



Overview for James

Purpose: The Epistle of James was a general letter of instruction intended for circulation among the churches, rather than as a communication to a specific church or individual. It was written to warn early believers of doctrinal issues and provide practical advice and admonition regarding Christian living.

Author: In the opening verse, the author identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Several men in the New Testament bore that name, however tradition accepts that James, the “Lord’s brother” (see Galatians 1:19), was the author. Though not a follower of Jesus during the Savior’s time on earth (see John 7:5), James saw and believed on Jesus after His resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7). He was numbered with those in the Upper Room who tarried for the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). Paul counted him among the Apostles (see Galatians 1:19), and he served as the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13). According to the historian Flavius Josephus, James was executed in A.D. 62.

To Whom Written: The greeting to “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” indicates that James was addressing Jewish believers. However, what he wrote is applicable to all Christians.

Date Written: James probably wrote his epistle before the Jerusalem Council of A.D. 50, as no mention was made of the decision regarding admission of Gentiles into the church.

Setting: The epistle was sent to Jewish believers who had been dispersed by persecution and were residing in Gentile settlements outside Palestine (see Acts 11:19). At this time, there were Christians among almost every Jewish community throughout the world. Regarding those communities, Flavius Josephus wrote that there was no city, whether Greek or barbarian, or nation in which Jewish law and customs had not taken root.¹

Unique Features: Bible scholars consider the Epistle of James to be one of the most characteristically Jewish books in the New Testament. While references to Jewish theology such as circumcision, Sabbath, laws regarding purity, and the Temple are not part of this letter, James used frequent illustrations and allusions to individuals in the Old Testament such as Abraham, Rahab, and Elijah. There is a strong emphasis upon godly behavior, and for that reason, the book sometimes has been likened to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

Although Jesus is mentioned only twice in the epistle, there is a similarity between the tone of its teaching and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. This would be natural if, as is supposed, the author shared the boyhood environment of Jesus and was closely associated with Him prior to Jesus’ public ministry.

Summary: The structure of the Epistle of James is somewhat loose, but several themes are woven throughout the book. These include patient perseverance in trials, faith that produces works, Christian speech, and godly wisdom.

The pages of the Book of James are filled with direct commands for the practical pursuit of holy living. James wanted his readers to mature in their faith by living what they believed. To him, faith was not an abstract proposition, but an internal force that impacted every area of life. He offered numerous practical examples to illustrate this, pointing out that faith is steadfast in trials, calls on God for wisdom, controls the tongue, sets aside wickedness, visits orphans and widows, and does not confer favor. He condemned a number of carnal behaviors, including pride, hypocrisy, favoritism, and slander, and instructed believers to live by godly rather than worldly wisdom and to pray in all situations. James insisted that genuine faith in Jesus Christ would produce real life change (see James 2:17).

1. Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.39.282

Timeline

Many of these dates are approximate, as reference materials differ slightly.

Jesus crucified; Pentecost; Church begun A.D. 30	Stephen martyred; Paul's conversion 35			Peter's ministry in Asia Minor 47	Jerusalem council 50	PAUL IMPRISONED (CAESAREA) 57-59	PAUL'S HOUSE ARREST 60-62	James (Jesus' brother) martyred 62	Peter & Paul martyred 67/68?	Jude martyred 72
	PAUL IN CILICIA & SYRIA 35-46			PAUL'S MISSIONARY JOURNEYS 46-48	50-52	53-57	Paul's trip to Rome 59			Rome destroys Jerusalem 70
			Holy Spirit falls on Gentiles 41	James (the Apostle) martyred; Peter imprisoned 44						
				Galatians; James 49	1 & 2 Thessalonians 51/52	1 & 2 Corinthians 55	Romans 57 St. Mark 58/60	Ephesians; Colossians; Philemon 60 Philippians 61 St. Matthew; St. Luke 61/64	1 Timothy; Titus; 1 Peter 64 Jude 65	Acts; 2 Peter; 2 Timothy 66/68 Hebrews 68

Outline

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- I. Introduction: the author and recipients (1:1)
- II. Faith and trials (1:2-12)
 - A. Trials produce maturity (1:2-4)
 - B. Trials deepen the prayer life (1:5-8)
 - C. Trials provide perspective (1:9-11)
 - D. Trials produce rewards (1:12)
- III. Faith and temptations (1:13-18)
 - A. Tempting is contrary to God's character (1:13-15)
 - B. Tempting is contrary to God's conduct (1:16-18)
- IV. Faith and the Word (1:19-27)
 - A. The reception of the Word (1:19-21)
 - B. The doing of the Word (1:22-27)
- V. Faith and impartiality (2:1-13)
 - A. The command (2:1)
 - B. The illustration (2:2-4)
 - C. The instruction (2:5-13)
- VI. Faith and works (2:14-26)
 - A. Faith without works is non-faith (2:14-17)
 - B. Works are an evidence of faith (2:18-20)
 - C. Justification is only by faith that works (2:21-26)
- VII. Faith and the tongue (3:1-12)
 - A. The misuse of the tongue (3:1)
 - B. The control of the tongue (3:2)
 - C. The description of the tongue (3:3-12)
- VIII. Faith and wisdom (3:13-18)
 - A. The principle (3:13)
 - B. The nature of earthly wisdom (3:14-16)
 - C. The nature of heavenly wisdom (3:17-18)
- IX. Faith and conflicts (4:1-17)
 - A. Conflict with the flesh (4:1-10)
 - B. Conflict with fellow Christians: the command and reason (4:11-12)
 - C. Conflict with unspiritual thinking (4:13-17)
- X. Faith and various exhortations (5:1-20)
 - A. Exhortation to the rich (5:1-6)
 - B. Exhortation to patient endurance (5:7-11)
 - C. Exhortation to holy living (5:12-20)