

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF JAMES – PART ONE

Most of the New Testament writers had been prepared for their ministry, whether speaking or writing, during the three years of Jesus' own public ministry, or like Paul and Luke, even later once the work of the church had already begun on the day of Pentecost. There were two notable exceptions, James and Jude, his brother. Their perspective on the Christian message was strikingly different. As the half-brothers of Jesus they had grown up with Him before anyone else had heard of Him outside of His carpenter's shop in Nazareth.

James, the apostle, had been murdered by Herod.(Acts 12:2) Peter after his release from jail acknowledged another James among the leaders of the Jerusalem church.(Acts 12:17) When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to seek mature help to settle the dispute as to whether grace or law was the secret of the Christian life, it was again James who led the meeting which resolved the problem.(Acts 15:13) Years later it was still James who welcomed Paul to Jerusalem and diplomatically organized Paul's visit which could have been divisive.(Acts 21:18-26) Paul identified his host on these various visits as 'James, the Lord's brother'.(Gal. 1:19; 2:9) But it had not always been this way.

Mark records how Jesus was a carpenter, as well as the son of a carpenter, and gives the names of his four brothers including James and Judas, otherwise known as Jude.(Mark 6:3) His sisters were unnamed. On an earlier occasion, Jesus' family wanted to lock Him up because they thought He had gone crazy.(Mark 3:21) When they arrived at the house where He was preaching presumably to carry out their intention, He firmly disowned them until they were ready to do the will of God.(Mark 3:31-35) They were still unbelieving in their older brother when they urged Him to move His ministry to Judea presumably to spare the family embarrassment in their own neighbourhood.(Jn. 7:1-9) Yet in the upper room awaiting the day of Pentecost, Jesus' mother and brothers were among the expectant group of believers.(Acts 1:14) What had changed their hearts? A personal resurrection appearance by Jesus to James, is recorded by Paul.(I Cor. 15:7) What a meeting that must have been! Finally James knew who His brother really was and spread the word among the family.

Now it all made sense. From their times of birth until He was 30, the brothers and sisters had lived alongside Jesus. Nothing is known of those years except one episode recorded by Luke when Jesus was 12 years old and the lovely description of Him 'continuing to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.' After the visit to Jerusalem, He 'continued in subjection to His parents, and kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.'(Lk. 2:40-52) This is the last mention of Joseph, so presumably having taught Jesus his trade, he died sometime before the Lord's ministry began. Jesus, as the oldest son, would have taken on much of the task of supporting His mother, helping to raise His younger siblings, and earning a living for the family. James would have seen God in action in family and business life. We can only guess what practical problems Jesus had to deal with. What we can be sure of is that He did it with outstanding wisdom, grace, patience and love.

James and the others watched all this but were blind to the obvious, until James met his risen brother.

It is not surprising therefore that James' insight into the Christian message was so practical and down to earth, although entirely consistent with all the other writers. His frequent references throughout his book to the Christian's attitude to the poor would reflect what he had experienced throughout his childhood and early adult life.

My encouragement in studying this powerful letter is to begin by reading and re-reading it until you are thoroughly familiar with the main themes. Always begin with prayer so that God is your teacher. Question Him as you read about what is not immediately clear. It is often helpful to divide books into sections which reflect the flow of ideas. We will study James a chapter at a time, so start by breaking chapter one into parts, but always remember that ideas flow from one part to the next. My suggestions are as follows: verses 1; 2-4; 5-8; 9-11; 12-18; 19-25; 26-27. If you give each section a title it helps to remind you of the key ideas.

QUESTIONS ON CHAPTER ONE

1. How does James describe himself in his introduction? Why does he not mention that he was Jesus' brother? What can we learn from this about our own ministry? To whom was the letter written? How does this fit in with James' lifelong ministry in Jerusalem?(1:1)
2. What conditions should we expect in our Christian lives? What should be our response to tough times? What will be the outcome of this response? Reflect on some hard times in your own life, how you responded and what God did.(1:2-4)
3. When times are difficult what should be our first request of God? Why does this always need to come before any other request?(I Jn.5:14,15) What does He promise will be the outcome? What must be the essential condition of any such prayer? What does it mean to be 'double-minded'? Why is it so damaging?(1:5-8)
4. What according to this section will be the first consequence of asking for wisdom? How will wisdom change our view of ourselves? How is this new wisdom so different from the values of the world we live in?(1:9-11)
5. What now will be the next question which God's wisdom answers about life? Why is it so important to understand this? Where then according to James do bad things come from? Who deceives us?(Rev.12:9) Should we only expect good things from God? To have 'first fruits' in our lives what needed to have happened first? How can we best help those who are struggling?(1:12-18)
6. What third consequence of asking for wisdom in tough times does James now describe? How are most of us inclined to react when bad things happen to us or those around us? How will wisdom change that? What warning does James give about only hearing what God says but not doing? To what everyday behaviour does he compare it?(1:19-25)
7. What fourth example of the outcome of God-given wisdom is given? What does wise living look like in practice?(1:26,27)