

## **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 19 Reading Guide

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

James 5:13-18

There is a grace found in the natural world that speaks of the divine creativity of the Lord. It's the cause for the psalmist to exult, "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." We don't see this only in the grand evidences of the Lord's awesome power such as mountain ranges or ocean cliffs, but also in beautifully mundane glimpses of the Lord's design. Take, for instance, the honking V formation of Canadian geese making the migratory trek that the Lord has hardwired into their existence. They fly together in formation for two reasons: so that they can together share the load of leading and so that they are able to keep tabs on every member of the skein, assuring that all make the journey safely.

This is no sales pitch for the Audubon Society, but an invitation to see all around us glimpses of the truth that serves to conclude the Letter of James. To a wearied, suffering people, James encourages them to count their trials joy (1:2), to ask the Lord for wisdom in faith (1:5-8), to live lives of congruence between what they claim to believe and the actions that define them, to pursue and value the wisdom that is ultimately from above (3:13-18), and to trust that the Lord will return to finally redeem and vindicate them (5:7-11). But just as geese move on their migratory way together, James concludes his letter with the reminder above (5:13-18), that the journey that is the Christian life is not intended to be a solo venture.

Why? Because we will inevitably grow weary, we will become unwell, we will struggle, at times, to hold onto the confident faith that echoes that of Elijah, and we will wrestle with the residue of our sin nature that endures while we are on this side of eternity. And

James, as one who cannot be present with these believers, invites them to see the gift of grace found in the community of Christ-followers. We see throughout these final few verses a call to live with a Godward bent in every season and situation of life, be it in times of sickness and sorrow, or joy. Why would James encourage this at the last? Because he actually believes that true wisdom comes from the Lord. Because he genuinely trusts that God is the just Judge who will vindicate us when he returns. Because he is convinced wholeheartedly that the Lord can heal those who are sick. Because he holds to the hope that the gospel frees us to acknowledge our frailties, our sins, and be embraced by the Lord and his people with the grace of reconciliation because the gospel is good news in truth not just in theory. This is corporate life in the Body, and it is ours together in Christ. 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**

*Psalm 145*

This Psalm is a portrait of a heart postured toward the Lord. The praise that the psalmist commends is rooted in a deep confidence in the care and provision that the Lord promises. May it be so that we, with the psalmist, would prayerfully say, “my mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.”

**Wednesday | Thursday**

*Psalm 32; John 9:1-7*

These passages offer a glimpse of instances in which Scripture speaks of sin having a negative impact on someone physically (Psalm 32), as well as the indication from Jesus (John 9) that there is not always a direct correlation between sickness and sin. Read these passages in tandem as you prayerfully consider where sin might reside and need to be confessed in your own life.

**Friday | Saturday**

*1 Kings 17:1-7; 18:41-46*

Here is the account of Elijah’s prayer of faith which James holds up as exemplary. Bear in mind as you read that while Elijah was certainly a prophet of the Lord, James emphasizes that he was “a man with a nature like ours,” who bore great confidence in the promises and provision of God.

## Life Group Questions | James 5:13-18

- 1) As you consider the themes that run throughout James, why might James conclude his letter (5:13-20) as he does?
- 2) James has taken considerable space to speak about the power of our words. How do verses 5:13-14, and the exhortations to pray/praise, connect with this broader theme?
- 3) Have you ever experienced, or witnessed, being anointed with oil and prayed over by the elders of a church? How does James define faith and why is it a key component in this prayer of the elders?
- 4) Read Psalm 32. Can there be a connection between sin and physical illness according to Scripture? Is illness always the cause of sin? Can you think of biblical examples that demonstrate both sides of this?
- 5) What role does confession of sin to other believers currently play in your life? Based on this text, what role should it play?
- 6) How does James describe Elijah and his prayer? How does this paragraph encourage you? How does it challenge you?

Take some time to listen to the Lord on behalf of your life group members this week as you pray. Take the time to ask the Lord what he wants to do, and then pray in line with that, rather than simply asking the Lord to do what you believe to be best.