

An In-Depth Study of the Letter of James

[Part 1]

The letter of James could be seen as a “*how-to*” book on Christian living.

Confrontation, challenge, and a call to commitment await us in its pages.

This letter will expose hypocritical practices and teach us right Christian living.

James will expose the real depth of our Christian character.

James 1:1 [NIV] “*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.*”

At the very beginning of this letter James describes himself by a title wherein lies his only honour and his only glory.

A bond slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, without any other added qualifications.

There are at least four implications with this limited title.

a) **Absolute obedience** –

The bond slave knows no law but his master’s word.

The bond slave has no personal rights.

The bond slave is the absolute possession of his master.

The bond slave is bound to give his master unquestioning obedience.

b) **Absolute humility** –

Thinks only of their duties **not** any privileges.

Thinks only of their obligations to the master.

Thinks only of service **not** of self.

A person who says “*No*” to self and “*Yes*” to their master.

c) **Absolute loyalty** –

Has no interests of their own, being utterly pledged to their master.

All that they do is done for their master.

Their own profit or preference does not enter into their calculations.

Their loyalty is totally to their master.

Yet behind all of the above lies a certain implication of pride, because of whose bond slave they are.

Far from being a title of dishonour we find it is the title given to all the great people of the Old Testament.

Moses was the bond slave of God. [1 Kings 8:53; Daniel 9:11; Malachi 4:4]

Joshua [Judges 14:24]

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [Deuteronomy 9:27]

By taking on the title of bond slave James sets himself in the great succession of those who found their fulfilment in perfect submission to the will of the Creator God.

The only greatness to which a Christian can ever aspire in this physical life is that of being a bond slave of God.

James was writing to the Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution.

Israel is the name given to the twelve tribes that came out of captivity in Egypt and were settled by God in what we know as Palestine today, plus additional area around the present state of Israel and the South Bank.

The people of Israel were forcibly taken out of the Promised Land, given to them by God, in three great movements.

1) Removal of northern tribes with their capital in Samaria by the Assyrians. [2 Kings 17:23; 1 Chronicles 5:26] These ten tribes never returned to the Promised Land, but remain scattered throughout the world.

2) The second removal about 580BC by the Babylonians, conquering the two southern tribes whose capital was at Jerusalem. [2 Kings 24:14-16; Psalms 137]

3) The third compulsory transportation took place in 63BC when Pompey conquered the land of Judah and took back to Rome many Jews as slaves.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, writes: *“There is no city, no tribe, whether Greek or Barbarian, in which Jewish law and Jewish customs have not taken root.”*

Other ancient texts read in the same way.

The fact that the tribes of Israel were so extensively dispersed throughout the world was a great factor in the spread of Christianity.

This dispersal meant that there were synagogues all over the world, and it was to these synagogues that the Christian preachers first went.

It meant that all over the world there were groups of people who already knew the Old Testament, and who had persuaded others among the Gentiles at least to be interested in their Jewish faith.

The word *“diaspora”* is the technical word used for all the people of ancient Israel who are scattered throughout the world, could have an alternative meaning in the mind of James.

Galatians 6:14-16 [NIV] *“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. **Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.**”*

Paul refers to the Christian church as the *“Israel of God.”*

This is a common concept that the Christian church is the new chosen people of God.

The nation of Israel had originally been chosen by God to become an example nation for others to follow.

Israel failed, refusing to accept the responsibility of the challenge given to them.

When the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came to the only remaining tribes of Israel in the Middle East, they rejected Him as the awaited Messiah [Saviour].

Therefore all the privileges, but also the responsibilities, which had once belonged to Israel, were passed over to the newly-forming Christian church.

Romans 9:7-8 [NIV] *“Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” In other words, it is **not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.**”*

Paul explains this more fully.

The true descendents of Abraham, the physical father of Israel, were **not** those who could trace their physical descent from Abraham, but those who had made the same venture of faith in God’s promises that Abraham had made.

The true Israel of God was composed of all who had accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, in faith, as the cleansing power of all our sins.

Matthew 5:13-16 [NIV] *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

If we are to be counted by God to be part of the new Israel of God, this is what we should be like in our Christian living.

