

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 13 Reading Guide

1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5 Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"? 6 But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James 4:1-10

Roads lead us somewhere. They have direction and purpose. It may simply be a dead-end street with a few scattered homes. It may be a dirt track marking a winding line through a field. It may be the frenzied interstate surrounding a major city. Whatever the road, if we adhere to its boundaries and follow it to its end, we will end up somewhere. Sometimes, roads lead us home or toward breathtaking new vistas. Sometimes, roads serve to deepen the reality that we are lost.

Before arriving at this portion of his letter, James warned against the divergent roads of the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of the Lord. He warned that there is a real, tangible danger to the internal divisions that arise while serving two masters because those internal divisions refuse to stay internal. Just like a coffee cup with an almost imperceptible crack running down its side, eventually, the liquid inside will leak out and prove that the cup was indeed fractured and, more than that, the table or the papers or the linens around will be stained by the leaking liquid.

This is the warning that James offers: when we follow the road of the wisdom of the world, it will inevitably lead us not simply toward stark internal division as we seek to serve the Lord and our own desires, our wealth, or our power. That internal division will, inevitably, have external consequences. This is why we cannot be "friends" with

the world and, ultimately, live submitted to the Lord. Therefore, James calls these believers to repent. These seemingly disparate ideas that he's already discussed in his letter — the love of status and money, the poor treatment of those deemed less than, the dangers of unbridled tongues, the battle against doubt — all come together here, and James addresses these collectively point-blank. These are all born, he says, of your desire to try and serve God and something else. It's hubristic, it's folly masquerading as wisdom, and it's creating division with the Body that comes, ultimately, from the internal division that you're experiencing. So repent. Experience the grace of God that will meet you in your confession of need, trust that the Lord is kind and good, and live in light of *his* wisdom. 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

Proverbs 3

James directly quotes Proverbs 3:34 in verse 6, but in fact much of Proverbs 3 (and the whole of Proverbs for that matter) is found echoed in James's letter. The author of Proverbs extols the path that follows the wisdom of the Lord and warns of the dangers in taking the road paved by the wisdom of the world. These are words of caution and care, and they serve as a fitting place to begin this new year.

Wednesday | Thursday

Isaiah 57:1-8

When James speaks of "friendship" with the world, he means something far more intimate than our modern conception of the word. We see that connection clearly portrayed in Isaiah's staggering presentation of the idolatry of Israel, using language that speaks of deep infidelity. We cannot worship the Lord *and* serve at the altar of our idols. Here we are reminded of that, and of the significance of James's call to repentance.

Friday | Saturday

Matthew 7

It's clear that James was influenced by the teaching of his half-brother, Jesus. Once again we hear our Savior's words resonating in James's exhortation. Not only does he implore his readers to petition the Lord in prayer with persistence, but imbedded in this passage in James is an admonition to trust in the veracity of God's promises and to build your life on his Word.

Life Group Questions | James 4:1-10

- 1) We would encourage you to re-read James 1-3 in order to re-acquaint yourself with the flow of James's argument. It will help to rightly situate all that he says in the passage we're considering this week.
- 2) How does James describe the root cause of the divisions that exist amongst his readers? How have you experienced in your own life that internal division (in particular, a desire to serve some idol *and* the Lord) has led to external strife with others?
- 3) Consider James's argument in verses 2-4 in light of your own prayers. Are there specific ways that you would acknowledge that you have not persisted in prayer about something? Are there ways that you would acknowledge you have prayed for something with selfish/sinful motives? How might the Lord be inviting you to repent of that and either persist in prayer or shift how you pray?
- 4) Re-read James 4:6. In the midst of such a challenging passage, why is this promise such good news?
- 5) **Read Proverbs 3.** In what ways are you most acutely tempted to follow the wisdom of the world as opposed to the wisdom of the Lord? How can, and should, you encourage one another in your pursuit of a life defined by submission to the wisdom of the Lord?
- 6) The challenge of this passage is evident in the reality that the battle James describes, of building our lives around humble submission to the Lord versus the constant pull of the world, is an ongoing one for us each day. How might you, practically, remind yourself of the need to humbly submit yourself before the Lord each day? (Consider, for example, one verse or passage that you can commit to memory this week, or a way in which you might regularly remind one another of the truth of God's Word throughout the week).