

The letter of james

Doing faith



James? Who and what is James? And why study it?

James was the brother of the Lord Jesus who later became a leader in the early Jerusalem church. After the miraculous conception of Jesus, Joseph and Mary had several other natural children [Matthew 13:53-58]. During his earthly ministry they did not believe in him and were not amongst his followers [Matthew 12:46-50; John 7:1-5]. After his death and resurrection at least one of them, James, witnessed the resurrected Christ [1 Corinthians 15:3-8] and became a believer and follower. Later he became a leader of the Jerusalem church and a “pillar” alongside the Apostles Peter and John [Acts 12:17; 15:6-21; 21:18; Galatians 1:18-2:9].

The Letter James was a circular written by him to the early churches. Unlike the Apostle Paul’s letters to specific churches or people James is addressed to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” [1:1]. The “twelve” refers to the original number of tribes in the Israelites (God’s Old Testament people). But eleven tribes had long since been destroyed by the Assyrians. Its use here casts these churches as the true heirs of God’s promises and purposes for Israel. The “Dispersion” was the term used to refer to Jews (the remnant tribe of Israelites) scattered outside Judea following the Exile. By the time James wrote, in accord with his endorsement of Paul’s mission to the Gentiles (non-Jewish nations) [Acts 15], these churches contained non-Jews alongside Jews.

James is the pastoral letter by the Lord’s own brother and witness and leader of the founding church to Christians and churches beyond his immediate responsibility. It strongly ties the spreading Christian movement back to its historical roots in its founding church, the witness to the resurrected Christ and his earthly life and ministry.

Apart from addressing these “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” James says virtually nothing about the situation to which it was written. Some things can be discerned from the issues it addresses, such as, enduring troubles, rich-poor relations, speech and relationships, and making plans and doing business. Being a circular letter, James probably had no specific situation in mind. It tackles very important and timeless issues of life.

More than any other New Testament Letter James is immediately practical and closely paralleled to the Lord Jesus’ ethical teaching as preserved in the Gospels. It is concerned with a doing faith or what faith does. Amongst its well known lines are “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” and “faith without works is dead”!

In his recent Boyer Lectures, “The Future of Jesus”, Archbishop Peter Jensen observed that Jesus remains popular while churches and Christians are not. Churches and Christians are commonly criticised for being out of touch and not doing what they preach, and for being too distant from their founding Lord. In such a social setting it is very timely to be brought back to the Lord’s practical teaching on life. Even more importantly, for their own sakes and for integrity before their Lord Churches and Christians need to constantly be brought back to their Lord’s practical instructions and ways for life.

James' Structure

James uses the phrase “my (beloved) brothers” to grab attention at key points. (Note: “brothers” reflects a generic use that includes male and female, as in “man” for “mankind” or “humanity”.) Commonly these also mark the beginning of the Letter’s sections [1:2 (16), 19; 2:1 (5); 2:14; 3:1, (10, 12); 4:11; 5:7, (9), 12, (19)]. (These studies follow the units marked in this way.)

James’ opening chapter rapidly and briefly runs through a number of topics and themes expounded at greater length and depth in the rest of the letter.

Chapter 1		Chapters 2-5	
1v2-4	Trials (temptations) as tests producing endurance for the goal	5v7-11	Endure like Job
1v5-8	Asking in faith for God’s good gifts (wisdom)	3v13-18 5v13-18	Wisdom from God Praying like Elijah
1v9-11	Rich and poor, boasting and humility	2v1-13 4v1-10 4v13-17 5v1-6	Bias to the rich, platitudes to the poor Humility Boasting Rich-poor oppression
1v12-15	Temptations (trials) as tests producing endurance for the goal	3v13-4v10	Ambition & passions
1v16-18	God’s good gifts	See 1v5-8	
1v19-20	Speech in righteousness/wickedness	3v1-12 4v11-12 5v12	Taming the tongue Judging brothers “Yes” & “no”
1v21-25	Doing faith (doers of the word)	2v14-26	Faith without works
1v26	Speech in righteousness/wickedness	See 1v19-20	
1v27	Doing faith	See 1v21-25	

#1 Joy in Trials

James 1v2-18

Opener -

Intro – The opening chapter of James briefly introduces the topics and themes expounded at greater length and depth over the rest of the letter. (See the introductory notes.) It is marked by three uses of “my (beloved) brothers” [v2, 16 & 19] producing three sections. The middle [v16-18] one both completes the first and leads into the last. These opening two studies will explore the first [v2-15] and third [v19-27] sections separately while touching on the second linking section in each.

Being an introduction the chapter only briefly touches on each topic and theme, leaving them to be explored and applied more fully later. It lays down some principles that are more specifically applied later. By these brief touches the topics and themes are brought into close connection. But unlike more explicit connections in Paul’s letters their connections are left implicit, inviting reflection by readers (hearers).

Breaking it down – James 1v2-18 contains five sub-sections that form a pattern.

- 1v2-4 (A) Trials (temptations) as tests producing endurance for the goal
- 1v5-8 (B) Asking in faith for God’s good gifts (wisdom)
- 1v9-11 (C) Rich and poor, boasting and humility
- 1:12-15 (A) Trials (temptations) as tests producing endurance for the goal
- 1:16-18 (B) God’s good gifts

Read chapter 1v2-18, noting these sub-sections and their pattern.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each sub-section. Note what the second occurrences of (A) and (B) add to their first.*

v2-4 (Note: In the original language the noun “trials” (also in v12) matches the verb “tempt” [v13-14]. Depending on the context either word may be a neutral test or carry an intention to cause failure. The words translated “testing/test” [v2 & 12] carry a sense of proving something or someone to be genuine and of worth. For example, the testing or proving of metal in a furnace.)

v5-8

v9-11

v12-15

v16-18

What is the connection between each sub-section? Why does (B) follow (A) etc? (Perhaps depict this in a diagram.)

