

James 1:1 'James, A Slave!'

Brothers and sisters, as with any letter, what is all important is the reason or the purpose behind the writing of that letter. That is indeed if people actually still write letters these days. I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time I actually received a hand written letter. But I do remember being really touched that the person went to the effort to write to me! But yes the purpose behind the writing of the letter is all important. If it's from the power company or the phone company etc, you know it's going to cost you money. And if it's from the RTA, we generally think to ourselves, 'Oh what have I done now?' Well, similarly, with the book of James, we need to understand the circumstances behind him feeling that he needed to put pen to paper. And let's also remember, that though it is James who has the pen in his hand so to speak, it is God the Holy Spirit who is the author speaking through him!

Friends, just as important as it is to know the purpose of the letter, may I suggest, that it is as equally as important, to know the person who is writing the letter. Just as when a generic letter arrives with our mail will get very little or no attention, the opposite is true if it comes from someone whom we love, like family and friends. And we basically can't wait to open the envelope. It's true isn't it? Well the Puritan writer and Bible commentator Thomas Manton, (who is one of the men that I will be referring to throughout this series) explains, that whenever we open up the scriptures, that we should read them not only as history, (because as someone has said, the Bible is His story) but also as a personal letter of love to us from God! That is what His Word the Bible is: His letter and expression of His love for His people. As He rescues them from the curse of Adam's sin in the garden of Eden, and He Restores, He Redeems, and Reconciles them to Himself through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ!

So what do we know about this man James? There are quite a few 'James' that are referred to in the New Testament. James the brother of John who was "the disciple whom Jesus loved, the son of Zebedee." There is also "James the son of Alphaeus" of whom we read in Matthew. To whom some scholars attribute the authorship.

But most modern commentators (with whom I agree) hold to the author being James, the second son born to Mary, the mother Jesus. In Mark 6:1-4 we read: "Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What is this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles? Isn't this the Carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him. Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour."

We learn another thing about this James, that along with most of his family, he did not believe in Jesus. In John 7:1-5 we also read, "After this, Jesus went around in Galilee, purposely staying away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take his life. But when the Jewish feast of tabernacles was near, Jesus' brothers said to him, "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him."

Friends, are you feeling the contempt that we are seeing here? *'Hey Jesus, what's this doing all of this stuff in secret all about? Why don't you go to where your disciples are? Go and show them and the rest of the world (that's if you are the real deal) all of these miracles you are doing!'* And you know they actually leave Jesus behind, and go up to the feast themselves. There is a real sense here of Joseph being abandoned and sold into slavery by his brothers, as we see in Genesis.

And this contempt for Jesus which is held by his brothers is made clear a still in Mark 3. Since Jesus is present, a large crowd had gathered. Some to gawk, others to be healed, some to be fed and still others who were genuine followers no doubt. And Jesus` family hears about this commotion. So like that crazy uncle or the strange distant lunatic member of the family, that everyone is ashamed of and embarrassed to own, they feel the need to act. As we read in Mark 3:20-21: "Then Jesus entered a house and a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, *(please notice the words used)* they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He's out of his mind." And since James was the eldest of these brothers of Jesus, there is no doubt he would have been at the head of the queue!

The Greek word which is used here is *Extēsη*, the word we get the English word ecstasy from, meaning to be beside one's self, to be in a trance. Like those devotees of the occult which we find in Haiti, and other places which dabble in the Mystic religions, with voodoo practises and summoning the dead. Yes, "he's lost his mind." *What, is he possessed? We had better go and get him before more damage is done to the family name.* And in the meantime, the religious elite actually do come and accused Jesus of being demon possessed. V22: "And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub. By the Prince of demons he is driving out demons." But Jesus explains *'no, I am not of the devil, "the strong man" He calls him. No you can't "rob," you can't clean the house of the strongman, you can't save souls, until the strong man is bound. I Am the One that binds, yes I Am the One that "binds and robs" "the strongman" of his power over souls.* Then in v31, Mary and His brothers arrive. But being too embarrassed to get Him themselves, they "send someone else in to get him."

Brethren, we need to remember, that like we ourselves before the Spirit of God enters into our hearts, the oldest of the brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ, James, was not naturally drawn to Him or inclined to Him as Saviour. No. Who was James at that time? The one who thought of Jesus "He's lost his mind." Beloved, this shows us two things. Firstly, (and it is something which is perhaps never made more clear than it is in this example of James) a person is not saved, or Christian, by association! Whether they are born into a Christian home. They have a Christian partner, or they are mixing with Christian friends and family. These things will not bring them into Jesus` Kingdom and prepare them for heaven, no. And secondly, (which I guess is actually the second half of the first point) is that we must all come to know who Jesus truly is, as Lord and Saviour, for ourselves! Yes we must all come to understand personally Jesus` Birth, His Death and Resurrection. We must all be brought to the Cross!

