

# James

## Authorship

The James most often identified as the author of this book is the Lord Jesus' half-brother, who became influential in the Jerusalem church. This accords with the understated salutation, the internal evidence and external testimony.<sup>1</sup>

## Date

The description of the addressees, the Jewishness of the contents, and the absence of any hint of a Gentile presence in the church support a very early date for this epistle. If the crucifixion is placed in A.D. 33 and Paul's conversion in A.D.34, then James can hardly be dated much, if any later.<sup>2</sup>

## Historical Setting & Original Readers

The salutation and general contents (or more specifically lack of certain things in the contents, such as controversy over Gentile inclusion in the church) indicate that James is writing against the background of a completely Jewish church, but one that has undergone persecution and is scattered (cf. 1:1). Such a scattering is reported in Acts 1:8. It therefore seems to have a Palestinian setting, but with scattered Jewish Christians in mind.<sup>3</sup>

## Occasion

James is concerned with the encouragement of Christians who have undergone various kinds of trials as well as situations that have apparently arisen within Christian congregations and have resulted in disharmony. Otherwise there is no specific situation in view.

## Message

Proper conduct in the face of trial will produce Christ-like character and eternal reward.

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<sup>1</sup> See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 7-10 and John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 131-35.

<sup>2</sup> See Hodges, *James*, 10-11; Robinson would date it in A.D. 47/48 (*Redating*, 137-39.)

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid.*, 122, for a statement supporting such a setting.

## Outline

I.	Salutation: James writes as a servant to dispersed Jewish Christians.	1:1
II.	Prologue: Believers must respond to trials as God's method of character development.	1:2-20
	A. Trials provide opportunity for the purifying of faith.	1:2-8
	1. Trials are to be welcomed for the production of endurance.	1:2-4
	2. Trials are to be encountered through wisdom given by God.	1:5-8
	B. Trials remind one the frailty of human existence.	1:9-11
	C. Trials hold the promise of eternal reward.	1:12-18
	1. Temptation resisted leads to an approved life.	1:12
	2. Temptation entertained leads to death.	1:13-18
	a. The desires of man tempt unto death.	1:13-15
	b. The gifts of God lead to life.	1:16-18
	D. Trials must be encountered with proper behavior.	1:19-20
	1. The believer must be quick to hear.	1:19a
	2. The believer must be slow to speak.	1:19b
	3. The believer must be slow to anger.	1:19c-20
III.	Body: Appropriate Christian conduct must be cultivated.	1:21–5:6
	A. General Instruction: The innate word must be received and acted upon.	1:21-27
	1. The command: the word must be welcomed as consistent with their new nature.	1:21
	2. The concept: they must become doers of the word.	1:22-25
	3. The conduct: they must practice true religion.	1:26-27
	B. Specific Application: Christian conduct must be consistently & concretely cultivated.	2:1–5:6
	1. Instruction on faith and works.	2:1-26
	a. Faith with partiality is a perversion.	2:1-13
	1) Partiality judges via externals.	2:1-4
	2) Partiality denies God's value system.	2:5
	3) Partiality displays social hypocrisy.	2:6
	4) Partiality disobeys the law of love.	2:7-13
	b. Faith without works is dead.	2:14-26
	1) Faith without works denies necessary aid to others.	2:14-17
	2) Faith without works does not become mature.	2:18-22
	3) Faith without works is devoid of God's approval.	2:23-26
	2. Instruction on dissension and harmony.	3:1-18
	a. The tongue untamed is destructive.	3:1-12
	1) The tongue is capable of great harm.	3:1-6
	2) The tongue is tamable only by God.	3:7-12
	b. Works of wisdom are constructive.	3:13-18
	1) Works are the safe vehicle for displaying wisdom.	3:13
	2) Envy and self-seeking display the wisdom from below.	3:14-16

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|     | 3) Those who make peace display wisdom from above.                            | 3:17-18 |
| 3.  | Instruction on pride and humility.  | 4:1-17  |
|     | a. Pride promotes strife between believers.                                   | 4:1-6   |
|     | b. Humility prompts the support of God.                                       | 4:7-10  |
|     | c. Pride judges a brother.  | 4:11-12 |
|     | d. Arrogant boasting is evil.   | 4:13-17 |
| 4.  | Instruction on wealth and fraud.  | 5:1-6   |
|     | a. Wealth hoarded is corrupt.   | 5:1-3   |
|     | b. Wages withheld are redressed by the Lord.                                  | 5:4-6   |
| IV. | Epilogue on the opportunities presented in difficulty.                        | 5:7-20  |
|     | A. Personal suffering presents opportunity to develop patient endurance.      | 5:7-12  |
|     | 1. The coming of the Lord motivates our endurance.                            | 5:7-9   |
|     | 2. The name of the Lord is honored by our endurance.                          | 5:10-12 |
|     | B. Personal difficulties present opportunity to experience God's deliverance. | 5:13-20 |
|     | 1. He aids and cheers the sufferer.   | 5:13    |
|     | 2. He restores the afflicted through prayer.                                  | 5:14-18 |
|     | 3. He delivers from death.  | 5:19-20 |

### Message

Proper conduct in the face of trial will produce Christ-like character and eternal reward.

### Argument

Christians can expect to experience various kinds of difficulties as a result of their faith. They also are still prone to the desires of the flesh, which cause personal and interpersonal problems. Encouragement is always appropriate with respect to living life as the Lord Jesus Christ instructed and exemplified. One who grew up in Jesus' presence, and later came to believe in him, writes this general letter for the purpose of such encouragement. Its intent and contents are timeless in their applicability.

