

# **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 8 Reading Guide

**1** My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. **2** For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, **3** and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," **4** have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? **5** Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? **6** But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? **7** Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

*James 2:1-7*

There is a common adage which holds that as we grow further into adulthood we, eventually, become our parents (it's the reason why the Progressive commercials currently circulating are so funny). While there are conversations to be had around the impact of nature versus nurture in terms of the development of personality and perspective, what is certainly true is that we are taught to see the world and interpret what we see in a certain way. The family and community of our origin help shape and tint the window by which we view the world. But that is not the end of it. There are other, far more insidious influences at play in shaping our perspective on life. The Apostle John, especially in his letters, often refers to this as *the world*, which sounds terribly generic but speaks of (in the case of 1 John in particular) a system and values which are set in opposition to the Kingdom of God. This system is made up of a choir of voices reciting the liturgy of *more*, inviting us to worship at the altar of comfortability, and all of this is mediated by the priests of power and influence.

None of this is new. Just as we feel the pull of the world's perspective today, James's readers would have known this Kingdom-opposing system, evident most clearly in the horror of the crucifixion of Christ, and yet they too heard the siren song of wealth and power and influence. That's clear from our passage this week. James, here, is lovingly calling these men and women to see the inconsistency between the world's perspective on value and worth, and that of the Kingdom of God. God isn't impressed by our bank accounts or the size of our social media following or the titles on the nameplates of our office door.

What about us? Is my confidence for the future found in a particular political party or a specific number in my 401k or the accomplishments of my children or the success of my teams? Or is it found in the unshakable truth that the risen Christ is reigning now and his name has been proclaimed over me such that I am his and he is mine for all of eternity? Would we be willing to ask those difficult but necessary questions as we engage our texts this week?

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

**Monday | Tuesday**

*Deuteronomy 10*

Deuteronomy is a book that beautifully captures a retelling of Israel's redemption up to the point of preparing to enter into the land of promise. In this chapter, Moses reminds Israel of the Lord's saving work and, in so doing, points them toward the heart of God which cares so deeply for the destitute and broken.

**Wednesday | Thursday**

*Luke 1:26-55*

Mary offers a poetic response to the miraculous promise of a child who would, in fact, be the Son of God. As Mary celebrates the Lord's faithfulness, she recounts the Lord's care for her people and the ways in which this promised child represents the Lord's fulfillment of his promises to Israel. Pay special attention to verses 46-55, wherein Mary speaks of God's deep concern for her humbled people.

**Friday | Saturday**

*1 Corinthians 1*

God's economy is, according to the world, upside down. God is not impressed with our wealth or our wisdom, nor does he seek only those who are impressive according to earthly standards for his Kingdom. Paul reminds us of this truth, challenges us to consider the church in light of this truth about God's Kingdom, and to consider ourselves as servants who have received divine grace and mercy.

## Life Group Questions | James 2:1-7

- 1) James continues to utilize familial language when addressing his audience. Why do you think this is significant, especially in relation to the topics that James is covering in his letter?
- 2) Read **Deuteronomy 10:17-18**. In James 2:1, James refers to Jesus as “the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory,” or in other translations the “glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” This was language that was often used to describe the Father in the Old Testament. What is the significance of James’s linkage between Jesus and the Father, especially as you consider the similarities between Deuteronomy 10:17-18 and James 2:1?
- 3) James 2:2-4 offer an illustration of the partiality that James condemns. How have you experienced the negative consequences of partiality? How have you demonstrated (or still demonstrate) the kind of partiality that James warns against here?
- 4) In verses 5-7, James provides several concrete reasons why partiality has no place amongst the people of God. One of the points that James makes is that partiality runs counter to the nature of God and his Kingdom, saying that God has “chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.” Read **1 Corinthians 1:26-29**. What do these verses say about the nature of the Kingdom of God? How does this oppose the values of our world?
- 5) In James 2:7, the author argues that the wealthy who are the recipients of this partiality are those who are guilty of, by oppressing the believers, blaspheming the name of Christ. James is here, in part, seeking to remind his readers of their identity as children of God. Why do you think he does this? Why is it important that we, in a world that values power and wealth and influence above nearly everything else, continue to remember our value as children of God, as well as the inherent value in others, regardless of their economic and/or social status?
- 6) Our bent toward demonstrating partiality often reveals idolatry in our hearts as it shows the things that we look toward for value, comfort, and security. What does your partiality (or the temptation to show partiality) demonstrate about your confidence, hope, value, and security for the future?