

# THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

*“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”*

## MARTIN LUTHER’S VIEWS ON THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

### BIBLE STUDY COURSE - SESSION #2

#### LUTHER’S NEGATIVE COMMENTS:

Among many comments made about the Epistle of James, the great reformer, Martin Luther, is often quoted and specifically known to have written the following:

1. “St. James’ epistle is **really an epistle of straw**, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.” (*Luther’s Works V.35, pg. 362*)
2. “The epistle of James gives us much trouble, for the Papists embrace it alone and leave out all the rest ... Accordingly, if they will not admit my interpretations, then I shall make rubble also of it. **I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove**, as the priest in Kalenberg did” (*Luther’s Works V. 34 pg. 317*)
3. “We should throw the epistle of James out of this school (*i.e. Wittenberg University*), for it doesn’t amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning. **I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he did.**” (*Luther’s Works V. 54 pg. 424*)

#### LUTHER’S BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONS:

Among his many great accomplishments, Martin Luther, is credited with the translation of the Holy Bible into the *“language of the people.”* He began the translation of the New Testament from ancient Greek texts into German at the Wartburg Castle on Christmas Day 1521. Exercising phenomenal diligence, he completed the task by Easter Sunday 1522. The new translation was first published in September of that year. From 1523 onward, various books of the Old Testament, translated from Hebrew source texts, also began to appear; and, the complete Bible was finished by Luther in 1534.

Twenty-first century learners of Scripture and its message sometimes find it difficult to understand why reference is so often made to *“Luther’s Bible.”* To most of us the *“Holy Bible”* is a designation given to a corpus of 66 books (39 in the O.T.; 27 in the N.T.), which although published in various modern translations (*i.e. KJV, NRSV, NIV, CB, etc.*) contains the same books, and in the same order. (*Roman Catholics include some apocryphal books in their editions.*)

There were Bibles in Germany before Luther. His first deeply serious study of Scripture began in the Erfurt monastery and at the University of Wittenberg. One of the rooms in most medieval monasteries was a *scriptorium*, or writing room, where monks laboriously hand-copied manuscripts before the days of printing. The Latin translation of the Holy Bible that St. Jerome had made (*The Vulgate*) around the beginning of the fifth century A.D., was the most common one. It has been estimated that probably 26,000 copies of this Latin bible were in use during the 15<sup>th</sup> century; but, they were found almost exclusively in churches, monasteries and universities. When printing was invented, the very first printed book was Guttenberg's Bible around 1452. So, the Bible was not unknown in the church, but only the educated could read the Latin version.

Martin Luther's initial translation of the New Testament books into common everyday German (*the spoken language of the people*) was so that the Scripture might be read and made available generally. Luther also provided introductions to many of these books as an aid to understanding them. Some of his prefaces are quite remarkable, not just as summaries of the books themselves, but as articulate expressions of the Gospel, and as clues to understanding the way in which he (*Luther*) interpreted Scripture. The prefaces to the New Testament appeared in the very first 1522 edition. They show Luther's freedom of judgment concerning the relative importance of specific biblical books in the light of the Gospel, as illustrated directly below:

### **LUTHER'S PREFACE TO THE EPISTLE OF ST. JAMES -**

***"I think highly of the epistle of James, and regard it as valuable although it was rejected in early days. It does not expound human doctrines, but lays much emphasis on God's law. Yet, to give my own opinion without prejudice to that of anyone else, I do not hold it to be of apostolic authorship, for the following reasons:***

***Firstly, because in direct opposition to St. Paul and all the rest of the Bible, it ascribes justification to works, and declares that Abraham was justified by his works when he offered up his son. St. Paul, on the contrary, in Romans 4 [:3], teaches that Abraham was justified without works, by his faith alone, the proof being in Genesis 15 [:6], which was before he sacrificed his son. Although it would be possible to 'save' the epistle by a gloss giving a correct explanation of justification here ascribed to works, it is impossible to deny that it does refer Moses's word in Genesis 15 [which speaks not of Abraham's works but of his faith, just as Paul makes plain in Romans 4] to Abraham's works. This defect proves that the epistle is no of apostolic provenance.***

