

Living Faith

An Equip Series on the Book of James

An Introduction to the
Book of James



VINTAGE PRESS

Living Faith: An Introduction to the Book of James

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PURPOSE OF THE EQUIP SERIES

Regardless of time and culture, the greatest danger to Christianity is that it becomes lifeless. This in fact is the cry of many who refuse to follow Christianity. They like Jesus for what he taught but refuse to be a Christian because many Christians live a life contrary to what they believe. In our day and age, faith has become a simple ascent to knowledge. A Christian is someone who believes and knows all of the right doctrines. However, James, the brother of Jesus and early church leader, believed differently. He rightly recognized that true Christianity is characterized not just by belief but also action. He knew that what we believed and confessed was to be a “living faith.”

AUTHOR

Like most New Testament letters, the book of James begins with a salutation, which says, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). In the New Testament, two James are prominent. One James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, was a disciple of Jesus. From Scripture, we know that he was martyred by Herod sometime shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 12:1–5).

Church tradition has never considered James, the son of Zebedee, to be the author of the book of James. Rather, tradition has held that the other prominent New Testament James wrote this letter. In the Gospels, Jesus is said to have brothers and sisters, including a brother named James. While he was not a believer in Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime, Scripture seems to suggest that James came to believe in Jesus as the Christ after the resurrection. We find James to be gathered with the early church when Judas was replaced (Acts 1:14), present after Peter received his vision of the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 12:17), and presiding over the Jerusalem Council as the primary leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:1–35). Paul reminds the Corinthians that James was one of the first to see Jesus risen from the grave (1 Corinthians 15:7). Also, in Galatians, Paul reminds the church that after his conversion he “saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother,” considering him to be a “pillar” of the church (Galatians 1:19). From the Jewish

historian, Josephus, we also know that James was martyred by an angry mob incited by the Jewish high priest, Ananus, in AD 62.¹

Despite such evidence for the authorship of James, critical scholars have offered several reasons why the brother of Jesus did not write this book. First, many wonder why James would not have mentioned somewhere in his letter his special, familial relationship to Jesus. The only connection he makes is in the salutation, and there he simply calls himself a “servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.” While this might be an issue for some, we must readily admit that it is an argument from silence. While James was the brother of Jesus, the early church would have known this and therefore James would not have had to state the obvious.

Second, many question how a Jew from Galilee could write a letter in such excellent Greek. The scholar, Peter H. Davids, rightly asks, “would a person with James’s background be capable of the quality of Greek and the rhetorical sophistication that is found in this letter?”² Growing up and living in Galilee, James would have encountered Hellenism near Nazareth and therefore would have interacted with those who spoke Greek fluently. Moreover, James would also have had some education, perhaps enough to prepare him to adequately write Greek.³

Third, “was James prominent enough after his martyrdom and the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE that a later writer or community might have used his name to give authority to a letter that they composed?”⁴ While James would have certainly been a prominent figure after his death and the fall of Jerusalem, little reason exists to assume that he still could not have written this letter. If someone would have used the name of James, the letter does not demonstrate typical patterns found outside of the first century. In fact, the letter’s interests speak more to the first century than any other century after it.

Fourth, some wonder how James, the brother of Jesus, could have written this letter and it not be popular until the third century? While many of the New Testament books were popular and regularly used throughout the church in the first century, we have little evidence that James was widely used early on. In fact, the church father, Origen (184/85–253/54), is the first to cite the book of James by name.⁵ Nonetheless, just because someone has not written about the book does not mean that it did not exist prior to the third century.

Finally, many debate the authorship of James because of the book's relationship to Paul and his theology, particularly his view of justification. James "insists that works are required for justification: 'a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone' (2:24). Paul, on the other hand, teaches that a person is justified by faith and not by 'works of the law' (e.g. Rom. 3:28)."⁶ While on face value, these views seem contradictory, with a closer reading, one can quickly recognize that James and Paul are using "justification" in different ways. Thus James, the brother of Jesus, could have known Paul and written this letter without any contradictions. While doubts certainly exist, many factors point to James, the brother of Jesus, authoring this letter. James seems to have used countless quotes from Jesus (now found in Matthew and Luke) that would have been oral sources. Because he does not identify himself as the brother of Jesus, it seems more appropriate to believe that everyone would have assumed that he was the brother of Jesus. Finally, the content of the letter, particularly its lack of detail regarding church leadership and doctrinal issues, seems to imply that the letter was written early.⁷ For these reasons, we will hold that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this letter.

