

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.

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Week 2 Reading Guide

5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

James 1:5-8

Why? It's a question that is emblematic of what it means to be human. It's a query that we don't have to teach our toddlers as they are first forming words and beginning to engage the world around them, as their minds start to fill with considerations of life and people and their relation to it all. *Why?* As we grow into adults, the question doesn't change, but the stakes surrounding it often do. Instead of posing innocent, cosmic, inquiries like *Why are leaves sometimes green and sometimes red?* And *Why do rainbows only appear once in a while?* We find ourselves in the grimy reality of having lived for years, experiencing the unvarnished joys and pains that accompany our human experience, and all of that shapes the *why* questions that we ask. *Why did the Lord allow that to happen? Why won't the pain subside? Why can't I ever experience freedom, really?*

James is writing to a group of men and women who are carrying backpacks full of *whys*. They had entrusted themselves to the resurrected Christ, they believed that he was who he had claimed to be, they had hoped in the future his gospel promised, and they were now suffering because of their attachment to him. *Why?* As James seeks to pastor these folks from afar, he anticipates their questions because he knows the valleys they're in and he does the best thing he knows to do — he invites them to ask and trust the Lord, the One who is the source and supplier of wisdom. What is wisdom? Scholar Doug Moo argues that wisdom is “the means by which the godly can both discern and carry out the will of God.” We have all had, or will have, seasons in which the *whys* of life come like a tidal wave. Will we, this week, heed the call of James and, rather than pretending that we have everything figured out, acknowledge our weakness, confess the questions that reside in our hearts, and entrust ourselves to our gracious God? 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

Proverbs 2:1-8

James and his readers were steeped in the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, and few places better exemplify that than Proverbs. Echoed in James, Proverbs 2:1-8 reminds us that the Lord is the source of wisdom, and that wisdom is found as we ask, listen, trust, and obey him.

Wednesday | Thursday

Matthew 7:7-11

In addition to the Jewish Wisdom Literature (like Proverbs), the words of Jesus were also very much influential for James. Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus encourages the crowds to ask the Lord, trusting in the good and faithful care of their loving Father.

Friday | Saturday

Matthew 21:18-22

Not only does Jesus exhort his followers to ask his Father expectantly, he emphasizes the significance of faith in the asking. In these verses, as Jesus prepares for the final week before his crucifixion, he uses a fig tree as an object lesson on the importance of faith as he seeks to impress this truth upon his disciples.

Life Group Questions | James 1:5-8

- 1) Read Proverbs 2:1-8. How would you define wisdom as described in this passage? How does wisdom as described in Proverbs 2 help clarify our understanding of wisdom as James addresses it in James 1:5-8?
- 2) When James exhorts his readers to “ask in faith, with no doubting,” he isn’t implying that we must never have questions or concerns or uncertainties surrounding the challenges and trials of life. Rather, James is inviting us to trust something deeply significant about the very nature of God as one who “gives generously to all without reproach.” Why is a right (biblical) understanding of who God is and how God sees us so necessary for us to be able to ask the Lord for wisdom *in faith*? How might we grow that understanding of the Lord in our lives?
- 3) Our response to trials can, often, fall into one of two categories. We ask either, “God what do you want to do in and through this moment?” OR “God, how can I get out of this?” How have you, historically, responded to moments of trial or hardship? How might the Lord use the first question to shape your understanding of the challenges you face?
- 4) Is your willingness to trust the Lord with your life contingent on anything? Perhaps another way to consider that question is, is there anything in your life that, should the Lord take it away, it would impact your willingness to trust him? Is there anything you’re waiting on the Lord to give you *before* you trust him?
- 5) Where we turn for answers, particularly in times of trial, is often telling. To what do you tend to look for wisdom and/or answers other than the Lord? Why do you pursue that specific person/thing for wisdom? How might the Lord be asking you to trust him fully instead of having a divided heart and mind?
- 6) Consider James 1:2-8 as a whole. What is the relationship between trials and wisdom as James describes it here?