

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 3 Reading Guide

9 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, **10** and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. **11** For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

James 1:9-11

If you were to take the cog train to the top of Pike's Peak in Colorado, ascending to some fourteen thousand feet above sea level, as you exited the train car you would be confronted with a choice. You could fixate on the lack of oxygen in the seemingly wafer-thin atmosphere as you felt the invasive and biting cold wind crawl under your jacket. Or you could, instead, allow your gaze to drink in the blues and greens and browns and golds that mingle to form the palate of earth and sky before you, and risk your breath being stolen not by the frozen wind but by the majesty of all that you see. And the story that you tell coming down the mountain will very much depend on your perspective at the top.

In Matthew 6, as he speaks about life in the Kingdom of God, Jesus addresses money. More specifically, Jesus addresses how we should, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, think about money. He says, famously, "you cannot serve two masters," those two masters being God and wealth, because the master that we choose to serve will dictate our perspective on the other. We will either view our resources (and all of life!) through the lens of who we are as citizens of the Kingdom of God, or we will consider our relationship to the Lord and his Kingdom as subservient to our ultimate pursuit of wealth. And James addresses this concept in our passage. If believers are economically poor, that is peripheral in comparison to the hope and promised blessing that is theirs as heirs of God in Christ. If wealthy, they are not first defined by the depth of their pockets but rather their spiritual poverty and identification with Jesus. Life on this side of eternity is transient, but in Christ we are offered an eternal perspective by which to consider ourselves and our world. Would you ask the Lord to continue to shape an eternal, Kingdom perspective in you as you consider these passages 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 3

Just as we saw the influence of Proverbs 2 last week, hear again the echoes of Proverbs as the author addresses the insidious nature of pride and speaks to the bond between wisdom and humility.

Wednesday | Thursday

Psalms 103

Hanging in the background, influencing the theological emphasis of James in our verses, is the notion of the brevity of each person's days on earth. But as we see in this psalm, the brief and transient nature of our existence makes the love of God all the more magnificent. The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting!

Friday | Saturday

Matthew 6:19-34

Jesus knows full well that the way in which we engage our wealth reveals a great deal about the state of our hearts. Citizens of God's Kingdom should, then, consider their debit cards and bank statements according to their place as sons and daughters of God, rather than allowing their identity to be shaped by the stuff of earth which so easily consumes us mind, body, and soul.

Life Group Questions | James 1:9-11

- 1) Read Proverbs 3. What is the connection made in the text between wisdom and humility? In what ways does the author condemn pride and why is it so destructive?
- 2) As you consider your own state in life through the lens of God's Kingdom, how might the call to *boast* in these verses (James 1:9-11) apply to you? Are you fixated on what you don't have such that you are unable to see the grace and kindness of God in your life? Are you fixated on your wealth such that you are unable to acknowledge your own spiritual poverty apart from Christ?
- 3) Consider what James says regarding the brevity of humanity's span of life. How does that idea, which is prevalent throughout Scripture, strike you? Is it a source of fear and concern? Why?
- 4) Is there any area of your life wherein you would admit that you have not allowed the Lord access? Does money (either an abundance or a lack thereof) or anything else dictate your experience of joy in the Lord?
- 5) How should the gospel — the good news of Christ that is our salvation — shape our understanding of possessions?
- 6) What verse(s), either from James 1:9-11 or one of our corresponding texts, could you memorize this week? Consider sharing this with your group and memorizing it together.