THE END OF HYPOCRISY
THE BOOK OF JAMES
The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.
— Brennan Manning

More than any other book in the bible, James presents a bold challenge for Christians to address the distance between faith and obedience. On the one hand, James refers to faith 14 times in the letter. On the other, the letter is filled with commands to obey. In fact, out of 108 verses that make up the epistle, there are 59 commands. These instructions are a full frontal assault against believers who only hear God’s Word, but don’t live them. It’s a cry for true faith and authentic discipleship. A genuine Christian will not only listen to Jesus and talk about Jesus, but also - in God’s strength - strive to live like Jesus.

According to James, faith and obedience are not mutually exclusive, but come together perfectly in the life of Jesus and His followers. To neglect obedience over faith is to be deceived. Like a man looking in the mirror, only to forget who he is when he walks away, so is the man who hears God but lives in disobedience and dishonour. The world is full of such hypocrisy - but there is no place for it among the church. We are to be men and women who talk the talk and walk the walk.

The theme of authenticity is developed by James in view of the social conflict between rich and poor and the spiritual conflict between fractions in the church. James rebukes believers for their worldliness and challenges them to pursue a deeper relationship with God.

In our day the church is presented with new challenges and different conflicts, but the call to gospel obedience remains the same.

It is important to remember that we are saved by faith alone, but as Luther famously said, *the faith that saves will never be alone*. Like fruit on a vine, the fruit of good works in our life is the evidence of God’s spirit within.
Another important aspect to James’ teaching about faith and works relates to its effectiveness in the world. A living and active faith not only confirms which believers are genuine, it will also have an impact on those in our community, city and around the world.

As Platt identifies, ‘the book of James addresses many practical issues: trials, poverty, riches, materialism, favouritism, social justice, the tongue, worldliness, boasting, making plans, praying, and what to do when we’re sick. As we’ll see, James moves from one issue to the next which can make it difficult to find the book’s structure, but he returns repeatedly to how faith impacts the details of our lives but also the lives of those around us - both locally and globally’ (Platt, D).

Faith moves Christians to open up the bible in the workplace and share it with colleagues. Faith inspires Christians to serve the poor. Faith strengthens us to pursue peace with a neighbour, journey with an addict and offer forgiveness to an enemy. Faith drives us to comfort the broken and welcome the marginalised. Faith compels us to love the sinner and speak the truth. Faith enables us to take steps of radical obedience to make the glory of Jesus and His gospel known to the ends of the earth.

We will be in the book of James for 15 weeks and I am excited for at least three reasons.

Firstly, as we gather under God’s word - we can expect to grow. God’s word always achieves its purpose and never returns empty. I am trusting that through this series His Word will inspire us to a deeper and richer trust in God. A faith in God that renews our minds, captures our hearts and puts our hands to work.

Secondly, I am excited by the difference we can make in our world. I am captured by a vision of a church who are putting to death hypocrisy, worldliness, consumerism, apathy and indifference. I see a church whose faith is inspiring them to take radical steps to bring His light to the world. By God’s grace we will see and hear stories of God’s people fighting sin, reconciling relationships, offering mercy, visiting the sick and sharing the good news of Jesus.
INTRODUCTION

Thirdly, I am excited by the many people God is going to bring to Jesus as a result of this series. Many in our workplaces, universities and homes find the distance between our words and action to be a stumbling block to belief. Duplicity, inconsistency and hypocrisy provide the enemy the perfect ammunition in the fight for faith. And yet we believe in a God who is not daunted by our sin or overwhelmed by the devil. Our Lord can do immeasurably more than we ever think or imagine.

Indifference will be exchanged for love. Pride will be exchanged for humility. Self-centeredness for sacrificial service. Judgementalism for grace. Lies for truth. Our prayer is that we will put an end to hypocrisy, and - like a city on a hill - our world will ‘see these good deeds and praise our Father in Heaven.’

By Guy Mason
JAMES THE BROTHER OF JESUS

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...”
– James 1:1a

There are actually several people called James in the New Testament: James the brother of Jude, James the father of Judas (not Iscariot), James the son of Alphaeus, James the younger, James the son of Zebedee, and James the brother of Jesus. It is generally understood that the writer of this letter is the latter: James the brother of Jesus, also known as ‘James the Just’ (Moo, D.J.).

