

STUDY 1. NOTES FOR LEADERS

Attached please find notes from Holman Bible Dictionary that give a general introduction to the letter of James, also notes on Faith.

1. **Read through any part of James and share your insights about the following.**
 - a. Does the letter seem to follow themes? What are some of them?
 - b. Does it seem very “theological” or practical?
 - c. If it is addressed to a number of churches, what do you think the problems in those churches would have been?
 - d. Why do you think we have called this series “Christian Living for Dummies”?
 - a. *There are disjointed themes in James although some commentators feel that all the themes are connected and that the sequences are logical.*
 - b. *James would probably be upset if we taught that the letter was only practical. There is little teaching about the nature of Jesus but the letter also develops the themes of faith very strongly and assumes some of the teachings of Jesus.*
 - c. *Conflict? Inactivity? Social discrimination? Suffering? Persecution?*
2. **See Matthew 6:30, 8:10, 14:31, 17:20; Acts 16:5, Romans 5:1.**
 - a. How is the word ‘faith’ used in these passages?
 - b. Looking at these approaches of faith, which element would be your strength?
 - c. What would be your weakness?
 - d. If you prayed as the apostles prayed, “Lord increase our faith,” how would God answer that prayer for you?

Matthew 6.30 Trust in the promises of God to provide.

Matthew 8.10 Confidence in God to achieve the extraordinary.

Matthew 14. 31 Trusting in God in a way that overcomes fear.

Matthew 17. 20 Having a trust in God that helps you achieve the impossible.

Acts 16. 5 Faith is the teaching of the Church...doctrine.

Romans 5.1 Faith here is the basic relationship/ trust in God that believes that it is possible to have a relationship with God based on his love, grace and acceptance. In Romans and Galatians the emphasis is that faith is required in God, rather than obeying the Jewish law.

3. In one church, in a time of financial crisis, they had some positive things happen. In what ways was faith apparent in the following comments:
 - a. A leader in the Church Board said, “I believe that God will bless us.”
They were prepared to launch out into the unknown)
 - b. A young person said, “I am going to increase my offering.” *(Faith can mean obedience to God and being willing to take a risk. Faith, as we will discover in James, is also about “works.”)*
 - c. Another said, “I want others to come to understand the Christian Faith.” *(Faith in this context is doctrine.)*

FAITH IN THE LETTER OF JAMES

4. **Read James 1:2-3**

...because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance (Jas 1.3, NRSV).

- a. What is it that tests your faith?
Personal conflict? Illness? Disappointments? Emotional illnesses? Something else?
- b. Are any of these happening now?
- c. Have you emerged as a stronger Christian because of this test?

5. **Read James 1:6**

But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind (NRSV).

- a. In what way is the word faith here used?
- b. What is being asked for here? (See verse 5).

James describes the “wise man” and the prayer mentioned here is one of asking for wisdom. Wisdom will be the subject of another study in this series.

6. **Read James 2:14-17**

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

- a. What type of faith is James talking about here when he says that “faith without works is dead”?

James is probably talking about a faith/ belief in God/ Jesus that is purely academic and has not impacted on life, values, relationships, priorities.

- b. See James 1:17, 27, 19, 2:5-6, 3:5-6, 4:1
In the light of those verses, what do you think James means by “works”?

James seems to speak mainly about relationships and the need to avoid social discrimination. Anger, misuse of the tongue, failure to be generous, to honour the poor, and we may assume that these areas are addressed by a meaningful and active faith.

- c. Are any members of your group people who show an active faith? How do they do it? In what way do their “works” make a difference to themselves?/ To others?

7. **See Romans 3:27-31.**

Doesn't it say that we cannot be saved by works? Is this a contradiction with what James teaches? What do you think Paul means?

Paul and James are speaking of two different things when they use the term “works”. Paul is using “works” as synonymous with “the law”. Paul says faith is needed, not law. James, on the other hand, is saying that if our faith is real it will transform our lives and others will see that faith has made a difference to our lives. He calls this difference “works”.

You may draw the group's attention to Romans 12. Paul has just argued that we are saved by faith, not by works, but then goes on to point out, with the opening word of the chapter, therefore, what a difference that should make to daily living. James and Paul stand on very similar ground.

8. **See 1 John 3:18.**

- a. How does this fit in with what James is saying about faith?
- b. Has God ever challenged you to be more involved in Christian service? How did this challenge come about? How did you respond?

9. The apostles asked Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). In the light of what we have learnt about faith in this study, what would happen to you if you prayed that prayer.

JAMES, THE LETTER The Letter of James belongs to the section of the New Testament usually described as the "General Epistles." The letter is one of exhortation for practical Christianity. The author stated principles of conduct and then frequently provided poignant illustrations. The author's concerns were clearly more practical and less abstract than those of any other New Testament writer. No other New Testament book has received criticism to the extent encountered by this epistle.

