



JAMES 1 – ITS ORIGINAL N.T. ORDER; CHRISTIAN CHARACTER & GOD'S LAW

Introduction to the General Epistles

It might come as a surprise to know that the Bible you probably use does *not* have the New Testament books in their *original* order. In most of our Bibles, the epistle of Romans *follows* the book of Acts, yet this was not the case in the *original order* for the *first three centuries* of Christianity!

How did this happen and does it really matter? As we will see, it is of *great importance*, for its original order was *not* innocently changed but instead, there are sinister reasons for *this lie*.

Neil Lightfoot, in this book, *How the Bible Came to Us*, gives us the proper New Testament order. "Our present manuscripts indicate *four categories* were generally followed: (1) the Four Gospels; (2) Acts and the *General Epistles*; (3) the *Pauline Epistles*, and (4) the book of Revelation" (1963, p. 28). Note in this second category, the General Epistles came *after* Acts and *before* Paul's epistles.

Also, in his *Introduction to the New Testament*, Werner Kummel, agrees: "In the canon of the *Greek Church*, the General Epistles *stand after Acts and before the Epistles of Paul*. Acts, with the history of the [early] church, *was followed at once by the Epistles of the [first] apostles of the church*. In the canon of the *Latin [or Roman] church*, the Pauline... *precede* the General Epistles" (p. 283).

So, what were *the reasons* for this change in the original order of the New Testament books?

As *The Companion Bible* notes, "Our English Bibles follow the order *as given in the Latin Vulgate*. This order, therefore, *depends on the arbitrary judgment of one man*, [the Catholic] Jérôme (A.D. 382-429). *All theories based on this order rest on human authority, and are thus without any true foundation* (Appendix 95).

McClintock & Strong state in their *Cyclopedia*, "The Western Church...as represented by Jerome, Augustine, and their successors, gave *priority of position to the Pauline epistles*. The tendency of the Western Church to *recognize Rome as the center of authority* may perhaps, in part, account for *this departure from the custom of the East*. The order in the Alexandrian, Vatican and Ephraem manuscripts gives precedence to the [General] Epistles, and...is *also recognized* by the Council of Laodicea, Cyril of

Jerusalem and Athanasius CS, it would appear to have been *characteristic of the Eastern churches*" (Vol. 1, p. 800).

The article, "Restoring the Original Bible" points out, "*Jerome with his Latin Vulgate did considerable damage to the early and pristine teachings of Christianity* when he *redesigned* the books of both the Old and New Testaments in order *to advance Gentile authority* over any Jewish authority. His rearrangement also had the advantage (from Jerome's viewpoint) of *exalting Rome and its ecclesiastical authorities* over areas within the Christian community" (Chap. 1).

We also have a clear warning from the Bible itself how about being very careful when reading Paul's epistles to avoid misunderstanding their meaning. Peter warned, "Therefore, beloved...consider that the long suffering of our Lord is salvation--as also our beloved brother *Paul*, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also *in all his epistles*, speaking in them of these things, *in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction*, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:14-16).

This is why it is very different to *first* read Paul's epistles after Acts and *then* those of James, Peter, John and Jude. Many do stumble with some of Paul's epistles, while the General Epistles are quite easy to understand and unequivocal about keeping God's laws. Starting with Paul's epistles is like first studying algebra and then arithmetic.

Since God's inspired Word would remain as a witness (1 Pet. 1:23-25) what could the Devil due to *confuse* its message? One way was *to change the order of the books to confound* its readers. By putting Paul's epistles first, which many deal with the local issues and complex theology, one can be confused about God's law. Yet, when reading the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude, there is no doubt how the law of God should be applied.

That is why Martin Luther, who detested and attacked the epistle of James, called it "an epistle of straw," that is, of little substance. He knew it undermined his doctrine of salvation by faith alone and without works. Yet, what gall he had to attack a

book inspired by God Himself (see 2 Tim. 3:16) just because it didn't back some of his *human and erroneous* interpretations of Scripture!

Thus, the Devil took advantage by changing the *original* order of the books and we must be aware of that deceit. Yet, it suits the Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical world to keep the books of the New Testament out of order and thus focusing first on Paul's epistles. We, on the other hand, who love God's law, as David did (Ps. 119:97) and also Paul (Rom. 7:22), will, in this series, begin with the order as God had inspired it. So we start with the General Epistles, covering the spiritual core of His law and then, Paul's epistles, which fill in the details. It means starting with the basics and then going to the advanced and complex, not vice versa.

The Epistle of James

First, notice the author of this epistle is so well known he doesn't have to explain who he was. He simply says: "James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings" (1:1).

There is only one James who had that renown and authority: James, the half-brother of Jesus. In his modesty, he doesn't boast of being in the brother of Jesus. Paul does bring it out, saying, "After three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and stayed with him fifteen days; but I saw none of the apostles except *James the brother of the Lord*" (Galatians 1:18-19). James was in charge of the main church in Jerusalem until his death around 62 A.D. In fact, Jude, in his epistle, only needs to mention James to identify himself: "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ, and *brother of James...*" (Jude 1:1).