DATE & PLACE OF WRITING

If James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this letter then some time parameters must necessarily be set. First, we can recognize that he did not write this letter prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus or his conversion to Christianity. While these dates are not absolute, most agree that Jesus was crucified sometime between AD 30–33. Second, we also know from Josephus' account that James was martyred in AD 62. Therefore the book of James was written sometime between AD 30 and AD 62. Because the details are so vague, most scholars disagree with the dating of this book. Some scholars consider James to have been written in the middle 40s, prior to the Jerusalem council. They believe this for two reasons. First, "James shows awareness of Paul's distinctive emphasis on 'justification by faith alone,' but does not really come to grips with what Paul meant by this doctrine. Such a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching was unlikely after the two had met and

hashed out a consensus on the requirements to be imposed on Gentiles for entry into the people of God at the Apostolic Council in A.D. 48 or 49 (Acts 15).”⁸ Because James and Paul seem to be saying two different things regarding justification, James must have been written earlier. Scholars also argue that James was written early because of the lack of conflict over the Torah (i.e. Jewish law) that emerged in the early church because of the inclusion of Gentiles. Because the letter of James was written to Jews and not Gentiles, James often references the Torah. Thus the very fact that James was written to a Jewish church potentially demonstrates that James was written prior to the Jerusalem Council and the massive influx of Gentiles into the church.⁹

Other scholars assume that James was written later, near or after the death of James. They argue that “the best explanation of the data is that the letter of James was written shortly after the death of James, the brother of Jesus, making use of sermons and sayings stemming from James (and/or Jesus).”¹⁰ These scholars believe that most, if not all, of the material came from James. If the book of James was “written” after the death of James, then the community he led would have then compiled the document in the form that we have it today.

In regards to the place of writing, several factors point toward Palestine and more specifically Jerusalem being the place of writing. From the language of the salutation, James highlights the fact that he is writing to Jews. He writes to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” a traditional reference to a Jewish audience. Also, much of the language and references found throughout the book of James are very Jewish. Thus if James was writing to Gentiles, he was using terminology and examples that would not have resonated with Gentiles. Finally, James was one of the pastors in Jerusalem. He was also martyred in Jerusalem. From all accounts, he did not leave the city and therefore would have written this letter from Jerusalem.

TITLE & GENRE

The title traditionally attached to this book is “The Letter of James.” While it is certainly a letter, one of the challenges with the book of James is that it lacks most of the features found in New Testament

letters. James begins with the typical salutation (1:1) and rather than offering a “thanksgiving,” the book jumps immediately into the body of the letter (1:2–5:6). While no personal greetings or final blessings can be found at the conclusion of the letter, “it follows another typical letter convention of the period by ending with a summary (5:7–11), oath (or, in James’s case, a non-oath, 5:12), health wish (in James’s case, a healing prayer, 5:13–18), and purpose statement (5:19–20).”¹¹ All of this information leads Davids to argue that James is “a literary epistle, i.e. a tract intended for publication, not an actual letter, e.g. the epistles of Paul to specific churches.”¹² For this reason James is often referred to as a “general” letter, meaning it was “written to the church at large rather than to a specific church or group of churches.”¹³

While James is certainly a letter, the book also consists of wisdom. Broadly speaking, one could consider James to be in the genre of ancient wisdom. Wisdom literature in the ancient world, particularly Israel, focused less on knowledge and more on action and right living. One author highlights this wisdom focus, noting, “What is clear is that James fits more into a wisdom genre than into the polemics of philosophy or theology. James leads with behavior and relationship to God, for which theological values form an oft-assumed base. James is concerned that his readers live well and more successfully than they currently are. This is the typical concern of Wisdom literature, like Proverbs, or Job.”¹⁴ For these reasons, James should be read as a general letter with strong wisdom overtones.