Well this is what has happened to James, as he writes this letter. He is not the same man who grew up with Jesus. Even born from the same womb, no. No longer does he believe that Jesus is "out of his mind." He believes and knows that Jesus is Lord, even the very Son of God! Now he is believed to have been converted after Jesus` resurrection. Yes it does seem that it took seeing the resurrected Jesus to bring his soul to life. In 1 Corinthians 15 we read of what is believed to be (for want of a better description), James` road to Damascus life changing moment! V37 "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the 12. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same

time. Most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles." Now firstly, it might appear to be a bit confusing here because in verse 5 Paul talks about "the twelve," so let's just call them the 'capital A' Apostles. And in v7 "then to all," let's call them, the 'small a' apostles, because it simply means, all of the other disciples that were followers of Jesus at that time. They didn't hold the Apostolic office as "the twelve," but like you and I today, they were sent of Christ. That is what the word apostle means. One who is sent!

What is important to notice here though, is that after His resurrection "Jesus appears to Peter," "the twelve," "500 of the brethren at once," and only after all of these appearances, (and this perhaps is an indication of the hardness of James' heart) does Jesus appear to James! We can only imagine what must have been running through his mind. Perhaps his earlier words, "he's out of his mind." This reminds me of one of our modern hymns, as we sing, *'Behold I hear my mocking voice, call out among the scoffers'*.

Friends like you and I, James' life by Jesus' resurrection had been changed forever! He would become prominent at the church in Jerusalem. Tradition holds that he was considered to be the first Bishop of that church. The Pastor, come teaching - and - ruling elder. This prominence is seen when Peter is released from prison, and going to Mary, John Mark's mother's house. Peter knocks upon the door and the young servant girl Rhoda answers. And seeing it's Peter, in her excitement she slams the door in his face. Well he keeps knocking, they open the door, and as everyone is excited, he calms them down, and says in Acts 12:7b "Tell James and the brothers about this, and then he left for another place." And finally in Acts 21:17-18, (which is the last place where we hear of James in the book Of Acts) we read: "When we arrived at Jerusalem the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us, went to see James, and all the elders were present."

Yes James' prominence is clearly implied in these passages! But the place where James' prominence and headship is most clearly seen, is at the first council of Jerusalem. Where the problem had arisen, that the Jewish Christians were seeking to place the yoke or the weight and implications of the Levitical ceremonial law, upon the necks of the non-Jewish or Gentile Christians at Antioch. Antioch was actually the place where the followers of Christ with first called Christians!

So Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem, and while on their way they spread the great news about all of the Gentile converts, and they come to Jerusalem explaining the situation. But then some converts who were Pharisees also tried to load the law on the Gentile Christians. So Peter speaks and then Barnabas speaks, and when everything is said and done, James has the final say. As we also read in Acts 15:13-20 "When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written. "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name", says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages. It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."

So friends clearly we can see what love and concern James the Pastor has for the church and its unity. And did you notice that even as Jesus did, James draws his authority from the scriptures. And his concern for the Gentiles, is that their way to Christ, be not marked with landmines and the difficulties of the old ways, which have been done away with by Jesus' death and resurrection. But that their pathway to salvation and understanding, be made clear and uncomplicated. As Jesus

Himself said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Yes the heart of the Pastor leaps off the page here. And it is the Pastor's heart, which governs this letter of James! The return of Jesus, though still fresh in their minds, was not yet. And of course, as in every church just as in our own day, problems were arising. As indeed many of the biblical letters were written due to some kind of problem!

And James seeks to deal with these things in what I would call, 'meat and potatoes' ways. There is nothing, mind blowingly theological here. And yet still, being deeply theological in the truest sense of the word because theology is literally the study of Theos, of God! And yet James' theology (as he applies these things to us) is deeply practical. It is our response to God of obedience. It is in effect, where our rubber hits the road as Christians!

So after all of that groundwork, let us have at the text. And it is James 1:1. With the first three words we are powerfully struck by yet another tremendous insight, into the man behind the letter, who James now is! "James a servant." And the Greek word which he actually uses here is *dolos*, which literally means slave, or bondservant. Someone who is indebted to another. Again, it is a powerful insight into the man who James now is.

