

General Epistles: JAMES

INTRODUCTION

The book of James is packed full of godly advice centered on how we as believers should walk faithfully in our core identity as followers of Christ. James, the brother of Jesus, writes to Jewish Christians living outside of Israel around a decade after Christ's death and resurrection as they face persecution for their faith and struggle to live in Christ. In this book, James comforts them, corrects them for their worldliness, and challenges them to seek God's wisdom and live with eternity in mind.

At the very beginning of the book, James recognizes that many believers in that time are going through immense difficulty. However, he reminds them that our good God uses suffering to grow their faith so that they may be more rooted in Christ. He points back to godly people like Job and the prophets of the Old Testament to show that, in our suffering, God is abundantly full of compassion and mercy, and he plans to give us a hope and a future. James then calls the believers of his day, and us as well, to remain steadfast and suffer well as God writes his good story.

As he proceeds throughout the book, James points out different aspects of their lives that aren't matching up with their identity in Christ. He addresses how many of them have fallen into different worldly traps like partiality, ungodliness, carelessness with speech, jealousy, and selfish ambition. He then uses logical arguments to expose the errors in their thinking and encourages them to run after the higher calling for their lives that is possible through the sacrifice of Christ. After discussing every vice, he shows them that the only remedy for their error and sin is found in Christ. Only through him can we walk in true fulfillment, joy, and holiness.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

Have you ever done something hard and difficult with an immense personal cost? Then, in the middle of that "trial," have you ever had a mentor or someone watching from the outside come in and point out where you are clearly falling short? How did you feel when they did that?

In the book of James, the believers James is writing to are going through intense suffering as they struggle to grow as some of the very first Christians. But, looking deeper into the book, we see that they have shifted into survival mode, trying to stay afloat through persecutions while seeking some worldly comfort. This is where James comes in and challenges them to go from mere survival to rejoicing in trials and having a more eternal perspective on life. We as Christians are not called to get through life with the fewest battle scars, but to live as godly, upright characters in God's story. God sets holiness as the bar for our lives, and this is the same standard James encourages in his letter for the first-century believers to pursue.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

- Greetings (Jas 1:1)
- 3 Key Themes (Jas 1:2-11)
- 3 Themes Repeated (Jas 1:12-27)
- 3 Themes Explained (Jas 2:1-5:18)
- Closing (Jas 5:19-20)

JESUS IN THE BOOK OF JAMES

Throughout the book, James is constantly alluding to Jesus' teachings. David Platt, in his commentary on James, writes, "The key to understanding this whole book is realizing that James is leaning heavily on Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount." A clear example of this is found in James 1:12, when he says that "blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial" because it will result in eternal life. Upon reflecting on the wording used in the Sermon on the Mount, especially when Jesus talks about those who suffer for the sake of righteousness (Matthew 5:10), we see that they are nearly the same. James is merely reminding believers of Jesus' words and holiness. Like Christ, James corrects them and calls them to live out their faith in a God-honoring way.

Many times in his book, when James is calling believers to grow in godliness, he includes wording that is designed to remind his readers of Jesus, our perfect example and role model of holiness. At the very beginning of the book, James calls believers to "count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (James 1:2). This is exactly what Christ did on the cross, enduring suffering for the sake of the joy ahead of him (Hebrews 12:2). Using this powerful language, James points out that the glorious purpose in suffering is literally to become more like Christ. Suffering molds us to look more like him. There are plenty of references to Christ's work and perfection in this book, so be sure to be on the lookout for when James hints at Jesus!

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF JAMES

OBSERVATION

- What is God teaching us in the book of James?
 - People: To whom is James writing? What is their background?
 - Time: What was going on during the time James was writing?
 - Events: What is James addressing?
 - Purpose: Why might he be addressing this issue?
- What literary devices are being used?
- How does James bring up the issue and address it?
- What is the author emphasizing, repeating, contrasting, or bringing attention to?

INTERPRETATION

- What does the author want the reader to notice? What are some common themes/words/phrases? Can you trace what he is saying to any of Jesus' teachings?
 - Example: "Blessed is the man" (James 1:12)—reference to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12).
 - Example: Stress on obeying God and not only hearing (James 1:19-27)—parallel to Jesus' emphasis on righteousness and the law (Matthew 5:17-20).
- What is happening at this point in history? What are the believers facing? Why might they be stuck in the sins that James is addressing?
- Explore how James describes God's character in this book.
 - How does James use God's character to help believers understand these issues better?
 - Example: God is a gracious giver (James 1:5)
- How does the book of James challenge our comfort zone and priorities? How does James raise the bar on the issues that he is addressing?
- Trace the theme of prayer in this book. What does James call us to pray for? How are we called to pray?
- Is the standard that James sets for believers perfectly attainable? How does James call us to holiness while acknowledging our imperfect nature?

APPLICATION

- What and how does God want us to pray?
- How does God want us to face trials and temptations?
- What is our role in the process of sanctification? What is the biblical connection between faith and works?
- How do we seek God's will and desires over our own?
- What does God want us to prioritize?
- How can we respond when God calls us to do hard things?
- How can we be better characters in God's story?
- How can we recenter our lives to look more like God's?

PRAYER

- James tells us that if we ever lack wisdom, we should ask God; and he will give it to us if we trust in him (James 1:5-8). In Scripture, we learn that there are things we should always

expect to receive when we pray for them because they are always in God's will. What things are always in God's will? What God does promise to always say yes to? Be sure your answers are based in Scripture.

- In James 4:3, James says that the reason the believers he was writing to weren't receiving what they wanted was because they were asking wrongly. They were approaching God as a vending machine to use for their own desires. How does James say we should make requests of God? Pray that God uses this answer to shape how you view him.

WHAT CHURCH HISTORY HAS SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF JAMES

"The message of James is one that we all need to hear—and obey. No profound theologian, James' genius lies in his profound moral earnestness, in his powerfully simple call for repentance, for action, for a consistent Christian lifestyle. His words need to thrust through our theological debates, our personal preconceptions, our spiritual malaise, and set us back on the road to a biblical, invigorating, transforming Christianity."

—Douglas J. Moo

Tyndale New Testament Commentary on James

WORKS CITED

- *The ESV Women's Study Bible*. English Standard Version (Crossway Bibles, 2020).
- Platt, David, et al. *Exalting Jesus in James* (B & H Publishing Group, 2014).