Author Verse one of the letter identifies James as the "servant of God" and the author of the letter. Several possibilities for proper identification of this "James" include: (1) James the brother of John and the son of Zebedee, (2) James the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve apostles, or (3) James the half brother of Jesus, a younger son of Mary and of Joseph. Of the three, James the brother of the Lord **is the most likely choice**. See James 3. Tradition of the early church fathers universally ascribes the letter to James, the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

The general content of the letter is a call to holiness of life. This accords well with what is known of the life of James. Church tradition noted his exceptional piety, reporting that the knees of the saintly James were like those of a camel due to the unusual amounts of time spent on his knees before God. The author of the epistle was also steeped in the Old Testament outlook in general and in Judaism in particular.

On the other hand, James the brother of John, the son of Zebedee cannot be the author since he became an early martyr (Acts 12:1-2), his death almost certainly predating the writing of the Letter of James. Little is known of James the son of Alphaeus--too little to conjecture that he was involved in the writing of the epistle. Scholarly theories that later disciples of James gathered his teachings and published them in a Greek style too exalted for James are not necessary to explain the evidence.

Recipients Although some passages appear to address unbelievers (Jas. 5:1-6), the letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1 NRSV). Reference to the "twelve tribes" suggests that the recipients were Jews. Specifically, reference is made to the "Jews of the dispersion." This phrase recalled the scattering of the Jewish nation first in 722 B.C. when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire and finally in 586 B.C. when the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to the marauding Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar.

However, James clearly had a still more narrow focus. Apparently, James had in mind the "**Christian**" Jews of dispersion. This may be conjectured from James' identification of himself (1:1) as a servant of Jesus Christ as well as from references like having "the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1).

Date Supposing an early date of writing may account for the peculiarity of the address. James' martyrdom by A.D. 66 provides us with the latest possible date of writing. Evidences of a very early date, such as the mention of those coming into the "assembly" (Greek, *synagoge*), point to a time very early in Christian history, perhaps prior to the Jerusalem Conference in A.D. 49-50.

Though some Bible students date James after A.D. 60, many scholars are convinced that James is the first book of the New Testament to be written, some dating it as early as A.D. 48. As such, it provides the reader with a rather remarkable insight into the developing concerns of the church in its earliest era.

Occasion The letter was evidently the product of concerns on the part of early pastoral leadership about the ethical standards of early Christians. Therefore, the subject matter includes an analysis in chapter 1 of how to respond to temptation and trial (1:1-18). The necessity of "doing" the word as well as "hearing" the word is the focus of James 1:19-27. Treatment of the poor and the appropriate management of wealth are topics of concern in James 2:1-13 and 5:1-6. The waywardness of the tongue and the necessity of its taming are discussed in chapter 3. Conflicts and attitudes to other Christians is the subject of chapter 4. Appropriate responses to life's demands and pressures are suggested in chapter 5.

James' Contributions Some scholars have compared James to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. In many respects the two are quite different. However, the comparison is valid from the perspective of ethical instruction. The theme of the book is that practical religion must manifest itself in works which are superior to those of the world. The essence of such works covers the areas of personal holiness and service to others, such as visiting "the fatherless and widows," and keeping oneself "unspotted from the world" (1:27). These "works" further demand active resistance to the devil (4:7), submission to God (4:7), and even brokenhearted repentance for sins (4:9).

Patience in the wake of trials and temptations is the subject both of the introduction and of the conclusion of the epistle. Readers are to "count it all joy" when trials come (1:2) and expect reward for endurance of those trials (1:12). In James 5:7-11 James returns to the subject, citing both Job and the prophets as appropriate examples of patience in the midst of tribulation.

Questions and Challenges of James Two difficult and widely debated passages in James challenge Bible students. In 2:14-26, James argued that "faith if it hath not works is dead" (2:17). This apparent contradiction to the teaching of the apostle Paul has caused much consternation among some theologians. For example, Martin Luther referred to the book as "an epistle of straw" when compared with Paul's writings.

More careful exegesis has shown that the contradiction is apparent rather than real. James argued that a faith that is only a "confessing faith," such as that of the demons (2:19), is not a saving faith at all. The demons believed in God in the sense of "intellectual assent," but they were void of belief in the sense of "commitment." Orthodoxy of doctrine which does not produce a sanctified life-style is, in the final analysis, worthless.

In 5:13-18 James spoke of healing and its means. Actually, this passage only treats the subject of healing incidentally. The actual purpose of the discussion is to stress the effectiveness of the earnest prayer of a righteous man (5:15-16). This is illustrated by a reference to Elijah, whose prayers were sufficient alternately to shut up the heavens and then to open them (5:17-18).

