



Introduction

The small, fast paced and pushy Epistle of James has been quite the instigator over the centuries. It was debated often in the early church, irritated one of the leaders of the protestant reformation, and has encouraged and built up the lives of believers in every age. Many of its teachings are quite well known. Consider this short list all coming from the first chapter of the book of James:

- *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...*
- *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights...*
- *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger...*
- *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...*
- *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world...*

Passages like this and many others throughout the book have made it one of the most memorable and impactful portions of scripture in the Holy Bible. James is also strong medicine. He doesn't play around. He comes to life with an agenda that we might follow Jesus and build our lives on his teaching. James gives no room for being a pretend or play Christian. He demands the real deal from us as followers of the risen Christ.

Theologians such as John Frame of Reformed Theological Seminary have taught us about the tripartite nature of the truth of the Word of God.¹ It has a *normative* aspect and teaches us what we ought to believe about God and ourselves. It has a *situational* aspect in that the Scriptures teach and impact us individually and communally in each of our lives. Finally, it has an *existential and ethical* aspect in that it prescribes for us the paths we should walk and the way we should live. James is an ethical book in that

¹ See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1987), 1.

he says to us "this is the way to go now walk therein." As such, James is immensely practical and on the ground in real life with us.

This year at Jacobs Well we have looked at the *normative* truths of the Gospel. Who Jesus is and what he has done for his people. These truths are objective and the most real reality that there is. We have also briefly traveled in how truth about God should actually transform us. The *situational* aspect of the gospel is that it sanctifies and makes us holy as we live in our historical and cultural context. The gospel impacts our own story uniquely. We now arrive to James to look at the ethical aspect of life in Christ: walking the walk, living out the talk.

In this essay my goals are simple indeed. I want to introduce you to the Book of James. I want you to learn about its author, its impact in church history and its robust practical theology and ethical vision. Furthermore, I wish to point you towards further resources for our study of this book. So do track with the footnotes and go to the bibliography. There is much more to be found in the works referenced there. To begin we will look at a simple name: *James*. It is a common name traveling with an uncommon extraordinary letter.

The James Identity

The letter itself identifies its author with the name of James. In fact we get little more detail about him from the writing itself other than he calls himself "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*" (James 1:1)

This actually helps us very little as the name James was very common to the Jewish-Christian community of the first century. It's Greek and Hebrew equivalents boil down to the name "*Jacob*." It's like the name Mohammed or George or Aarav or Jose; many people in certain communities would have had that name. In fact, there are four different guys named James in the New Testament alone. A quick reading of Acts chapter 1 will land you with this in verse 13:

"And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James."

In just one verse alone we have three men named James. This commonality in early apostolic Christianity just complicates our identification of the author. Here we find a certain Judas has his father (James) mentioned here in order to distinguish him from the more nefarious individual of the same name. So this James wasn't as big of a deal in history. Furthermore, James the son of Alphaeus, though one of the twelve disciples, did not seem to be a major player that would have had his name associated with a canonical work the Book of James.

This leaves two large men named James looming in the early Christian community. There is James, the son of Zebedee and James the "brother" of Jesus (Galatians 1:19, Matthew 13:53-58). The son of Zebedee is one of the three central apostles whom Jesus brought close on many special occasions. For instance, Peter, James and John were witnesses to his Transfiguration (see Matthew 17, Mark 9) as well as a specific powerful miracle (Luke 8:49-56). This James was sort of a big deal. However, most historians and New Testament scholars exclude James, the son of Zebedee as the author of the epistle because he was killed as early as A.D. 44 by Herod Agrippa I (see Acts 12:2).² To date the Book of James

² Craig Blomberg and Marianne J. Kamell, *James : Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 28.

so early with no apparent reason to do so seems problematic. So the most likely author remaining is James the brother of Jesus whose prominence grew in the early days of the Christian movement after the resurrection. We'll talk more about him specifically in a bit.

This understanding that the epistle of James was written by the Lord's brother was also the accepted and traditional view for some 1700 years though there have been notable exceptions. One luminary figure being that of St. John of Calvinism (1509-1564) who held that James, son of Alphaeus, could have been the author. Others such as Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) held that another, perhaps unknown man named James could have been the author.³

If we hold to the Church's historical understanding of James the brother of Jesus being the author we gain much indeed. First, we understand the time period in which the letter was written quite readily as James is prominent in the Book of Acts. We can glean several insights from a cross-referencing with that narrative. Specifically we see that the early church had been dispersed by persecution so the audience to whom James was writing comes more into focus. Additionally, we are able to make many connections to the person of James himself from recorded Christian tradition and history. Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes with great alacrity what we gain from understanding James, the brother of the Lord as the author:

