

1 James Overview

Written by whom?

The author identifies himself as James, and he was probably the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem council. There were four men in the NT with this name. It could not have been the apostle James, who died too early (AD 44) to have written it. The other two James did not have the standing or the influence necessary to write it. James was one of several brothers of Christ, probably the oldest. At first he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him and misunderstood his mission. Later he became very prominent in the church. He was martyred around AD 62.

Written when and where?

The letter gives no indication of where James was when he wrote. However, since he was the pastor and leader of the Jerusalem church, it seems reasonable that it was written from Jerusalem. The indications are that it was written before AD 50. The Jewish nature suggests that it was composed when the church was still mostly Jewish converts. There are no references to Gentile circumcision. It seems to have a simple church organization, with only elders and teachers. It is most likely the earliest of all the NT writings.

Written to whom?

The recipients are explicitly called “the twelve tribes scattered”. This would most naturally apply to Jewish Christians. A Jewish audience would be most in keeping with the obviously Jewish nature of the letter, since James uses the Hebrew title for God. It has been suggested that these were believers from the early Jerusalem church who scattered after Stephen’s death.

What form?

This letter, like the others after Hebrews (excepting Revelation) are called the General Letters. They are called this because they are not addressed to a specific individual or church. Rather, they were specifically intended to be read and circulated among all the congregations. It could also be considered a Wisdom book, similar to Proverbs, because of the many practical instructions concerning the way to live as a believer.

What’s it about?

James places emphasis on vital Christianity, characterized by good deeds and a faith that works, accompanied by a consistent lifestyle. It seems to have been intended to reinforce Jesus’ teachings, specifically the Sermon on the Mount.

2 James Chapter 1 – Scripture Questions

1. According to James, what should be considered a joy (or gift)? (vs. 2-4)
2. What will we receive from God, if we ask in faith? (vs. 5-8)
3. What will happen to those who focus on wealth and prosperity? (vs. 9-11)
4. How will those who are loyal to God be rewarded? (vs. 12)
5. Who is responsible for our temptations? (vs. 13-15)
6. From where do all good things come? (vs. 16-18)
7. What should we do with our human anger? (vs. 19-21)
8. How does James describe those who hear God's word and act on it? (vs. 22-24)
9. How can we recognize true devotion (or religion)? (vs. 26-27)

3 James Chapter 1 – What Did it Mean to Them?

When the New Testament was being assembled, there were debates about including the book of James. It doesn't have specific doctrinal teachings; it is short; the identity of the writer was in question; it was not written by one of the apostles; it was sent to no specific person or church.

It was eventually included for a number of reasons. The practical emphases of James rest on a solid, though not specifically spoken, theological foundation. Three doctrines come up frequently: 1) The doctrine of God and his generous, holy nature, 2) the universal problems of sin and the consequences of sin, and 3) the end times, the day of judgment and the return of Jesus Christ.

A careful look at the book will show that James uses the teachings of Jesus, specifically the Sermon on the Mount. Some of James' writing include what seem to be quotes from Jesus, and certainly include themes from Jesus' words.

Most commentators feel that James was writing to Christians who had been scattered from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). After Stephen's death, Christians in Jerusalem experienced a surge in persecution. Those who fled no longer had contact with the apostles, no one (or few people) who could instruct and encourage them. Their difficulties included persecution and oppression by rich people. For some, their religion was becoming a superficial formality. They were discriminating among themselves, showing a lack of love. Evidently there was anger, bitterness and poor attitudes among them. Reports of the problems they were facing got back to Jerusalem. In response, James wrote as a pastor to them, to urge his people to make the needed changes in their lives and in their church relationships.

4 James Chapter 1 – Application Questions

1. James is writing to people far away who are struggling with their faith. We have ministers in our congregation who would be glad to help answer questions or encourage us in our faith. What question(s) would you like to have answered?
2. James makes standing up to temptation and problems sound like a good thing, like exercising makes your body strong. How do you identify temptations? What temptation have you (mostly) gotten control of? Which one still gives you trouble?
3. So: we are not supposed to just listen to the word of God, we are supposed to do what it says. Name something specific that you know we (as Christians) are supposed to be doing. Is this happening, as far as you know? What should we do about it, if we need to change?
4. According to James, if we think we are religious but can't control our tongues (or in today's world, our keyboarding), we are kidding ourselves and our religion is useless. Doesn't this seem a little extreme? How could it possibly be a sin to be a chatterbox? Or to swear occasionally? Or to help people on the internet understand how wrong they are?

