

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 10 Reading Guide

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? **15** If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, **16** and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? **17** So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. **19** You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! **20** Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? **21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? **22** You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; **23** and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. **24** You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. **25** And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? **26** For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James 2:14-26

There is a scene in *The Lion King* (the original, animated version of course) in which the hyenas, those wicked minions of the chief villain Scar, are reflecting on a recent encounter that they’ve had with King Mufasa. They remark on the power and authority that he possessed, so much so that even the sound of his name made them shudder in fright. They bore no love for Mufasa. They gave him no allegiance. In fact, they were tied to one who sought to undermine the King’s authority in full. What a horrible, hollow position, to acknowledge the might and authority of a good and benevolent king and yet stubbornly refuse to submit in obedience, refuse to allow confession to drive action.

That is the cognitive dissonance to which James speaks in our passage this week. To confess a faith in Christ that does not shape the contours of our decisions is to hold something that is fundamentally *other* than genuine, transformative faith in Christ. It may be intellectual assent, it may be a culturally familiar routine, whatever it is, a confession of belief that does not correspond to the pursuit of active submission to the

Lord with the whole of our lives is counterfeit. It is Monopoly money, fit for a game but of no value in reality.

James is not arguing that we somehow purchase God's approval with our deeds on His behalf. God does not choose us for his team because of what we bring to the table. We do not earn our salvation. The Apostle Paul helps make that abundantly clear in passages like Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." To that James would lift his hands in agreement and remind us that this grace that is ours through faith is also the means by which God fundamentally changes our identity so that, as sons and daughters of God and citizens of His Kingdom, our faith bears itself out in the obedience of our lives. It is a faith that works.

Would you, this week, ask the Lord to reveal to you where there may be a dissonance between the faith that you proclaim and obedience to the Lord in the actions of your life? Remember that the Lord isn't asking you to earn anything from him. We will never obey perfectly while we bear a sin nature. That is why we must yoke ourselves to Jesus in faith so that we go where he goes. How might the Lord be inviting you to trust him so that you say *yes* to Him in joyful submission to his gracious and benevolent authority? Consider these questions as you spend time in God's Word 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

Genesis 15:1-6; Genesis 22:1-19

These familiar stories of Abraham's confession of faith and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac formed the foundation of the Jewish identity and they would have been familiar concepts for the men and women to whom James wrote. Abraham's confidence in God revealed itself in the fruit of his life, most profoundly evidenced in his journey up Mount Moriah with Isaac in Genesis 22.

Wednesday | Thursday

Joshua 2

Rahab's story may be an unfamiliar one, but she is placed alongside Abraham in James 2 as one for whom the actions of her life demonstrated the validity of her faith in the Lord. Rahab was no saint. She was a prostitute in Jericho who believed in the power of God and whose life was changed because of that. Her inclusion in James 2 should undercut any notion that James is arguing for a works-based salvation but, rather, inviting us to see the beauty and significance of a life that has been miraculously transformed by a gracious God.

Friday | Saturday

Romans 2

Though Paul and James are, at times, said to disagree with one another, passages like Romans 2 help dispel such a notion. Here, in this theological treatise on faith from Paul, he presents a case for the significance of a faith which manifests itself in obedience to the Lord. The gospel of grace redeems us and innervates us for a life of obedience to Christ.

Life Group Questions | James 2:14-26

- 1) Look back through (or read if you're able) each of the previous sections in James up to this point. As you do so, and as you consider this passage as well, what repeated ideas, themes, or points of emphasis do you notice? How would you articulate, in one or two sentences, the central idea of James thus far?
- 2) In verse 17, James states bluntly, "*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*" It's an idea that will be repeated throughout this section. After reading this passage, how would you describe the point(s) of emphasis for James? What was your response to your initial reading of this passage? Why did you respond that way?
- 3) Read **Genesis 15:1-6** and **Genesis 22:1-19**. James makes reference to these two passages when discussing the faith and works of Abraham. How do we see, in these passages, that Abraham's life demonstrated congruence between his faith profession and the outworking of that faith in action?
- 4) Read **Romans 3:21-31**. James has, throughout church history, sometimes been pitted against the Apostle Paul by those who argue that James is advocating for a works-based salvation whereas Paul advocates for salvation by faith apart from works. Passages like this one in Romans 3 have served as the basis of that argument. While we would argue that to theologically pit James against Paul is invalid, we don't simply want to make that assumption. So, as you have read through our passage in James as well as this passage in Romans 3, how might you describe the similarities and the differences between these two passages? How might James and Paul affirm what the other has written (here and elsewhere)?
- 5) The account of Rahab may be found in **Joshua 2**. How is it that Rahab demonstrates a faith that works?
- 6) Where is there a lack of consistency between your profession of faith in Christ and the actions of your life? How might the Lord be challenging you to step into specific actions of obedience which demonstrate your faith in Him?
- 7) Two vital components of an active faith are found in both sensitivity and submission to the Spirit. We must hear and understand Him if we are to respond in obedience. How are you cultivating Spirit-sensitivity in your life? How might you invite others to walk with you in the process of acting in submission to the Spirit?