



James

The epistle of James although taking the form of a letter feels much more like a sermon. It is the closest that any New Testament book comes to being a part of the wisdom tradition since time and time again it urges its recipients to live their lives according to the wisdom that comes from God rather than earthly wisdom. At the heart of the letter lies the invitation not just to listen to good advice but to put it into action.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 16 mins
Short of time? Just read 1.1-7; 2.1-17; 3.1-13



Genre

Epistle/wisdom



Anything tricky?

Martin Luther famously disliked the book of James and called it 'a book of straw'. Some see the message of James which encourages action as well as faith as fundamentally opposed to what Paul says about being justified by faith alone. I would see this as a misunderstanding. Paul did believe in justification by faith but expected that faith to transform how people behaved; this is exactly the same as James. But read it and see what you think.



Inspiring quotes

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

(James 1.5)

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

(James 1.17)

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

(James 2.15-17)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

(James 3.13)



About the Author

The letter claims to be written by 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Christian tradition associates this James with the brother of Jesus, who was the leader of the Jerusalem church. The Jewish historian Josephus in his history of the Jews (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.9) states that James was martyred in ad 62.

There are of course other Jameses in the New Testament but the weight of tradition suggests that this James was the leader of the Jerusalem church.

What do we know about him?

James appears a few times in the New Testament. Paul declared that the risen Jesus appeared to him (1 Corinthians 15.7) and in Galatians 2.9 referred to him, alongside Cephas (Peter) and John the Apostle as being a pillar of the church. Acts 12.17 implies that he might have been the leader of the Jerusalem community and in Acts 15.6-19 played an important part in the gathering that took place in Jerusalem, which is often called the Jerusalem council. Again in Acts (in 21.18ff) James insisted that Paul cleansed himself ritually at the temple to counter the claim that he had rebelled against Torah.



About the times

If the letter was written by this James then it is quite early, written in the 50s AD since James was killed ad 62.

There are some, however, who do not believe that it was written by James himself but by people faithful to James' memory, arguing that the style suggests a much later date of the early second century ad.

What were people feeling?

Assuming an early date for the epistle, two decades after the death of Jesus the people were trying to work out what it meant to follow Jesus when he was no longer with them. James provides many practical solutions to questions like this.

The letter is, slightly oddly, addressed to 'the twelve tribes of the dispersion'. The dispersion or diaspora is the word used by Jews to refer to the spreading of Jews to other countries following the exile. It probably therefore means Jews around the world, though the topics he then covers suggests he is talking to Jewish followers of Christ. If this is James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, then this would make sense as most members of the Jerusalem church were Jewish.



What kind of Book is it?

James appears to be a letter but there are very few personal details in it, and it reads much more like a sermon than a letter (Hebrews is the same). It contains down-to-earth pragmatic advice about how to live as a Christian. This, coupled with its emphasis on God's wisdom, suggest that it draws a little on the Old Testament wisdom tradition.



How is it structured?

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| 1.1 | Greeting |
| 1.2-18 | Opening encouragements, many about joy |
| 1.19-27 | Don't just listen, do it! |
| 2.1-13 | On favouritism (to the rich) |
| 2.14-26 | There is no faith without works |
| 3.1-12 | On controlling the tongue |
| 3.13-5.6 | On living wisely |
| 5.7-20 | Farewell and final encouragements |



Look out for...

As we noted above many think that this book is connected to the wisdom tradition, so look out for general teaching about wisdom as well as any wisdom type sayings that there are as you read!

James uses particularly vivid imagery in his writing, see which of them is your favourite.

James is well known for its emphasis on works (and for the fact that some people think that this contradicts what Paul says), think about this as you read and see what you think.



What could this mean for me?

James offers practical advice about how to live wisely in the world. Reflect on which of his advice is still relevant today and whether you might want to add a gem or two of your own.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- What did you think was the most powerful advice that James offered for Christian living? How might you put it in to practice in your life?
- James has particularly strong words to say about the preferential treatment of the rich when Christians gather together. Think about your own church – who is given preferential treatment there? What do you think James might say to your own church?
- James' image of bridling the tongue is a particularly powerful one and his advice is as relevant today as it ever was. Discuss why this is such hard advice to follow and what you might need to do to put it into practice.
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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