

James 1:1

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[0 : 00] I'm really enjoying our study on James in the neighborhood fellowships.

Some of you are also involved in your own neighborhood fellowship. I am sure you are having a similar experience. Some folks aren't able to participate for different reasons, so hopefully focusing on the letter on Sunday mornings, I think it will largely be Sunday mornings, will allow all of us to profit from this letter. And as I say, I don't know how long it will take us, but I imagine a few months. I was just reading one or two background books about James, and somebody made the point, it's not a very deep theological point, but they made the point that you can read through the book of James in about eight minutes. I suppose it depends how quickly you read, but something you might want to try, see how long it takes you. There's some Sunday afternoon fun. Read through James and time yourself. Well, we will be meandering our way through it at a somewhat more leisurely pace. As I say, I haven't really broken it down. I haven't got an already established kind of plan as to, you know, how I'm going to break it up. All I know is that today we're going to be looking at verse number one. I do promise you that we will not do it one verse at a time, but today we are just going to be thinking about the first verse. One commentator describes this letter as practical, pastoral, and penetrating. I think those three adjectives do capture quite helpfully the character of the letter. I'm not going to use those three adjectives as the headings for a three-point sermon, but I think they are memorable in the literal sense that we can easily remember them, and they are not only memorable but also accurate, practical, pastoral, and penetrating. What I want to do this morning is a kind of introduction to the letter by looking at verse 1. And in verse 1 we have what you would expect to have at the beginning of a letter in the New Testament, and that is the opening greeting. And the structure of the greeting is simple enough.

We're introduced to the author, James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. We're also introduced to the recipients of the letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. And then we have a very short one-word greeting, that is the word greetings. So, it's simple in terms of the three parts that you would expect to find in an opening greeting to a letter. And so, what I hope to do, or what I'm planning to do this morning, is I think a modest task, but hopefully also an instructive and an encouraging one, and that is to consider these three elements of the greeting and spending a little bit more time on the first two where there's more material to work with. So, we're going to begin by thinking about the author of this letter who identifies himself as James. Now, who was James?

James. There seems to be a pretty solid and settled consensus that the James in question is James, the brother of Jesus. We know from other parts of the New Testament that Jesus had a brother called James. He had a number of siblings, but one was named James. For example, just to give one reference for that in chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel and in verse 55, we read, as Jesus has been spoken about, isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary? And are it his brothers, James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? And it goes on. So, there we have one of the brothers of Jesus identified as James or Jacob. Now, there are a number of reasons, and I'm not going to go into the details of them, but for many reaching this consensus, really, that James here, the author of this letter, is in all probability, though it's perhaps not possible to state categorically, but in all probability, the brother of Jesus. You'll remember, of course, that during Jesus' lifetime, his family were skeptical concerning his claim to be the Messiah. In fact, they did not believe that he was the Messiah, and it was only after his resurrection that members of his family came to faith, and in particular, our interest is in James. Again, we could just notice what Paul says in writing to the

Galatians. In Galatians chapter 1 and in verse 19, a reference is made to this reality there. In Galatians 1 verse 19, I saw none of the other apostles, only James, the Lord's brother. That is really very explicit, this reference to James as somebody who had come to faith, who was part of the believing community, and is identified as the brother of Jesus, the brother of the Lord. So, this is the man who has written this letter. Those who have kind of studied the matter and tried to work out the calculations, consider that in all probability, the letter was written in the 40s, maybe the late 40s, and in terms of what happened subsequently to James, we do have external evidence that is pretty solid in the form of a reference made by Josephus, the Jewish historian, who was a contemporary of these events, and he makes reference explicitly to James and to his death as a martyr by stoning, and he dates that to A.D. 62. So, this is the man who wrote the letters, as far as we can tell. Now, how does James describe himself? Because he identifies himself in a particular way. He describes himself in this way,

[7 : 01] James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I just want to think a little bit about what this self-designation, that's how he himself identifies who he is, how does that, what does that tell us about James? As we're going to be going through James and listening to what he has to say, it would be helpful just to have an idea of what kind of man he was. So, it's almost as if somebody familiar to us is speaking, is writing. So, what does this self-designation tell us about him?