James was a leader in the first church at Jerusalem, a fierce defender of the truth whose forthright teaching and wise counsel helped shape the first Christians’ understanding of Jesus.

But James was not always such a fan of Jesus ...

James is not numbered among the 12 disciples, and it would seem that he was in fact very slow to believe that his brother was the Messiah. He appears to have travelled with Jesus in the earliest stages of His ministry, present when Jesus changed the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, then moving on to Capernaum (John 2:1-12). But soon after we learn that Jesus’ family believed He was ‘out of His mind’ (Mark 3:21), and by the end of Mark 3 Jesus seems to distance Himself from His family, declaring that His true family was anyone who did the will of God (Mark 3:35), not just those who were linked to Him by blood. By Matthew 10:36 there seems a growing tension, as Jesus speaks of a person’s ‘enemies’ being ‘those of His own household’, and John declares in 7:5 that ‘not even His brothers believed in Him’. One can only imagine the pain this caused for Jesus.

What changed, then? How did James go from being a disbelieving skeptic of the gospel to one of its chief advocates?

The answer, it seems, lies in the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes that the risen Lord Jesus appeared to numerous witnesses, and makes a point of saying that He appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7). This seems to have transformed James. It is likely that James was, like so many of his countrymen, looking for a Messiah who would reign in
power, and the subversively humble tones of Jesus’ teaching must have confused and offended him. Jesus’ protestations that the mighty Messiah must die would have seemed like mad folly - but when James saw his brother risen from the dead, the true nature and power of His kingdom was unveiled. Finally James understood that Jesus was victor over sin and the grave, and he committed his life to declaring this truth. As William Barclay writes, ‘it was the sacrificial love of the Cross and the power and the presence of the Resurrection which changed James the enemy into James who was faithful unto death.’ for ‘a Christian is always a (person) whose heart has been broken by the Cross, and whose life has been renewed by the Resurrection.’

Thus transformed, James quickly rose to prominence, and is thought to be the first ‘bishop’ of the church at Jerusalem.

In Acts 15 he is a key speaker at the Jerusalem Council, which grappled with questions of what it looked like for Gentiles to become part of the people of faith as they believed in Jesus. Remember: Jews had been taught for long centuries that they were God’s uniquely chosen people, instructed to keep themselves separate from those who did not believe - so Jesus’ instructions to ‘make disciples of all nations’ (Matt. 28:19) was a confronting one that demanded a total change of mindset. James was crucial in this process, instrumental in the embrace of the Gentiles as the gospel spread. At the Jerusalem Council (around 50 AD. and described in Acts 15), James quotes the Old Testament prophets who spoke of God being made known to the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21), showing that James understood God’s plans were always more expansive. James goes on to suggest wise instructions that will help the new believers live out the faith in their own contexts, and later rejoices to hear ‘the things that God had done among the Gentiles through (Paul’s) ministry’ (Acts 21:19-20).

It is remarkable that James had such a position, because he had not been one of the disciples, and seems not to have followed Jesus over His three-year ministry. He had, however, lived with Jesus all his life, and we can only guess at the impact of these many years sharing a home with the incarnate
God! Certainly we can see Jesus’ priorities and passions in James’ writing, for James shares his brother’s distaste for hypocrisy, unimpressed by knowledge that does not lead to action. And, just like his brother, James diagnoses the vitality of one’s faith in how we treat the poor and vulnerable.

As such, James was continuing the work of his brother, reaching the Jews with the good news that God’s kingdom had come. His letter reveals an extensive and intimate knowledge of the Old Testament; his heroes of faith are Old Testament figures like Abraham, Rahab, Job and Elijah, and he makes direct quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures (eg. 4:6). He clearly loved the Torah, and was known for his piety - even amongst Jews who rejected Jesus as Messiah; he is sometimes called ‘James the Just’, and was said to have knees as hard as a camel, so devoted was he to prayer. Desperate to show his countrymen that Jesus was the foretold Messiah, he looked to remove every offence and any stumbling block, and ‘sought every way possible to maintain ties between the emerging early Christian movement and the Judaism in which he had been nurtured and in which he ministered’ (Moo, D.J.).

