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The epistle of James has been one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. In the Leipzig Debate of 1519, Roman Catholic scholar Johann Eck used it to challenge Martin Luther’s view of justification by faith alone, insisting that works needed to be added to the equation.

Luther, in response, eventually denied the epistle’s inspired authorship, mainly on the mistaken claim that it taught justification by works. In the introduction to his 1522 German translation of the New Testament, Luther indicated his preference for books like John, 1 John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, which reveal Christ and teach “everything that is needful and blessed . . . to know.”

His preface to the book of James was even more negative. Luther called it “really an epistle of straw” because it had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” Although Luther never removed it from the canon of Scripture, he separated it from what he considered the core of the canon.

Luther’s emphasis on Paul’s epistles, especially Romans and Galatians, and his rejection of James for anything more than devotional value, has influenced a large segment of Christian thinking through the centuries.

Who was James anyway? Was he a legalist, combating Paul’s idea of justification by faith by teaching that justification is really by works? Or was he simply providing a slightly different perspective on the subject, similar to the several perspectives on the teachings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels? The answer is, clearly, the latter.
Not all of the Reformers shared Luther’s low opinion of James. No less a luminary than Melanchthon, Luther’s closest associate, believed that the writings of Paul and James were not in conflict.

James had a firsthand knowledge of Jesus. In fact, his epistle, of all the epistles, may very well be the earliest Christian writing in existence, and, of all the epistles, reflects most closely the teachings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels. As in the parables of Jesus, imagery from agriculture and the world of finance is abundant. Other important themes include wisdom, prayer, and above all, faith.

James is unique in other ways, too, thereby opening a window for us into some of the struggles that the earliest Christian congregations faced. With envy, jealousy, and worldliness creeping into the fold, there seems to have been societal and cultural pressures that pitted wealthier Christians against poor ones. We also see the great controversy being played out as James attacks counterfeit forms of wisdom and faith.

Most important for Seventh-day Adventists, the epistle of James exudes confidence in the return of Jesus; it also provides crucial perspectives on the law, the judgment, and the Second Coming. Elijah is even presented as a model for us to emulate. This has special relevance for us, as Seventh-day Adventists, who are entrusted with preparing the way for Christ’s second advent.

Thus, in some ways, our journey this quarter spans the entire Christian era, as it includes some of the earliest preaching, as well as special insights for these last days.

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Of the 38,000 Seventh-day Adventists in Belize, 70 percent are young people. Once each summer, a few hundred meet on rented ground to worship, fellowship, and play. The place is too small to host more. Their dream is to have a place to call their own—a Seventh-day Adventist youth camp in Belize.

In Jamaica, the dignity of thousands of street-dwelling men, women, and children has been restored at the Good Samaritan Inn, where they receive a hot meal and have the opportunity to shower, get a haircut, and do laundry. The inn also provides a safe night shelter for women and children. Now they hope to build a clinic, providing pre- and post-natal care, along with dental services for children and adults.

Thank you for making these projects a reality through your generous gifts to this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering.