

James

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Author The letter was written by James, *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. 1:1. This was probably the James who was the brother of Jesus. Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Galatians 1:19. He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Acts 15:13; 21:17; Galatians 2:9.

Written to *The twelve tribes scattered throughout the nations*. 1:1. James was a Jew and writes to Christian Jews who had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire by persecution. Acts 11:19. The letter was probably written in Palestine and assumes that the Jewish Christians were poor and struggling. The references James makes to the rich are similar to those of the Old Testament prophet, Amos. See James 4:13-17.

Date James was the first book in the New Testament to be written. Persecution of Christians started under Herod Agrippa in 44AD so it was probably written after that. It doesn't deal with Jewish/Gentile issues which means it was written before the first Jerusalem Council in 51AD. Also it doesn't deal with false teaching as do many of the letters written by Paul, Peter, Jude and John. As a result scholars believe James was probably written around 45-49AD. James was martyred in AD 61 or 62.

Type Exhortation and teaching. James touches upon many subjects using short paragraphs, each an entity in itself. There are few transitions between these subjects and no overall logical argument. (This kind of writing is typical of "wisdom literature" as found in Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament).

Purposes The letter by James was written to

- strengthen Jewish Christians undergoing persecution. 1:2-4, 13-15; 5:7-11.
- correct misunderstanding about the doctrine of justification by faith. 2:14-26.
- combat lethargy in the church.
- pass on practical exhortation and wisdom about Christian living.

James's approach is not dogmatic or theological. He gives no detailed teaching about salvation as in other New Testament letters. Rather, he focuses on practical Christian living from a Jewish/Christian perspective.

Themes Major themes in James' letter are:

Trials and temptations

When we go through trials it helps to build character in us. Temptations don't come from God; they come from our own evil desires.

Practical application of the word

We are to be doers of the word and not just hearers of it. Real Christianity is practical.

Favouritism

We should treat everyone with love and show mercy to all. The Kingdom of God is for all who love God, regardless of whether they are rich or poor.

Faith

Faith is to be worked out through our actions.

Control of our tongues

We must keep our tongues under control. What we say can have great effects – both for good and evil.

Wisdom

God's wisdom needs to be worked out in our lives, rather than our own selfish human "wisdom".

Submission

We are to submit to God's will and put our trust in Him.

Suffering

We are to be patient in suffering, especially as the time when the Lord returns is drawing near.

Key verses

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 1:22.

Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 2:17.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 3:13.

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. 4:7-10.

Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 5:8.

Outline

Greeting 1:1.

James identifies himself as *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*. He is writing to the *twelve tribes scattered among the nations* - the Jewish Christians who left their homeland in Israel due to persecution.

Trials and temptations 1:2-18.

James begins with some words of encouragement for the persecuted Christians. They are all relevant for us today!

- We are to *consider it pure joy* when we go through trials because the testing of our faith produces perseverance and helps us grow in maturity.
- When we need wisdom we are to *ask God* for it and He will give it *generously to all without finding fault*. When we ask for wisdom we are to do so with faith and with no doubting. If we doubt we won't receive anything from the Lord.
- The poor should take pride in their *high position* in Christ and the rich take pride in their *low position* because their riches are transitory and will pass away. Isaiah 40:6-8.
- Those who *persevere under trial* are blessed because *after they have stood the test* they will *receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him*.
- When we are tempted to sin we should not think that it is God who is tempting us. *God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone*. Temptation comes from our own evil desires which *when full-grown, give birth to death*.
- God is good and *every good and perfect gift comes from Him*. God doesn't *change like the shifting shadows*. Rather He chose to give us salvation *through the word of truth* (Jesus) that we might be a kind of first fruits of all He has created. Revelation 14:4.

Obedience to God's word 1:19-27.

We should be *quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry* because our anger doesn't help us in bringing about *the righteous life that God desires*. We must *get rid of all moral filth* and *humbly accept the word* planted in us that can save us.