But James’ ministry was cut short when he was slaughtered in 62 AD, condemned by the Jewish high priest Ananus II. There are conflicting reports of how he died: Josephus says simply that he was stoned for ‘violating the Law’, while Hegesippus the Christian historian gives a lengthier account. He reports that James was still held in high regard by the Jews, and was invited to speak at the temple to those who were being ‘led astray’ by the new faith. Evidently the religious authorities did not understand where James’ loyalties lay, for instead of condemning Christ he proclaimed Him as the Son of Man! Horrified, Hegesippus reports, the Jewish leaders flung him down from the temple, then was clubbed to death by a particularly zealous fuller.

Whatever the true nature of the case, two things are certain: James was a martyr for the message of Jesus - and now he stands face-to-face in the warm embrace of his brother, his Lord, his Saviour, in the realms of heaven.

By Luke Nelson
To whom did James write? James tells us in the very first verse: ‘To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion’. But just who are these twelve tribes and what dispersion does he mean? There are two possible solutions to this: a symbolic or a literal reading of this initial verse.

The symbolic view maintains that James uses this language of the twelve tribes and the dispersion in a similar way to Peter in his letters. That is, he takes the language that was originally applied to the Jewish nation (Israel) and applies it to the new covenant people (the church), a people comprised of mixed Jewish and Gentile origin but heir to the Old Testament promises and heritage. In using the Old Testament language he is identifying this new community firmly within God’s elect remnant down through the ages. They were not necessarily Jewish in ethnicity, but they could look back on their spiritual ancestors. The slaves in Egypt who were set free by the blood of the lamb, the pilgrims in transit to the promised land before fighting to enter it, and then struggling ever after to live in holiness and uprightness. This mixed community is not made up solely of Jews but they are all God’s elect people, the true remnant, His Holy church and this letter is addressed to them.

The literal view on the other hand maintains that James’ reference to the twelve tribes refers simply to the physical people of Israel, the Jews. The dispersion (diaspora) of verse 1 then refers to their physical scattering across the known world that had occurred in two major events: the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the exile east to Babylon, and the exile west when the Roman General, Pompey, conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC. Nehemiah and Ezra had led mass returns to the land of Israel, but in Jesus’ day (as in ours) the majority of Jews remained and continued to live their lives and practice their faith outside Israel. So this view would see James writing his letter to these Jews: Jews by ethnicity and by religion, and Jews who had come to accept that Jesus was the promised Messiah.
We know from the book of Acts something of these Jewish Christians of the diaspora, for they were there in Jerusalem at Pentecost, listening to Peter’s first sermon proclaiming the crucified and resurrected Jewish messiah. Luke tells us that among those listening that day were inhabitants of Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the parts of Libya about Cyrene, Rome, Crete, and Arabia (Acts 2:9-10). Furthermore, a few chapters later he tells us that those who disagreed with Stephen were said to have belonged to the synagogues of the freedmen of Rome, of Cyrene and Alexandria, and of Cilicia and Asia (Acts 6:9).

So which view is correct? A Jewish or a mixed audience? We cannot be certain. One frustrated commentator has said that if James were to have posted his letter today it would have been returned to sender on the ground of it being insufficiently addressed! However, it does seem that the balance of the evidence points to the latter view. James is writing in the first instance to Jewish Christians scattered across the lands outside Israel. Christians whose situation he knew well from their representatives who came each year to Jerusalem for Passover. These communities undoubtedly contained Gentile converts, but those that had been circumcised and become ‘christian Jews’. His lack of specific identification (i.e. to the Jews in Antioch) probably points to the fact that he was writing a sort of “Diaspora encyclical” from Jerusalem. a letter that would pass from congregation to congregation.

The great majority of bible scholars now favour this view that James addressed his letter to the Jewish churches, but the issue at stake is not ultimately important. There can be no doubt that later generations of predominantly gentile believers have read these words of James addressed to the twelve tribes as symbolically addressed to them. And in one sense they undoubtedly are. Gentile Christians have been grafted (Rom. 11) into the historic people of God and, whatever its original audience, there can be no doubt that what James writes in his letter applies directly to them and us too.
THE TWELVE TRIBES

