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## **Epistle of James**

*"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."* James 2:17

**Key verses:** James 1:1-4; 2:17

**Key personalities:** Early Jewish Christians

**Timeline:** The Church is established and grows by the Power of the Holy Spirit and the multiplying networks of The Apostles, 35-65 A.D.

**The Epistle of James.** 45-49 AD. "*James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ,*" probably Jesus's half-brother, the first leader of the Church after Christ. Considered the Proverbs of the New Testament for its short, practical stanzas about real faith in action, as right belief will equal right actions. James deals with Christian ethics by combating the everyday problems facing Christians then and now, uncontrolled speech, unwillingness to listen, a lack of spiritual desire, bad attitudes, strife in the church and home all from a shallow faith. The theme is that when our faith is impacted by Christ, it will real and working. A true faith will produce authentic deeds that glorify our Lord.

Who was this *James*? Most biblical scholars contend it is James, son of Joseph, half-brother of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. James was fathered from Joseph with Mary, whereas Jesus--His humanity--was fathered from God with Mary chosen to be His mother.

James is more of a book of sayings that it is an epistle as it was not addressed or meant to a particular person or group. It is a practical discourse of wisdom literature focusing on moral exhortations, just like Proverbs. It is about personal responsibility by aligning one's beliefs to be right, so that one's behaviors are right.

James uses the Old Testament, especially Psalm 15, as his background, and his exhortations are almost like a commentary to it. James warns and encourages his readers that the sufferings they are experiencing are only the beginning, and it will get worse. But, when our faith is in who Christ is and His work in us, we will have the confidence and perseverance to not only get through our trials, but actually persevere so we will also learn and grow through them! As a result, we will be even better and more mature; we will be able to extol others in the faith. James then switches to practical, "hands on" Christian living to control our attitudes and tongue, to be listeners, and to stay away from pride and sin. When we do such things, we will be better able to grow in the faith and model the Christian life to others.

**Key Happenings:** Faith that does not produce authentic deeds is a faith that is disconnected from Christ!

Many of the Apostles had gone far off in their missionary journeys as Jesus called, or had been martyred, so James takes over the lead of the Church base in Jerusalem. Without the New Testament being available yet and the instructions from the Apostles absent, a vacuum of instruction came into the Church. James starts to write his sermons, based on Jesus' teaching, to extol and encourage the Church. He writes like a pastor to point out problems, potential problems as well as sin, and encourages them to really follow Christ by faith and make the changes in their lives so they reflect Christ. Only then will they be able to do something with their faith that is worthwhile.

**Why was James written?** During the time of James, the church was at a crossroads. The "honeymoon" period of being ignored by the religious leaders, growing and feeling comfortable, being well was coming to an end. They were still a part of Judaism and had not split off from their roots. Now, at this point, they are being singled out and picked on. The persecutions were just starting. The two other James in the

New Testament had already been martyred. Steven had been stoned to death. Many were leaving the faith because of fear. The Church was also starting to deal with the human, sinful nature of gossip, strife, carnality, slander, doctrinal arguments and power plays, so their faith was becoming useless and unproductive--the very themes we still have with us today. The self-filled life and the focus on the will of ourselves was overtaking fulfillment in Him and seeking God's Will (John 1:16; 3:30; Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; Col. 1:19; Col. 1:25). James seeks to write an extolment of Christ and an encouragement to the saints to look to Christ in faith and not to their circumstances. Looking to Christ in faith, we will then be able to live a righteous life and be meaningful Christians.

- James' Epistle was copied and dispatched to all the known Christian world as a handbook on how to endure persecution, model authentic faith, and be encouraged because *Christ loves you!* It was also a first century sermon resource for pastors!
- James is a book of unparalleled distinction, with no counterpart in controversy in the early church to the Reformers. It is a book that is unique, as it is not about the life of Jesus as the Gospels are, nor is it a treatise of doctrine such as Paul's letters, nor is it a prophecy as is the Revelation. Rather, it is a "how to" in practical living and encouragement for what lies ahead. It is more like Proverbs than any other New Testament book.

**Audience:** James is primarily speaking to Jews living in Jerusalem who are starting to face persecution. The period is such that it has only been a decade since Jesus' death and Resurrection. The Pharisees had started to persecute the early Christians. They killed James the brother of John, they killed Steven, and Paul was on the prowl to destroy the Church (Acts 6-9). The Israelites, of whom most of the Early Church was made up, had a history of difficult circumstances, from greedy fellow Israelites taking advantage of them, to famine and the Romans coming and taking most of the rich people's land away; and then, things got worse.

**Theme:** Right belief equals right behaviors from a Christ-directed and faith-centered life. The theme is that the knowledge of what God puts in our hearts must transmit into our daily lives. The key verse is, "... *faith without works is dead...*" (James 2:14-20). The principle theme is, *real, authentic faith will produce works to glorify our Lord*. Faith, without any actions to prove it, is worthless and meaningless. Saved? Perhaps. But, what good are you claiming to be a Christian and not doing anything with your faith (Psalm 15)!

- The primary theme running through James is the knowledge we are given by our Lord. The knowledge we gain from our experiences in life must be rooted in our hearts so it can bubble up into our daily lives. Simply put, the knowledge that is in our hearts must transition to how we live our lives!

**Contents:** James is literally a series of short exhortation sermons. James is a book of exhortation that is intended to persuade, incite, advice, counsel, and rebuke us while encouraging us to be responsible with our faith. James is calling Christians to take their faith seriously and not recklessly. We are shown what it means to have application of our faith and the importance to learn and grow in Christ. In this way, we can grow in faith and maturity, so we can apply our Christian character. This will be evident in the way we conduct ourselves with others!

**Chapter 1:** How do we react to pressure? Faith will not break when it is real, even when times are dire. We are stable because who we are in Christ and not because of our circumstances.