If James's authorship is taken as historically accurate, then, in one stroke, we are provided with a place of origin, an approximate dating, and some hope of imagining the circumstances of author and readers. As a not inconsiderable bonus, we are also given valuable evidence for Palestinian Christianity sometime between 35 and 62 CE.⁴

Brotherhood to Jesus

The James in view for us here was spoken of very explicitly by the apostle Paul as "the brother of the Lord" in Galatians chapter 1 verse 19. The very fact that Jesus had brothers (and sisters) may be shocking to some if they grew up in a specific religious tradition. The Roman Catholic religion teaches the perpetual virginity of Mary⁵ so her having other children was not permissible. Over the years many theories have been put forth to reconcile Mary's virginity with that of Jesus having siblings as recorded in Matthew 12:46 and 13:53-58. The following are the major views. I'll spare you the technical names for now (OK, if you like, in order the views are known as *Hieronymianism*, *Ephiphanianism* and *Helvidianism*⁶)

1. **Jesus's cousins** - The theory that these people were merely his relatives or cousins was put forth by the eminent Latin theologian Jerome in the fourth century. This is highly unlikely because the Greek term (*adelphos*) never means cousins.⁷ It means siblings in a family that have at least one blood parent relative.
2. **Joseph's other kids** - This, of course, is possible due to the fact that Joseph could have had other wives. This view is favored by Catholics as it allows Mary to have no other biological children.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 12.

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 92.

⁵ "The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, 1.2.2.3.2, 499." http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a3p2.htm (accessed 1/4/2014). The relevant article reads as follows: *The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." And so the liturgy of the Church celebrates Mary as Aeiparthenos, the "Ever-virgin"*

⁶ Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2011), 16.

⁷ Moo, 22.

3. **Mary's kids** - This seems to be the most natural reading of the biblical texts and the most likely meaning in light of the children accompanying Mary in Matthew 12 and 13.

Historically, Roman Catholics have worked to go with number 1 or number 2 both of which keep Mary a virgin for life. Protestants have gone mostly with number 3 but some have given a nod towards number 2.⁸ Most Protestants find the declaration of Mary's perpetual virginity to be an unnecessary historical invention without much biblical or cultural warrant.

James the Man

In the New Testament we may piece together some things about Jesus's brother James. First, he would have been from a family that had many children and the boys all had very traditional Jewish names (Jacob, Joseph, Jesus/Joshua, Simeon – see Mark 6:3). This would indicate they were an observant and likely religious family.⁹ Furthermore, it seems that Jesus's brothers did not really believe in him (his identity as Son of God) or his message until after his resurrection (John 7:3-5). Interestingly, James is specifically mentioned as one to whom Jesus appeared to after his resurrection. Seeing his dead brother alive again likely turned James from skeptic to pastor pretty quickly. I've always felt the irony in this. James pastoring his brother's church. Not simply the church his brother founded but the church that worships his brother. He even calls himself a servant or slave of Jesus in James 1:1. He himself now worships his brother!¹⁰ Kinda crazy and cool.

Finally, James emerges in the book of Acts as a major leader in Jerusalem. After Peter had been sent out on mission James role likely grew in prominence. In Acts 15 we find James steadying the young Christian movement at The Jerusalem Council through a huge controversy involving Jewish and Gentile believers and requirements for being a Christian. We'll talk more about the nature of that controversy here in a moment. What we do see in James is a just and problem-solving leader at a crucial moment in the life of the early church. When a resolution was found to the crisis James was the person speaking for the apostles as they moved to create a culture wide open to the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church of God.

The Audience of the Book of James

The letter was almost certainly written to Jewish Christians for several reasons. First, verse two in chapter 2 describes them as meeting in a synagogue¹¹ which was common for first century Judaism and early Jewish Christians. Second, their concept of God is monotheistic but Jesus is being called "Lord" in the greeting of the letter. Third, the law is mentioned in three chapters of the book but within a gospel understanding of Torah. Finally, the greeting in chapter 1 describes the recipients as being of the "12 tribes of the Diaspora". In other words, they were likely Jewish believers scattered out from Jerusalem. This fits well within an early date of the 40s as the church was pushed by persecution out of that city. The content of the book also leads us to believe that many were poor, marginalized and suffering people. They seem to have been exploited and cast down by rich land owners and perhaps were seeing life in terms of financial ability.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ McKnight, 16.

¹⁰ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James : The Tests of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 28.

¹¹ The word for "assembly" or "gathering" in James 2:2 is *synagoge*.