Whatever else may be intended, clearly the prayer of faith "saves the sick." The anointing oil, whether medicinal, as some have argued, or symbolic, as others have held, is not the healing agent. God heals, when He chooses to heal (4:14), as a response to the fervent prayers of righteous men.

The Letter of James remains of lasting value and consequence to the Christian confronted by an increasingly secular world. Christ ought to make a difference in one's life. That is the theme and mandate of James.

Paige Patterson

FAITH Trusting commitment of one person to another, particularly of a person to God. Faith is the central concept of Christianity. One may be called a Christian only if one has faith.

Our English word "faith" comes from the Latin *fides*, as developed through the Old French words *fei* and *feid*. In Middle English (1150-1475) "faith" replaced a word that eventually evolved into "belief." "Faith" came to mean "loyalty to a person to whom one is bound by promise or duty." Faith was fidelity. "Belief" came to be distinguished from faith as an intellectual process having to do with the acceptance of a proposition. The verb form of "faith" dropped out of English usage toward the end of the sixteenth century.

Old Testament Expressions The word "faith" occurs in the Old Testament only twice in the KJV, eighteen times in the RSV, and sixteen times in the NIV. This discrepancy becomes even more interesting when we note that the RSV and the NIV agree on only five of these verses of Scripture (Deut. 32:51; Judg. 9:16,19; Isa. 26:2; Hab. 2:4), and the KJV concurs with them only on the translation of Habakkuk 2:4. These differences revolve around problems with the translation of two Hebrew roots, *ma al* and *aman*.

The first of these roots, *ma al*, is a negative term that means "to be deceitful, treacherous, or unfaithful." The RSV, NASB, and the NIV translate this word with the phrase "broke faith" (Deut. 32:51; Josh. 22:16) or with "acted unfaithfully" (Deut. 32:51; Josh. 7:1). The KJV translates this root in those same verses with the word "trespass." While the Hebrew uses no single noun for "faith" in these verses, the translators have in each case rendered the sense of the Hebrew.

The second root, *aman*, is more difficult to translate because its meaning changes as it passes through the various Hebrew verb forms. There are seven such forms, but this root occurs in only three of them. In the first and most basic verb form the root means to support or nourish and is used of a parent's care for a child. In the second verb-form one encounters a range of meanings having to do with being secure.

Only the third verb form was rendered with the Greek word for faith in the New Testament and in the Septuagint, an early Greek version of the Old Testament originating in Alexandria. *Aman* expresses the idea of stability and steadfastness in this form and is translated as standing firm (Job 39:24, RSV; Isa. 7:9b NIV), or "to trust" (a person) or "to believe" (a statement). One stands firm in one's convictions. In relationships, one trusts persons and believes their testimony or promises. Thus, we find no Hebrew noun for "faith" in the Old Testament, only verbs that have been translated with "faith" because of New Testament influence.

If we do not find the noun "faith" in the Old Testament, we surely find the concept named with other words. In the Old Testament faith is described as the "fear of God" (Gen. 20:11; Ps. 111:10; Eccl. 12:13; Mal. 4:2), and in terms of trust (2 Chron. 20:20; Ps. 4:5, Isa. 26:4), and obedience (Ex. 19:5; 1 Sam. 15:22, Jer. 7:23). Faith is a New Testament concept that encompasses and enriches these Old Testament concepts. The English versions of the Old Testament have translated a pair of Hebrew verbs using the noun "faith." They do so in order to express the understanding of God's relation to humanity that has grown out of the New Testament.

Because the Old Testament does not have a word equivalent to the English noun, "faith," does not mean the idea of faith is unimportant for the Old Testament. Habakkuk 2:4 was properly taken by Paul as the center of Old Testament religion. God prepared the way for His people in mercy and grace, then called them to obedience. To accept the responsibilities of God's covenant was to trust His word that He alone was God and to commit one's life to His promises for the present and future. That is faith.

New Testament Expressions The Greek noun, *pistis* (faith), is related to the verb *pisteuo* (I have faith, trust, believe). The noun and verb are found virtually everywhere in the New Testament, with the notable exception that the noun is absent altogether from John's Gospel and occurs only once in 1 John. The verb form does not occur in Philemon, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, or Revelation.

Classical Greek used *pistis* and *pisteuo* to mean "trust" or "confidence." In this period belief in the existence of the gods of the Greek pantheon would be expressed with the verb *nomizo* (to think, believe, hold, consider). In the Hellenistic period, however, both the noun and verb moved from secular to religious usage. The noun came

to mean piety, and the verb took on the meaning "to believe"--a usage derived from debates with atheism in which faith required the overcoming of objections.

