what are we to do?’

He replies, *Count it all joy*. Each word in the prescription is important. The verb, *count*, refers to the importance which we accord to something—the ‘account’ we would give of it. Paul, for example, ‘counts’ everything as loss in respect of the surpassing glory of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:7–8); Peter urges us to ‘count’ the seeming delay in the return of Christ as the Lord’s forbearance (2 Pet. 3:15). James uses the form of the verb (aorist) which signifies being precise, definite or decisive about something: in a word, to ‘have a settled conviction’. The small word *it* contains the whole of life. It sums up in its tiny compass every one of the *various trials* which the present may contain, the future may bring, or the past may keep stored in memory. Paul’s experienced sailors did not plan to ‘strike a shoal’ (Acts 27:41), for they did not know it was there—but they did strike it, and the account in Acts uses the same verb as is here in James: ‘falling upon or into’. Life is full of hidden rocks, sudden violent winds of circumstances lying in wait for the believer. Every single one of them is embraced in James’ word *it*. There is no trial, no great calamity or small pressure, no overwhelming sorrow or small rub of life outside that plan of God, whereby it is a stepping-stone to glory. And it is for this reason that our settled conviction must be to appraise it as *all joy*, not because it is joyful in itself (for ‘all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant’ (Heb. 12:11) when it is in full flood), but because ‘later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness’ (Heb. 12:11). In James’ words, it is the only way forward to become *perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*.

‘Doctor,’ we might say, ‘does the medicine have to be so nasty? Does the treatment have to be so severe?’ And he replies, ‘Don’t you want to be better?’ So then, do we want to be like Jesus? Do we want to come to the full enjoyment of our full salvation? Do we want, when we reach heaven, to have our perceptions and faculties so sharpened and sensitized

that we will be able to see the glory? Then there is no other way. If the tares are pulled out prematurely the wheat will come, damaged, to the harvest (Mt. 13:29–30). In this too we must be like our Lord: we must set the great *joy* before us and, in consequence, endure (Heb. 12:2).

Is it any wonder that, in setting this teaching out for us, James has attempted to breach the stronghold of our minds and to capture the way we think? Peter says we are not to think it strange when trials try us (1 Pet. 4:12), but generally speaking we find it very strange indeed and are greatly surprised at it. James says we are to *count it all joy*, but do we ever do so? If we are to line ourselves up with Scripture a whole revolution in thinking is called for. And this revolution touches not only our appraisal of life's experiences, but of our spiritual expectations also. So often we are encouraged to think of holiness, sanctification, perfection, victory over sin (or whatever way the ultimate glory of the likeness of Christ may be expressed) as the result of an inner transaction with God, a total commitment, a self-abandonment to him; sometimes even we hear those who promise these benefits as instantaneous results, open to us now. How very far this is from the teaching of James and the expectations he encourages! By comparison, James' road is both uphill and thorny; the benefits he promises are hard won, and progress painfully made can be consolidated only by repetition of the same costly effort.

But let us ask ourselves: is this what James teaches? For if it is—and, indeed, there can be no 'if' about it—then Scripture has spoken, and our duty (and privilege) is to reform our thinking in the light of God's Word. But even more deeply, and with a greater privilege, is not this the way our Saviour went forward to his glory? And if it is the way the Master went, shall not the servant tread it still? Furthermore, do we know anything that our hearts want more than to be made like the Son of God in all things?