Well, I think at one level we can certainly say that it speaks of his humility. He describes himself as a servant. And if we were just to pause for a moment and think about how he could have described himself, what descriptions he could have used that would have been true, that would have been accurate, but that would have been different to this one. He could have described himself, he could have identified himself as James, brother of the Lord. It would have been true. He could have, in that way, had basked in the reflective glory of having been conceived in the same womb and brought up in the same home as the incarnate Son of God. There's not many people who could have made that claim. But he didn't. In fact, he makes no mention to his family or filial connection to Jesus, not the brother of Jesus, but a servant, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Or he could have described himself as a pillar of the church. Now, it's very unlikely that he would have spoken of himself in those terms, but others did. Others used that language to speak of him. We've already noticed Paul making reference to James in Galatians. And in that same letter, there's a subsequent reference to James where he is described in that way. In Galatians chapter 2 and in verse 9, there we read Galatians 2 and verse 9,

James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. And then it goes on. So, this is how these men were considered by the believers in the church in Jerusalem and perhaps beyond, pillars of the church. But James doesn't speak of himself in those terms, not a pillar, but a servant. He could have described himself as a leader or as an apostle of the church in Jerusalem. And not just any leader, but clearly, as we've just noticed, a very prominent leader in a very prominent congregation. But no, that is not how he describes himself, not as a leader, but as a servant. And the very word that he uses, the word translated servant, and that's a perfectly legitimate and accurate translation to speak of himself as a servant or to translate the word with the word servant. But equally, the word slave could have been employed.

The Greek word *doulos* could also be translated with that much more dramatic word in some ways, certainly to our ears, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a slave of his brother, and he glories in that description. Though Paul's letter to the Romans had not yet been written when James wrote his letter, if the calculations that folk suggest are accurate, and I think they probably are, though that letter had not been written, so obviously James wouldn't have been able to have read its contents. Nonetheless, he was certainly a man who lived by the exhortation that is found in that letter. In Romans chapter 12 and verse 13, Paul encourages all of us and challenges all of us in these terms, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. And it would certainly seem fair to say that James was a man who was careful to take that seriously. And it's, of course, sound advice for all of us.

Just to bring to attention or to draw in something very current, I'm sure all of us in the course of this past week have heard about the death of Billy Graham. And, of course, we've heard or read the obituaries and the tributes and the discussions that there have been around his life. And it's interesting that we've probably heard more, certainly in what I've heard, I've heard more about his character than about his crusades. You think, well, that's what he was about, these crusades from city to city and the millions who heard him preach. But it is interesting that so many have focused, I think rightly, on the man's character and how that gave an authority to the message that he spoke. I was sharing with some of the folks who were at the lunch club this week that last year, myself and Martha were in Charlotte in North Carolina, where Billy Graham is from.

[12 : 21] And in Charlotte, there is what's known as the Billy Graham Library. It's really more a museum, but for some reason, it's identified as the Billy Graham Library. And while we were there, we heard the story of when the complex was opened, I think about 10 years ago. So, Billy Graham would have been in his late 80s when this complex was inaugurated. And given his age, he had had very little to do in the planning of this project. However, the first time that he actually saw what had been built was on the opening day, and he was given a tour around the premises of this complex.

And at the end of this little tour, somebody asked him, so, I don't know how they addressed him, Pastor Graham or Billy or whatever, what did you make of the museum? And his reply was, too much Billy Graham, which I thought was good. I suppose, what would you expect in a Billy Graham library? Presumably, there's going to be quite a lot about Billy Graham. But it is interesting how he was somewhat uncomfortable with this focus on him, on his life and what he had done. His concern was that, as his preaching had always been, to point to Jesus. And I think James would have warmed to the response that Billy Graham gave to that question. He was just a humble servant, the one who writes this letter, for all its value and for all the richness of it, as we will discover, considered himself as simply a servant, a humble servant. So, it speaks of his humility, this self-designation, but I think it also speaks of what we might say his identity and his dignity, because he wasn't just a servant. He was a servant of. He was a servant of God and of the Lord