This means that we are not to *merely listen to the word* and so deceive ourselves. Rather we are *to do what it says*. If we if we don't obey God's word it is as if we looked in a mirror and then immediately forgot what we looked like! Blessing will come if we *look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom*, continue to do this, don't forget what we hear and do what it says.

Being obedient to God's word *includes keeping a tight rein on our tongues looking after orphans and widows in their distress and keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world.* True Christianity is intensely practical!

Favouritism 2:1-13.

Favouritism and faith in Jesus Christ don't go together. For example it is discriminatory and judgmental to show special attention to a rich man when he comes into the assembly and to ignore a poor man. *God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith, and to inherit the kingdom He promised to those who love Him.* Favouritism of the rich over the poor insults the poor and doesn't make sense when it is the rich who have been exploiting and slandering Christians. Much better is to follow the "royal law" *love your neighbour as yourself.* Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 5:43. If we show favouritism we are sinning and are *convicted as law-breakers* because *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all.* It's as if we had committed adultery or murder! We must *speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom* and that means being merciful to others. If we judge others without showing mercy to them we will be *judged without mercy!* God's way is that *mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Faith in action 2:14-26.

James now turns to an important question: can faith save us if we don't back it up with actions? (Remember that this was written well before Paul's letters where he explained all about justification by faith). James gives an example of a brother or sister who is *without clothes or daily food.* Just wishing them well without doing anything to meet their needs isn't helpful at all. *Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action is dead.* Some had said that there are "faith Christians" and "works Christians" but this is not so. True faith is always demonstrated by works. *Show me your faith without deeds and I will show you my faith by my deeds.* It is not enough to believe the truth – even demons believe the truth that there is *one God!* *Faith without deeds is useless!* Abraham was a good example of this. In obeying God when told to offer Isaac as a sacrifice *his faith and his actions were working together.* His *faith was made complete by what he did.* As a result of his faith and his actions he was declared righteous and was *called God's friend.* *A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* Even Rahab the prostitute demonstrated her faith by protecting the spies at Jericho. So *faith without deeds is dead.*

In this section James provides a balance to Paul's teaching on justification by faith in Romans Chapters 3-8. To Paul justification is by faith alone. When we believe in Jesus Christ we are saved and God declares us to be righteous in His sight, based on the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Because we are justified we are able to have fellowship with God. James adds an extra dimension to this by saying that we must also put our faith into practice in a practical way. Our faith is worked out through our actions.

This is an example of a "truth in tension" – something that was easily understood in the Jewish thinking of the day, but not so easy to reconcile with our modern ways of thinking. Salvation is by faith alone and also by faith and works! Together, though, Paul and James give us a better understanding of faith and how it is to be worked out in our Christian lives.

Controlling the tongue 3:1-12.

Not many of us should *presume to be teachers* because *those who teach will be judged more strictly.* We all make mistakes and nobody is perfect. This is shown especially in the way we speak. We can easily control horses (using bits and bridles) and ships (using rudders), but it is almost impossible to control our tongues. *The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole courses of life on fire and is itself set on fire by hell.* We can tame all kinds of animals but *no one can tame the tongue.* We use our tongue to praise God and to curse others made in God's likeness. *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. This should not be!* What comes out of our mouths should reflect the Christian lives in our hearts.



Wisdom 3:13-18.

True wisdom will always show itself in the way we live. If we are *wise and understanding* we should show it by our *good life* and by *deeds done in humility*. There are two kinds of wisdom:

- **Human, earthly, unspiritual wisdom.** This doesn't come from God; it is *of the devil*. This kind of "wisdom" is based on selfishness, and leads to envy, jealousy, boasting, denial of truth, disorder and evil practices.
- **God's wisdom.** This comes from heaven and is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. It leads to *peace* and a *harvest of righteousness*.

Submit to God 4:1-12.