DATE

There is consensus that this letter, which we know as the book of James, was written very early in the history of the church. At the very latest it must be dated before 62 AD (when James was martyred!) but most scholars see a far earlier date, perhaps between AD 40-47. This is because James not only fails to mention any of the climatic events leading up to the Jewish revolt of AD 66, but there is no evidence of the tensions between church and synagogue that were apparent in AD 48 or of the Gentile mission which contributed to it. This Gentile mission was surely happening, but had the letter been written after the Jerusalem council of AD 48 (recounted in Acts 15) in which James himself played a prominent part, then he would surely have referred to, along with the controversies over circumcision, the Sabbath, and the ritual law that dominated matters from AD 48 onwards. When we study James we therefore delve back into the very earliest years of our faith. This letter from James ‘joins the early chapters of Acts as a unique canonical witness, and the lone firsthand testimony, to very early Jewish Christianity. In short, these are our roots!’ (Blomberg, C.L. & Kamell, M.J.).

CONTEXT

The context of these early Jewish Christians is clear from the specific issues James addresses in his letter. These issues have been well summarised by Varner:

James assumes his readers hold the faith of Jesus the Messiah (2:1) and recognize the perfect law of liberty (1:25; 2:12)....The believers themselves are mostly poor (2:5), with the few rich ones belonging to their body (1:10) being in danger through covetousness, worldliness, and pride (4:3–6, 13–16).... The ecclesia is under the guidance of elders and James instructs them in how to minister healing to the sick (5:14–15). Their place of meeting is the synagogue, to which strangers are admitted (2:2–4). They are exposed to trials of many kinds, especially from their rich oppressors, and one main object of the letter is to encourage them to patient endurance (1:2, 12; 2:6; 5:7–8, 10, 11). Among the recipients there exists, however, behavior to criticize seriously. Their faith can be weak and they are inclined to complain both against God and against man (1:6–8, 13; 4:11; 5:9). Their faith and generosity sometimes is a matter of words and forms, without corresponding deeds.
(1:22, 25–27; 2:14–26). They are deficient at times in genuine love of others and can be haughty to the poor and partial to the rich (2:1–9, 15–16). They are in danger of being censorious, ambitious, eager to set themselves up as teachers, greedy of pleasure, and forgetful of God's will (3:1, 6, 9, 14; 4:1–8, 4:13, 16; 5:12) (Varner, W.).

These words may have been written at a time when the blood stained cross was still fresh and Jairus' daughter whom Jesus healed was still only a young woman, yet the issues facing their church, with the exception of poverty (in the West at least), is every bit as relevant to us today in 21st Century Australia.

By Andrew Grills
‘What is authentic faith?’ is a question that has plagued Christians throughout the centuries of church history. It is incredibly important for us to be clear on, for the answer dictates how we will understand our present standing before God. Within his epistle, James provides us with the answer, explaining the interplay between faith and its public expression in good works. The theme of faith and works is at the heart of James’ pursuit of the end of hypocrisy.

In 2:14-26 James enters into the debate and casts a definitive explanation. In words that have proved equally clarifying and controversial, James describes that faith in God will always result in the doing of good works. If good works are not evident, one simply does not possess active faith—their faith is dead. Good works are thus the exercising of authentic faith.

In the midst of his argument James interacts with an imagined objector. He argues that faith and works cannot be separated; faith will inevitably produce works (2:18). Faith is not mere intellectual assent, for even the demons know the truth of who God is and what He’s done in Christ for the world (2:19). James then uses the example of Abraham and Rahab to show that these great saints, who were, to be sure, justified by faith, could also be said to be justified by works because their faith was evidenced by their obedience (2:20-26). Martin Luther summed up this idea with his famous quote, ‘We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.’ As Jesus said, the tree of saving faith will always bear good fruit (Matt. 7:17-20).

The crux of the controversy surrounding James’ teaching stems from 2:23-24 where he uses the same quote from Genesis 15:6 that the Apostle Paul uses in Romans concerning Abraham: ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’. James and Paul seem to take the verse in contradictory ways. This seeming contradiction can be solved by noticing the different audiences of the respective letters and therefore the different arguments Paul and James are making. Paul is writing to Jews and Gentiles in Rome explaining how one is justified (cleared of guilt) before God. The answer is by

KEY THEMES: FAITH & WORKS
faith alone, just like Abraham. James is writing to dispersed Jewish Christians experiencing persecution, confusion, along with the temptation to live like the world. The reminder these Christians need is that their faith will prove itself to be genuine by how they conduct themselves, in the same way Abraham’s did through his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

The application for 21st century Christians is clear. We live in an intellectual age, yet faith is not mere intellectual assent. We live in a pragmatic age, yet faith is not a blind activity. We live in an age with a great need to see Christians shine like a city on a hill. Living out our faith through the doing of good works will prove our faith to be genuine, and bring about the end of hypocrisy.