Jesus Christ. And we could maybe dwell on that, but we're not going to. But simply making that point highlights that this was a man who had received a high calling. He was a servant of God. He was a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. And of course, that is true of all of us who are believers, all of us who have put our trust in Jesus as our Savior. Our calling is to be servants, servants of God, servants of the Lord. And the designation just following on from that does, of course, speak of James's calling to be a servant of the servant. And that sounds maybe a bit of a riddle, but how does Jesus speak of His mission? In Matthew, He spoke of the Son of Man in chapter 20 and verse 28 and speaks of why the Son of Man came. You're familiar, I'm sure, with these words of Jesus. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus is our servant King, as we'll be singing at the end of the service. And in that light, the title that James gives to himself a servant of Man, a servant of Man, a servant of Man, a servant of Man, a servant of

Jesus Christ, though evidence of His humility also speaks of a high and worthy calling to be like Jesus, to be like His Master. We are to be the servant princes of a servant King. How do you identify yourself? Do you identify yourself principally, above all other descriptions that might be accurate or true, might provide some insight to others as to who you are and what you do?

Do you principally identify yourself as a servant of Jesus Christ? And if we do, that is a good thing, but remember that servants serve. That's pretty basic, but it's a detail that we can sometimes forget.

[16 : 29] It's not enough just to identify as servants. We must live as servants, and servants serve. But also just another question around this self-designation of James, and the question is this, what does this self-designation tell us about his Master? James speaks of serving God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He is a servant of God the Father, and he is a servant of God the Son. And the very expression he uses, though not a proof text for the divinity of Jesus, does place Jesus, I think significantly, side by side with the Father in terms of honor due and obedience to be rendered. And so, in this way, though it's not James' concern to deal with a theology of the person of Jesus Christ, the very manner in which he describes himself does have that effect of placing Jesus at that level of enjoying equal honor with the Father. So, who's the author? Well, the author is James. But we need to say just a little more or one more thing in the matter of authorship. And the truth that we want to stress is perhaps best captured by posing two questions side by side or one after the other.

So, the first question is simple enough, who's writing? Well, it's James. The second question is, who's speaking? And the answer is God. James wrote the letter. God speaks through the letter. James wrote it, and God speaks to us through it. This is the Word of God. As we begin to study this letter, it is crucial that we are clear on what we sometimes speak of or sometimes is described as the dual authorship of Scripture, that God used men like James. But behind these men, God is the author. God is the one who is speaking through His Word. We need to share the convictions of the believers in Thessalonica, to whom Paul was able to say in the second chapter, or what he said is recorded in the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians and in verse 13. We also thank God continually because when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the Word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe. May we, as we enter into this study of James, have that same attitude, that same conviction as the believers in Thessalonica. And make no mistake, God is speaking to you in and through this letter, and He has plenty to say, and not just plenty to say, but plenty to command. Somebody who has given themselves the trouble of counting, and it wasn't me, has discovered that in the space of just over a hundred verses that make up this letter, there are about 50 imperatives or 50 commands. Now, that's a lot of commands for a short letter. And so, be aware of that and be prepared to listen to and obey God as He commands you through the content of this letter.

But let's move on to the recipients of the letter. And they're described in this rather intriguing language, the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Now, that's quite a grandiose description of the recipients of a letter. But what does it mean, or who does it refer to? I think the expression can be understood in one of two ways, which I don't think we need to choose. They're complementary.

I think the first way in which this language can be understood is simply as follows, that James is making reference to Jewish communities outside of Palestine scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Just to be aware that historically, in terms of the setting, the scattering of Jews throughout the empire wasn't just something that Christians were subject to when persecution arose.

Even before that, the very presence of Rome in Palestine led to many Jews having been scattered long before Jesus came. And so, there were these scattered communities, this diaspora, which is actually the very word that James employs here, across the Roman Empire. And among them, there were believing communities. And so, James is writing to these communities, largely Jewish communities, it is argued, hence the language he employs. It's interesting that throughout the letter, there are references that have a very Jewish feel to them. Just to give one example in chapter 2 and verse 2, where we read there, suppose a man comes into your meeting. The word meeting, or the word translated meeting there, is the word synagogue, which literally just means gathering. But the very fact that he uses that word also lends weight to understanding this expression, identifying the recipients as being very much a focus on Jewish, a Jewish audience, the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations.

[22 : 02] But having said all that, I think we can also conclude and also take the view that the expression almost certainly is intended to include both Jewish and Gentile believers. James is reflecting the truth that both Jewish and Gentile believers are the Israel of God, to use the language that Paul uses in his letter to the Galatians. Together, we constitute Jewish believers and Gentile believers, the Israel of God. Interestingly, the next letter in the New Testament, 1 Peter, begins with very similar language with a Jewish feel, and yet the content of that letter makes clear that it is addressed to both Jewish and Gentile believers. Just notice the language that Peter uses there in the first verse of that letter. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

The same language of a scattered people that James employs. So, the letter is addressed to all believers across ethnicities and across time. It's addressed to us. It's addressed to you.

What does this designation tell us about us and about God, the twelve tribes scattered among the nations? Well, we'll start with us. What does it tell us about God's people?

Maybe if you just think for a moment of the original recipients, then we'll move on to ourselves. For Jewish believers scattered among the nations, this greeting or this designation of who they are was a reminder that they still belong to God's chosen people. You see, they were in a context where many Jews considered them traitors, considered them apostate. They'd abandoned the faith of their fathers. They were heretics. They were going after some new religion. And this was the barrage that they were having to face. And James says, no, you are the people of God. You are the twelve tribes of God.

You are still part of God's ancient people. Don't allow others to question that reality. So, for Jewish readers, this would have been encouraging to have been addressed in this way. But for Gentiles, it was an assurance that they now belong to God's chosen people. If for Jews, it was an assurance that they still belonged, for Gentiles, it was an assurance that they now belong. They didn't used to belong, but now they do. They've been grafted in. They've been brought in to God's ancient people. They're part of the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Well, that maybe is what we could imagine. Original readers would have thought and how they would have been encouraged by it. But bringing it to our day, what do these words speak concerning God's people today about us? Well, we are an ancient people.

[25 : 04] The language speaks of our historic continuity and preservation through history by God's gracious and preserving hand. And so, when we sing from the Psalms and we sing of God delivering His people from Egypt or from exile or through the desert, we think, oh, that just seems so far away and it's nothing to do with us. That's our people. We're part of that people. One people through time, God's people, that God has preserved and brought forward through time to the present. We are part of that people, the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. It speaks of a people that is diverse and yet unified.

The twelve tribes, different tribes with their own characteristics. And of course, today, when we think of the church of Jesus Christ, made up of Jews and Gentiles, of Scots and Slovaks, of Black and White, from East and West and North and South, many tribes, much diversity, but one people, one nation, one people of God. What does the designation to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations tell us about God? Well, let me just focus on one truth that we can draw from this designation. And it is this, that our God is a God who scatters. Now, this is more than just a description of a historical circumstance where James says to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations. Now, that is simply something that was true. They were scattered among the nations. So, it is a description that is accurate of their circumstances, and that is part of what is being said there. But I don't think that's all that is being said there. I think this language of God, being a God who scatters His people, speaks more deeply of how God works, how God extends His kingdom, how God builds His church. This is a statement of purpose. Our God, with missional intent, scatters His people. And there is a rich vein of biblical material that we could trace to follow this theme of God scattering His people. And we've done that previously, and we're not going to do that again this morning. But let me just fleetingly trace a path that begins in Zechariah, the passage that we read just a few moments ago, and that continues through into the

Gospels. We read in Zechariah chapter 13 and verse 7 how the shepherd would be struck, but then also how the sheep would be scattered. And of course, it's very clear that this is a prophecy about the death of Jesus. And of course, the focus is so often on that part of the prophecy because it's so central. The shepherd being struck, and rightly we focus in on that part of the prophecy. But the prophecy also speaks of the sheep being scattered. And in Matthew chapter 26, explicit reference is made to that prophecy in Zechariah to explain why it was that in the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples scattered when Jesus came, or rather when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. And so Matthew looks to that occurrence as being a fulfillment of the prophecy spoken of by Zechariah. But I don't think the story ends there because those scattered disciples, scattered in fear of arrest and possible death, they were then gathered together again. They were told that they would gather in Galilee, and there Jesus, the risen Jesus, would meet them, and were just rushing through this. But what happened when they did meet again there in

