

Week 1: Overview

Getting Acquainted

James's letter is one of the most quoted books of the entire Bible. It's filled with famous phrases and quotations that often make their way into Christian conversation:

- Faith produces steadfastness.
- God cannot be tempted.
- Every good and perfect gift comes from above.
- Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.
- Be doers of the word, and not hearers only.
- Even the demons believe—and shudder!
- Faith apart from works is dead.
- Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

On the other hand, James is also full of passages that have left Christians scratching their heads. Does James have it in for rich people? What is the point of anointing a sick person with oil? Does James teach that if you just have enough faith, God will always heal? Then there are even larger and more pointed questions. Why doesn't James talk very much about the cross? Does he understand the gospel the same way the rest of the New Testament writers do? And in [James 2](#), isn't he disagreeing with Paul about the relationship between faith, works, and salvation?

These are all important questions, and in the course of this study we'll address all of them. It helps, however, to realize that the primary message driving James's letter is that Christians' faith in the gospel should work itself out in a life of obedience. As he says in [James 1:22](#), believers in Jesus should not just hear the word and believe it, but they should also do what it says. The gospel of Jesus—which James understands deeply and affirms completely—results in a new life of obedience when a person believes. That's James's message, and as we come to understand that, his book will be a stirring exhortation to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

Placing It in the Larger Story

James is an intensely practical book, filled with exhortations to Christians about the way they should live their lives now that they have been given new life in Jesus. It is filled with allusions to and quotations of the teaching of Jesus, and it includes more imperatives (commands) per word than any other New Testament book. For these reasons, James has been called "the Proverbs of the New Testament."

James is therefore highly relevant to the Christian life. Unlike many of the other books of the New Testament, James's aim is not to give a theological presentation of the gospel. Rather, he writes his book to those who already believe the gospel, and his goal is to help them live faithfully as followers of Jesus. There are many different and seemingly disconnected themes in James—perseverance under trial, riches and poverty, wisdom, the danger of the tongue, prayer, and faith and works. But what ties them all together is James's desire to take the teaching of Jesus and apply it to the Christian's personal life.

Proverb: A brief saying that conveys a lesson about how to live wisely and well, usually drawn from observations about nature and life. The book of Proverbs contains the vast majority of biblical proverbs, but they occur in other books as well.

Key Verse

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” ([James 1:22](#))

Date and Historical Background

The book of James was written by a man who identifies himself simply as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” ([James 1:1](#)). But who was this James? The very plainness of the address gives us some clue, because there were not many Jameses in the early church who could get away with such a simple identification. In fact, there was probably only one James who was famous enough to call himself simply “James” and expect that everyone would know who he was—James the brother of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph.

James died in AD 62, so the letter had to have been written before that. Further, if James wrote his letter after the Jerusalem council of AD 48–49, it’s hard to imagine that he wouldn’t have mentioned those events. Therefore, the book of James was almost certainly written in the mid-40s. That means that—despite the way the New Testament books are arranged—James likely wrote his book several years before Paul wrote his letters and only 15 years or so after Jesus had died and risen again.

James is a general epistle, meaning that it doesn’t seem to be written to any particular church, but rather to all Christian churches in general. It is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” which probably means that James has Jewish Christians primarily in mind. The themes he addresses, however, are universal. Persevering under trial, not favoring the rich and powerful, taming the tongue—these are issues which will confront every Christian church and every believer.

Dispersion: From the Greek for “scattering,” refers to the numerous relocations of large groups of Israelites/Jews throughout the world, including to Assyria and Media (722 BC), Babylon (586), Alexandria in Egypt (c. 300), Phrygia (c. 200), and Rome (c. 63). This dispersion resulted in greater exposure of the Jews to other peoples and also laid the groundwork for the worldwide spread of the gospel during the first century.

Outline

1. Greeting ([James 1:1](#))
2. The Testing of Faith ([James 1:2–18](#))
3. Hearing and Doing the Word ([James 1:19–27](#))
4. The Sin of Partiality ([James 2:1–13](#))
5. Faith without Works Is Dead ([James 2:14–26](#))
6. The Sin of Dissension in the Community ([James 3:1–4:12](#))
7. The Sins of the Wealthy ([James 4:13–5:12](#))
8. The Prayer of Faith ([James 5:13–18](#))
9. Concluding Admonition ([James 5:19–20](#))
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As You Get Started . . .

How have you thought about the book of James in the past? Does it confuse you, or have you found it helpful in your walk as a Christian?

After reading this introduction, why do you think James wrote his book? What is the main thing he’s trying to accomplish in his readers’ lives?

Why do you think James doesn't spend time giving a systematic presentation of the gospel? How is his aim different from Paul's aim in, say, Romans or Galatians?

Which parts of James most perplex or confuse you? Are there any parts of the book to which you want to give special attention as you begin this study?

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. Also look back through this unit of study to reflect on a few key things that you would like to learn throughout this study of James.