Dating the book of James is difficult as this is closely related to the question of authorship. Assuming, as we did above, that James the brother of Jesus and Pastor in Jerusalem is the author, we conclude that it was likely written in the mid-40s A.D. The strongest argument for the date in the mid-40s comes from the fact that the book of James does not mention the rulings of the important council in Jerusalem that took place in Acts 15. James was a prominent leader in that council whose goal was to settle the issue of Jewish and Gentile inclusion together as one church. The questions addressed there were whether or not the Gentiles needed to first become Jewish in order to be followers of Jesus. Did they need to keep the whole Law of Moses? What ritual and ceremonial practices did they need to observe? Did the gentile men have to get their man business trimmed back with circumcision? James's lack of address of this council and its decisions when addressing the Torah make it likely that he wrote before the apostolic council.¹²

Others have argued that a date in the 40s is likely due to the theological vision James articulates surrounding justification and faith. Although he says nothing that would contradict Paul's doctrine in later books like Romans and Galatians, he does seem to be addressing a potential concern with that teaching. How does faith and works fit together? James addresses this concern strongly in the classic passage in chapter 2. This fits well with a date where a strong tension between faith/works would have been addressed.

The Book of James in Church History

James was discussed early in considerations related to the canon of Scripture but was included in all final compilations of the New Testament. By the early fourth century the church historian Eusebius cited the book of James as canonical scripture.¹³ In the early Eastern Church, Theodore of Mopsuestia seemed to reject all the general epistles but the great preacher Chrysostom quoted James with approval. Jerome, the great translator of the vulgate, affirmed the book as scripture and also credited the work to the brother of the Lord. Augustine followed and with these two theological giants affirming, James's position in the canon was unquestioned and unthreatened until the Reformation era.¹⁴

At the arrival of the reformation, James took some shots from some significant scholars and leaders. In the reformation era, Erasmus of Rotterdam, a Catholic scholar, questioned the quality of the Greek and it being attributed to Jesus's brother.¹⁵ Martin Luther infamously spoke against James calling it an "epistle of straw"¹⁶ and quipped off in his familiar humor that he was tempted to "throw Jimmy in the stove." Luther felt James pressed against the beloved doctrine of sola fide, or justification by faith alone. Other reformers disagreed and strongly affirmed the epistle of James. Men such as William Tyndale, the first translator of the Bible into English, and John Calvin, one of the fathers of the Reformed church, all stood strongly with James inclusion in the canon.¹⁷ Interestingly enough, Luther himself did not deny James as Scripture; he just ran his mouth a bit that he didn't like it so much. Philip Melancthon, Luther's friend and heir to the Lutheran theological tradition, also affirmed James reconciling it with justification by faith quite nicely.¹⁸

The Book of James has been around since a decade after the resurrection of Jesus and has picked a few fights with the faithful over the years. The book itself comes to us in a unique form, addresses us a

¹² Moo, 26.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Johnson, 140, 141.

¹⁶ Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 1.

¹⁷ Johnson, 142.

¹⁸ McCartney, 1

family of faith, and presses us forward to live in light of our deep held beliefs. What I want us to do next is look at the book itself for a bit before closing with a reflection on its major theological emphases.

The Book of James Proper

What believers in every age have found is that James is immensely practical. Dan McCartney recounts this well:

*Its orientation to practical theology, its interest in true godly wisdom and consistent Christian behavior, and its large supply of memorable phrases and aphorisms that encapsulate many aspects of the practical Christian life have made it useful for purposes of moral exhortation.*¹⁹

James is given to us to move us towards building lives and living with moral courage. Structurally, the book is a bit eclectic in its collection of teaching and at first appearance seems to lack a strong logical connection of its varied ideas. It is almost like a big bag of awesome sayings without a huge overarching emphasis.

Many scholars have offered their own schemas to organize and structure the letter, but none have been conclusive. There are major themes that emerge as we read James which have to do with trials and suffering, seeking godly wisdom as well as passages dealing with riches and poverty.²⁰ However James's lack of an apparent, precise organization and structure to his letter may be a boondoggle for western scholars trying to master its every angle, people on the street hear James clearly without much difficulty. Shocking I know. Douglas Moo states the following rather succinctly:

*Interpreters of James are often, indeed, puzzled to figure out a clear organization in the letter. But what troubles interpreters is a virtue for many readers, who can immediately appreciate the point that James is trying to make. Indeed, in this respect James is somewhat similar to Old Testament and Jewish wisdom books, such as proverbs; and Christians appreciate these books for similar reasons.*²¹