The true Israel of God are all who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are the light and salt in this sin-darkened and Satan-deceived world.

If the Christian church or individual Christians fail today in their task of being the new Israel of God, they too will be rejected by God as were the original chosen people of God.

James 1:2-4 [NIV] *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*

Persecution and trials have always accompanied the people that God has chosen to be the “*firstfruits*” of His created family.

Remember that God is in the process of creating character like His own in physically created human beings.

Genesis 1:26-27 [NIV] *“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*

We need to continue to have these verses in the forefront of our mind.

Every human being is born in the “*image*” of God. A shadow of the real thing.

But “*likeness*,” referring to character, is learnt and produced only over time and experience.

Every human being is given physical human life to develop the character of God.

The “*human spirit*” within us [see **Job 32:8 and 1 Corinthians 2:11**] is the key and spiritual link to the Holy Spirit which will enable us to produce the “*fruits*” of the Holy Spirit [**Galatians 5:22-25**] which are the characteristics of the Creator God’s very nature.

1 Peter 1:13-16 [NIV] “*Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”*”

Only then can we fulfil this command of God and be acceptable as His created children.

Why trials and temptations?

We cannot really know the depth and quality of our character until we see how we react under the pressure of trials and temptations.

It is easy to be kind and loving to others when everything is going well, but can we still be kind and loving to them when they are treating us unfairly.

God wants us to mature and become complete in the “*likeness*” of His character through pain and trials.

Hebrews 2:9-11 [NIV] “*But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make **the author of their salvation perfect through suffering**. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.*”

Jesus did **not** need to suffer for His own salvation, because He was God in human form.

Jesus’ suffering made Him the perfect example and leader of our salvation, through our trials and suffering.

Hebrews 2:17-18 [NIV] “*For this reason he [Jesus Christ] had to be made like his brothers in every way, **in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people**. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*”

Jesus, through physical suffering, made Him the perfect High Priest, acting as a link between physical humans and a spiritual God.

1 Peter 4:12-19 [NIV] “*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become*

of the ungodly and the sinner?” ***So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.***”

Every Christian should expect and use trials and suffering to mature, committing ourselves to the mercy and love of God.

1 Corinthians 10:13 [NIV] *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And **God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.**”*

God will never allow trials to come on us that we are **not** able to withstand with His help.

But from personal experience, I know that God may choose to leave this help until the very last moment, to test our faith in Him.

Instead of complaining about our struggles in life, we should see them as opportunities for spiritual growth.

Continually thank God for being with us in hard times.

Ask God to help us solve our problems or to give us the strength to endure them.

Then be patient, remember how patient God has been with us in our lives, and that patience is one of the very characteristics of God Himself that He wants us to develop.

The Greek word translated “*perseverance*” is “*hupōmōnē*” is more than the ability to bear trials but to turn them into greatness and glory.

The thing that amazed the heathen in the centuries of Christian persecution was that the martyrs did **not** die grimly but died singing praises to the Creator God.

The Greek word translated “*mature*” is “*tēlēiōs*” meaning to attain the goal that was set us to accomplish.

In our Christian lives we will experience many such goals on our path to becoming “*complete*” in the eyes of our Creator God.

Each goal accomplished will make us more fit for the personal task in the world that God has called us to do, and God intends us to accomplish before our death.

By the way we meet every experience and trial in life will make us either fitter or unfitter for the task which God meant us to do in life, and which will limit our reward at the return of Jesus Christ.

The Greek word translated “*complete*” is “*hōlōklērōs*” meaning without blemish and is used for the animal that was sacrificed under the Old Covenant for the sin offering to God.

Ephesians 5:22-27 [NIV] *“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. **Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.**”*

If we are to fulfil this awesome responsibility towards our wives, we will need working in us the same love, compassion that Jesus Christ has for the Christian Church.

This word describes also a process of shedding old blemishes in our lives and adding new virtues until we become a fit vehicle in God’s hands to serve other human beings.

The Greek words translated “*lacking anything*” are “*leipo*” meaning destitute and “*meden*” qualified victory, **not** without a victorious end to life.

There will be nothing in that person’s life that will cause them to fail reaching the standard of character that God demands.

Each day in such a person’s life brings them nearer to the character of Jesus Christ Himself.