

# GOD'S AMAZING BOOK

THROUGH THE BIBLE, BOOK BY BOOK

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## CHRISTIANITY IN SHOE LEATHER A Quick Look at the General Epistle of JAMES<sup>1</sup>

### 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.<sup>2</sup>*

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Heavily dependent upon Daniel Akin’s handout for a local church on “James” [www.danielakin.com](http://www.danielakin.com)

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1983), 462.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 399.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dever, *The Message of the New Testament*, 435.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

### THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT JAMES<sup>7</sup>

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 JAMES<sup>8</sup>

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.**

<sup>6</sup> Irving Jensen, *Simply Understanding the Bible*, James.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Lasseigne, *Highway 66* (Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing, 2004), 179-180.

<sup>8</sup> Jim George, 262.

When glass skyscrapers were first built and popularized in the 1950s, a number of office-workers were scared of working in offices thirty, forty, even fifty stories above the ground with nothing visible stopping them from plunging downward. *Reader's Digest* once carried a story about one of these earliest skyscrapers, describing how a number of people in one office could not work because their desks were too close to the massive windows. The people in the office would sit there looking down hundreds of feet, petrified! They knew there was a glass window between them and the drop, but they were not used to the idea that glass could act as a barrier. It was causing enough trouble in the office that the building manager was contacted. He came up and told them about the design of the frame and thickness of the glass; he explained how it could hold so much stress and even gave an example. But they were still nervous. The building manager was perplexed about what to do. So he brought up a structural engineer who explained it all again. Still, they did not feel comfortable looking down all that distance. Then the engineer said, "I have an idea." He called everyone to stand near the inside wall, which they did. He stepped back, and then ran full speed toward the glass wall, hit it with his full weight, and bounced off. He was fine! He was willing to throw his whole life against the glass wall because he knew it could take it! That is what ... real faith is. It is not the faith of the person who can sit, read a religious document, and say, "I believe this." ...faith... throws its whole life into living out the truth believed.<sup>9</sup>

**I. Author** - The author of this book identifies himself as "James, a bondservant or slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). He was probably the half-brother of Jesus and **a leader of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15)**. Four men in the NT have this same name. The author of this letter could not have been the apostle James, who was the first apostle martyred (Acts 12:1-2; c. A.D. 44). The other two men named James had neither the stature nor the influence that the author of this letter has. James was one of several brothers of Jesus and was possibly the oldest since his name appears first in the list in Matt. 13:55. At first he did not believe in Jesus and even challenged him (John 7:2-5). Later he became both a believer and very prominent in the church:

1. He was one of the select individuals Christ appeared to after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7).
2. Paul called him a "pillar" of the church (Gal. 2:9).
3. Paul, on his first post-conversion visit to Jerusalem, saw James (Gal. 1:19).
4. Paul did the same on his last visit (Acts 21:18).
5. When Peter was rescued from prison, he told his friends to tell James (Acts 12:17).
6. James was a leader in the important council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13).
7. Jude could identify himself simply as "a brother of James" (Jude 1:1), because James was so well known.
8. He was martyred c. A.D. 62.

<b>TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH</b> [Edmond Heibert]	
1. Faith tested by its response to trials.	1:1-11
2. Faith tested by its response to temptation.	1:12-18
3. Faith tested by its response to the Word of God.	1:19-27
4. Faith tested by its response to partiality.	2:1-13
5. Faith tested by its production of good works.	2:14-26
6. Faith tested by its production of self-control.	3:1-18
7. Faith tested by its reactions to worldliness.	4:1-5:12
8. Faith tested by its resort to prayer.	5:13-18
9. Faith tested by its recovery of an erring brother.	5:19-20

**II. Date** - The book of James is the earliest of the New Testament epistles or letters. Some date the letter in the early 60s. There are indications, however, that it was written before A.D. 50, perhaps in the mid-40s.

1. Its distinctively Jewish nature suggests that it was written when the church was still predominantly Jewish.
2. It reflects a very simple church order— officers of the church are called "teachers" (3:1) and "elders" (5:14).
3. No reference is made to the Gentile controversies.
4. The Greek term *synagogue* ("synagogue" or "meeting") is used to designate the meeting of believers (2:2).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Dever, 433-434.

