

## 11 STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF JAMES

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## *Introduction*

As the brother of Jesus, James experienced misery, majesty and in his view, mental insanity.

As a child and well into adulthood, he likely heard taunts and slurs about his mother's respectability. Everyone knew Joseph, James' father, had not fathered Jesus. Jesus himself was hard to fathom. As a boy he'd debated and taught his religious leaders and claimed God was his Father (Luke 2:49). Then he'd become a carpenter, and we can imagine the jeering James may have heard: "So God did all this, so that his son would be a carpenter?"

The adult Jesus was difficult as well. He wandered around the country proclaiming that he was indeed the Son of God. As proof, there were miracles. On one occasion, James and his family tried to take Jesus by force, so concerned were they about his mental sanity (Mark 3:20-21). When they tried to see Jesus and have time with him, they were shut out (Mark 3:31-33). Only after the shame of the crucifixion and the incredible resurrection, did James come to know majesty and magnificence. In a private meeting (1 Cor. 15:7), he finally believed that Jesus was his Messiah and Lord.

He then became a key leader in the early church (Acts 15). Sometime later, between AD 40-62, but most likely the middle 40's, he wrote a letter to Jewish Christians, these "twelve tribes in the dispersion" of 1:1, who had left Jerusalem.

As a writer, James loved using strong images to drive his point home: a forest fire raging out of control; people peering into mirror but then forgetting what they look like; a sea-vessel, straining in strong winds but holding steady under the control of a tiny rudder. James weaves eternal truths with vivid everyday images. Then he drives the truths home with searching applications. He's not just interested in making an impact though. He clearly expects his readers to be changed by what they're reading. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only," 1:22) he writes and later he takes aim at fraudulent Christianity. "Do not be deceived" is a constant, strong refrain.

Perhaps his own close proximity to Christ without the reality of faith made a deep impression, because he's anxious that his readers don't have the same blinkers on about the status of their own faith.

Pray that your time studying this letter will deeply transform both your life in Christ and your friendship with God. For this to happen, each of us must ask God to make us willing to be transformed as we look into the mirror of scripture. This may well involve pain, "Be wretched and mourn and weep...humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." (James 4:9-10)

So, even though *James* contains truths that are deeply comforting, such as "God gives (wisdom) generously to all without reproach"(1:5), don't expect his letter to be comfortable. Like the Book of Proverbs, *James* is full of practical advice concerning the shape of a life of wisdom, and this is called the New Testament's book of wisdom. At first glance, *James* may seem to lack a cohesive thread that holds the whole letter together and read like a random collection of practical advice from a wise apostle. It does have more commands per word than any other New Testament book and some feel it doesn't say much about the grace of God.

However, as we look more closely, the grace of God is woven carefully throughout the whole letter. James uses different images and language to some of the other New Testament writers. Nevertheless, his letter is saturated with the gracious character of God, and all of his commands are based on the work and person of the Lord Jesus Christ. From 1:1 we see that James acknowledges whose servant he is, and through whom the grace of God the Father, has come.

Behind his teaching too, is the direct teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ which we find in the gospels, particularly from chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel containing the Sermon on the Mount, which is full of the wisdom, love and grace of our Lord and Saviour. We can imagine the post-resurrection James feeling the full weight and impact of Jesus' teaching for the first time. He longs for his readers to have this same experience and to stop being shams like he was.

So as we begin to absorb the whole letter, we find one of the connecting threads is the character and grace of God. James illuminates our struggle for wisdom in a huge array of difficult circumstances, he helps us find steadfastness and real faith when the pressures of the world squeeze out our faith and obedience.

He takes us through all sorts of circumstances that would cause us to wander from the truth. He brings wisdom to bear on the reality of anything--internal and external--that would take us away from the grace of God.