Galilee? What did Jesus do with His gathered disciples? They'd been scattered, they're gathered again. What does Jesus do? Well, He scatters them again. What does He say to them? Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. So God is a scattering God. That's the way He rolls. That's the way He works. He scatters His people among the nations, and He does that for a purpose, with an end in view. Where does He scatter us?

Well, He scatters us among the nations. He doesn't send us to a mountaintop. He doesn't call us to a monastic solitary life. Rather, we are to live and serve and witness to be salt and light among the nations. And why? Because that is the way God draws the nations to Himself. The language of scattering sounds quite random, and yet God never scatters randomly. You are where you are for a purpose.

[29 : 52] God has placed us in this nation, in this city, among the diverse and multi-ethnic citizens of Aberdeen for a purpose. Each Sunday, we gather as God's people, as God's covenant community. But then at the close of today, God sends us back into the city. He scatters us across this city to live among the people, among the nations. And so this language speaks of what God is like and of what God does and does with a purpose. Of course, the picture of the reality of being scattered isn't just geographic.

Well, that's the principal sense of how it's being used here in the verse we're looking at. But there is a sense in which being called to service that is unfamiliar to us or difficult for us, called to service in places and in ways that we are reluctant to do or to go, is also part of God's scattering as He would push us beyond where maybe we would like to go. And so I wonder, is God prodding you? Is He looking to scatter you?

Is He looking to send you, maybe not across to the other side of the world, though He may be, but even within Aberdeen pushing you beyond where you are comfortable. The picture that I have in my mind, I don't know how helpful it would be, but it's the picture that came to my mind as I was thinking about this. I don't know if you watched at the Olympics, that the wrestling could be wrestling or the sumo. It's the same sort of idea. And there's this big circle, and you have the two wrestlers.

And of course, the idea is that they need to get one of them out of the circle. And it's sometimes intriguing to see how a wrestler who's right on the edge, how that with such skill and with such energy wriggles his way in such a manner as not to be sent out. You think, how can he possibly stay within the circle? But somehow he manages, and it's impressive to behold. I think sometimes we're like that. Of course, the difference is that it's a good thing to be sent out of the circle in God's purposes. But we wriggle so as not to be beyond where we want to be. And I wonder if God is pushing us, be it individually as believers, to serve in an area that we've always been reluctant to serve, or to go to a place that we're afraid of going to. Well, we've thought a little bit then about the recipients. Let me finally just comment much more briefly on the greetings, the third element that we have in this verse. We've thought about the author, we've thought about the recipients, but then finally we have the greeting, just one word, greetings. And there's really not much to say about it. It is interesting, I'm not sure if we should place too much significance on this, but nonetheless it is interesting that James employs a word that is rooted in the verb to rejoice.

Now, it is a word that had become current at the time that James was writing to simply mean what it is translated as, greetings. But nonetheless, that is the root of the word, the verb to rejoice. And if we just take that on board, may God help us as we study this letter over the next few months or however long it is, to know something of the joy that comes, not simply from hearing God's word, but from obeying and doing God's word. That's what James would have wanted, and that's what God demands. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

[33 : 39] We thank You for this letter that we're venturing into. We pray that it would prove to be for us practical and pastoral and penetrating. We pray that we would, with the church in Thessalonica, be persuaded that this is a word not just of men, but the Word of God for us, a word directed to each of us in our own particular and varied circumstances. We thank You for Your purposes for us. We thank You that You are a God who scatters Your people among the nations, that we might be salt and light, that we might be those who can call others to the Savior. And we pray that wherever You have placed us, that would be our great concern. And help us to, with James, know what it is, to humbly and yet joyfully identify ourselves as servants of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray in His name. Amen.