James has long been categorized as a *general* epistle as its audience was not as laser focused as say Ephesians or 1 Thessalonians. These works are both obviously written to specific communities in certain cities. James seems to address a more general and vaguely identified audience of “*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.*”

Many more technical genres of literature have been suggested for James: diatribe, paranesis,²² diaspora letter²³ and protreptic discourse have all been put forth by scholars.²⁴ The latter means *an exhortation to live life in concord with a particular profession/belief*. Luke Timothy Johnson summarizes his opinion that James shows itself to be such a protreptic discourse in the form of a general letter. James is a letter that urges us to build life upon the *profession* of Jesus as Lord. As a letter it might also be said to be a “literary letter” rather than one of personal correspondence²⁵ as it lays out general themes and exhortation rather than personal correspondence and teaching.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

²⁰ Blomberg and Kamell, 25, 26.

²¹ Moo, 2.

²² McKnight, 13.

²³ McCartney, 39.

²⁴ See Johnson, 18 - 24. Johnson provides an excellent summary and discussion of genre.

²⁵ Moo, 7.

Others have argued that James serves as a sort of New Testament wisdom literature as it is a collection of wise sayings and proverbs. However, others lean towards its identification as a series of exhortations forming a sermon. In fact, James seems to be a compilation of a dozen or so mini sermons. This is discernible from the subject and topic breaks that travel with and demarcate the book.²⁶ Personally, I see James as a general letter containing preaching that urges us to live out our professed convictions based upon the truth of the Word of God.

One thing is clear. When we read the book of James itself, we do find many proverbial and ethical exhortations as well as a whole heap of imperatives. James is certainly giving commands and pushing us to live a certain way; he does so by using a rich treasure trove of metaphors and illustrations. Douglas Moo describes this wonderfully as follows:

*James's lavish use of metaphors and illustrations makes his teaching easy to understand and to remember. The billowing sea, the withered flower, the image of a face in a mirror, the bit in the horse's mouth, the rudder of the ship, the destructive forest fire, the pure spring of water, the arrogant businessman, the corroded metal, and moth-eaten clothes – all are images of virtually universal appeal.*²⁷

One final observation is important to make before we move on to a discussion of the major theological themes in the book of James. James connects his teaching deeply with the teachings of Jesus more than any other New Testament writer. Some of the deepest connections come from the sayings of Jesus from early oral tradition along with direct connections to the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.²⁸ This most famous of Jesus's teachings ends with the following metaphor about building:

24 "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. 26 And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

One can almost see James reflecting on his Lord's teaching and writing: *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.* (James 1:22)

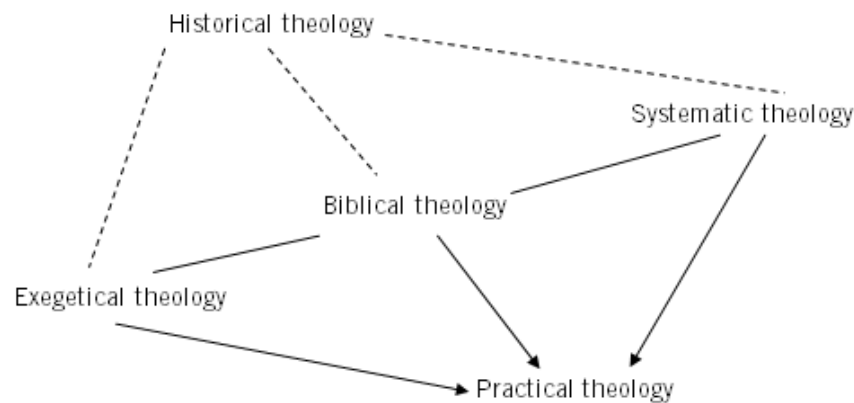
²⁶ Blomberg and Kamell, 22.

²⁷ Moo, 2.

²⁸ Johnson, 56, 57.

Major Theological Themes

Over the years I have enjoyed discussing various theological discourses with guys I disciple and train. We have a module in our Well Diggers curriculum that has this juicy chart designed by my friend Dr. Gregg Allison of Southern Seminary. It makes an appearance on page 32 in his recent published work *Historical Theology*.²⁹ The chart shows various flavors of theology. The following definitions I hope are helpful to you as well.