This is true Biblical wisdom. It's deeply practical, but grounded on and saturated with the knowledge of who God our Father is, and what he has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is why James has such a deep concern for his readers to "receive with meekness the implanted word."(1:21) He wants us to be transformed by God's word in all the nooks and crannies of our whole lives, and our self-deceit exposed and repented of. James knows we will need humility to hear and obey what is taught, so he writes a great deal about arrogance towards God and others.

Let's commit to reading humbly, with open hands and hearts. Let's ask God to give us the wisdom we need to have his word planted deeply and that His Spirit will transform every area of our lives.

## *Study 1 - James 1:1-8*

1. Who is the book written by and to? What does this tell us about the letter?
2. Scan the beginning and the end of James' letter. What appears to be some of the key reasons he is writing this letter at first glance?
3. Write a brief summary of these 8 verses.
4. What exhortation does James give to the readers and what reasons for obeying this call does he provide? (v2-4)
5. What do you think he means by "let steadfastness have its full effect", and why would steadfastness be something worth having?

6. How does James connect v5-8 with the paragraph before? (Note: this is a favourite literary device he uses in the whole book...so watch for it.)  
Why might James raise the need for wisdom here especially?

7. What is the basis for our confidence that God will answer our prayer for wisdom?  
What warning qualifies the promise? (Note: For help with understanding 'double-mindedness' read chapter 4:3-10. Double-mindedness is a key theme throughout the whole book, so look for it as you read James)

8. Share the challenges/encouragement James has given regarding how you face trials when they inevitably come?

9. Pray together for wisdom to be steadfast in serving and trusting God when you are experiencing trials.

## ***Study 2 - James 1: 9-18***

It appears both here and later in James, that part of the suffering the scattered Christians are enduring is economic and social disparity, even within the churches. James is anxious that they know how to live wisely in the light of the trials they face.

1. Write out a brief summary of the main points in this passage.

2. In v9-11, what are the two different groups in the churches urged to boast in? What do you think James could mean by this? What reason does he give for this redirection of our boasting? (Note: see also Isaiah 40:6-8 and 1 Peter 1:24-25). What do these passages tell us is the only eternal thing?

3. According to James then, how does a Christian without status and money find his/her place in the body of Christ? How is a wealthy Christian with social status meant to understand his /her life in relationship to God and others?

4. In v12-18, we find that James has actually not left the subject of steadfastness. What more do we learn about steadfastness, and why it is a quality that Christians need to seek in their lives?

5. What common temptation/deception does James raise and how is it related to the issue of being steadfast? How does James further explain the downward spiral of temptation? (v13-15)

6. How are trials (v2, 12) and temptations (v13-15) connected, but very different?

7. To help with this situation, what truths about God and what he has done are taught here by James?

8. Share the times when you are tempted to think that God does NOT give you what is good and perfect. What has James taught that will help you deal with this temptation?

9. Pray for each other regarding some of the issues this passage has raised for you.

### ***Study 3 – James 1:19-27***

James continues to write about things that would cause us to wander from God. He moves to examining the interior of our lives, picking up a thread he has already introduced in v16, “do not be deceived.”

1. Write out a brief summary of the passage.

2. What new area, about which we are self-deceived, is covered in this next passage? (Note the use of variations of the word ‘deceive’ in v22 and v26).

3. What preparation for rightly responding to God's word does James put forward in v19-21?

4. Why is meekness (by the way, what IS meekness?) a key to how we receive God's word? What temptations do you face regarding how you receive God's word?



5. Read v21-25, and also re-read Isaiah 40:6-8 and 1 Peter 1:24-25, which James has already alluded to in v10-11. What is at stake when we fail to rightly receive and respond to God's word? (See also Luke 6:46-49 on how we hear his word.)

6. James says the one who fails to obey God's word is like someone who “forgets what he was like”. What have we learnt from James about the only remedy we have for self-deception? (v19-25)

7. What kind of hearing assures the word of God is implanted, according to James in v19-25?

8. What 3 practical evidences of fruitful hearing does James then give us in v26-27?

9. Pray together for meek hearts to receive the seed of God's word and to bear fruit in true religion. Pray also that God would free you from any self-deception in these areas.