SETTING

Much of the setting for the book of James can be inferred from the very beginning of the letter. After he identifies himself, James notes his audience: “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1). This language would have been very familiar to a Jew since the language refers to the twelve tribes who originally lived in Israel but had later been dispelled from their homes. In the first century, Jews living in the dispersion were simply Jews who were living outside of Judea and the area surrounding Jerusalem. The audience, however, is no longer just Jewish. Rather, they are Jews who have converted to Christianity.

An Introduction to the Book of James



Map taken from the *ESV Study Bible*

Therefore, James seems to be writing Jewish Christians living in areas like Egypt, Asia Minor, or even Rome.¹⁵

The text of James also provides clues to the setting of James. As these Jewish Christians were living outside of Judea in the dispersion, they were experiencing poverty and oppression. Whether inside or outside of Judea, most Jewish Christians were not wealthy. In fact, they were often some of the poorest people. In the midst of their poverty, however, “the entire community is called to look out for the most dispossessed within its midst: the orphan, the widow or the person without adequate clothes or daily food.”¹⁶ By the time James was written, many of the recipients had been Christians for some time. While they would have held to orthodox beliefs regarding God and Jesus, they were experiencing difficulty in their finances. Therefore, they began “to grasp tightly to whatever money they [had]. Naturally this orientation would mean a proliferation of schemes to gain more financial security, i.e. a love for the world in James’s view.”¹⁷ Ultimately, James is concerned that the church has become wrapped up in worldly affairs, becoming more like the sinful world and less like the perfect Jesus. Hence the reason James discusses ethical and moral behavior beyond money and finances (e.g. pure speech, testing, etc.). “James is most concerned about the breakdown of unity, love, and charity within the church. The tests of faith were breaking the church apart as people

yielded to pressure. The call is for internal unity and charity.”¹⁸ This is the dire setting James finds himself writing to.

PURPOSE

James is a practical book. While James is concerned with right belief, doctrine is in the background of the book. James assumes that the church believes the right things about God, Jesus, and salvation. James is greatly concerned about how the church is living out their faith. While they might know all of the right things and believe all of the correct doctrines, James fears that their correct beliefs are divorced from right living. “Basic to all that James says in his letter is his concern that his readers stop compromising with worldly values and behavior and give themselves wholly to the Lord.”¹⁹ Ultimately, James wants the church to know that giving yourself wholly to the Lord is not just in what you believe but how you live your life in response to what you believe.

THEMES

- Living Faith

Without doubt, James is concerned with the church’s living faith. While he does not denounce right doctrine, James recognizes that the church’s problem is not with what they believe but how they live out their faith. James himself speaks to this truth when he writes, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). James reminds the church that they are to “be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing,” a challenge not toward right belief but right action (James 1:4). This perfection is the goal of spiritual maturity that all Christians must find themselves pursuing.

- Testing & Trials

James also highlights testing and trials. Testing and trials are such significant elements to the book of James that he

feels compelled to begin his letter with them. He writes, “Count it all joy my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1:2–3). The testing and trials were coming through various means, including their own sin, money and status, and Satan. While James empathizes with the church’s suffering, he also recognizes the value in suffering. James recognizes “this complex of trials as a cause for joy, because he discerns that God’s purpose is purificatory.”²⁰

- Wisdom

While James is not “official” wisdom literature nor does he seldom mention “wisdom,” his letter certainly is full of wisdom similar to the Proverbs. Wisdom is such an important theme in his letter that he tells the church to ask God for wisdom if they are lacking it (James 1:5–6). He also reminds the church that true wisdom comes from above (James 3:12–18). Much of the wisdom James shares comes from the very mouth of Jesus himself. While the Gospels might not have been written down at this point, the oral tradition of Jesus’ sayings would have been widely known. In particular, there are approximately eighteen references in James that are almost identical to references found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. All of this points to the fact that James sees the sayings and teachings of Jesus as wisdom for the church.