In the New Testament "faith" is used in a number of ways, but primarily with the meaning "**trust**" or "**confidence**" in God. This basic meaning is particularly evident in the Synoptic Gospels. Mark 1:15 introduces and summarizes the Gospel with Jesus' charge to his hearers to "repent ye, and believe the gospel." (The word usually translated "believe" in this verse is the verb form of "faith" for which there is no English equivalent. The call is repeated as "Have faith in God," using the noun form, in Mark 11:22.) Thus, Jesus called His hearers to place their confidence in God. It is common in the Synoptics for Jesus to say after healing someone, "thy faith hath made thee whole" (Matt. 9:22; Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; 8:48.) One's confidence in or allegiance to God makes one whole. John expressed a similar understanding of faith in 6:29 and 14:1 where people are called to have faith in the Christ. The difference between John and the Synoptics is a grammatical one; John used only the verb and never the noun for faith.

Outside the Gospels faith is related to the keynote concepts of the Christian message: the state of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9), sanctification (Acts 26:18), purification (Acts 15:9), justification or imputed righteousness (Rom. 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 3:24), adoption as children of God (Gal. 3:26). Each of these comes by faith. As in the Gospels, faith is an attitude toward and relationship with God mediated by Christ Jesus. It is surrender to God's gift of righteousness in Christ rather than seeking to achieve righteousness alone.

Faith is also called a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22)--something God creates in a person. In another place "faith" is used quite differently as a gift of the Holy Spirit that is given to some but not to others (1 Cor. 12:8-9). Apparently such special gifts of faith refer to the ability to do great acts for God, what Jesus called moving mountains (Matt. 17:20; 1 Cor. 13:2).

The New Testament sometimes uses "faith" to designate Christianity itself or that which Christians believe (Acts 6:7; Eph. 4:5; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 1:19; Jude 3). In this usage it is clear that an element of what we call belief is essential to the personal relationship we are calling "faith." Here it would be well to note Hebrews 11:6 also-- "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is.... " In this verse also the word translated "believe" is the Greek verb form of "faith." Context here dictates that we understand it in the sense of intellectual acceptance of a proposition, "belief." To have a right relation with God, it is necessary to "believe" that God is, that God has revealed Himself in Christ, and to accept God accepts you.

If faith is the religion itself, it is so in more than an intellectual way. Faith is also the living out of the religion; it is Christianity in action. This is the meaning of "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). "Walking" represents the totality of one's way of life. Paul wrote that "faith," both in the sense of Christian piety and of the trust and confidence one puts in God, determines action in life. Faith changes the standards and priorities of life. Similarly, using the imagery of a soldier's armor, Paul said that faith is a shield against sin and evil in our lives (Eph. 6:16; 1 Thess. 5:8).

If Christianity itself may be called "the faith," then it is a small step to the New Testament usage of the participle of the verb form of faith to designate Christians. This form is often translated "believers" (it occurs most often in the plural) or "those who believe" (Acts 4:32; Rom. 1:16). If we continue our distinction between faith and belief, we would prefer the translation "those who have faith" or the ungrammatical "those who faith."

The nearest the New Testament comes to presenting a definition of "faith" per se, is in Hebrews 11:1. Here faith is called "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (RSV). Thus, Hebrews closely ties faith very to Christian hope. The personal conviction of faith encourages the Christian to continue hoping for the fulfillment of the promises of God, but it is not the substance (as in the KJV) of these "things hoped for" in any normal sense of "substance." The "things hoped for" have a reality greater than anyone's hoping for them. Faith is then meant as a sort of foretaste of the hoped for things.

Faith as the Way to Salvation The concept of faith is primarily that of a personal relationship with God that determines the priorities of one's life. This relationship is one of love that is built on trust and dependence. We receive it by trusting the saving work of Jesus. Faith is the basic Christian experience, the decision for Christ Jesus. It is the acceptance of Christ's lordship (i.e., His God-given, absolute authority). In this sense faith is doubly a break from the past: it is one's removal from sin, and it is one's removal from all other religious allegiances (1 Thess. 1:9). As a break from the past, faith is the beginning of relation to God and not an end. It is, especially in Paul's letters, the inauguration of incorporation "in Christ," in which one continues to grow and develop.

If faith is primarily a relationship into which one enters through acceptance of Jesus' authority, it also includes a certain amount of "belief." As a derived use, then, "faith" may also denote the content of what is believed. In this sense faith is the conviction that God acted in the history of Israel and "that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). In theological usage "the faith" may refer to many more doctrines and dogmas that have been developed since New Testament times, but in the New Testament "that which must be believed" was more limited as Romans 10:9-10 may demonstrate.

Conclusion Faith is what we believe, it is Christianity itself, but primarily it is the relationship we have with God through what Jesus accomplished in His death and resurrection.