

WHITFIELD PARISH

St James' Church † St Luke's Church

Introduction to the Epistle of James

Over view

A simple way of looking at the Bible might be to suggest that what is written there is either about *the way to God* or *walking with God*. The Epistle of James is addressed to believers and is in the second category. James encourages believers to have an authentic walk with God, a walk in which our faith is demonstrated by the way we live.

Who wrote the letter?

Early church tradition suggests that the writer is James the half-brother of Jesus who became the lead elder in the church in Jerusalem. You can find references to him in Acts 12.17, 15.13 and 21.18. (James the brother of John and son of Zebedee had already been martyred by AD 44 and is generally not considered to be the author.)

In John 7.5 we read that 'even his own brothers did not believe' in Jesus, but James did come to faith. I Corinthians 15.7 records the fact that the risen Lord Jesus appeared to James. We don't really know if this was what made him believe in Jesus or if he came to a position of faith more gradually.

In Galatians 2.9 Paul refers to James, along with Peter and John, as one of the 'pillars' of the church in Jerusalem. Paul refers to the recognition, which these three gave to himself and Barnabas, showing how important they were. V.10 is also interesting: 'All they (Peter, James and John) asked was that we (Paul and Barnabas) should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.' As we read the letter of James we'll notice echoes of this concern.

In Whitfield Parish, the title of St James' Church is 'St James the Great' - but in Christian tradition James is often referred to as 'James the Just': he was someone who was known for his holiness.

Who read the letter?

The greeting in v.1 addresses the letter to 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations'. We can assume that the first readers were Jewish Christians.

When and where was the letter written?

The letter was probably written in Jerusalem in the mid to late forties, a time of dynamic church growth and enormous challenge.

What is in the letter?

After his greeting in v.1, James introduces three key themes of his letter in v.2-11:

- When we face difficulties Christians should rejoice because they help us become mature
- When we face difficulties we should ask God for wisdom, having faith that God will answer
- Christians should understand that wealth and riches are temporary

These themes are woven throughout the letter.

In v.12 James begins to write in more detail about each of these; in v.13-18 he begins by taking a further look at how believers face difficulties.

To sum up

This letter is probably the first written New Testament document, written by James, Jesus' half brother and chief elder in the church in Jerusalem, during the latter part of the forties to a group of believers who were Jewish Christians. It has a distinctive vibrant tone which sounds almost like a series of short talks.

As you read it, prepare to be challenged by the writer's call to live an authentic Christian life whatever our circumstances. Why not try to read it at one sitting? This is a very practical letter – we should expect it to make a difference to the way we think and the way we behave.