### *Study 4 - James 2:1-13*

James continues exposing faith that is fake or self-deceived, desiring to keep people from wandering from the truth.

1. Write a brief outline of the passage.

2. James is concerned to impress on his readers the inseparable connection between what they believe and how they live. How does he do this in v1?

3. What appears to be happening in their gatherings?

4. James then proceeds to explain why this behaviour is inconsistent with their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. What is the key reason he gives and why do you think this should make a difference in how we treat each other? (v5-6)

5. In v6-7, what practical reason arising from their circumstances does he also raise? (Note: in the whole book, he appears to refer to several different groups of wealthy people who are in and around the congregations)

6. He then challenges a claim they appear to have been making. How does their behaviour discredit that claim? (v8-13)

7. What do we learn about God's law in this section? (see also 1:25) What, if anything, surprises you about this teaching?

8. James concludes by reminding them that God has shown mercy to them in his judgment. Why then, in the light of all James has taught, is showing partiality in the body of Christ so wrong?

9. How have you been guilty of showing partiality in the gathering? Confess and pray together concerning what God has convicted you of from this passage.

## ***Study 5 - James 2:14-26***

1. Write a brief summary of the passage.
2. What is the key issue James is discussing in this section?
3. How does this connect to what has already been said in chapters 1 and 2?
4. What have been some of the 'works' he has already raised in his letter?
5. James makes his case by exploring several examples of faith in v19-26. What do we learn about the faith of the demons and their response to the truth about God? Why is it not the kind of faith that saves?

6. What were the responses of Abraham and Rahab to the word of God? Why is that the kind of faith that is alive and not dead? (v20-26)

7. What then is the kind of faith that saves and why must faith and works never be separated?

8. So what would you say to someone who says “Well, I say the creed and believe it, why should God expect any more?” Or what would you say to someone who says, “I’m just a practical person, don’t ask me to think about what the Bible teaches and believe it.”?

9. In summary what is the relationship between faith and works according to James?

**A few comments on this passage:**

One of the key principles we need to follow when we read the Bible is to not read one part of it against another part. God is one God, and he cannot speak with a forked tongue. We need to be ready to think about how what may appear to contradict, actually works together. For example, some have used this text to claim James and Paul had different gospels. It's more accurate to say, they have different things to say about the same gospel. In their letters, when discussing justification, for example, Paul and James are tackling a different issue. Paul has in mind the person that thought he was justified by his works and lets them know in no uncertain terms, that this is an utterly fruitless and hopeless endeavour. We are justified by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone. James, however, has in mind the person who is ‘orthodox in faith’ yet whose life bears no change or evidence of the reality of that faith, who is in fact, self-deceived and whose faith is dead. Both Paul and James agree that faith **MUST** demonstrate itself in obedience and good works (ie for Paul see Titus 3:8. That whole letter is a call to sound life that flows from sound doctrine.)

It is important to remember, the Bible authors are all unique and different and sometimes use words and terms differently. There is great diversity between Peter and Paul, and John and James and Luke for example, but great unity in the one gospel, passed on to them by Christ.

For more help with understanding the relationship between faith and works here is a great quote from Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's *Short Declaration of the True, Lively and Christian Faith*.

“The first entry to God, good Christian people, is through faith, by which we are justified before God. So that no-one should be deceived for lack of right understanding of this, you must note diligently that faith is taken in the Scripture in two ways. There is one faith which in Scripture is called dead faith, which brings forth no good works, but is idle, barren and unfruitful. The holy apostle James compares this faith to the faith of devils, who believe God to be true and just, and tremble for fear, yet they do nothing well, but all evil. This is the faith of the wicked and ungodly Christian people, who confess God (as Paul says) with their mouth, but deny him in their deeds, and are abominable, and without the right faith, and in all good works reprehensible. This faith is a persuasion and belief in man's heart, which means that he knows that there is a God, and assents to all truth of God's most holy word, contained in holy Scripture, but it consists only in believing that the word of God is true. This is not properly called faith.