#### I. Salutation: James writes as a servant to dispersed Jewish Christians (1:1).

With the humility appropriate to a true servant of God, James writes to Jewish Christians who have been displaced as a result of their faith and, therefore, need to be encouraged in proper Christian conduct.

II. Prologue: Believers must respond to trials as God's method of character development (1:2-20).

Far from being resented, various trials are to be welcomed as part of God's character training regimen, with a view not just to the immediate, but to the eternal future. Faith is the key to living the Christian life. Therefore, faith must be continually purified and strengthened. Trials provide a unique opportunity for this (1:2-8) since humanity cannot handle all that life throws at it anyway (1:9-11). Solicitation to evil, as part of the trials of life, should never be thought of as deriving from God; the Father only gives good and perfect gifts, quintessentially illustrated in the life brought at spiritual birth (1:12-18).

With such a perspective on the nature of the believer's testing and the goodness of God's gifts, James counsels three qualities that are always needed and always appropriate when undergoing trial: keen "listening" skills, thoughtful and restrained speech, and self-control when it comes to anger (1:19). This is because it is the righteousness of God, as opposed to the natural propensities of man, that is the issue in living the Christian life (1:20).

III. Body: Appropriate Christian conduct must be cultivated (1:21-5:6).

Having established the need for godly conduct in the midst of trials, James sets forth very specific examples of what that means, beginning with a general statement of the principle of practical versus theoretical Christianity.

A. General Instruction: The innate word must be received and acted upon (1:21-27).

Instead of continuing to hang on to the behavioral patterns of the old life, believers are to welcome instruction in the Word because it is in complete harmony with what they have become as new creatures in Christ (1:21). Because there is an internal dynamic at work, believers can perform according to that standard. However, it involves practical action, not just doctrinal affirmation (1:22-25). A practical example, which will be dealt with in chapter 3, is the use of one's tongue (1:26). In general, pure religious devotion is encapsulated in the twin realms of practical ministry and personal piety (1:27). James will now begin to explore some of the practical aspects of this "pure religion."

B. Specific Application: Christian conduct must be consistently & concretely cultivated (2:1-5:6).

James moves through a number of areas of Christian conduct, all of which, in some way, revolve around the three qualities mentioned in 1:19-20. By correcting wrong

attitudes and practices, he lays down specific guidelines for godly behavior.

1. Instruction on faith and works (2:1-26). While the world makes distinctions on the basis of externals, Christians must not. The wealthy are not more valuable in God's eyes, since true heavenly wealth accrues to those rich in faith, who are often, in fact, the poor of this world (2:5). Even Torah reflects the true value of the person (2:8). The believer operates under the law of liberty, which enables the fulfillment of the law of love (2:10-12).

When it comes to responding to a fellow Christian having material need, it is not the sentiment that matters but the act (2:14-16). Sentiment without action must not be allowed to count as pure religion. Such "faith" is actually inactive, "dead" (2:17). Despite the objection that there is no necessary relationship between the presence of works and the demonstration of faith, James contends that Abraham's case proves just the opposite. He in fact was vindicated, before men, as a man of faith only when that faith was outwardly demonstrated by his active obedience (2:18-21). In this way faith becomes fully developed and demonstrably significant (2:22-25). Faith must be exercised by good works in order to remain vibrant and active (2:26).<sup>4</sup>

2. Instruction on dissension and harmony (3:1-18). Just as speech takes up much of the book of Proverbs, one of James' favorite sources, so it becomes an important aspect of pure religion. Proper use of the tongue is a mark of spiritual maturity (3:1-2). However, its misuse can have the most destructive effects in the body of Christ (3:3-6). Though man can tame all sorts of wild beasts, the tongue is only conquerable by God (3:7-12). True wisdom will display itself through good conduct, while the wisdom of the world just results in disunity and confusion (3:13-16). Godly wisdom will produce righteousness and peace (3:17-18).

3. Instruction on pride and humility (4:1-17). While peace and harmony come from above (3:17) wrangling and enmity actually come from the pursuit of selfish gratification, stimulated by the idea that one's self is the ultimate measure of value and meaning, that is, by pride (4:1-6). In reality, this attitude simply puts one at odds with God, thereby forfeiting the efficacy of his grace for daily living (4:6). Humility is the only way to assure God's aid and protection in life (4:7-10). Judging one another and boasting over life's

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hodges, *James*, 58-72.

pursuits are contrary to the kind of conduct needed to assure the best outcome with respect to the various trials of life (4:11-17).

4. Instruction on wealth and fraud (5:1-6).

Returning to his opening topic, namely, how wealth is viewed, James condemns the corrupt hording of riches and the fraud that so often accompanies such a practice. Once again, it can be seen that this violates the definition of pure and undefiled religion as that which looks out for others in need (1:27).

IV. Epilogue on the opportunities presented in difficulty (5:7-20).

Having set forth the requirements of pure and undefiled religion in a series of contrasting attitudes and actions, James returns to his original topic—the endurance of trials. In effect it is a summary exhortation to patiently endure hardship in expectation of the Lord's return (5:7-12) all the while looking unto him no matter what circumstance may befall (5:13-18). A particular emphasis at this point is prayer: prayer in suffering, prayer in healing, prayer in spiritual restoration. When trials are met out of a right conduct, God may be trusted to empower not only to the preservation of one's own life (1:21) but the lives of others as well (5:20).

#### SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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