***Secondly, because, in the whole length of its teaching, not once does it give Christians any instruction or reminder of the passion, resurrection, or spirit of Christ. It mentions Christ once and again, but teaches nothing about Him; it speaks only of a commonplace faith in God. It is the office of a true apostle to preach the passion and resurrection and work of Christ, and to lay down the true ground of this faith, as Christ himself says in John 15 [:27], You shall be my witnesses. All genuinely sacred books are unanimous here, and all preach Christ emphatically.***

***The true touchstone for testing every book is to discover whether it emphasizes the prominence of Christ or not. All Scripture sets forth Christ, Romans 3 [:24f] and Paul will know nothing but Christ, 1 Corinthians 2 [:2]. What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, not even if taught by Peter or Paul. On the other hand, what does preach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, or Herod does it.***

***The epistle of James, however, only drives you to the law and its works. He mixes one thing with another to such an extent that I suspect some good and pious man assembled a few things said by disciples of the apostles, and then put them down in black and white; or perhaps the epistle was written by someone else who made notes of a sermon of his. He calls the law a law of freedom, although St. Paul calls it a law of slavery, wrath, death, and sin.***

***Yet he quotes St. Peter saying that “Love covers a multitude of sins”, and again “Humble yourselves under the hand of God”; further, St. Paul’s word in Galatians 5. The spirit hateth against hate. But St. James was killed by Herod in Jerusalem before St. Peter’s death, which shows the writer to have been far later than St. Peter or St. Paul.***

***In sum: he wished to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to works, but he had neither the spirit nor the thought nor the eloquence equal to the task. He does violence to Scripture, and so contradicts Paul and all Scripture. He tries to accomplish by emphasizing law what the apostles bring about by attracting men to love. I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible; but I would not prevent anyone placing him or raising him where he likes, for the epistle contains many excellent passages. One man does not count as a man even in the eyes of the world; how then shall this single and isolated writer count against Paul and all the rest of the Bible?”***

### **A BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF LUTHER’S VIEW ABOUT THE EPISTLE OF JAMES:**

Luther (*in his own words*) offered these three main reasons why he questioned James:

1. The epistle ***“is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works.”***
2. Although ***“its purpose is to teach Christians ... in all [its] long teaching it does not mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ.”***
3. Finally, ***“James does nothing more than drive to the law and its works.”***

Later in life, Luther concluded: ***“I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him.”*** [LUTHER’S WORKS V. 35; pp 396-397]

## **REACTION TO LUTHER'S "PREFACE" COMMENTS:**

Although Martin Luther never wrote a formal commentary on the Epistle of James, his "Preface" printed above, has had a significant impact on the Christian Church from the time of its writing to the present. Nearly every writer who has ever commented on James, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant, has done so in full awareness of Luther's view and has responded accordingly – often negatively.

Actually, Luther first publicly questioned the integrity of the Letter of James within the context of his discussion of the sacraments in "*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*", which he published in 1520. In reference to the sacrament of Extreme Unction, Luther attacked its biblical basis in the Roman Church's understanding – as did some other contemporary catholic critics like Erasmus – by writing "***this Epistle is not by James the apostle, and it is not worthy of an apostolic spirit.***" However, in his argument against extreme unction, Luther left the question of James' authorship aside for the moment. He argued, instead, that extreme unction was not a sacrament on the basis that it lacked institution by Christ himself.

Later, in comments made in the prefaces to Luther's translation of the complete Bible (1534) and a special New Testament edition made in 1539, the aforementioned negative references to James were removed. But Luther's original remarks (1520 & 1522) about James have since become a source of ongoing controversy in biblical interpretation.

Reflecting back over a 50+-year ministry of Word and Sacrament, engaged in by the writer of this bible study, the fact is that readings from the Epistle of James were rarely included in the Lectionary of the Lutheran Church used during worship services that this author conducted. Moreover, using a text from James as the basis for construction of a homily or sermon was even rarer. There is no memory of any elective course(s) on James being offered in seminary (*early 1960's*), nor is there much recall of distinctly 'Lutheran' bible study materials on James having been produced by the publishing arm of the national church.

## **REACTION TO THE EPISTLE OF JAMES BY OTHER PROTESTANTS:**

Over many years there have been relatively few Lutheran scholars who have supported views in opposition to brother 'Martin!' In the wider Protestant tradition, however, commentaries on James have most often been produced by theologians in the Reformed Church movement. Chief among these was **John Calvin** (1509–1564).

