

Midweek Study

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God's Amazing Book

Journey Through the New Testament

CHRISTIANITY IN SHOE LEATHER

A Quick Look at the General Epistle of James

Fast Facts on James

Written by? James, half-brother of Jesus

Written to whom? Early Jewish Christians

Written when? A.D. 44-49

Written why?

- 1) To encourage Christians facing persecution.
- 2) To correct wrong doctrine about faith and works.
- 3) To instruct proper Christian behavior.

Key Verse? James 2:26

Faith without works cannot be called faith. It is dead, and a dead faith is worse than no faith at all. Faith must work; it must produce; it must be visible. Verbal faith is not enough; mental faith is insufficient. Faith must move into action. Throughout his epistle to Jewish believers, James integrates true faith and everyday practical experience by stressing that true faith “works.” It endures trials; it obeys God’s Word; it produces doers; it harbors no prejudice; it controls the tongue; it acts wisely; it provides the power to resist the devil; it waits patiently for the coming of the Lord.¹

Gordon Fee says, “Don’t fall into the habit, which is easy in this case, of reading James as though it were addressed to individual believers about their one-on-one relationship with God and others. Nothing could be further from James’s own concerns. **From the outset his passion is with life within the believing community.** While it is true that each must assume his or her individual responsibility to make the community healthy, the concern is not with personal piety as much as it is with healthy communities. To miss this point will cause you to miss what drives this letter from beginning to end.”²

One myth James dispels is, **“religion is a private matter.”** It is true that faith is very *personal*. It has to be personal if it is genuine. Some kinds of public religion are nothing but hypocrisy. But what people usually mean when they say “faith is private” is, “I don’t want to talk about faith.” In the name of religion or spirituality, then, they justify treating this life as ours to do with as we please. Religion becomes a tool for self-centeredness and control over our own destinies. [The playwright Tennessee Williams, explaining why he had given up visiting his psychoanalyst, reportedly said, “He was meddling too much in my private life.”](#) We have a tendency these days to think of our religion as a part of our own private lives, on the same level as our ambitions, fantasies, and fears. James says that faith must be acted out and cannot be private. Personal, yes, but not private. Both God and his people will be involved with what you do with your words, time, money, and even your desires for pleasure.³

Mark Dever says, “The religion that people are looking for today is practical. Do not let all the mystical-sounding talk about spirituality deceive you. By and large, the mystical experiences people want are ones that will give them certainty of purpose when they go to work in the morning. The spirituality people sign up for is the kind that calms their nerves or lowers their blood pressure. People today want a faith that works.”⁴

¹ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1983), 462.

² Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 399.

³ Mark Dever, *The Message of the New Testament*, 435.

⁴ Mark Dever, 427.

The Bible speaks mainly on two related themes: **the way to God**, and the way to **walk with God**. No one can walk or live day by day with God who has not first returned to Him. Much of the New Testament teaches the way to God - it is by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. James tells his first readers about their **walk with God**. They are saved, but their faith must bring forth works. A faith that fails to show itself is "useless" and "dead," according to James 2:20, 26.⁵

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT JAMES⁶

1. James is probably the earliest of the twenty-seven New Testament books.
2. James is one of only two New Testament books written by a brother of Jesus (see also: Jude).
3. The epistle of James has more figures of speech, analogies, and illustrations from nature than all of the Apostle Paul's epistles combined.
4. While James does not ever quote Jesus directly, he does present more of Christ's personal teachings than any other New Testament writer.
5. The language of the Sermon on the Mount is reflected more in this epistle than in any other New Testament book.
6. In many ways, James is the "Proverbs" of the New Testament.
7. James is the most practical book in the New Testament, containing little formal theology.
8. The epistle of James is very Jewish in nature (with no mention of Gentile believers), and contains twenty-two allusions to Old Testament books.

Life Lessons from JAMES⁷

1. Genuine faith will produce real changes in your life.
2. Temptation is not sin, but if it is not dealt with, it can lead to sin.
3. Being wealthy is not a sin, but selfishness is. God gives you money to help meet the needs of others.
4. Prayer plays a significant role in the ministry of the local church.
5. God is not a respecter of persons, and you should not be either.

Martin Luther, the leader of the great Protestant Reformation, was not fond of the epistle of James. Luther objected to it on the basis that he felt it spoke too much about good works and not enough about faith. He also felt that it taught too little about Christ and the gospel. Even though Luther called James "an epistle of straw, and destitute of evangelic character," he nevertheless considered it to be the Word of God, though not one of the chief books.

The idea that James contradicts Paul's view of justification by faith (2:14-16) is without foundation and fails to account for differing perspectives and purposes for the two writers.

If God gives you St. Paul's faith, you will soon have St. James' works. - Augustus M. Toplady

"Old Camel Knees" - Church historians report that his knees were hard like a camel's knees because of constant kneeling in prayer. He was stoned by order of Ananias, the high priest, c. A.D. 62 or 63.

⁵ Irving Jensen, *Simply Understanding the Bible*, James.

⁶ Jeff Lasseigne, *Highway 66* (Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing, 2004), 179-180.

⁷ Jim George, 262.