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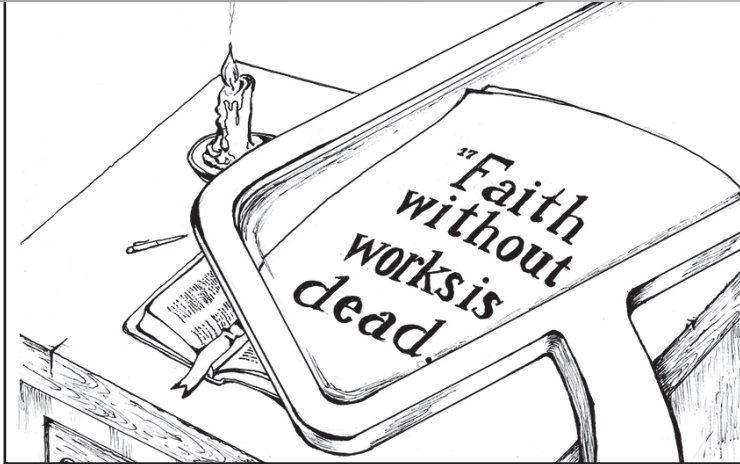
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Introduction



An “Epistle of Straw”?

The Epistle (letter) of James has been one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. In the Leipzig Debate of 1519, Roman Catholic thinker Johann Eck used this letter to challenge Martin Luther’s opinion of justification (forgiveness; holiness) by faith alone. Eck argued that works needed to be part of a Christian’s life.

In answer, Luther denied that James had been inspired (led by God) to write this letter. Luther also argued that the letter was wrong in teaching justification by works. In the introduction to his 1522 German translation of the New Testament, Luther made it clear that he preferred (liked better) books like John, 1 John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter. This is because these books show Christ and teach “everything that is needful and blessed . . . to know.”

Luther’s introduction in the book of James was even more negative. He called James’s book “an epistle [letter] of straw” because it had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” Luther never removed this book from the authorized Holy Bible. But he separated it from what he thought was the authorized list of holy books.

Luther’s focus on Paul’s letters, especially Romans and Galatians, and his refusal to accept James fully had strong influence on Christian thinking for hundreds of years.

Who was James anyway? Was he a legalist?¹ Did James disagree with Paul about justification (forgiveness; holiness) by faith by teaching that justification is really by works? Or was he just giving a different understanding of the subject, very close to several teachings of Jesus in the Gospels? Clearly, the answer is that James meant to give a slightly different view or understanding on the subject of salvation by faith.

Not all of the Bible thinkers during Luther’s time agreed with his low opinion

1. legalist—a person who believes he or she can be saved by his or her works or by keeping the law.

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of James. One of them was Melanchthon, Luther's closest friend. Melanchthon believed that the writings of Paul and James were in agreement.

James had a firsthand knowledge of Jesus. In fact, his epistle of all the epistles (letters) may be the earliest known example of Christian writing. Of all the epistles, James shows most closely the teachings of Jesus as found in the Gospels. As in the parables (stories that teach lessons) of Jesus, there are many examples in James from farming and the world of finance. Other important themes (ideas) include wisdom, prayer, and faith.

The book of James is special in other ways too. It opens a window for us into some of the struggles that the earliest Christian churches faced. Envy, jealousy, and worldliness spread among the Christians. Social and cultural pressures caused problems between wealthier Christians and poor ones. We also see a great struggle going on as James attacks false ideas about wisdom and faith.

James meant to give us a clearer view on righteousness by faith.

Most important for Seventh-day Adventists, the Epistle of James shows strong faith in the return of Jesus. It also gives us important understandings about the law, the judgment, and the Second Coming. Elijah is even held up by James as an example for us to follow. This is something special for us as Seventh-day Adventists. This is because we are entrusted with preparing the way for Christ's second coming.

So, in some ways, our journey this quarter covers the entire Christian period—from Christ's time to ours. The reason is that it includes not only some of the earliest preaching but also special wisdom for these last days.

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