

The Epistle of James

Study Guide

LESSON
ONE

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES



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CONTENTS

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE	3
NOTES.....	4
I. INTRODUCTION (1:01)	4
II. BACKGROUND (1:18)	4
A. Authorship (2:07)	4
1. Traditional Outlook (2:52)	4
2. Personal History (11:55)	7
B. Original Audience (14:37)	8
C. Occasion (18:33)	9
1. Location (18:46)	9
2. Date (21:21)	9
3. Purpose (23:51)	10
III. STRUCTURE & CONTENT (28:08)	11
A. Greeting (35:11)	12
B. Wisdom and Joy (37:25)	13
C. Wisdom and Obedience (40:28)	13
1. Action (40:36)	13
2. Favoritism (44:22)	14
3. Faith (47:35)	15
D. Wisdom and Peace (48:53)	15
1. Tongue (49:23)	15
2. Two Kinds of Wisdom (52:08)	16
3. Inward Conflict (53:56)	16
E. Wisdom and the Future (55:03)	16
1. Making Plans (55:13)	16
2. Hoarding Wealth (56:11)	17
3. Waiting Patiently (58:09)	17
F. Wisdom and Prayer (59:42)	18
G. Concluding Exhortation (1:01:16)	18
IV. CONCLUSION (1:01:47)	18
REVIEW QUESTIONS	19
APPLICATION QUESTIONS	25

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (1:01)

II. Background (1:18)

A. Authorship (2:07)

1. Traditional Outlook (2:52)

The letter clearly identifies a man named “James” as the author (1:1).

Two men named James had enough authority in the early church to write a letter like this:

- James, the son of Zebedee – martyred under Herod Agrippa I (A.D. 44).

The epistle of James was likely written after Herod's death.

- James, the brother of Jesus – leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

The traditional outlook affirms that that Jesus’ brother James wrote this epistle.

a. Support

- The writer didn't give any credentials but simply assumed that his name carried sufficient authority.
- The opening greeting makes a strong case for Jesus' brother James because of his status in the early church.
- Early church testimony confirms this outlook on the authorship of the book (*The First Epistle of Clement, Shepherd of Hermas*).
- Origen identified the author of James as "the brother of the Lord" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*).

b. Objections

Critical interpreters have suggested two alternatives:

- Unknown James

Unlikely because the author's identification at the beginning of the letter indicates he was well known.

- "Pseudonymity" – the practice of assigning written works to someone other than the actual author.

Three arguments by critical scholars for pseudonymity:

- No relation to Jesus – there is no mention of the author's relation to Jesus.

But Jude never mentioned his blood-ties to Jesus in his epistle either.

- Hellenistic culture – the book gives evidence that the author was aware of Greek culture.

Many Jews in Palestine had knowledge of Hellenistic philosophy and religion.

- Inconsistencies – some ideas in the epistle don't match James' theological outlooks in other New Testament books (Acts 21:17-25; Galatians 2:12).

James' position on the law is actually consistent with his theology in Acts and Galatians.

2. Personal History (11:55)

- One of Mary's sons and one of Jesus' half-brothers (Matthew 13:55).
- While growing up, he and his brothers didn't recognize who Jesus really was (John 7:5).
- Came to have saving faith in Jesus and rose to prominence in the early church.

James' position of authority is well documented:

- "Pillar" of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9)
- Spokesman for the apostolic council (Acts 15)
- Acknowledged in non-Christian historical documents (*Antiquities*, 20.9.1, Josephus)

Later in his adult life, James had an unwavering commitment to Jesus as the Christ (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2.23, Eusebius).

B. Original Audience (14:37)

James identified his readers as "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations" (1:2) and "believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1).

It's possible that these were members of the Jerusalem church scattered throughout Judea and Samaria following Stephen's martyrdom.

James' vocabulary supports the idea that his original readers were Jewish followers of Jesus.

- "*Synagōgē*" – reference to Jewish gatherings (2:2).

- "*Kurios Sabaōth*" – from a common Old Testament name for the God of Israel (5:4).

There were also many Gentiles converts to Judaism who attended synagogues (Acts 8, 10).

C. Occasion (18:33)**1. Location (18:46)**

James lived and ministered in Jerusalem until he was martyred in A.D. 62.

James' audience was most likely scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, as far as Phoenicia, Antioch and Cyprus (Acts 11:19).

2. Date (21:21)

- The earliest likely date for the letter's composition is A.D. 44.

James became a significant leader of the early church in Jerusalem, by the time Peter was released from prison in A.D. 44 (12:17).

- The latest possible date of composition for the epistle is A.D. 62, the year James was martyred.

Two reasons to think that the date of composition was earlier in this timeline:

- James' use of the word "*synagōgē*" (2:2) – James may have written before Christians were forced out of the synagogues.
- No mention of Jewish-Gentile controversies – it's likely that they hadn't yet become a factor for James' audience.

3. Purpose (23:51)

James called his audience to pursue wisdom from God so that they would have joy in their trials (1:2-5).

These trials appear to have led some to abandon their loyalty to Christ and pursue “friendship with the world” (4:4).

For James, wisdom from God was the key to receiving joy as they endured their many trials.

James taught that humility before God is a path to wisdom (4:8, 10).

III. Structure & Content (28:08)

James' epistle reflects a long history of wisdom literature stemming from the Old Testament:

- Job (James 5:11)
- Ecclesiastes
- Proverbs
- "wisdom psalms"
- prophetic wisdom sayings

James also reflects the content of influential wisdom books outside of Scripture:

- *The Wisdom of Sirach* (e.g., James 1:5 and *Sirach* 1:26).
- *The Wisdom of Solomon*

There are also many similarities between James' writing and Jesus' instruction in the Gospels (e.g., Matthew 5:10 and James 1:12).

