

# Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

Vol. XXIII

January 27, 2013

No. 4

## Luther's Epistle of Straw

(Jerry Fite)

**M**artin Luther wrote the following statement in his original Preface To The New Testament in 1522: “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. *Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw*, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in the other prefaces.”

When Luther called the book of James an epistle of straw, he was comparing it to other New Testament books, not saying the book of James had no value. In paragraph 1 of his introductory remarks to his translation of James he writes, “...I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God.”

Luther questioned the authenticity of the book of James because it did not speak of the death and resurrection of Christ; nor did it teach anything about Christ. In paragraph 3 of his preface he writes, “And that is the true test by which to judge books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.”

He believed the book could not have been written by an apostle of Christ because it ascribed justification to works in the example of Abraham (*James 2:24*), thus contradicting Paul who taught that Abraham was justified apart from works (*Romans 4:2-22*). Luther judged the book of James in light of his understanding of Paul’s teaching of the just shall live by faith and not by the works of law. Adding to his dilemma was James referring to the “law of liberty” while Paul referred to the law as one of “slavery”. To him James contradicted Paul. But could it be that James did not contradict Paul, but contradicted Luther’s interpretation of Paul?

Paul refers to the gospel of Christ as “the law of the Spirit” which makes us “free from the law of sin and of death” (*Romans 8:1-2*). Was not James speaking of this same freedom offering law when he calls it “the perfect law of liberty” (*James 1:25, 2:12*)?

The word “works” can have a different meaning in different contexts. Isaiah B. Grubbs writes, “*Paul speaks of ‘works’ by which ‘faith is made void,’ Rom. 4:14, and James speaks of ‘works’ by which faith is made perfect,’ James 2:22.*” In Romans 4, faith is made void if our justification is based upon perfect works under a system of law. Justification by grace through faith becomes unnecessary. In James 2, faith is made perfect in us being justified through works of obedience. Abraham complied with God’s conditions completing a justifying faith. Paul, like James emphasized “*obedience of faith*” (*Romans 1:5, 16:26*). Luther’s inaccurate characterization of James came from making his inaccurate interpretation of Scripture his standard for criticism.