*By Nick Coombs*
James challenges us to understand the ‘the poor’ as more than just those experiencing material poverty. The poor are all those who are afflicted, marginalised from society, powerless, oppressed and dependent on God. Such poverty is not a qualifying factor for grace; rather the desperation such disempowerment provides encourages a humility that makes the poor more likely to entrust themselves to God in faith. The poor are presented as righteous and dependent on God: those who look to God for their ultimate justice. It is to these ‘righteous poor’ that James addresses the eternal promises of hope.

God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. That’s not to say that we should sell our things and live a life of poverty but rather, James pleads with us to adopt a biblical perspective on wealth. He invites us to reject the mindless, self-indulgent accumulation of wealth and instead, be aware of its snare and even use it to generously meet the needs of the poor.

In James we will see that God’s people should tangibly, practically and materially care for the poor as an expression of true religion: as an expression of our love for God, through our love of our neighbour. As we seek to be more like Jesus, we should love and care for the things that He cares for. And He loves the poor!

We are to show no discrimination in our love and service of one another. Any discrimination or partiality based on issues of material possession, social standing and external holiness, dishonours those to whom God has offered grace. Furthermore, it violates the fundamental unity and equality of image-bearers who are one in Christ.
The unrighteous rich, those who are proud, who oppress, defraud and persecute others while living lives of excess and self-indulgence will not inherit the Kingdom. As we study James, we’ll encounter the distorting power of wealth and the vulnerabilities those blessed with an excess of power, material wealth and status face. James challenges the wealthy in the early church for actively engaging in the folly of building treasure of temporal, decaying and corruptible earthly materials instead of laying up treasures in heaven. While James makes clear that judgment will not be based on any quantifiable amount of wealth, he certainly indicates that wealth can foster a self-reliance that allows little room for humble dependence on God and can instead breed waste, corruption, exploitation and oppression of others. As we study James’ letter, we will be challenged to search our hearts to see if we are possessed by power, riches and wealth or a humble obedience and gratitude to Jesus.

We will be reminded that we can use our wealth to serve righteous purposes. These acts are a mark of grace, not securing our justification, but expressing the love and generosity we have received from our Father as an overflow of our hearts. Beyond that, fundamental to Jesus’ teaching, as advanced by James, is a gross redistribution of money to the poor and a collective responsibility to address structural inequality.

By Brett Woods
James is writing in a context of suffering and persecution. Theology of suffering is not only James’ starting point in the letter (1:2-4), but it has been suggested by one commentator that it is also ‘the theme that binds all the others together’ (Nystrom, D.).

James deals with both the source of suffering and how Christians are to respond in the midst of suffering.

The first source of suffering within James’ audience is selfish desire. Trials and temptations come when someone is ‘lured and enticed by his own desire’ (1:14). The quarrels and fights within this community are caused by ‘your passions at war within you’ (4:1).

The second source of suffering is status and money. In the section on the sin of partiality (2:1-13), the rich are ‘dishonouring the poor’ (2:6) and they have added to the suffering of their labourers by fraudulent underpayment (5:4). The pursuit of the rich to gain more status leads to the increased suffering of the poor. However, they will be held to account for their behaviour (1:10-11; 2:4; 4:16; 5:5-6, 9).

The third source of suffering is Satan. This is implied by 1:13 where God is not the one responsible for temptation. Worldly wisdom is described as ‘demonic’ (3:15) and in his discussion on worldliness, James’ call is to ‘resist the devil and he will flee from you’ (4:7).

In the midst of suffering the first response of the Christian is the pursuit of perfection. In James 1:2-4, the Christian can approach suffering and trials with joy, because they know that God will use hard times to accomplish His purpose. Testing leads to steadfastness which leads to maturity. This is described as ‘perfect and complete, lacking in nothing’ (1:4).

Akin to the pursuit of perfection is to respond in patience. If God is accomplishing His purposes through trials and temptations, the Christian simply needs to trust that God is good and is using this for their good and His glory. God will bring justice (5:9) and the call is to be patient ‘until the coming of the Lord’ (5:7). Patient like the farmer waiting for rain (5:7), the Christian needs to know that ‘the Lord is at hand’ (5:8). The prophets were patient in suffering (5:10).
and they were blessed in and through their steadfastness (5:11 cf. 1:3-4). Job is given as the ultimate example of patient trust in God (5:11). Suffering is normal in the Christian life and Calvin says that patience is ‘a real evidence of our obedience’ to God.

The final response to suffering and sickness is prayer. ‘Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray’ (5:13a). This is a further extension of patient trust in God and His purposes. The final section of the letter (5:13-20) explores the idea of prayer in affliction, elders praying for the sick, the confession of sin and the removal of suffering through healing today that points forward to the ultimate removal of sin and suffering when the Lord returns.

By Dave Miers
For those acquainted with the Israelite wisdom literature of the Old Testament, a brief reading of James will sound very familiar: ‘What is your life? ...you are a mist’ James reminds us (4:14) echoing the Preacher’s memorable opening to Ecclesiastes. How to endure your present suffering?, recall the ‘steadfastness of Job’ exhorts James (5:11); and of course, James’ singular appeal that true wisdom is alone to be received from God above (1:5, 1:16ff) recalls Proverbs 1.

Similarly, the style of James contributes to this sense of familiarity with the instruction in James often arriving in the form of imperative—reasoning wisdom couplets found throughout Proverbs (’Do this .. for ..’): ‘let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, /for/ the anger of man …’ (1:19b-20); ‘be doers of the word, and not hearers only, ... /for/ if anyone is a hearer of the word …’ (1:22-23); ‘if you really fulfil the royal law … you are doing well, /for/ whoever keeps the whole law …’ (2:8-10). .. and so on.

Why wisdom? It is clear from the opening of the letter and subsequent references that James is writing to a body of believers who are facing suffering for their faith. Unfortunately, it seems that so far their response has been bickering (1:19), favouritism (2:1-7) and slander (1:26-27) (to name a few), none of which honour the name of Christ and all lead to disunity. In contrast, biblical Wisdom, received from the mouth of God, is that instruction which exhorts us to live Godly lives in the present age: practical advice aligning with the cosmic reality of God’s sovereign plans.

It seems fitting therefore that in this present trial, James exhorts the church to return to God as the initiator and author of wise, Godly living under trial. God’s wisdom (3:13,17) begins with purity, and leads to Godly character (cf. Gal 5:22-23); God’s heart (1:5-8) is generous towards His people and desires an undivided, faithful (not fake) response; God’s gifts to His followers are perfect and good, steadfast and truthful (1:16-18), leading over time to followers marked by changed lives, ‘first fruits’ of a new creation.
Ultimately, James works against an impoverished view of God’s gracious, generous, powerful and transformative action in the lives of His believers. In this way, James is simply repeating the Lord Jesus who prepared (time and again) His followers for the trials to come, by pointing them to God’s steadfast love and His active and powerful presence in their lives to withstand whatever may come at them in this passing age (e.g. Mark 13:11-13, Matt. 28:20). Wisdom indeed!

*By Simon Angus*
For all its practical teaching, the letter of James is also highly theoretical leaving none of its ethics unsubstantiated. James carefully weaves a biblical perspective of time and reality into his message: that is the perspective of now and tomorrow.

Even as Christians we tend to forget that we are going to experience two forms of existence. We are experiencing one of these now in a world where things come and things go: where our bodies’ age and our lives are temporal. The other is eternal, where our bodies will not age and our lives will simply carry on. James pleads with us to be continually concerned with both of these forms. Our present existence ought to be informed and shaped by a complete awareness of our eternal destiny.

James invites us to zoom out and view our lives objectively as if they were plotted on an infinite timeline so we can see them for what they are. He compares life to a withering flower that passes away (1:11) and declares that our possessions will rot and corrode (5:2-3). Despite the bleak imagery, James is no pessimist, in fact he is thoroughly realistic aiming to snap us back to reality and inspire holy living.

