

JAMES

“Proverbs” of the New Testament

Writing of the Book

- James the half-brother of Jesus is the author of James.
 - At first, he was a skeptic of Jesus, but later he became the leading pastor of the church in Jerusalem.
- According to ancient tradition James's faith cost him his life, as he refused to deny Jesus as Lord when Jewish authorities publicly demanded that he do so in 62.

Writing of the Book

- Because James died in the early 60s his epistle was obviously written before that, and after enough time had passed that the faith had spread among various locations.
 - So, it was written sometime between the late 30s and early 60s.
- The intended audience were “the twelve tribes scattered,” or the diaspora, the Jewish community beyond their homeland in Palestine.

Writing of the Book

- The original audience would have been Jewish Christians in various communities where the gospel had begun to gain a foothold.
- A knowledge of the Old Testament is presumed as is familiarity with the synagogue.

Purpose and Message

- James's tone echoes two forms of Old Testament literature: prophecy and wisdom.
- Like the prophet Jeremiah, James shows tenderness as he addresses his “brothers” and “dear brothers” throughout (gender neutral terms).
- Yet, like Nathan, he pulls no punches as he urges obedience.

Purpose and Message

- Some of the strongest charges to obey God in the NT come in James, indicating the zeal and style of the OT prophets continues to be part of the message for the church age.
- In 108 verses there are more than 50 direct commands.
- James also reflects the wisdom tradition, however.
- Wisdom is not primarily intellectual cleverness, but **moral astuteness** that comes from God and is given to those who seek God.

Purpose and Message

- James is practical, emphasizing that the goal of the Christian life is to live for God, to put his Word into practice.
- Like the book of Proverbs, James will touch on a theme, go on to others, and then circle back around to the original theme.
- It can appear disorganized to us modern readers, but **its coherence lies in its consistent call to faith** rather than logical progression.

Outline of James

- I. Address and Greeting (1:1)
- II. Trials and Temptations (1:2-18)
- III. Putting the Word into Practice (1:19-2:26)
- IV. Worldliness in the Church (3:1-4:12)
- V. Looking at Life from a Christian Perspective (4:13-5:11)
- VI. Concluding Exhortations (5:12-20)

Major Themes

Faith and Works

- As long ago as 1522 Martin Luther called it “a rather strawy letter” in comparison to Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, in that it emphasized good works so much more than Paul or Peter seemed to do.
- Some biblical scholars since then, however, have emphasized the difference between James and Paul to such an extent that they do believe they are teaching different messages, or gospels.

Major Themes

Faith and Works *(continued)*

- This apparent contradiction comes from a comparison of James 2:24 with a verse like Romans 3:28, which emphasizes justification is by faith alone.
 - *You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.*
James 2:24
 - *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.* Romans 3:28
- However, there is no disagreement between Paul and James, or between faith and good works.

Major Themes

Faith and Works *(continued)*

- In Romans, for example, Paul addresses the error that says salvation is earned by human merit by emphasizing that salvation is a free act of grace which we can only receive by faith, not by merit.
- James addresses a different error that equates faith with mere assent to certain doctrinal truths without any corresponding changes in heart or behavior, without any genuine trust in Christ at all.
- Genuine faith involves the whole person, not just the mind, and always results in good works.

Major Themes

James and Jesus

- James's stress on the close link between **practice and belief, ethics and theology**, comes from the Old Testament as well as Jesus himself.
- James echoes the Sermon on the Mount at a number of points.
- James almost certainly would not have had the Gospel of Matthew; **he knew the words and ministry of Jesus.**

Major Themes

James and Jesus *(continued)*

- It's also important to remember that he was influenced in a similar way as Jesus was growing up (they were half-brothers!).
- After Jesus died and rose from the dead, Jesus' teachings finally sunk in, and **James makes the passing on of what Jesus taught (the Great Commission)**, a primary part of his ministry.

Major Themes

The Gospel and Justice

- James addresses a number of “justice” issues in his letter, including economic inequality and racism.
- This has led some people to read their politics back into James (instead of allowing James and the rest of the Bible to shape their politics).
- It’s important for us to remember that modern explanations and definitions of political and social justice issues are **not equivalent to biblical ones**, and that **when the Bible does address these issues, it does so from an explicitly gospel-centered perspective**.

Major Themes

The Gospel and Justice *(continued)*

- This means an acknowledgment of creation, of sin, of the need for salvation, of the person and work of Jesus Christ, what the church is, judgment, and of the kingdom of God.
- This in no way means we should set aside the teaching of James on justice issues, **but instead understand where they come from and how they can be lived out.**

Major Themes

The Gospel and Justice *(continued)*

- James writes to the church who lives life consciously before God and is consistent with the rest of Scripture in **pointing to Jesus as the ultimate solution to injustice.**
- We are called to accept and look to practice James's teaching for ourselves, to submit to God and live with selflessness and compassion, to be salt and light in a world that needs Christ.