There is another faith in Scripture, which is not idle, unfruitful, and dead like the previous faith. It works by love as Paul declares (Galatians 5). As the other, false faith is called a dead faith, so may this be called a living faith. This is not only belief in the doctrines of our faith, but it is also a sure trust and confidence in the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a steadfast hope of all good things to be received from God's hand. It trusts that, although through weakness or temptation by our spiritual enemy we fall from him by sin, yet if we return to him with true repentance, he will forgive and forget our offences for his Son's sake, our Saviour Jesus Christ. He will even make us inheritors with him of his everlasting kingdom. In the mean time, until that kingdom comes, he will be our protector and defender in all perils and dangers, whatever may happen. Though sometimes he sends us sharp adversity, yet he will always be a loving father to us, correcting us for our sin, but not withdrawing his mercy from us. So we must trust in him and commit ourselves wholly to him, hang only upon him, and call upon him, ready to obey and serve him.

This is the true, living, and unfeigned Christian faith. It is not in the mouth and outward profession only, but it lives and stirs inwardly in the heart. This faith does not exist without hope and trust in God, nor without the love of God and of our neighbours. It does not exist without fear of God, nor without the desire to hear God's word, and to follow it in avoiding evil and doing all good works gladly. This faith, as the Bible describes it, is *‘being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see’*.

And later it says: *‘anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him’*.

And nothing commends good men to God so much as this assured faith and trust in him.

Three things should be especially noted about this faith. First, this faith does not lie dead in the heart, but is lively and fruitful in bringing forth good works. Second, without it no good works can be done that will be acceptable and pleasant to God. Third, we should note what kind of good works this faith brings forth.”

## ***Study 6 - James 3:1-12***

Throughout his letter, James makes the case that our speech is a true barometer of our heart.

1. Write a summary of the passage.

2. Why would James return to this subject after the issues raised in the last study?

3. For this particular section on how we use our tongues, who is the first audience?  
Why would they receive special mention?

4. What is the point made by the vivid illustrations he uses in v3-6?

5. How does he intensify his point in v7-10 ?

6. If it is impossible for human beings to tame the tongue, why do you think he is bothering to tell us all of this?

7. In v10-12, James then reminds them of Jesus' teaching in both Luke 6:44-45 and Matthew 12:33-37. What is the point being made when they talk about fruit trees, springs of water, heart's treasure? How does this help us with answering Question 6?

8. In what ways have you been convicted regarding how you use your tongue?  
(Read Chapter 4:6-10 for help if you are overwhelmed with failure in this area.)



**Study 7 - James 3:13-18**

1. Write a summary of this passage.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Without taking James' writing into account, how would you define wisdom?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What seems to be happening in the churches that makes him write this? (see also 4:1)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Using this chart, identify how the two kinds of wisdom that James mentions can be recognized, and the results of relying on each?

<b>Earthly Wisdom</b>	<b>God's Wisdom</b>
<b>Results</b>	<b>Results</b>

5. Think of a time when you thought you were 'wise', but your behaviour proved otherwise. What is James saying is at the root of this behaviour? (v15-16)

6. Biblical wisdom is always deeply practical. It is living our lives in the light of who God is, often in very complex and difficult circumstances. Discuss together how James has brought to bear, the truth of who God is, on some of the your real-life issues.

7. God has promised to give us wisdom in James 1:5. What have you learnt over the past weeks that have exposed your need to ask God for this?

8. Pray together asking God to give you wisdom that will transform your whole life.

## *Study 8 - James 4:1-12*

James continues to shed searching light on what is real and what is self-deception when it comes to our faith and claims to being wise.

