

I.

A Significant Greeting

(James 1:1)

Introduction

Despite its brevity, James' opening greeting sets the tone for what is to follow. First, the greeting identifies the author and affirms his relationship with the Lord in whose name he writes. Second, the greeting reminds the audience of the spiritual privileges and the spiritual responsibilities that they have. Third, the greeting acknowledges the challenging circumstances of those to whom the letter is addressed and provides the context for the pastoral exhortation that follows in the rest of the letter.

Listening to the text

Context and structure

As noted in Part One, the letter of James begins with the traditional formula: (1) author, (2) recipients and (3) greeting. Although brief, this traditional formula contains important qualifying statements, about both the author and his audience. The words 'in the Dispersion' provide the theological and sociohistorical context for the discussion

of 'trials' and 'temptations' in the rest of chapter 1. The word 'greetings' in verse 1 is verbally connected to the word 'joy' in verse 2. This is the first of a number of instances where James uses repeated 'link' words to transition between sections or to connect paragraphs and ideas with each other.

Working through the text

The author begins his letter by describing himself as a 'servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Comparison with the introductory formulae of other New Testament letters shows this self-designation to be unique. Only Paul introduces himself as a 'servant of God' as James does, but then immediately follows that introduction with the words 'and an apostle of Jesus Christ' (Titus 1:1), a title that James cannot and does not use. Paul describes himself as 'a servant of Christ Jesus' (Rom. 1:1) and Jude describes himself as 'a servant of Jesus Christ' (Jude 1), but neither context contains a reference to being 'a servant of God'. James alone refers to himself as a servant both of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What are we to deduce from James' description of himself in this particular way? Certainly, as most commentators observe, James' reference to himself as a servant speaks of an appropriate humility, both before God and before the Lord Jesus Christ. Such humility before God was to be expected of a devout Jew, but James' acknowledgement of Jesus as 'the Lord' whose servant he now is, is particularly striking. Such an acknowledgement presupposes not merely a dramatic but a miraculous change of mind with respect to Jesus (see John 7:5). As we noted in Part One, this change was in all likelihood

due to James' encounter with the risen Lord Jesus, though we note James' inclusive language in describing how God 'brought us forth by the word of truth' (James 1:18). From this we can surely deduce that James' conversion was on the basis not only of an encounter with the risen Lord but also through hearing the word of truth, the gospel 'in accordance with the Scriptures' (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-4). Nor should we miss the theological significance of the conjunction in this statement. In describing himself as a servant of God *and* of the Lord Jesus Christ, James ascribes the highest possible authority and dignity to Jesus, an authority and dignity equal to that of the Father. Here then, almost in passing, we find evidence that belief in the deity of Christ was not a later addition to Christian doctrine but something held as foundational to the faith from earliest times.

While many commentators point out that a position of service before God carried with it a sense of dignity and authority, there is a prophetic element contained in the title 'servant of God' that they largely ignore. In Old Testament terms Moses was the 'servant of God' par excellence (see e.g. Exodus 14:31; Deuteronomy 34:5; 1 Kings 8:53). But the term is also used of the Old Testament prophets in general, especially in relation to the LORD's patience in sending prophets to call Israel to return to the LORD (see especially 2 Kings 17:13 and Jeremiah 7:25). Given James' own Jewish identity and the description of his audience as 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion', it may well be that in describing himself as 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' James is claiming prophetic authority for his message. This case will I trust become clearer as we explore James' message in the letter as a whole.

James' description of his audience as 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion' is worthy of exploration. As we noted in Part One, the dispersion that is in view here is probably that dispersion of Jewish believers from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria following the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1).

As a matter of historical fact, the ten northern tribes were dispersed with the fall of Samaria (*circa* 722 B.C.). These tribes remained dispersed, as the kingdom of Israel, founded by Jeroboam I, ceased to exist after that date. It is also clear from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that many from the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin declined or were unable to return under Zerubbabel after the exile in Babylon. Nevertheless, Old Testament prophetic eschatology had as its focus an Exodus-like restoration resulting not only in a restored Jerusalem and Davidic kingdom but also in a reunited Israel (see e.g. Isa. 43:1-7; 44:1-5; Hosea 1:10-11), with the twelve tribes brought back together as one people.

By referring to his Christian Jewish audience as the 'twelve tribes', it is clear that, from James' perspective, this restoration had already partially taken place through the Lord Jesus Christ. James 2:1 makes clear that his audience are included, having come to faith. By speaking about them as 'dispersed', James makes clear that this physical dispersion signifies a partial and 'not yet' nature to this restoration. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, they and not the Jews had been given the privileges and the responsibilities of truly belonging to the people of God. But their restoration was not yet complete, nor would it be until the return of the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ (James 2:1; 5:7-9). As the people of God therefore they were called to faith, to brotherly love and to patient endurance.

They were to take care that neither they nor their fellow believers were polluted by the world (1:27) or wandered away from the truth (5:19-20). It was thus with prophetic authority and pastoral concern and also as a fellow believer in the Lord Jesus Christ that James wrote his letter and made his appeal.

From text to message

The question of the importance and relevance of the book of James as a whole (see Part One) is of course particularly pertinent when it comes to the introductory greeting of the letter. Is it really worth preaching a sermon on this first verse, or should you just jump straight to the meatier section dealing with trials and perseverance? Three reasons would suggest that time spent on the introductory greeting is a worthwhile exercise.