Fights and quarrels come from the desires that battle within us. The selfish side of our natures causes us to kill, covet, quarrel, fight and focus on our own pleasures. When we ask God for things we don't receive them because we ask with wrong motives. We are adulterous people whose *friendship with the world* is *hatred towards God*. When we choose to be a friend of the world we become *enemies of God*.

But God isn't like that! He placed His Spirit in us when we were saved and He *intensely* wants us to live for Him. *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*. Proverbs 3:34. That's why we are to *submit ourselves to God*. This involves

- resisting the devil. When we do this he will flee from us.
- drawing near to God and He will draw near to us.
- washing ourselves from all sin.
- purifying our hearts.
- grieving and mourning because of our sin (which is part of the repentance process and why we often say "I'm sorry").
- Humbling ourselves before the Lord. When we do this He will lift us up.
- Not slandering or saying anything against others. If we do this we are judging them for not keeping God's law. We are even sitting in judgment on the law itself. God is the only *Lawgiver and Judge* – not us.

Boasting 4:13-17.

We don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. Only God knows that. Life is uncertain and we are only here for a short time so we should not make plans or boast about tomorrow without recognising that everything is subject to the will of God. We should say "*If it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that*". To do otherwise is to be boastful and evil. *Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins*.

Warning for the rich 5:1-6.

Judgment is going to come for rich people who hoard their wealth and who live in *luxury and self-indulgence*. Their wealth will rot, corrode and be lost because they have failed to pay those who work for them, and condemned and murdered those who opposed them. God is always concerned for justice!

Patience in suffering 5:7-12.

Even though we are going through sufferings we are to *be patient until the Lord's coming*. As farmers must wait till for the rains to water their lands to get their valuable crops, so we *must be patient and stand firm because the Lord is near*. This means not grumbling about our situation; never swearing or using oaths, and always persevering as did the prophets who suffered in the past. *The Lord is full of compassion and mercy* and He will finally bring about His purposes.

Praying in faith 5:13-20.

We should pray regardless of our situation: whether we are happy, in trouble, or sick. If we are sick we should *call the elders of the church to pray over us and anoint us with oil in the name of the Lord*. Their *prayer offered in faith* will *make the sick person well*.

If the sickness is due to sin, that sin should be confessed and God will forgive. *Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous*

The prayer of faith

This is a prayer that God inspires. We hear from God and this creates faith in us. (Faith comes by hearing the voice of God. Romans 10:17). We then say what God has told us to say and it comes to pass because it is God's will. Matthew 17:20,21. Very powerful!

person is powerful and effective. Elijah is an example of this type of prayer as he prayed for rain. See 1 Kings 17:1; 18:41-45

If we see that another Christian has *wandered from the truth* and are able to bring them back to the lord they will be *saved from death*, and God will *cover over a multitude of sins*.

James' letter finishes very abruptly! Unlike most other letters in the New Testament there is no conclusion, farewell or benediction.

Discussion questions

A number of people in the New Testament are called James. Who were these people and what was their contribution to the early church? Which of these "James" is likely to have been the writer of the letter of James?

James is probably the first New Testament letter to have been written. How does this affect the content that it covers? How does this content compare to later letters written by Peter, John and Paul.

James is written as a series of unrelated paragraphs providing encouragement to Jewish Christians in the early church. What are the major themes that James covers? How were they relevant for the early Jewish Christians? How are they relevant for Gentile Christians today?

Why is it so hard to keep our tongues under control? Give examples of situations when you said things that you didn't want to say. Why did you say them? What should you have said? What could you have done to say the right thing? What do you learn from James about keeping your tongue under control?

James has a strong emphasis that faith should be demonstrated by our actions. How does this reconcile with Paul's teachings that salvation is by faith alone? What are some actions that people may believe can help save them? Do these actions contribute to their salvation or not? Give examples of how you put your faith into action.

The original readers of James were experiencing suffering for their faith. What does James say they should do as they are suffering? How do think they would feel on reading the instructions in James? Are you undergoing suffering for your faith? How does James help you today?

What have you learned from your study of James? How will you apply this in your life?