

Introduction to the Epistle of James

The book of James makes a unique contribution to the New Testament in several respects. James' style of writing is reminiscent of the Old Testament book of Proverbs with series upon series of short, pithy, moral exhortations. His book comes to us in bullet format as if it were the distillation of numerous thoughtful sermons. James' letter also has the distinction of being the most practical of all the New Testament writings. With a passionate heart and genuine concern for his readers, he writes to give them a clear picture of what *true, genuine faith* looks like in everyday life.

The theme of the characteristics of true faith is developed throughout his book. James effectively uses these characteristics as a series of tests to help his readers evaluate the quality and genuineness of their own faith. There are remarkable passages on patience, endurance, prayer, trials, humility, and favoritism; restraining the tongue, the subject of riches, temptation, and faith itself. This practical book is full of instruction on various topics that extend to every part of the Christian life. James' lavish use of figures of speech, analogies and imagery from nature make his teaching extremely memorable.

Listen as James speaks to us from chapter 1 verses 23-24. "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." NIV

James confronts the discrepancies between our hearing, our words, and our actions head on. His words will penetrate and challenge us on a deep level. Let's pray that this insightful book will develop a deeper motivation to *exercise our faith* and live it out skillfully and wisely every day.

Background and Setting

As the early church was being formed there were no New Testament writings. The story of Christ at this time was entirely oral—spoken by men who were eye witnesses to the earthly ministry of Christ. Then in Acts 7 Stephen was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. In Acts 8 we see Saul persecuting the church in Jerusalem which resulted in the church being scattered throughout the Mediterranean world (Acts 8:1-8 and 11:19). New converts were made by the dispersed Christians and the need for written guidance for these new believers brought about the inspired letters, which the Apostles wrote and circulated among various groups. The book of James is believed to be the earliest of these New Testament letters, written between A.D 44-49.

The fact that James identifies himself only as "James" indicates that he must have been the most well-known James—the James who needed no other introduction—the brother of our Lord. Evidence from early church historians and from Scripture itself leads us to the same conclusion. James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem in the years following the Day of Pentecost. When persecution scattered his congregation he wrote this letter in part to fulfill his pastoral responsibilities to people he could no longer touch personally. Thus, James provides the first New Testament model we have of a pastor.

James steered the church through a very tense and difficult time of transition. The church was emerging out of Judaism and many Jewish Christians were still very much entangled with all the temple activities, ceremonies and festivals. It was also a time when Gentiles were beginning to come to faith in Christ. Confusion arose over matters of “law” and “grace.” James’ role as mediator was crucial to both Jews and Gentiles in clarifying the question of how one can be saved (See Acts 15). James’ epistle was likely written *after* Paul began to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles but *before* he and James met at the Jerusalem Council.

James became known as “James the Just” by the people of Jerusalem because of his well-known holiness. He died a martyr in A.D. 62.

1. When did you realize that following Jesus was costly? What keeps you going?

OVERVIEW

Like much of the New Testament, the book of James is a letter. Reading these letters is similar to reading a letter from a friend. You might read it first to get the general idea of what your friend is telling you—then you read it again to get the details. This is a good way to begin studying a biblical letter. In this lesson the objective is to observe the letter as a whole and try to catch the overall picture of what James is communicating.

Prepare Your Heart: Before you begin, come to God and prepare to study His Word. Open your heart and begin to focus your attention on the extremely practical message from James.

2. **Read** through the letter of James in its entirety. The five chapters that make up this book can be read silently in about ten minutes. This reading is for the purpose of getting an over-all impression. *At first glance you might think James is just bouncing around from subject to subject, following a random stream of consciousness. Part of your challenge in this study will be to find the thematic underpinnings in the epistle.*

Read through the book of James a second time from the same translation. As you read keep the following questions in mind. Write your insights below.

- a. Look for and mark the key words that James repeats.
- b. Jot down the main subjects that are discussed in the letter.
- c. Do you find any overarching themes that bind the various exhortations together?

3. **Pause and Reflect:** Which part of James' letter affects you the most?
What excites you?

What challenges you?

What convicts you?

What causes you to praise?

While reading through James' epistle you may have noticed some parallels between James' teaching and the teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). James seems to have been so immersed in the specifics of Jesus' teaching that he could almost unconsciously weave the teachings of Jesus into the fabric of his own instruction.

4. Below is a sampling of the many references and allusions we find in James' letter to Jesus' sermon in Matthew. Read and compare the Scriptures below. Can you spot others?

James

1:4

1:20

1:22-25

4:4

The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:48

Matthew 5:22

Matthew 7:24-27

Matthew 6:24

The character of the author is an important part of understanding a letter. Even though the New Testament gives us only brief glimpses of James we can trace the miraculous transformation in his life through the following Scriptures: Matthew 13:55; John 7:5; Mark 3:21; Acts 2:1; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 12:17; Galatians 1:19, 2:9; Acts 15:13-21.

5. Read each reference carefully and note what you are able to glean about the author of this epistle. When do you think James became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ?

6. Now that you have spent some time with the book of James what are some of the questions that you would like to have answered as you delve more deeply into the book? *Jot down your questions below ... then wait upon God to write His wisdom on your soul.*

As you allow the truths of this intensely practical book to saturate your inner-most being, God will meet you and urge you on to deeper levels of maturity.

7. From your initial overview of James do you sense God speaking to you about areas in your life where growth is needed? If so, explain.

8. Take a few moments to contemplate the spiritual journey that lies ahead. Consider your personal hopes, your fears and expectations. *Then write out your heart-cries to God—praying humbly and boldly for yourself.*