Calvin, in answer to Luther's position, accepted the Epistle of James, stating that James and Paul are reconcilable with all of Scripture. For Calvin, the deciding factor for determining the authority of James is not that it must preach Christ. The criterion he used is "***that it contains nothing unworthy of an Apostle of Christ.***" In Calvin's further words: "***it is indeed full of instruction on various subjects, the benefit of which extends to every part of the Christian life.***" [Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, 276; CO 55:381]

Several other early prominent Protestants wrote formal commentaries on The Book of James. These two are mentioned: (1) **Niels Hemmingsen** (1513-1600), who was an influential Lutheran preacher, a bishop and a recognized scholar in his native Denmark. (2) **Thomas Manton** (1620-1677), an English rector of St. Paul's Cathedral, Covent Garden and a noted theologian at Oxford.

Calvin, Luther, Hemmingsen and Manton all expressed concerns about the actual authorship of James. Unfortunately, none had the benefit of the modern tools of biblical interpretation used today in our contemporary study of Scripture. Had those means been available back in earlier centuries, it is conjectured that these respected theologians might now agree that James, the "half"-brother of Jesus, certainly provided the *'inspiration'* for the book and that it was named ultimately to honor him.

### **LUTHER'S PARADOX:**

There is no doubt that Martin Luther struggled greatly with James. Here are two verses of Scripture that the Reformer found in direct contradiction with one another:

**Romans 3:28** – *"For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law."*

**James 2:24** – *"You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone."*

On the surface these two verses definitely contradict each other; no doubt about it! Numerous attempts have been made to reconcile them. Some modern evangelicals like to declare *"we are saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone."* That's a debatable way of saying that faith alone saves us, but that faith will automatically produce works. Are there other theological insights that can be applied?

### **TWO SALVATIONS?**

Without a doubt, St. Paul was chief among all Christian theologians who have ever lived; and, Martin Luther, born many centuries later, followed in Paul's footsteps. The Letter to the Romans is commonly agreed to be the most comprehensive explanation of Paul's theology. A careful study reveals that Paul spoke of salvation in the past tense and salvation in the future tense, each with different requirements.

In **Romans 5:9-10**, Paul writes: *"Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."*

Notice that each past-tense reference relates to the death of Christ; and, each future-tense reference relates to the life of Christ in us!

In the past-tense, Paul speaks of the death and blood of Christ, which saved us and forgave our sins. In the future-tense, Paul refers to the life of Christ working in us – by direction of the Holy Spirit and by grace – and he always refers to works.

It's not just James who includes works. Paul only excludes works when he refers to salvation in the past tense. A good example follows:

**Ephesians 2:8-9 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and it is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast.”**

Here St. Paul refers to salvation in the past-tense. In Greek, the literal translation reads “***for by grace are you having been saved through faith.***”

But, when Paul refers to salvation in the future-tense, the story is radically different. Here are some examples specifically using the word “works” or a close synonym:

**2 Corinthians 5:10 – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.”**

**Romans 2:6-7 – “For he will render to every man according to his works; to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life;”**

**Galatians 6:6-10 – “Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”**

## **IS THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FAITH AND WORKS RESOLVED?**

It seems apparent to the author of this study that Paul agrees with James.

Salvation is only by faith alone if we are speaking in the past-tense of our forgiveness from sins, and our entrance into Christ. However, when we begin speaking in the future-tense of judgment, eternal life, and entering the kingdom of heaven, there we seem to find Paul agreeing with James. Future-tense salvation is not by faith alone.

Paul was taking pains to explain his theology to the Romans, because he was often being misquoted and slandered. In that careful explanation he divides our deliverance from sin in the past-tense from our future rewards.

James, on the other hand, is exhorting Christian believers who are excusing their lifestyles by leaning too heavily on salvation by faith alone. He may not be carefully explaining the Gospel to Luther's desired highest standards. Instead, he speaks generally of salvation, and he says it involves both faith and works. With that St. Paul would completely agree!

It's high time that we studied this book in greater depth and gave the Epistle of James a proper hearing, which is what is intended in the study that follows.

### **A TIME FOR GENERAL DISCUSSION:**

**How would you answer a person who told you that all you have to do to be saved, nothing more, is to believe in Jesus?**