**Chapter 2:** When Faith is authentic, it will show it in our lives. We will have real, dependable love that transitions into respect for God, for others, and for ourselves! Obedience and action are proof of faith.

**Chapter 3:** When our faith is real, we will show control and humility. We will have constructive ways of being encouraging by our communication! How we use our words reflects what is in our soul.

**Chapter 4:** When faith is working, we will be expressing patience. We will be able to handle conflict and strife and resolve the tough issues of life! How we control our desires shows whether we want God's Will or ours.

**Chapter 5:** When we are patient, we are persevering. We will have confidence and hope in life regardless of what we face because of who we are in Christ. How we handle our money shows our devotion and what matters to us.

- James uses illustrations directly for the time and events the people were then facing; he draws from nature and Greek philosophy. James' main assertions are our relationship of faith and life, and that we must make our Christian life real and meaningful; if not, it is worthless (2:14-26). James speaks to both the rich and the poor (1:9-11; 2:1-9; 4:13-17), to persecutions (1:2-8; 2:6-7; 5:4-6), temptations (1:2-4; 2:11; 4:2), handling our words (1:19-20,26; 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:9), how to seek wisdom (1:5; 3:14-18), developing our faith (1:6-8; 2:14-26), and enduring trials to benefit us (1:9-11; 5:7-11).
- *I know your afflictions.* In times of suffering, we may think that Christ is absent, but He is not. He is fully with us (Rev. 2:9)!
- *Faith...* springs from our growth and intimacy in Christ. We are given faith and we make more. This trust rests and looks to God for what He has done (James 1:3; 2:5, 14-26).
- *Love.* This is a fruit of faith and shows our authenticity, which allows us to serve. It lives in the present as it looks outward to others (John 3:16; 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 3:14; James 2:14).
- *Know what will happen* refers to a stoic, philosophical statement. This means ignoring the providential, sovereign reign of God in our lives (Job 9:5-6; 28:25; Psalm 104:10-25; 145:15; 147:9; Matt. 4:4; 6:26-28; Luke 12:6-7; Acts 17:25-28; Rom. 8:28). It is to live our lives our own way with arrogant presumption and self-satisfied forgetfulness of God. This mindset shows a total disregard for God, His truth, and His call. James' readers would wholeheartedly agree with this; however, they did not practice it! When we make plans without God, we are like a blind person stepping into the dark without guidance or sight.
- *What is your life referring to*, if faith has not changed you over, you will lead a life of problems, without purpose and one of no distinction or betterment to yourself or others. Why? Because, problems are a part of life. At any one time, a problem is headed your way now, you have just gotten out of a problem, or you are headed into a problem. We have to know this--problems are coming! Problems are here! The question is not how to avoid them; we cannot avoid all problems. We also should not ask, *Why did this happen to me?* Rather, the question needs to be, *How are we going to deal with them?*

The Epistle of James is about how "to be" a Christian of faith, so that we will be able to handle problems and life while being "doers" of our faith. When we are being real with our faith, we will be growing, learning, and maturing; we will be leading a life of excellence to our Lord's glory!

**Key Takeaway:** The new Christians were enjoying the freedom from the Law; suddenly, they were scattered because they feared the persecution. Their faith was in the circumstances and not really in the substance of our Lord. Like many today, they put their faith in the shallow end of the Christianity pool and had not developed the maturity, depth, or character to endure. Because faith was weak, the ways of the flesh sprang up; the gossip, slander, and strife, as well as spiritual warfare, abounded. Thus, a need was addressed to the social tensions of any time, pointing people to take responsibility for their faith development by seeking Christ and not their circumstances.

Our short-term setbacks will produce long-term results that glorify our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! So, we can look to the Prophets of the OT as examples of faith in the midst of extreme adversity. Job was a

great comfort to those who were in captivity. These examples help us to see the hope we have in Him, and give us perseverance and patience.

Christ's grace is sufficient! *Christ is enough!* "Christ alone by faith alone." The other aspects, such as "works," are merely the result of His work in us (Rom. 1:16; 10:4-17; James 2:14-26).

**The Call to the Church?** When we seek to do His Church on our own, we turn it into a church of evil, as diametrically opposed to Christ, as Satan is opposed to Him. We may not be worshipping Satan, but when we run the church by our ways and agendas, we are, in fact, worshipping Satan, because Christ is not only ignored, He is being opposed! Let us not be pressured to bow to people's agendas that are in opposition to Christ's. In this way, we can lead to God's Glory and even lead through any sufferings to overcome and learn from, so our members can run the course God's Way.

### Questions to Ponder

1. How does it make you feel our Lord says, *I know your afflictions*?
2. How do practical illustrations help you know about faith in action?
3. How and why do some Christians put their faith in the shallow end of the pool and never developed the maturity, depth, or character to endure?
4. How and why do right belief effect right actions?
5. What happens when you are facing problems like uncontrolled speech, unwillingness to listen, or a lack of spiritual desire? How do these affect your attitudes and relationships? What is it you needed?
6. What can you do to prevent strife in your church? What does it take to help yourself and others grow a faith that is not shallow?
7. *Faith* springs from our growth and intimacy in Christ. We are given faith and we make more. So how can you develop a trust that rests, and looks to God for what He has done?
8. How is *Love* a fruit of faith? How can you use love to show our authenticity, which allows us to serve?
9. How is it a personal responsibility of a Christian to aligning one's beliefs to be right, so that one's behaviors are right? What happens when we do not? How can the church help?
10. Who have you seen that has a confidence in their faith? How does that inspire you? How can you inspire others?
11. How can you achieve more perseverance to not only get through life, but trials as well?
12. What does the church need to do to help people actually persevere in faith to also learn and grow through them?