James did address his epistle to "*the twelve tribes, which are in the dispersion.*" Remember, the Jews in those days consisted largely of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and part of the Levites. By the time James wrote this epistle, the other apostles had already left Israel, as Jesus had told them, to go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6). This epistle addresses all the Christian congregations which the apostles had founded, many where the so-called "lost ten tribes" were, which included Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire in the diaspora.

Note James' style is similar to Jesus' by using short *parables* or illustrations to convey spiritual

meaning. The first topic James covers is how to develop godly character. Does this theme sound familiar? Yes, for all true servants of God are inspired by God's Spirit to focus on such key spiritual values throughout the ages.

James states, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (1:2-4).

Here is a key difference between converted and unconverted people. The first considers going through a tough trial as a curse with no redeeming value. He prefers to be free from difficulties and just have a good time. But the converted person considers trials, although not pleasant, to be part of a process of spiritual development and James doesn't want them to forget this vital truth.

As Barclay explains: "The Greek term *peirasmos* does not mean a temptation in our sense of the term. It is a testing or a trial directed towards an end, and the end is that he who is tested should emerge stronger and purer from that testing. For instance, a young bird is said to 'test' its wings. The Queen of Sheba went to 'test' the wisdom of Solomon. Abraham was 'tested' by God to see what kind of faith he had" (*Daily Study Bible*).

So this kind of testing is never to "tempt" a person into failing or sinning, but to make him stronger, more resilient and mature. James says overcoming trials requires "patience," yet this is another term not well translated from the Greek *hupomone*. This word is *far more* than just having patience, but rather, is having *activeperseverance*, which produces a "perfect and complete work" that is, creating a mature and godly character.

He says we also *need to ask for godly wisdom in a trial*, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (1:5-8).

James explains some members going through trials lack the godly wisdom to focus correctly on what they are experiencing. They have not

constantly gone to God about it but rather despair and lose heart. Yet, he mentions this wisdom is generously available from God. However, it must be asked with an active *faith*. For faith needs to accompany action--of us doing our part as well.

If God sees prayers are without true conviction or an active faith, He will not answer them. James illustrates those doubts as ocean waves being tossed to and fro. The "double-minded" person, or in the Greek, "with two souls," is spiritually unstable and this weak and fluctuating faith is not going to have a positive response from God.

James reveals that developing godly character is not based on whether one is rich or poor. He states, "Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits" (James 1:9-11).

So James mentions poorer members can even have an advantage since they can't rely on an abundance of physical things to protect them and can focus more on God and spiritual things. Prosperous members, on the other hand, can have the disadvantage of riches undermining their faith by causing them to rely too much on them and not enough on God. So the rich have to put the spiritual first and then the physical, which is not easy to do. That is why there are very few of them in the Church (Mt. 19:23; 1 Cor. 1:26). Thus, being rich or poor is not important in the Church since the goal is the formation of spiritual character to enter God's kingdom. Both classes of persons have to overcome the testing and trials because God will not judge a person by his economic situation but by the *spiritual* character built. As Proverbs 22:2 says, "The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all."

James then stresses: "Blessed is the man who endures temptation, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him" (James 1:12). Here we see that the true riches in life are the formation of spiritual character by being faithful and overcoming trials and temptations, all made possible by the grace and power of God.

James now explains the difference between a trial and a temptation. God may test one to form more spiritual character, but He will never tempt anyone to sin. He always wants to build and not destroy godly character (Hebrew 12:11). As he states, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:13-14).

Here, James, who knew fishermen well, uses the analogy of a fish that is lured by the bait to come out of its hiding place. So, this attraction is an internal desire or lust that is not induced by God.

He continues, "Then, when desire has *conceived*, it gives *birth* to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, *brings forth death*" (1:15). He now uses an analogy of the birth of sexual sin. First, one is enticed and seduced to fornicate, then a pregnancy occurs and with its birth, sin cannot be concealed. Yet, notice the fact of being tempted in itself is not a sin, but it is the yielding to it. If one succeeds in overcoming temptation, the reward will be the formation of godly character, and in the end, with God's grace, receiving "the crown of life" which means entering the kingdom of God and obtaining eternal life.

Therefore, James stresses it is so vital to resist and overcome temptations to build that godly character! As Jesus said: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Mt. 16:26). Yet, we will not win all the battles against temptations, but we *must win the spiritual war*. As Christ said: "He that *overcomes and keeps my works until the end*, to him I will give *authority* over the nations...*He who overcomes shall inherit all things* and I will be his God, and he shall be My son" (Re. 2:26; 21:7).

Thus, in this first study, we have seen James is very practical, inspiring and clear -- something very different from first entering the deep waters of Paul's theology. But, in these shallow and clear waters, we can learn to swim calmly through the General Epistles. James is an excellent start, and, as we will see the next time, it will grow in value.