- *Exegetical Theology* is responsible interpretation and understanding of biblical texts. Without exegesis you will miss the trees because they are in the forest. *Key theme*: understand the original meaning.
- *Biblical Theology* traces the major thematic teaching of scripture throughout the entire Bible and/or specified subsets or corpus. Without biblical theology you will miss the forest from the trees. *Key theme*: see the big picture and story.
- *Systematic Theology* is formulating doctrine based on the teaching of the entire Bible on a particular topic/subject, appropriately interacting with the cultural setting of the church. Without systematic theology you cannot teach about the trees or the forest. *Key theme*: teaching clearly.
- *Historical Theology* is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past. Without historical theology you may think that you are the first person walking in a forest and looking at trees. *Key theme*: humbly listen to others.
- *Practical Theology* is the living out of biblical doctrine together as God's people in the midst of his mission in space and time. Without practical theology you will not know the purpose for the forest or the trees. *Key theme*: all theology is practical and missional.

I reference this for you only to draw your attention to the final definition: *practical theology*. James is a strong practical theology in that it never leaves us in the high air of theological abstractions and speculation. It's about getting busy with the knowledge of God and ourselves. There are many themes in the five chapters of the book of James I only want to summarize a few here as we begin our study together.

²⁹ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology : An Introduction to Christian Doctrine : A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 32.

Trials and Suffering

Life outside of the Garden of Eden is difficult. There are trials coming and being endured by God's people constantly and they will continue until the Kingdom comes. How are we to see trials and difficulties? How are God's people to view suffering? Pastor James says a lot to suffering people using very few words.

Life Foundations and Money

Jesus and the Scriptures teach much about money for it travels with us in every society. We exchange value as human beings whether it is using sea shells, animal skins, gold duckets or swipes of cards hooked up to electronic balances with our banks. Are we to make riches the foundation of our lives? How are rich and poor to relate in this world? Are there dangers in riches? Pastor James is coming to speak to us on these matters.

True Wisdom

There is a true fountain of wisdom available for those who will seek God, hear his Word and heed his commands. So often we ask anyone and everyone about how we should live life under the sun. Virtual and real bookshelves are stocked with self-help tomes telling us the secret to happiness and the good life. Pastor James is going to get in our face and say "Why not ask of God?"

Hypocrisy

Self-deception is the worst kind of deception. Pastor James will warn us from living a life of going to church, listening to sermons and doing absolutely nothing with our knowledge of the truth. He thinks this is crazy talk. Pastor James wants us to be free people, living in holiness by the law of liberty. He knows that Jesus taught us that building our lives this way is the only sure ground on which to stand.

Watching our Mouths

Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. Pastor James is going to call BS on that one. He will show us how much damage and evil can pour forth from our mouths and why watching our tongue is essential to life in community and in relationship with almighty God.

Repentance and Faith driven lives

The type of Christianity that says "I believe" and that belief leads to nothing of good works in our lives is maddening to Pastor James. He won't let us off the hook because we prayed a prayer, did some religious jumping jacks at some point in our life saying we believe something. Pastor James will say "show me!!!" as a life of faith is reflected in a life of good works.

Prayer and Faithfulness

Last but certainly not least, Pastor James is going to lay out a life of prayerful dependence. He will exhort us to ask God for everything we need and to live as if we depend upon him for all things. Our health, our wisdom, our material needs? Ask God and be faithful to follow and obey.

Conclusion

As we conclude I want you to remember back when you first learned to ride a bicycle. You started by watching, getting a feel for the whole concept. You then had to get on the bike. Maybe you had a friend or parent holding it for you, maybe you had some training wheels...but you were learning by riding that thing. Before long you just rode that bike and maybe even rode it with no hands. Yes, you still fall off from time to time but you can go places now. I want you to see that our relationship with God is a little

like that. We hear the gospel, taste and see that Jesus is God and Savior. He puts us on the bike of faith and says "let's ride!" In fact, he is leading the pack and calling us to follow the pace he is setting for us.

If you don't mind me changing metaphors, I want to return to the great theme before us: BUILD. We are finishing up a building project at our new facility which we have named "The 27." It looked like an ugly yellow day care center a while back but then some transformation took place. Little by little, work by work, things began to change. The end product was seen in the mind of some people and this vision came about in time. Our lives our like this. God has a purpose and plan for each of us. He wants us to build on the truth of his Word and the gospel of grace.

Jacob's Well let's build! Let's build some things on the gospel: a life, some friendships, marriages, families, our communities, our church, a mission and yes, even the Kingdom of God. If we hear his Word and respond in faithful obedience we will be amazed by the work HE does as we follow.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

1 Corinthians 15:10,11

Pastor James will teach us that faith without works is a dead faith...and we know from other parts of the Scriptures that our faith is in Jesus and his work counts eternally before God. It is Jesus who extends to us hope in the gospel of grace so that we might BUILD together.

Indeed, let's continue to BUILD together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Reid Monaghan", with a stylized, flowing script.

Pastor Reid S. Monaghan

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