

Inductive Study

Week 1

Read James 1:1

Introduction

Imagine a scene where you've recently bought an old house. It's been cleared of furniture, but up in the attic, there are a few odds and ends including a dusty old box of letters dated as far back as the early 1900s. The previous owner has died, and there are no living relatives to leave the belongings to, so you feel free to peruse the letters. The correspondence you read is fascinating, and before you know it, you've spent an hour pouring over half a dozen letters. But you've read only one side of a conversation and there are old-timey turns of phrase that are hard to make sense of. Clearly it's going to require more reading before you're able to put the pieces together.

In order to understand this correspondence, you'll have to aim at establishing a few things first: what the original intention of the letter is, who the author and recipient are, and in what context the author and recipient lived. And so it is when we approach writings in the bible.

Before we begin applying meaning of a biblical text to our own lives, we have to do the same kind of detective work.

First, church history tells us that this letter was penned by Jesus' half brother James. . James lived an extraordinary life. Imagine what it would be like to grow up in the same household as Jesus. James was given a front row seat into the daily life of Jesus as he was empowered by the spirit to fully and perfectly obey God in all of life. In Galatians 1:19, James is considered an apostle (but not one of the original 12), and in humility, he uses for himself the simple title of "servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ".

James was also a leader in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15) and was skillful in resolving conflict. He included the Gentiles as a part of God's people (see Amos 9:11,12). He further goes on to explain that Jewish and Gentile Christians could and should fellowship together, and that the Gentiles were not required to observe ritual law. He also urged Gentile Christians to abstain from potentially offensive behaviors to the Jews.

The intended audience of this letter appears to be Jewish Christians, the "twelve tribes in the Dispersion". The twelve tribes refer to the historical origins of Israel, descended from the twelve patriarchs (Deuteronomy 33). But the people were scattered due to the Assyrian and Babylonian military victories over the nation. The church then, appropriated the title "Dispersion", with Jesus as their Messiah who reestablishes the twelve tribes (Je. 3:18; Ezk. 37:19-24; Pss. Sol. 17:28), and Christians (Jewish or non) recognized themselves as the true heirs of the Jewish faith (Romans 4; 1 Cor. 10:18; Gal. 4:21-31; Phil. 3:3). In Christ, the instruction and exhortation of the book of James is for all in the family of Christ.

Observation

1. What story is James born into? How do you think this affects the tone and content of his letter?
2. Read Acts 15:1-35. What can be learned about James' character from this passage?

Interpretation

1. Read Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:1, and Jude 1:1. What is common to each of these verses? Whose authority is invoked in each? James could easily have claimed a familial connection to Jesus. Why does he call himself a “servant”? What does this say about James character? What does this say about James’ authority?
2. Read 1 Peter 1:1 and James 1:1 again. What words are repeated? What does this commonality say about the early church?
3. Read John 7:35. How does the Pharisees talk of “the dispersion” inform attitudes between people groups in the early church?
4. Due to persecution in the early church, many believers were scattered (and considered by Peter and James as “the dispersion”). What positive effect might this dispersion have created for the cause of Christianity?

Application

James knows that the same Spirit that he witnessed empowering Jesus, lives in every believer and makes possible this faithful and fruitful living that he writes of throughout his book.

What is your prayer for yourself as we begin this study of the wisdom literature of the New Testament?

Take some time to think about how you might introduce yourself. What do you usually say? Does James’ introduction help inform your understanding of what it means to be a Christian?

James was writing to encourage and instruct people who were living far from what was familiar and comfortable. Have you ever felt like you were “dispersed?” Perhaps you have recently relocated to live in a different part of the country. Maybe you have taken a new job and are feeling challenged. Or maybe God has placed relationships in your life you’d rather not have. Read Acts 17:26. In light of this verse, what people has God put in front of you, and how can you be loving and serving them?

For Further Study

Write a letter to your family or Neighborhood Group members exhorting them in their walks with Christ. Be specific about what you have witnessed that is to be encouraged and where you are praying for their growth and maturity in Christ. Set aside time to offer this to them in a spirit of truth and love.