

# **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 20 Reading Guide

19 My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

James 5:19-20

We've all seen them. The movie we're watching has reached a climactic point. Two opposing forces stand arrayed against one another preparing for a final, inevitable battle. The protagonist steps forward and offers a rousing speech to stoke the emotional fires before the army rushes into battle. It's hard not to feel the thrill of excitement as you hear the responsive shouts from the listening crowd.

Why are these speeches, these moments, so compelling? The answer to that question is, in some ways, the reason why James concludes his letter as he does here in verses 19-20. In the moments before a fight that we cannot escape, James is reminding us that we are fighting for something greater than ourselves, and that we are fighting alongside others who are with us and for us in this battle.

James is saying goodbye in these verses. But he does not do so with a warm farewell and well-wishes. He does not even offer a personal note of any kind when, according to the traditional form of a first-century letter, one would be expected. Instead, James, desiring to be with these men and women but unable to do so, offers them this mutual responsibility: "care well for one another." And the call to care well for one another is not abstract or theoretical. James, building on his plea for spiritual integrity, for holiness, challenges the believers to fight for one another in their mutual pursuit of a Christ-exalting, holy life.

Do not hear in these final words from James a call to be the moral and theological police. Rather, in our battle against sin, we are reminded here that we are fighting alongside brothers and sisters who have known the grace of God in Christ and who are committed to reminding us of the truth of who we are because of what Christ has accomplished. We are called to love one another enough to say hard things when necessary, not from a place of moral imperiousness, but because the gospel frees us to walk in the light with our backpacks full of junk but our hearts and minds clean before the Lord.

This is the plea for integrity that James has advocated for from the beginning. It is not a naive expectation of sinless perfection, but a confidence that the gospel really does change us and that we need not live in bondage to the darkness and sin that lurk, ever-ready, to enslave. Would we take up these arms together as we walk, bound together, in the free air that Christ's death and resurrection has purchased for us. 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 10*

These verses in Proverbs demonstrate, just as James 5:19-20, the life-affirming power that can be found in our words when used for the glory of God and the good of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as James provides in these verses the positive foil to the negative power of the tongue, Proverbs 10:12 reminds us, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses." We've been in this chapter in Proverbs once before in our study through James, but it would be good for us to sit here again.

### **Wednesday | Thursday**

*Psalms 51*

There is a sober honesty inherent in James's words in 5:19-20. Brothers and sisters will, at times, deviate from the truth into the folly of sin. None of us are immune to that, and all of us would benefit from the reminder that there is hope to be found in repentance, just as David tells us in Psalm 51.

### **Friday | Saturday**

*Luke 15*

This series of parables offer a remarkable portrait of the Lord's response to those who acknowledge their sin and, in repentance, come to Him. What a joy that, as James tells us, we get to participate in God's redemption and restoration in the lives of others. The Lord does not begrudgingly accept our confessions of guilt with a lukewarm enthusiasm. Instead, we may trust that genuine repentance is met with the all-encompassing embrace of our Father.

## Life Group Questions | James 5:19-20

- 1) How would you describe the nature of the relationship between believers that James mentions in verses 19-20? What would need to be present in that relationship in order for the call to repentance to be offered and received well?
- 2) Have you ever had to pursue a brother or sister with an invitation to repent from sin in his/her life? Have you ever been pursued in that way? What made that experience a positive or negative one for you? What, if anything, would you change in retrospect?
- 3) In what way does the gospel free us to engage in relationships marked by the kind of honesty and transparency that would allow for the pursuit and repentance described in James 5:19-20?
- 4) Do you have others in your life who, you are certain, would lovingly but boldly invite you to repentance if they became aware of unrepentant sin in you? If yes, how might you continue to cultivate relational capital marked by complete transparency? If no, how might you practically seek out those kinds of relationships (or grow existing ones)?
- 5) Why is individual sin something that has corporate ramifications? Put another way, why is it not acceptable to simply say, "my sin is between me and God and no one else needs to worry about it"? What about James 5:19-20 leads us to believe that individual sin has corporate implications?

\*Designate time to pray with one another. If time and space allow, this would be a wonderful time to gather in gender-specific groups to offer a space for confession, repentance, and prayer.