Because of its close ties to wisdom literature, the structure of James' epistle can seem disorganized.

But unlike other wisdom literature, James' letter was written to specific churches and reflects some of the organizational features of other New Testament epistles.

A. Greeting (35:11)

James introduced himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

He exemplified humility by making it clear that he was the servant of his brother, Jesus.

B. Wisdom and Joy (37:25)

James' first words about the importance of wisdom began with a call to joy (1:2).

pasan charan: "complete, unmitigated joy"

Many wisdom writings encouraged those who suffered to consider themselves blessed (e.g., Matthew 5:12)

It's often difficult to see the benefits of suffering, so James told his readers to pursue wisdom from God (1:5).

Wisdom strengthens our confidence that God has ordained for us the blessing of eternal salvation (1:18).

C. Wisdom and Obedience (40:28)**1. Action (40:36)**

The word of wisdom from God must also lead to faithful obedience (1:22).

The theme of faith in action was so important to James that he returned to it throughout his epistle (3:13).

2. Favoritism (44:22)

James called his audience to give proper attention to “the royal law” (2:8).

James taught that neglecting the poor in favor of the rich is a failure to “love your neighbor.”

The law teaches us to care for one another, to have compassion on the poor, and to avoid favoritism

Those who trust Christ obey the law out of gratitude to God, because it’s the revelation of God’s wisdom (Psalm 19:7).

3. Faith (47:35)

To the question, "[I]f a man claims to have faith but has no deeds ... Can such faith save him?" (2:14) James answered, "No."

- Even the devil believes true things about God, but it does him no good.
- Abraham's faith led to obedience.
- Rahab demonstrated her faith through good works.

A faith that does not show itself in obedience is dead (2:26).

D. Wisdom and Peace (48:53)

James noted three main issues associated with wisdom and peace among believers.

1. Tongue (49:23)

James' warning against the tongue's capacity for evil is similar to the book of Proverbs (James 3:4-6; Proverbs 10:31, 11:12, 15:4).

To avoid conflict and live in peace, we must control our tongues.

2. Two Kinds of Wisdom (52:08)

James distinguished between earthly wisdom and wisdom that comes from heaven (3:14-17):

- Earthly wisdom – leads to bitter envy and selfish ambition
- Wisdom from God – brings peace

3. Inward Conflict (53:56)

James traced strife among Christians to selfish desires, wrong motives, and discontent.

Only humble submission to God would put an end to their fights and quarrels and give them peace with one another (4:7-10).

E. Wisdom and the Future (55:03)**1. Making Plans (55:13)**

James addressed those who were making plans for the future as if God were not in control.

James reminded his readers that their lives were fleeting and they couldn't possibly know what their futures held (4:15-16).

2. **Hoarding Wealth (56:11)**

James warned against hoarding wealth because of the future day of judgment.

James cautioned the rich who had gained wealth at the expense of the poor and told them that they would suffer for it (5:3).

3. **Waiting Patiently (58:09)**

James encouraged those who were suffering to wait patiently for God to bring the consummation of history to pass (5:7-8).

James encouraged the faithful to continue on the path of godly wisdom, obedient to God in the light of God's plan for the future.

F. Wisdom and Prayer (5:13-14)

James instructed his audience to devote themselves to prayer (5:13-14).

James expected his readers to draw near to God for wisdom in every situation.

G. Concluding Exhortation (5:19-20)

James urged his audience to watch out for each other and bring back those who had wandered away from the truth (5:19-20).

IV. Conclusion (1:1-47)

9. According to James' cautions about wisdom and the future, what was wrong with making plans and hoarding wealth? What could his audience anticipate if they waited patiently?

10. In what circumstances did James instruct his readers to draw near to God for wisdom and devote themselves to prayer?

11. What parting exhortation did James give his audience with regard to their responsibility toward one another?

Application Questions

1. According to James, it is possible to be joyful in the midst of suffering. Have you ever experienced this? How do you typically respond to trials and suffering in your life?
2. James tells us that true faith bears the fruit of good deeds. Take a moment and consider the way you live your life. In what areas of your life do you need to repent?
3. What does it look like to “love your neighbor as yourself”? Where have you found opportunities to observe the "royal law" in the past, and what are the greatest needs in your community right now?
4. How do you encourage others in your ministry to strive for obedience to Christ without falling into a theology of "works righteousness"? In other words, how do you promote obedience without teaching that our good works can save us?
5. The tongue can be used for building up or for tearing down. What circumstances most tempt you to use your words for tearing down? How can you overcome those temptations?
6. There is a wide chasm between the wisdom of the world and wisdom from God. What most tempts you to give in to the wisdom of this world? How does James’ epistle teach us to focus on heavenly wisdom?
7. In James 4:13-17, James tells us that only God controls the future, and we should not make plans as if we are in control. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your answer.
8. The epistle of James contains many condemnations for those who hoard their wealth and refuse to give to the needy. What are at least three practical ways you and your ministry can use their resources to provide for those who are in need?
9. It can be hard to wait patiently for the Lord in the midst of trials. How might James’ epistle encourage you during these times? How can you encourage others who are struggling in trials?
10. James repeatedly exhorted his readers to devote themselves to prayer. How would you judge your prayer life? Where does prayer fit into your daily routine?
11. How can we responsibly and compassionately confront those who have wandered from the faith? What strategies does your ministry have in place to call back those who have wandered away?
12. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?