

James: The Heart of God in the Life of His People

Introduction to The Letter of James

Jesus had siblings. It can be, at times, easy to skim over the early, formative years of Jesus' life and fast forward to the stories about a carpenter turned itinerant rabbi who, in his early thirties, began to gather followers and upend familiar notions about the Kingdom of God. But Jesus grew up in a home where he, presumably, learned Joseph's trade alongside his brothers, and we actually meet them in the Gospel accounts. In Mark's Gospel, in chapter 3, we are introduced to Jesus' family as they hear about their brother and son who had been gathering followers and upsetting the local pharisees by breaking Sabbath traditions and they, as Mark tells us, "went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'." Gathered with Mary and her other children was, in all likelihood, a young man named James who had grown up alongside Jesus and knew him as a brother before he knew him as the Messiah.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote what may be the earliest of the New Testament writings in this letter that we are about to study together. But he did not write as a skeptical sibling or a concerned man trying to poke holes in the stories about his now-departed brother. James wrote as a deeply committed follower of Christ, a convinced believer that his brother was in fact the Messiah, and he's addressing a group of scattered believers as their pastor abroad. He wants to encourage them as they suffer, to call them persevere in the face of challenges, to remind them of who they are as children of God, and to challenge them to live in such a way that their actions match their confessions of faith in Christ. As one who cares deeply for the men and women to whom he writes, James desires that the heart of God — God's will for their lives and the world around them — would flourish amongst his people, a people whose lives have been transformed by the death and resurrection of his brother, his Savior, Jesus.

How to Use The Reading Guide

James will serve as the primary text for our worship gatherings for several months, and it is our hope that you will join us in anchoring down in James in your own personal study. Each week this guide will offer a brief overview of the passage discussed during the sermon from the preceding Sunday. We will offer two to three supplementary texts which we would encourage you to utilize as you spend time in the Word each day. These texts are meant to be read in conjunction with the passage from James which will serve as the foundation of the reading guide each week. We'll also offer discussion questions for our life groups at the end of each guide, though we would encourage you to take time to reflect on those questions individually, as well. It is our prayer that the Lord, through our time in James, will continue to shape in us an understanding of what it means to live as faith filled, fully committed followers of Jesus.

James: The Heart of God in the Life of His People

Week 4 Reading Guide

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. **13** Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. **14** But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. **17** Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. **18** Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

James 1:12-18

Have you ever been lost in a forest? There is a panic and disorientation that sets in when you realize that the path is gone, that nothing looks familiar, and you wonder where it is that your journey went wrong. That same sense of unfamiliarity and confusion can also arise when, pressed by the trials and suffering of life, we begin looking for answers, wondering where things went wrong, wondering who might be to blame for our pain, and trying to ascertain how we can escape it. In the verses above, James offers words of encouragement and warning for those who are running after Jesus in a hailstorm. When the deluge of trials opens up, we are often tempted to look to blame someone or something for the pain, even God himself can serve as the object of our ire. But just as the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to *look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith*, so too does James invite us to trust that the God who has redeemed us promises the blessing of life beyond the reach of pain and suffering and trials to those who are willing to put one step in front of the next as they follow Jesus. Consider these questions as you meditate on the text this week:

- What does this text invite me to believe about God?
- What does this text invite me to understand about myself?
- What observations stand out?
- How might the Lord be asking me to respond?

Monday | Tuesday

Genesis 4:1-16

The implicit warning James offers is to guard against various forms of temptation in the midst of trials. Genesis 4 provides us a clear picture of the relationship between temptation, sin, and destruction which James so clearly describes, as Cain murdered Abel and provided a portrait of the calamitous power of sin.

Wednesday | Thursday

Hebrews 12:1-13

Instead of looking for someone or something to blame, or giving into temptation, in the face of life's trials the author of Hebrews instructs his readers to recognize that they, as part of God's family, must keep their eyes fixed on Jesus and press on in pursuit of their eternal reward. The Lord doesn't require that we have all of the answers to all of life's big questions, but he calls us to a present faithfulness at each step of our journey.

Friday | Saturday

Revelation 21

As we consider the crown of life which James promises to those who persevere, John's Revelation offers us a vision of what we can hope for in light of that promise. Weeping and pain and death will be no more. God will dwell in the midst of his people. As poet Wendell Berry has said, "There is a day when the road neither comes nor goes, and the way is not a way, but a place."

Life Group Questions | James 1:12-18

- 1) James speaks of the promised crown of life, the promised blessing of life with Christ for eternity. How does the promise of our future life with Christ shape our understanding of any suffering we must face in the present?
- 2) James alludes to the fact that temptation often accompanies specific seasons of trial and testing. Have you experienced this? How so? Why is it that James emphasizes that God is not the author of temptation, but rather that temptation is born of our own illicit desires?
- 3) Consider together this quote from one author, "Christian maturity is not indicated by the infrequency of temptation but by the infrequency of succumbing to temptation." How might we see this evidenced in our passage in James? What role can, and should, believers play in one another's lives in this regard?
- 4) Look at James 1:17. Why do you think the immutability of God (his unchanging nature) is such an important piece of encouragement at this point in the text? How might this serve as an encouragement to us as we consider the trials in our lives?
- 5) Verse 18 offers a sweet reminder that it is the regenerative work of the Lord, through the gospel, which is our hope. In a letter filled with encouragements to be not simply hearers, but doers of the word, that is an important reminder. How might you, practically, continue to keep the gospel at the forefront of your heart and mind even as you consider what formative work the Lord might desire to do in your life?