First, the summary of James' credentials is an opportunity for us to be reminded that the letter comes to us as the word of God and with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. What James said to his first audience is what the Lord said to them and continues to say to us today. We do well to bear this in mind even when what James writes challenges our way of thinking or our conduct.

Second, the focus on both the privileges and challenges of life as believers still 'in the Dispersion' gives us the chance to reflect on the reality of the 'now/not yet' of every Christian's experience. We may be the redeemed, privileged people of God, sharing this privilege with these early Jewish believers (see Acts 11:15-18). However, like them, we are still waiting for the fullness of God's kingdom rule. Like them, we face the challenges of life in a fallen world as we wait for the return of our Lord and saviour

Jesus Christ. Thus, this element of the greeting reminds us of just how relevant the letter is for our Christian lives and how important it is for our godliness. For in the midst of a fallen world the most important thing of all is that we hear and live by the word of God in Scripture.

Third, the miracle of grace evident in James' own life is surely worth noting. As with Paul, the move from unbelief to faith through an eye-witness encounter with the risen Lord (see above) was dramatic and is not the norm for us. And yet, as Paul himself testifies, such grace shown to sceptics and opponents is a reminder that anyone can indeed be saved and that we too may find our place in service of King Jesus (cf. 1 Tim. 1:16).

Getting the message clear: the theme

God, through James, has spoken and still speaks an authoritative and relevant word for His people living in the midst of a fallen and often hostile world.

Getting the message clear: the aim

To encourage and challenge believers to hear, receive and obey what James writes in his letter as the very word of God, a word for us today.

A way in

Given that a sermon on James 1:1 would aim to introduce the series as a whole, the best way in would probably be to highlight the reality of our present Christian experience. It is an experience that we share with James' original audience. On the one hand we are privileged people, chosen by the Lord and redeemed by Christ. On the other hand, we live in a fallen world and do not yet enjoy the full blessings of Christ's rule. There is thus a 'now' and a 'not yet' element

to our Christian experience. Two questions could then be asked by way of introduction:

- Question 1: ‘What pressures do we face under such circumstances?’ Answer: ‘Pressure to doubt and compromise, perhaps even to “turn back” from wholehearted following of Jesus.’
- Question 2: ‘What do we need more than anything else if we are to stand firm under such circumstances?’ Answer: ‘A clear and reliable word from God to encourage us and to help us to stand firm and wholehearted in our commitment to Christ. This clear and reliable word is exactly what James’ letter provides for us.’

Ideas for application

- The authentic Christian life is a ‘now/not yet’ experience.
- James’ letter provides us with an authoritative and relevant word from God to help us stand firm as we live for Christ in a fallen, hostile world.

Suggestions for preaching

Sermon

As noted in Part One, given my understanding of the melodic line of James, I have chosen *Undivided* as a title for the sermon series. This series title will be used for each sermon outline throughout the book.

Undivided (Talk 1)

‘A Significant Greeting’ (James 1:1)

1. Introduction

- The reality of our experience:
 - The privilege we enjoy
 - The pressure we face
 - The need we have
2. Our common faith:
- The twelve tribes – a privileged people of God
(We share a common faith with first-century Jewish believers. Thus, the spiritual privilege that we enjoy is precisely the same as the privilege they had – the privilege of being God’s chosen people.)
 - In the Dispersion – an opposed people living in a fallen world
(Like the first-century believers, we face opposition for our faith, and that can cause us to doubt our faith or perhaps just grow cold in our commitment to Jesus. Furthermore, although we are believers, we are not spared from the everyday trials of life in a fallen world. This experience of trials and tribulations is part of the normal Christian life.)
3. God’s good provision:
- A surprising messenger
(Here there is an opportunity to speak about the change that God brought about in James’ life.)
 - An authoritative and relevant word
(Here the focus is on James’ self-designation as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. In particular, this provides an opportunity to think about the authoritative nature of what James has to say and its particular relevance as a ‘prophetic’ word designed to keep us undivided in our walk with the Lord.)

Suggestions for teaching

Questions to help understand the passage

1. Compare James 1:1 with the introductory greetings of other New Testament letters.
 - What similarities or differences do you note?
 - In what way is James' introductory greeting unique?
2. How does James describe himself in relation to God?
3. Look up 2 Kings 17:13 and Jeremiah 7:25.
 - What word is used in these verses to describe the prophets?
 - According to these verses, what were the prophets sent to do?
 - What light do these verses cast on James' description of himself as a 'servant of God'?
4. How does James describe himself in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ? What is striking about this description?
5. What does James' description of first-century Jewish Christians as the 'twelve tribes' imply?
6. What does James mean when he refers to these believers as 'in the Dispersion'? (Compare this phrase with John 7:35 and Acts 8:1.)

Questions to help apply the passage

1. Look up Acts 11:15-18. According to this passage, what do believers today have in common with first-century believers, both Jewish and Gentile?

2. Given the common faith we share with first-century believers, what privileges do we enjoy as God's chosen people? (Look in particular at James' description of his audience as the 'twelve tribes'.)
3. James describes his first audience as 'in the Dispersion'. What does this phrase bring to mind?
4. How do you think the reality of life 'in the Dispersion' applies to Christians today?
5. James' letter was designed especially for Christians who, though privileged to belong to God, had their faith and their commitment tested through the challenge of living in a fallen and often hostile world. What relevance do you think James' letter may have for us?
6. Why should we listen to and obey James' teaching even when it challenges our way of thinking or our conduct?