’What is your life?’ James asks. How can we make plans, do this or do that as if time is our own? When Jesus returns we will have no choice but to put down the tools, or fold down the laptop. Every morning most of us wake up assuming that the coming hours belong to us and no one has the right to dictate them or take them away. This attitude produces arrogance and supersedes our understanding of God’s sovereignty, skewing our values and decision-making. We must remember that every moment of our existence is a gift from God! The more we recognize this, the more our values will align with His and life will carry the substance it is meant to.

Jesus’ return is the second most extraordinary event that will ever take place in the history of the world and James wants our eyes focused on this horizon. ’Behold, the judge is standing at the door.’ (5:9) he exclaims: ’...speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty’ (2:12).

In light of this balanced perspective of here and now, life begins to make a lot of sense. Living for riches or considering our appearance or career as supremely valuable
suddenly seems utterly ridiculous. Flippant promises, judging others and treating people disdainfully all begin to feel like dirty habits. We ought to adopt God’s values, pray for the sick, be involved in our Christian brother and sisters’ lives that they would not wander from the truth and ultimately, we should live to glorify Christ. This is true freedom; this is the meaning of our existence and there is nothing else worth pursuing now and tomorrow.

By Jono Newmarch
INTRODUCTION

The epistle of James is known and loved for its pragmatism. When compared to the other New Testament epistles, it seems to say very little about theology and even less about Christology (i.e. the theology of the person and work of Jesus Christ), leading some to believe that this epistle is lacking when it comes to being Christ centred. Yet, if we examine the epistle closely, we see the teaching and person of Jesus thoroughly woven into the text. Implicitly, we see Jesus as the teacher. Jesus as the friend of sinners. and Jesus as the one who actively continues to heal and forgive sins. Explicitly, we see Jesus as the one who will return as judge, and the importance of the titles James uses for Jesus as Lord and Christ.

IMPLICIT CHRISTOLOGY

Christology in James is largely implicit. It is therefore important to investigate what James is teaching about who Jesus is, what He has done, and what He continues to do in and through the church.

Jesus: The Teacher

Anyone familiar with the gospels will notice strong and consistent parallels between the teachings of Jesus and James. One of the most obvious parallels is the repeated allusions to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Some have noted up to 24 references through the book of James to Jesus’ famous sermon. however here we will just list a few:

Sermon on the Mount Matt. 5-7
Blessed are the poor in spirit - 5:3
Blessed are the merciful - 5:7
Blessed are the persecuted - 5:11
Not making oaths by heaven or earth - 5:34-37
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures - 6:19
None can serve two masters - 6:24
Being recognized by fruit - 7:16-17
Hearing and doing Jesus’ words - 7:24-27

James
2:5 - God choosing the poor
2:13 - Judgment for the merciless
1:2 - Joy when encountering trials
5:12 - Not swearing by heaven or earth
5:2-3 - Your riches have rotted and garment moth-eaten
4:4 - Friendship with the world is hostility to God
3:10-18 - Being recognised by fruit
1:22-25 - Hearing and doing the word
CHRISTOLOGY IN JAMES

It is particularly interesting that throughout the entire epistle, James does not directly attribute any of his letter, even those sayings that are close to direct quotes, to Jesus. James is not simply a student reciting his master’s teaching. Rather, we get a picture of Jesus’ teachings penetrating James’ entire life, and through his intimate knowledge of and relationship with Jesus, those teachings permeating the entire letter. Further, it also suggests his audience is so familiar with Jesus’ teaching that they have no need for those references to be made explicit.

James makes various references to the law that are important to note, particularly when he refers to the ‘royal law’ (2:8). In this instance, James is quoting both the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18) and Jesus’ teaching and interpretation of the law (Matt. 22:36-40). In referring to the law as the ‘royal law’, James employs kingdom language, therefore aligning this ‘royal law’ with Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God, and specifically, Jesus’ interpretation of God’s law, rather than the Mosaic Law.

Neighbour-love emerges as the primary law informing the ethics of the epistle. We see this as James addresses not showing partiality (2:1), not speaking evil or grumbling against one another (3:1-12; 5:9), visiting and praying for the sick (5:14), and restoring wandering believers to the truth (5:20).