**III. Recipients** - The recipients are identified in 1:1 as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.” While some hold that this expression refers to Christians in general, the term “twelve tribes” would more naturally apply to Jewish Christians.

**IV. Theme** - The theme that ties this epistle together is practical, vital Christian faith, which manifests itself in the behavior of the “good works” of those who profess to have faith. “The people in the Jerusalem church - the first church had been scattered to a number of Roman provinces due to persecution. James feels compelled to exhort and encourage them in their struggles. Genuine faith, James explains, will produce real changes in a person’s conduct and character. In a style similar to that of the Old Testament book of Proverbs, James presents a series of tests by which a person’s faith in Christ can be measured. If real change is absent, then readers are to examine their faith to make sure they are not exhibiting symptoms of dead faith-which is really no faith!”<sup>10</sup>

**EXTRA: What do the ten commands in 4:7–10 have to do with grace?**

These verses contain a series of commands that prepare a person to receive saving grace. These commands delineate a person’s response to God’s gracious offer of salvation and reveal what it means to be humble. Each command uses a Greek imperative to define the expected action:

- **Submit to God (verse 7)**—James used the phrase to describe a willing, conscious submission to God’s authority as sovereign ruler of the universe (Matt. 10:38).
- **Resist the devil (verse 7)**—Those who consciously “take their stand against” Satan and transfer their allegiance to God will find that Satan “will flee from” them; he is a defeated foe (John 8:44; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 3:8; 5:19).
- **Draw near to God (verse 8)**—Pursue an intimate relationship with God (Phil. 3:10).
- **Cleanse your hands (verse 8)**—The added term “sinners” addresses the unbeliever’s need to recognize and confess his or her sin (5:20).
- **Purify your hearts (verse 8)**—Cleansing the hands symbolizes external behavior; this phrase refers to the inner thoughts, motives, and desires of the heart (Ps. 24:3, 4; Jer. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:22; 1 Pet. 1:22).
- **Lament (verse 9)**—To be afflicted, wretched and miserable. This is the state of those truly broken over their sin (Matt. 5:3).
- **Mourn (verse 9)**—The internal experience of brokenness over sin (Ps. 51:17; Matt. 5:4).
- **Weep (verse 9)**—The outward manifestation of inner sorrow over sin (Mark 14:72).
- **Laughter to mourning, joy to gloom (verse 9)**—mourn over sin, rather than flippant laughter of those foolishly indulging in worldly pleasures without regard to God.
- **Humble yourself (verse 10)**—This final command sums up the preceding nine. The word humble means, “to make oneself low.” Those conscious of being in the presence of the majestic, infinitely holy God are humbled (Is. 6:5).<sup>11</sup>

<b>A Suggested Outline of James (by Warren Wiersbe)</b>	
Theme: The practical faith of the perfect (mature) Christian (Note 1:4, 17, 25; 2:22; 3:2—where “perfect” means mature)	
<b>I. The perfect man and suffering</b>	
1. The perfect work—God’s purpose.	1:1-12
2. The perfect gift—God’s goodness.	1:13-20
3. The perfect law—God’s Word.	1:21-27
<b>II. The perfect man and service</b>	
1. Faith proved by love.	2:1-13
2. Faith proved by works.	2:14-26
<b>III. The perfect man and speech</b>	
1. The exhortation.	3:1-2
2. The illustrations.	3:3-12
a. Bit and rudder.	3:3-4
b. Fire and beast.	3:5-9
c. Fountain and tree.	3:10-12
3. The application – true wisdom.	3:13-18
<b>IV. The perfect man and separation</b>	
1. The enemies we must fight.	4:1-7
a. The flesh .	4:1-3
b. The world.	4:4-5
c. The devil.	4:6-7
2. The admonitions we must heed.	4:8-17
a. Warning against pride.	4:8-10
b. Warning against criticism.	4:11-12
c. Warning against self-confidence.	4:13-17
<b>V. The perfect man and the second coming</b>	
1. Patient when wronged.	5:1-11
2. Pure in speech.	5:12
3. Prayerful in trials.	5:13-18
4. Persistent in soul-winning.	5:19-20

<sup>10</sup> Jim George, *The Bare Bones Bible Handbook*, pg. 263.

<sup>11</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 476.