- The Piety of the Poor

Finally, one cannot deny the significance of the poor in the book of James (see James 1:9–11, 27; 2:3–7, 15–16; 5:7–11). In particular, James writes how the poor are more pious or holy than the rich. James himself seems to borrow from the Old Testament tradition where the poor were cared for by God and were to be cared for by the people of Israel. Why are the pious considered poor

in the book of James? “The poor whom James knows of have been placed at the margins of society—widows and orphans, and those victimized by economic conditions as well as the dishonesty of their employers. The poor are the pious because they throw themselves on the mercy of God in the face of injustice.”²¹ James also reminds the poor within the church that despite their poverty, their pursuit in life is not to become rich but to love God and love people. While the piety of the poor is emphasized in the book of James, one must remember that James is not saying all rich people are evil or that the rich cannot be Christians. The rich are sinners in the context of James because they hoard money from the poor, live in senseless luxury, defraud their workers, and persecute the righteous. “Economic status and spiritual status do not exactly correlate.”²²

OUTLINE OF JAMES

- I. Salutation (1:1)
- II. Opening Statement (1:2–27)
 - A. Testing, Wisdom, Wealth (1:2–11)
 - B. Testing, Speech, Generosity (1:12–25)
 - C. Summary/Transition (1:26–27)
- III. Poverty & Generosity (2:1–26)
 - A. No Partiality Is Allowable (2:1–13)
 - B. Generosity Is Necessary (2:14–26)
- IV. The Demand for Pure Speech (3:1–4:12)
 - A. Pure Speech Has No Anger (3:1–12)
 - B. Pure Speech Comes from Wisdom (3:13–18)
 - C. Pure Prayer Is Without Anger (4:1–10)
 - D. Pure Speech Is Uncondemning (4:11–12)
- V. Testing Through Wealth (4:13–5:6)
 - A. The Test of Wealth (4:13–17)
 - B. The Test by the Wealthy (5:1–6)
- VI. Closing Statement (5:7–20)
 - A. Endurance in the Test (5:7–11)
 - B. Rejection of Oaths (5:12)
 - C. Helping One Another through Prayer & Forgiveness (5:13–18)
 - D. Closing Encouragement (5:19–20)²³

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION
JAMES 1:1

WEEK 2: OPENING STATEMENT
JAMES 1:2-27

WEEK 3: POVERTY & GENEROSITY
JAMES 2:1-26

WEEK 4: THE DEMAND FOR PURE SPEECH
JAMES 3:1-4:12

WEEK 5: TESTING THROUGH WEALTH
JAMES 4:13-5:6

WEEK 6: CLOSING STATEMENT
JAMES 5:7-20

RESOURCES FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY

Below we have included some study helps, aids, and resources for our series through the book of James. We encourage you to study the book yourself outside of our Equip Series.

TECHNICAL COMMENTARIES

Peter H. Davids. *Commentary on James*. In the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. ISBN: 978-0802871404.

Peter H. Davids. *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*. In the *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. ISBN: 978-0310291473.

Ralph P. Martin. *James*. In the *Word Biblical Commentary*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988. ISBN: 978-0849902475.

NON-TECHNICAL COMMENTARIES

Craig Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell. *James*. In the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008. ISBN: 978-0310244028.

Douglas J. Moo. *The Letter of James*. In *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. ISBN: 978-0802837301.

J. A. Motyer. *The Message of James*. In the *Bible Speaks Today*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1985. ISBN: 978-0877842927.

David P. Nystrom. *James*. In *NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. ISBN: 978-0310493600.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Gospel Coalition Resources on James

<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library?f%5Bbook%5D%5B%5D=James>

Desiring God (John Piper's Ministry) Resources on James

<http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-scripture/james/1>

<http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-scripture/james/2>

<http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-scripture/james/3>

<http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-scripture/james/4>

<http://www.desiringgod.org/all-resources/by-scripture/james/5>

The Village Church on James

<http://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/series/james>

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²Peter H. Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, in the *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 36.

³Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 14–15.

⁴Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 36.

⁵Ibid., 40.

⁶Moo, *The Letter of James*, 18.

⁷Burge, Cohick, and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 382.

⁸Moo, *The Letter of James*, 26.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, 41.

¹¹Ibid., 42.

¹²Peter H. Davids, *Commentary on James*, in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 24.

¹³Moo, *The Letter of James*, 6.

¹⁴William R. Baker, “James,” in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 204.

¹⁵Burge, Cohick, and Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*, 376.

¹⁶Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions*, in *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 160.

¹⁷Dauids, *Commentary on James*, 33.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁹Moo, *The Letter of James*, 46.

²⁰David P. Nystrom, *James*, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 22.

²¹*Ibid.*, 25.

²²Moo, *The Letter of James*, 36.

²³Dauids, *Commentary on James*, 27–28.