5 James Chapter 2 – Scripture Questions

1. “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show _____.” (vs. 1)
2. If we discriminate, or show favorites, between rich and poor believers, what have we become? (vs. 4)
3. What three things were the rich doing to James’ readers? (vs. 6, 7)
4. What is the royal law, the sum of all the commandments? (vs. 8)
5. To break one part of the law is to break _____ of the law. (vs. 10)
6. What triumphs over judgment? (vs. 13)
7. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is _____.” (vs. 17)
8. The demons believe in God. What good does it do them? (vs. 19)
9. How was Abraham’s faith made complete? (vs. 22)
10. What did Rahab do that made her to be considered righteous? (vs. 25)

6 James Chapter 2 – What Did it Mean to Them?

James is strongly emphatic about the ways that Christians are to treat people. He uses phrases that call to mind commands from Jesus: Matthew 22:39 “Love your neighbor as yourself”, and Matthew 7:12 “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” In this chapter he is very clear that the effects of faith will be shown in deeds.

The original readers evidently were having problems in their meetings with discrimination. It seems that they were having visitors to their worship, and these visitors were being handled according to the way they looked. James scolds them very strongly about this. He points out that the royal (or over-arching) law, specified by Christ, was to love your neighbor as yourself. To play favorites among people is to break this law from Christ. Whatever measure is used for other people will be used for us. Do we want to be judged with mercy? We must show mercy to others.

James has been accused (by no less than Martin Luther) of teaching that deeds are more important than faith. A careful reading, though, shows that this is not the case. For James, the things that were done by Christians showed whether or not their faith was genuine. Abraham was considered righteous long before he offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice, but the act of sacrifice was evidence of his internal faithfulness. James uses two almost ridiculous examples to show that false faith is useless. First, he talks about the absurdity of simply telling people to be well fed and warm without providing food and clothing. Then, he speaks of demons who KNOW that God is real. No one questions the damnation of demons even though they have complete belief in God. For James, this kind of belief/faith is simply an intellectual acceptance of reality rather than a commitment of life.

7 James Chapter 2 – Application Questions

1. If the things we do are evidence of our faith, should we be keeping lists of our activities so that we can prove our faith is legitimate? Do you think God keeps track of what we do? If he does, why?
2. Some people think that well-to-do members get treated better than others. How can we prevent this from happening? What are some practical things we can do as a church to make sure we don't play favorites?
3. In this section, James seems to say that false faith is simply intellectual acceptance. What is the difference between real faith and simply knowing something is true?
4. James' readers had examples from their past to help them understand how they needed to live. What examples of good Christian living do we have in our congregation? Can you think of some good examples from outside our congregation?

8 James Chapter 3 – Scripture Questions

1. Why shouldn't many people become teachers? (vs. 1)
2. What is necessary in order to be a 'complete' person, with full self-control? (vs. 2)
3. How does James describe the damage a person can cause by what they say—the way they use their tongue? (vs. 6)
4. Who can tame the tongue? (vs. 8)
5. What contrasts does James use to show the impossibility of good and evil coming from the same source? (vs. 9-12)
6. How does a wise person behave? (vs. 13)
7. What does earthly wisdom produce? (vs. 14)
8. What are the results of jealousy and arguments (contention)? (vs. 16)
9. Describe the results of the wisdom that comes from heaven. (vs. 17, 18)

9 James Chapter 3 – What Did it Mean to Them?

In order to understand this chapter, we must be careful to take it as a whole. James begins by speaking of teachers. Most likely, there were people among those who had left Jerusalem who wanted to gain authority and stature among the scattered believers. One way to do this was to set themselves up as teachers. James warns these Christians that if they decide to teach, they will then be held to a higher standard of behavior.