Beloved, only Jesus can do that. Taken from sitting in the seat of mockery and derision, to having a sober assessment of one's self. Yes only Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit can do that. And he does it at the Cross! Do you remember the account of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus, "one on his right the other on his left?" Both hurling insults at them in Mark 15:32, both of them mocking him. "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us." Until the Holy Spirit entered one of them, (we don't know which one) and then his miraculous confession. Listen to Luke 23:40-43 " But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God" he said, "since you are under the same sentence. We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to him, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth. This very day you will be with me in paradise." Yes similarly were James' words. *Extēsē*. "He's out of his mind." 'He's beside himself, He's possessed.' But now he has met Jesus. Even his own half-brother with a new heart and mind, at the Cross, and it is "James a *dolos*," a bondservant a slave!

K.A Kitchener explains that for us today in our modern western world, this concept and reality of slavery is almost impossible to grasp. But for those in China, some African and many Muslim countries around the world, this concept is not abstract but all too real. And there are those absolutely horrifying stories of women and even children that sometimes come to light. Of being abducted or even employed in foreign countries, kept prisoner for even decades only to eventually escape and emerge from their captors, to reveal their unimaginable accounts. Of what they have had to endure which they had been subjected to! And though yes there were slaves in those days who were treated very well, and some who even after having paid their debts, chose to remain slaves to caring considerate owners. Kitchener explains that the key word is owned. These people were owned. They were the possession of someone else. And as with any possession, they had no rights. Yes they were the possession of someone else to do with when, where and how, as they pleased. Bought. Sold. Left as an inheritance. Yes they were a commodity, and their value was determined by their age, their strength, their abilities and what value adding, they could bring to their owner. And when such abilities were gone or used up, (were they not the possession of caring owners) they could be put down like an unwanted animal.

As the commentator John Blanchard explains, all of these things being true, it is all the more astonishing that James refers to himself in this way! Think of the esteemed ways in which he may

have referred to himself. Pastor. Ruling elder. Teacher. Bishop of the church at Jerusalem. Friend and brother of Peter, John, Paul, Barnabas and all of the apostles. And he could have even referred to himself as the very brother of the Lord Jesus Christ. But no he didn't. Only "James a dolos" a slave!

Beloved I have mentioned this over the years. One of our greatest assets as Christians, that we may possess, (and it is one that we may have a say in having ownership of) is a sober assessment of ourselves. Of remembering who God is, and who we are. Paul puts it this way in Romans 12: "For by the grace given me I say to everyone of you, do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of the faith God has given you."

And Paul also writes in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

And again Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 "You are not your own, you were bought at a price." Yes, James had come to understand that as we are indebted to Jesus for paying our price for sin's curse, that we must think of ourselves in the terms in which Paul speaks. When Paul writes, he is describing particularly of a slave having been purchased! And in another place he asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?"

So if we try to think of ourselves in these terms, then we may begin, (just begin may I suggest) to understand that place where James is coming from. And friends if that is the place with his connections, where James is coming from. Then when we look into the mirror that is God's Word, we need to pray, that God helps us to see ourselves clearly. Amen! Because he was a man who although had been lifted up and exalted by God, and used by him in powerful and mighty ways, he understood that all he had and who he was, rested firmly and only, in God's gift of grace and mercy to him through Jesus. Just as it is, with every other sinner! Ephesians 5:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not of yourselves it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no man can boast."

Dear friends, I must confess that when I looked at this man's life, I felt a real sense of shame and being some kind of phoney. Now yes he was just a man and only a man, (even a mere sinner like ourselves) but certainly as he puts pen to paper before us, he knows who he is, and how he got there. And to whom does he belong! And these are the things that should drive the true believer. And yet I do feel that too often, in the midst of difficulties and worse still, simply in everyday life, I have a tendency to forget all of those simple and yet deeply profound truths. Yes difficulties arise and I have a tendency to lose sight of that truth. Roy Dallos, "a dolos" a slave! Purchased by Jesus, Blood, and made fit for service only by Him. That's what I feel each of us needs to do here. If we are to truly understand where James is coming from. If we just insert our own name here, then it does somehow seem to become all too real. Yes James clearly understood who he was, how he got there and to whom did he belong. "James a dolos of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ."

So I guess the questions are Do we know who we are before God? If indeed we are Christian and do call ourselves Christian, do we know how we got here? Do we know that it is all and only of Jesus?

Yes in Christ alone my hope is found! And finally, to whom is it that we belong? Yes insert your name here dear friends “James a slave of God, and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Let's pray!