1. Write out a brief summary of the passage.

2. According to James, why do Christians often fight? What really is behind our quarrels? Be careful here not to speak about 'others' ...what about you?

3. 'Worldly Christianity'- what images does that term conjour up? What does James tell us worldly faith looks like?

4. What is God's response to our behaviour and enmity? (v5-6)

5. In v6-10, trace the steps James leads us through in response to seeing how sinful and self-deceived we really are.

6. In these verses, note the promises God makes to encourage you in facing the truth.

7. Job 28:28 teaches “the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” What has James taught that has explained why this is true?

8. James then expands his teaching on how we speak. Notice how he ties several threads from his letter together. According to James in v11-12, how is speaking against our brother/sister an act of arrogance towards God?

9. Pray together, confessing your failure in this area to God and one another.

## ***Study 9 - James 4:13-5:6***

Note how these two sections, 4:13-16 and 5:1-12, both begin “Come now” as James addresses two different groups.

1. Write a brief summary of the passage.

2. We have been told by James that God opposes the proud and we all need to humble ourselves before the Lord. (4:6) What particular form of presumption/arrogance does v13-17 address?

3. According to James in v14-15, why is it foolish to make plans without God?

4. What ought to be the posture of the Christian who has the means and power to make plans and profit?

In 5:1-6 James uses the language of prophetic lament. Jesus and the OT prophets used it. Its purpose is two-fold, to comfort those who are suffering at the hands of the people he addresses, and to warn those who are guilty of inflicting that suffering. (The guilty are not necessarily in hearing range of the letter). He takes them into the future...showing the final outcome of their behaviour. (v1-3)

5. What are the rich people doing that draws strong warning from James?

6. In this section James is reflecting on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6:19-21. How does what Jesus says there add to our understanding about this passage?

7. From this whole section, what do we learn about who God is and what he thinks?

8. At the very centre of these two passages is a definition of sin (v17). How does this challenge your view of what sin is? In the particular context of these two examples from James, what does it mean to "know the right thing and fail to do it"?

9. In the light of this study, have you been convicted of the need to repent of something you've failed to do? Pray together with your group.

## ***Study 10 - James 5:7-12***

With the “therefore brothers” of v7, James ties this passage to the last two passages and addresses his fellow Christians who live with the reality of the circumstances he has discussed. He returns to the issue of steadfastness in suffering.

1. Write a brief summary of the passage.

2. In the light of what we read in James, what might be some of the particular kinds of suffering he is referring to?

3. What command does he make in v7-8? What wisdom does he give in establishing your hearts, so we might learn to be patient in suffering?

4. Why does suffering make us more prone to grumble against others? What warning does James give here against that?

5. What do we know of the examples of the prophets and Job and their steadfastness in the face of extraordinary suffering? How does their example, especially that of Job, help us?

6. How do we reconcile the compassion and mercy of the Lord with our suffering?

7. James then refers to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33-37. Why might he put this here in the context of facing suffering?

8. Pray together asking the Lord to make you patient in your suffering, in the light of who He is, and to help you remain steadfast.





6. How is it also made clear, that not just the elders are to be involved in the work of prayer and confession of sins? (v16-18)

7. To support the truth that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power” James gives us the illustration of Elijah. Read 1 Kings 17:1-7 and 18:41-19:8.

What is the context of Elijah's prayer? How also do we see that, as James claims, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” How does this challenge views we might have that God only hears certain ‘special’ people who pray?

8. Why does James conclude his whole letter with a strong encouragement to be seeking out others who are wandering from the truth? (v19-20) How does this key theme hold the whole book together?

9. How will you change your prayer practice and care for others’ spiritual welfare in the light of this chapter? Is there someone wandering from the truth who you need to seek out?

10. If time allows, spend time praying for one thing God has placed on your heart from the book of James. It may include asking for wisdom, praying for steadfastness in suffering, confessing sin and asking for His help in overcoming it, or prayer for someone you know who is wandering from Christ.