

**LIFE AFTER FAITH**  
**A STUDY THROUGH THE BOOK OF JAMES**

**LESSON 1 – INSTRUCTION IN AN INTRODUCTION – JAMES 1:1**

Since 1982, the English Department at San Jose State University has sponsored an unusual kind of writing competition. It's called the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. The contest, held each year, is to see who can compose the opening sentence to the worst of all possible novels. This contest began when a professor researched and discovered the origin of the oft-used line, "It was a dark and stormy night..." Most of the entries involve an absurdly long sentence, and all meant to be funny.

The website for the contest includes a list of all of the past winners. One of my favorites is Patricia Presutti from 1986. That year the opening sentence for the worst of all possible novels was this... "The bone-chilling scream split the warm summer night in two, the first half being before the scream when it was fairly balmy and calm and pleasant for those who hadn't heard the scream at all, but not calm or balmy or even very nice for those who did hear the scream, discounting the little period of time during the actual scream itself when your ears might have been hearing it but your brain wasn't reacting yet to let you know."

Now at a glance, the opening line to the book of James doesn't seem to hold all that much important or interesting information. Like the other letters of the New Testament, it begins with the author's name, his audience and some sort of greeting but when we examine the words used in this simple sentence, we find some inspired instructions for our lives as Christians. So let's spend our time and look at some things we learn from this opening sentence.

**The Christian's Relationship Is Not Casual**

When we write a letter today, it is our custom to put our name at the end of the letter but in ancient times, the writer's name would come at the beginning. In the New Testament letters, the writer would usually give their name, followed by some identifying statement or phrase that indicated who they were personally. For example, Paul begins 6 of his letters with the phrase, "Paul, an apostle..."

James also follows this pattern. His letter begins with the words, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..." He identifies himself by his spiritual relationship to Jesus. When you consider who James was and then look at the words he chose for his introduction, there is a lesson here about the nature of our relationship to Jesus. Let me show you what I mean...

**What James Could Have Said** – Through the process of elimination, it is very likely that the James who wrote this letter is the same James that served as a prominent early church leader written about in the book of Acts. If that's true, then this James has a unique connection that he fails to mention here in verse 1. In Galatians 1:19, Paul says this James was the brother of Jesus.

In other words, this James was a son of Joseph and Mary...the physical half-brother of Jesus Christ. Neither Peter or Paul could make that claim. James could have opened his letter with the line, "James, the brother of the Son of God." That's what James could have said, but that is not how his letter begins. James could have used his connection to Jesus as a badge of pride and a source of authority, but for James, his relationship to Jesus was much too serious to use for his own purposes.

**What James Chose To Say** – "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ..." Notice that word servant. It is translated from a word that literally means a slave. It means far more than just a servant. It describes someone who is deprived of personal freedom and becomes an instrument fully under the

control of the master. Think about it... James could have said, "Hey, listen to me, I grew up with Jesus. I am His half-brother." Instead, James chose to say, "I am the willing slave of Jesus Christ. Our relationship is one in which I am His unquestioning servant."

In his opening line, James reminds us that while our relationship to Jesus might mean a lot of different things to us, if it is anything less than slavery to His lordship, it is not all that it should be. James opens his letter by reminding us of the greatest truth regarding our relationship to Jesus. It is not a casual relationship. It is the relationship of a servant to his Master.

### **The Christian's Rejoicing Is Not Conditional**

James finishes his opening sentence with the word "greeting". This is an interesting word for James to use. The word translated as "greeting" here in verse 1, literally means "to rejoice". One writer suggests that the deeper meaning of the word is "to be satisfied." Think about this word that James chooses to use in his introductory verse, and notice a couple of things it says to us about a Christian's joy and rejoicing...

**Who He Was Addressing** – James essentially says this to the Jews here in verse 1, "To all of you who've been uprooted from your homes and forced into new and strange places...rejoice." When you hear James say, "Rejoice," to a group of people who had suffered so much, it seems like a really strange thing to say. In reality, it wasn't strange at all in light of what Jesus taught. In the beatitudes, Jesus addressed people with similar hardships, and told them that they were blessed.

"Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who are persecuted..." The Bible was not written for people whose lives are perfect, painless, and pleasant. It was written to people who are struggling and suffering. The Word of God speaks to those who are hurting, and its message is consistent with the greeting here in James 1.

**What He Was Asserting** – When James wrote this word "greeting" at the end of verse 1, he wasn't simply ending a sentence with a nice word...he was asserting a theological truth. Over the next few verses, James builds on the principle that even in trials and adversity, the Christian has reason to rejoice. In other words, our joy...and therefore our rejoicing...are not circumstantial and conditional...they are eternal.

Yes, the Jews had been uprooted and scattered into new and strange places. Yes, their lives had been interrupted and upset by persecution. All this was painfully and clearly true but they could still rejoice.

I think Paul explained it perfectly when he wrote this in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

Their joy was not in their situation...it was in their Savior. They rejoiced, not because their lives were good, but because their Lord was good! James opens his very practical book with a word that can be on our lips even when there is sorrow in our lives...REJOICE! Because of Who we serve, joy is never conditional. As long as Jesus is Lord, we can rejoice!

There is a lot more to the book of James than this one, brief, introductory verse. However, this one verse holds a book's worth of truth. In it James sets the stage for what he is going to say and he reminds believers of the seriousness of their relationship to Christ, the sovereignty of their place in life and the steadiness of their joy in Jesus. It's just the introduction, but hopefully we find in it some instruction for our lives.