Jesus: The Friend of Sinners
James’ call to ‘show no partiality’ towards the poor is tied directly to holding ‘the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory’ (2:1). Through His earthly ministry, Jesus, as the glorious king of God’s kingdom, befriends the sinners, the outcasts, and the lowly. For James, showing partiality towards the poor, while favouring those who are more glorious from a worldly perspective is antithetical to having faith in Jesus - it is not merely an ethical problem, it is the evidence of a severe Christological distortion.

Jesus: The Healer and Forgiver of Sin
In Jesus’ earthly ministry we see Him forgiving the sins of those who have stepped out in faith to seek healing (e.g. Matt. 9:1-8). In a similar way, James exhorts his readers to
seek prayer for healing through the elders praying over and anointing with oil ‘in the name of the Lord’ (5:14-16). It is evident that James sees this as the continuation of Jesus’ earthly ministry through the church, as elsewhere in the epistle James uses the title “Lord” to directly refer to Jesus (2:1). In the same way that Jesus raised up many bedridden people during His time on earth, He continues to raise people from their sickness today through the faith of the elders who pray. Further, the promise that ‘the Lord will raise him up’ coupled with the forgiveness of sins alludes to the resurrection of Christ as the first fruits of the future resurrection for those whose sins have been forgiven.

EXPLICIT CHRISTOLOGY

There are several explicit references to Jesus that are important to highlight as they help us to more clearly apprehend James’ understanding of who Jesus is. We see this in the references to Jesus’ return as the lawgiver and the judge, and the titles of ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ which James gives directly to Jesus.

The Return and Judgment of Jesus

Both James’ warnings to the rich (5:1-6), and his encouragement to remain patient in suffering (5:7-11), are directly tied to the return of Jesus and His role as judge. ‘Lord of hosts’ (5:4) could also be translated as ‘Lord of heaven’s armies’, and is a description of Jesus going into battle against His enemies to deliver divine wrath. The imperative to remain patient and to refuse to grumble against one another in the midst of suffering is also linked to Jesus’ immanent role as judge (5:9).

Furthermore, Jesus is not only the judge, but also the lawgiver – ‘There is only one judge and lawgiver, he who is able to save and to destroy’ (4:12). On its own, this verse could refer to God (as the monotheistic Godhead), but in light of the following verses in chapter 5 clearly referring to Jesus as the judge, it follows that Jesus is also the lawgiver. This further reinforces that the ‘royal law’ or ‘law of liberty’ previously referred to is not so much the Mosaic Law, but rather Christ’s reinterpretation of Mosaic Law.
The Titles of Jesus: Lord & Christ

‘Lord’ is used 14 times throughout the epistle. Importantly, ‘Lord’ is the word used for Yahweh in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Eight of these either explicitly or implicitly refer to God, or there is insufficient context to determine a more precise meaning (1:7, 3:9, 4:10, 4:15, 5:4, 5:10, and 5:11). However, two of the remaining uses directly modify ‘Jesus’ (1:1, 2:1), and we can be confident the remaining four refer directly to Jesus (5:7, 8, 14 & 15). These six uses, used alongside the other eight which refer to God, reveal that James explicitly gives Jesus the honour, respect and glory that is reserved for God alone.

‘Christ’ is used twice to directly refer to Jesus alongside ‘Lord’ in 1:1 and 2:1 (‘Lord Jesus Christ’). The title ‘Christ’ refers to the expected messiah and king who was to save the Jewish people. In Jesus, this title was confirmed by His sacrificial death, victorious resurrection and glorious ascension to the right hand of the Father. When used alongside ‘Lord’, James reveals his understanding that Jesus is the ‘God-who-became-man to save His people from their sins’.

CONCLUSION

Given the significance of both the implicit and explicit Christology we see in the book of James, it would not be hard to assume that, with different intentions, circumstances or audiences, James could have told us much more about the person and work of Jesus than he has here. While his intention is clearly focused on the practical outworking of the authentic Christian life, it would be negligent to assume that James thought Christology was unimportant. Rather, the epistle reveals that James was not merely a pragmatist, but someone who knew and loved his Lord deeply. It is this deep knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is that should weave through the very fabric of our everyday life.

By Neil Castle
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In Christ Jesus.

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City on a Hill began at the end of 2007 with a small team and a big vision to see Melbourne renewed with the great news of Jesus. Since then, God has gathered men and women of all ages with a passion to know Jesus and make Him known.

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