

James

- 1. Who was the writer? To whom was it written?** The writer of this book was James, the brother of Jesus -- see Matthew 13:55. Although James was not a believer prior to the crucifixion, he certainly was a powerful eyewitness following Christ's resurrection. James went on to become a powerful leader (probably an elder -- compare Acts 15:2 and Acts 15:13 along with Acts 21:18) in the church of Jerusalem. Upon Peter's rescue from jail in Acts 12, Peter told those assembled in prayer to report the good news to James and the brethren. We also see that James is mentioned as a man of high reputation in the Jerusalem congregation in Galatians 2:9. The letter of James was written to "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad." Many assume that James was writing a general letter to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire. However, I don't think that his letter is limited to Jewish Christians, but to all Christians. It is certainly true that the bulk of James' work was in regard to Jewish Christians -- see Acts 21:17-26. However, the entire New Testament is clear that the real Israel is spiritual in nature and consists of the Lord's church, both Jews and Gentiles -- see Romans 2:28-29, Romans 9:6-8, Galatians 3:29, Galatians 4:25-28, Galatians 6:15-16. It is fair to say that the letter of James is a general letter to Christians everywhere throughout history.
- 2. What is the main theme of this letter?** The main theme of James is faith in action. Chapter 1 establishes that Christians must be doers of the word, not merely hearers. Chapter 2 really brings out the interlinking of faith and works, making the point that faith without works is dead. Chapter 3 establishes that a Christian should "show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom." Chapter 4 shows that you are either a true Christian or else a part of the world; there is no middle ground. Chapter 5 communicates that those who endure in their faith will receive the reward at Christ's return. Christianity is real, and real faith produces real action that is pleasing to God.
- 3. What does James say about trials and suffering?** James begins his letter by taking on the issue of trials. In James 1:2-4, he encourages Christians to choose to be joyful when we encounter trials, because of the positive results. First of all, the testing of our faith produces endurance. In the physical realm, it is impossible to build up endurance without some arduous workouts. In the same way, we cannot have spiritual endurance without going through some difficult testing. As endurance is built, the end result is that we are perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. If Christians will joyfully complete the course that the Lord has set before us, we will be perfected; there will be nothing that can stop us. James goes on in chapter 1, verse 12 to say that the man who perseveres under trial, when he has been approved, will receive the crown of life. In other words, any sufferings that we encounter in this life are not even worthy to be compared to our reward in glory. James also closes his letter by coming back to the topic of suffering. He upholds the Old Testament prophets for their example of suffering and patience, and reminds us that they are blessed. James keys in on the example of Job, noting his endurance. He reminds us that the outcome of the Lord's dealings show our Lord to be compassionate and merciful.

- 4. What is the New Testament called in this letter?** In this letter, James has a special name for the New Testament. Twice he refers to the "law of liberty" -- see James 1:25, 2:12. The New Testament is definitely a sharp contrast to the Old Testament in this regard. The Old Testament was one of death and condemnation -- see 2 Corinthians 3:7,9. On the other hand, the New Testament is a covenant of life and liberty -- see 2 Corinthians 3:6,17.
- 5. How do we become doers of the word?** James 1:22-25 exhorts us to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Those who hear the word, but don't heed it are delusional. Such people think they are Christians, but really aren't -- see Matthew 7:21-23. Let us examine the contrast between hearers and doers.

Hearer

- 1) Looks at himself in the mirror
- 2) Goes away
- 3) Forgets what kind of person he was

Doer

- 1) Looks *intently* at the perfect law
- 2) Abides by it
- 3) Becomes an effectual doer

- 6. What do we learn about faith and works in this letter?** Faith and works are inseparable. You can't have consistent works without faith, and you can't have faith without corresponding works. James starts his discussion about this topic in 1:14, wherein he implies that professed faith alone is not enough for salvation. It says, "What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith *save him*?" So many people quote Ephesians 2:8-9 but ignore this passage. The conclusion we come to when we put all of the Scripture together is that works of the law don't save us, but works resulting from faith justify us. We can't get the cart in front of the horse, but we can't forget the cart either. True faith always results in faithful action. This is famously borne out in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. Our focus needs to be to increase our faith, but the pudding's proof is in our actions or inaction as the case may be. James 1:17 establishes that faith apart from works is useless, "Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself." James 1:24 demolishes the arguments of the "faith only" crowd -- "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." James 1:26 finishes these thoughts, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

- 7. What do we see about heavenly wisdom in the book of James?** There is a sharp contrast between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.

Earthly Wisdom

- Bitter jealousy
- Selfish ambition
- Arrogant
- Lies against the truth
- Demonic
- Disorder
- Every evil thing

Heavenly Wisdom

- Pure
- Peaceable
- Gentle
- Reasonable
- Full of mercy and good fruits
- Unwavering
- Without hypocrisy

- 8. What is the source of conflicts within the church?** The source of conflict is always selfishness on the part of one or more parties. James puts it bluntly, "Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?" Unity in the church is brought about when we put aside our own desires, and put Christ's interests first. When we all do this, peace and harmony reign.
- 9. What two things go along with resisting the devil?** James reminds us that when we resist the devil, he will flee from us. Associated with our resistance of the devil are two important practices. We must submit to God -- 4:7. In other words, we think about what is best for God, and then we bow our will to His. James 4:8 reminds us to draw near to God. We can't know God's will and carry it out if we don't have a close relationship with Him. We are His sons and daughters, and we should want to spend time with Him and be pleasing to Him.
- 10. What do we learn about prayer from the book of James?** From this book, we find that prayer is absolutely essential. James 1:5 tells us to ask God for wisdom. We each are often faced with difficult decisions, sometimes that we must make on the fly. If we haven't been asking God for wisdom, then we can't have confidence in the decisions that we make. We want to be sure that we are doing the right thing, so let's pray for wisdom. We find in chapter 5 that we should pray when we are sick or suffering. There is One who is able to heal, comfort us, and supply the strength necessary to endure the pain. Chapter 5 also exhorts us to pray for one another that we may be healed. The direct context is in reference to helping each other overcome sin. We need the help of God that is brought about through the prayers of the brethren. James closes by using the example of Elijah to communicate the power of prayer. Elijah's prayers first closed up the heavens and then reopened them. Elijah has nothing over us -- we are God's children -- His saints. Let's pray for each other!