In this context, the discussion about the ‘tongue’ means that the words spoken by these self-styled teachers had great power. James knew that the words spoken as teachings had the potential to encourage and the potential to destroy the congregations. If there was evil intent on the part of the teachers, the believers could be brought into sin.

Some of the words in the original language indicate that these ‘teachers’ were reaching for control and power over the congregations. There is some indication that different ‘teachers’ were creating division and discord among the believers, with one group taking pride in putting down another group. James strongly rebukes this, calling it earthly wisdom—from hell!

Finally, James gives his readers very practical ways to tell if their teachers are using heavenly wisdom. Their lives, he says, will give evidence of their rightness. Similar in some ways to Paul’s description of fruits of the Spirit, this description of godly wisdom makes it easy to tell if the person doing the teaching is actually a follower of Jesus.

10 James Chapter 3 – Application Questions

1. Why should teachers be held more strictly accountable than non-teachers? Who is responsible for over-seeing the efforts of teachers?
2. James sees an uncontrolled tongue as a dangerous weapon, something that can cause havoc and destruction. As Christians, how can we make sure our words reflect Christ and the 'royal law' of love?
3. The wisdom of the world can be thought of as "self interest". Where do you cross the line from being sensible about taking care of yourself and being self-absorbed? How can you tell if that line is crossed?
4. The wisdom that comes from heaven sounds lovely, and sorely needed in our world. What practical steps can we take to encourage and grow in this kind of wisdom, keeping in mind James' emphasis on active faith?

11 James Chapter 4 – Scripture Questions

1. What causes fights and quarrels among believers? (vs. 1)
2. Why do we not receive what we ask for, according to James? (vs. 3)
3. Where should we focus our devotion and friendship? Why? (vs. 4-6)
4. What happens when we resist the devil? (vs. 7)
5. How does James demand that his readers change? (vs. 8-10)
6. What is James' instruction concerning judging one another? (vs. 11, 12)
7. What 'law' is James referring to? (Hint: James 2:8)
8. Why does James seem scornful about making plans for the future? (vs. 14)
9. Instead, how should we think of our plans? (vs. 15)
10. "Anyone who knows the _____ he ought to do and doesn't do it, _____." (vs. 17)

12 James Chapter 4 – What Did it Mean to Them?

This chapter is connected with the end of chapter three. The wisdom from heaven (chapter 3) results in peace while the wisdom of the world (chapter 4) results in conflict. It is possible that James was addressing the conflicts within a specific congregation of believers. Just as desire can lead to sin and death (1:14-15), so a person's desires can cause fights and quarrels. James makes a clear picture of the cause of conflicts. Coveting, or desiring what another has not only breaks the tenth commandment, it also leads to savage (potentially lethal) efforts to gain what is coveted.

Christians need only ask to receive all that is *needed*. That is not the same thing as receiving all that is *desired*. Just as a loving parent will not necessarily give a greedy child all that they desire, God will not give us all that we desire.

In the original Greek, James speaks of 'adulterers and adulteresses'. His readers would have been very familiar with the image of God as the husband of Israel, and with the many stories that spoke of Israel's spiritual adultery. Jesus himself spoke of "this adulterous and sinful generation". Underneath these expressions are the understanding of the church as the bride of Christ. By using this description, James makes clear to his readers that they cannot be devoted to the world and the methods of the world without being unfaithful to God and Christ. Not only that, but their unfaithfulness toward the Law of Love and general disobedience toward God and lack of humility are the specific causes of strife within their communities.

James emphasizes the wise way to live: 1) Submission to God, and 2) Resistance to the devil. Submission is evidence of humility and leads to obedience. Resistance provides the way of escape from the temptations that desire and passion arouse. This kind of wisdom protects against the arrogance he describes, which assumes that life is under our control. It teaches that we are under the lordship of Christ, and that all our plans should be made with that thought foremost in our hearts.

13 James Chapter 4 – Application Questions

1. James is teaching his readers that their first devotion and focus should be on God. How do we balance this devotion with the needs of the world around us? How do we balance with our obligations to family?
2. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” sounds wonderful. Resist what—and how do we resist?
3. James says not to ‘judge’ one another because it breaks the law—presumably, the royal law of love he speaks of in chapter 2. Should we get the telephone pole out of our own eye before looking for the speck in someone else’s eye? Why?
4. What is the difference between making plans for the future on our own and making plans while saying “If it is the Lord’s will”? Do you think we should be more careful about announcing our plans? Why or why not?

14 James Chapter 5 – Scripture Questions

1. James warns non-Christian rich people of several upcoming punishments: (vs. 1-3)
 1. Weep and wail because of the coming _____.
 2. Their commodities are _____.
 3. Their stockpiled fancy clothes are being eaten by _____.
 4. Their hoarded money is _____.
 5. Their hoarded possessions will eat their _____ like fire.
2. What evil things had these rich people done? (vs. 4-6)
3. Turning back to the Christians, what did James tell them to do in the face of this evil? (vs. 7)
4. Why were they told to be patient and strong? (vs. 8, 9)
5. Why was Job used as an example of perseverance? (vs. 11)
6. What did James want them to do, rather than swear oaths? (vs. 12)
7. How are Christians supposed to respond to trouble? (vs. 13)
8. To whom should we confess our sins? (vs. 16)
9. What happened when Elijah prayed? (vs. 17)
10. What is the result when a sinner is turned from the error of his/her ways? (vs. 20)

15 James Chapter 5 – What Did it Mean to Them?

James begins this section by reminding his readers of the fact that the day of judgment was coming. The New Testament seems to regard the whole period between Christ's first and second comings as the 'last days'. In comparison with the preparation days of the Old Testament, this is the last period before Christ comes to set up his kingdom and to judge all people. James here warns of crimes that will deserve punishment at that judgment: hoarded wealth, unpaid wages, luxury and self-indulgence, and the murder of innocent people.

Most likely, the 'rich' that James speaks of were not believers. These individuals are not called 'brothers'. They are not called on to repent and change, but only to weep and wail because of the judgment coming to them. It is more reasonable to treat this section as being similar to Old Testament prophecies about judgments coming to pagan nations.

The next section, on patience and perseverance, is addressed to the 'brothers', so we know that James is speaking again to his Christian readers. The verb translated as 'be patient' describes the attitude of self-restraint that does not try to get even for a wrong that has been done. James begins with an illustration of a farmer, who must wait for the fall and spring rains to make a successful crop. The believers must be patient toward both outsiders who opposed them and insiders who irritated them. The words 'grumble against each other' is not a loud, noisy complaint but bitterness or resentment that expresses itself in groans, sighs or eye-rolling.

Second, James speaks of the prophets. Jeremiah was well-known as one who endured mistreatment (including stocks, prison, dungeon) with patience. He was never bitter, and persisted in his ministry. The third illustration is Job. The previous examples were for patience that does not retaliate, but this one refers to perseverance in difficult circumstances. Job was not particularly patient, but he was spectacularly persistent in his faith. His story is also one that has proof of the Lord's compassion and mercy, in that he regained all that he had lost.

When James speaks of oaths, he is referring to the light, casual use of oaths, not formal ones used in places like courts of law. Rather than using an oath to convince people that a statement was true, Christians should be so honest in all their speech that whenever they said "Yes" or "No" people would know that it was truthful.

In the last section, James gives believers a tool for dealing with difficult people and situations: prayer. Prayer is to permeate every part of their lives, included physical illness and spiritual difficulty.

16 James Chapter 5 – Application Questions

1. When James wrote his letter, Christians were, by and large, from the poor part of society. Do you think this is still true? Where do you think our congregation falls on this spectrum of poor to rich? What effect does our relative wealth have on our willingness to care for the poor?
2. James encourages his readers to be patient in the face of bad treatment, partly by remembering that Jesus would be coming back. What are some ways we can reinforce this idea, especially since it has been about 2000 years since he left?
3. Sickness was treated by prayer and medicinal oil, delivered by the elders of the church. Do you think our elders are involved enough with individual members and their struggles? Why or why not?
4. When speaking of someone who had ‘wandered from the truth’, the ‘bringing back’ seems to be the job of regular members. Why do you think we usually leave this to our ministers?