Summing it up - *Sum up this opening section.*

Putting it together - *What does this opening section suggest about the situation addressed by James?*

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#2 Doing the Word

James 1v19-27

Opener -

Intro – This last section of the Letter’s opening chapter flows directly out of the linking middle section [v16-18] that finished with the idea of Christians being produced “by the word of truth”. It takes up the necessary place of God’s word amongst his people.

Breaking it down – James 1v19 contains four sub-sections that form a pattern.

- 1v19-21 (A) Speech & righteousness/wickedness – slow to speak, slow to anger
- 1v22-25 (B) Doing the word – hearing without doing
- 1v26 (A) Speech & righteousness/wickedness – untamed tongue
- 1:27 (B) Doing religion – caring for the needy

Read chapter 1v2-18, noting these sub-sections and their pattern.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each sub-section.*

v19-21

v22-25

v26

v27

What is the connection between each sub-section? Why does (B) follow (A) etc? (Perhaps depict this in a diagram.)

Summing it up - *Sum up this closing section of the letter's introduction.*

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with opening section [v2-18]?*

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#3 Playing Favourites

James 2v1-13

Opener -

Intro – This first section in the body of the Letter after the introductory Chapter 1, marked by “My brothers” [2v1], picks up the topic and theme of relating to the rich and to the poor.

Breaking it down – James 2v1-13 is made up of two paragraphs:

1v1-7 Favouritism to the rich is bad judgment

1v8-13 Favouritism breaks the Law to “love your neighbour”

Read chapter 1v2-18, noting these two paragraphs.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each paragraph.*

v1-7

v8-13

What fault does each assert against favouring the rich over the poor?

Summing it up - Sum up this section (the combined point of the two paragraphs).

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#4 Doing Faith

James 2v14-26

Opener -

Intro – This next section of the Letter, marked by “my brothers” [2v14], moves on to the topic and theme of practical Christianity, a faith that does.

Breaking it down – James 2v14-26 is made up of two paragraphs marked by “someone” who “says/will say” something unhelpful about faith without works:

2v14-19 “someone says”: faith without works

2v20-26 “someone will say”: faith or works

Read chapter 2v14-26, noting these two paragraphs.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each paragraph to counter his anticipated opponent.*

v14-19

v20-26

What fault does each assert against faith without works?

Summing it up - Sum up this section (the combined point of the two paragraphs).

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

How does it flow on from the preceding section?

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

*How does this fit with Paul's teaching in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians about justification by faith?
(See specially Ephesians 2v8-10.)*

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#5 Taming the Tongue

James 3v1-12

Opener -

Intro – This next section of the Letter, marked by “My brothers” [3v1], moves on to the topic and theme of speech.

Breaking it down – James 3v1-12 is made up of three paragraphs each with a set of illustrations about the tongue (speech):

3v1-5 The tongue’s power: bridle, ship and spark

3v6-8 The tongue’s hellishness: wild animals

3v9-12 The tongue’s hypocrisy: blessing & cursing

Read chapter 3v1-12, noting these three paragraphs.

Listing the details - *List what James states about the tongue in each paragraph, noting the illustrations used.*

v1-5

v6-8

v9-12

Summing it up - Sum up this section (the combined point of the three paragraphs).

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

How does it flow out of the preceding section?

List other bad and good uses of the tongue in James.

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#6 Opposing Passions

James 3v13-4v10

Opener -

Intro – This next section of the Letter is not marked by “my brothers” but by a series of rhetorical questions. It moves on to the topics and themes of wisdom and humility to deal evil drives arising from within.

Breaking it down – James 3v1-4v10 is may be approached noting its series of rhetorical questions:

3v13-18 “Who is wise and understanding among you?”

4v1-3 “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this ... ?”

4v4 “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”

4v5-10 “Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ...”

Read chapter 3v13-4v1-10, noting this series of rhetorical questions.

Listing the details - *List what James states in answer to each rhetorical question. Note what he asserts about the internal nature of people and of God.*

3v13-18

4v1-3

4v4

4v5-10

What is the problem behind bad behaviour?

What is its answer?

Summing it up - Sum up this section (the combined point of the rhetorical questions).

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

How does it flow out of the preceding section?

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#7 Doing Business

James 4v11-5v6

Opener -

Intro – This next section, marked by “brothers” [4v11], returns briefly to the topic and theme of speech and then quickly moves on the business practices of the rich.

Breaking it down – James 4v11-5v6 is made up of three paragraphs:

4v11-12 “brothers” - speaking judgment

4v13-17 “Come now” - boasting business plans

5v1-6 “Come now” – oppressive business practices

Read chapter 4v11-5v6, noting these three paragraphs.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each paragraph.*

4v11-12

4v13-17

5v1-6

How might the warning against judging brothers fit with the critique of the business practices of the rich?

Summing it up - Sum up this section (the combined point of the three paragraphs).

Putting it together – *How does this section connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

How does it flow out of the preceding section?

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would've been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*

#8 Patiently Praying

James 5v7-19

Opener -

Intro – These last two sections of the Letter, both marked by “brothers/my brothers”, picks up the topics and themes of endurance and asking in faith for God’s good gifts.

Breaking it down – James 5v7-20 is made up of three small sections, each marked and introduced “brothers”:

- 5v7-11 Enduring like Job
- 5v12-18 Praying like Elijah
- 5v19-20 Bringing back the wanderers

Read chapter 5v7-20, noting these three paragraphs.

Listing the details - *List what James states in each section.*

5v7-11

5v12

5v13-18 (Note several cautions with this paragraph:

1. The language “sick” (two different words in the original language) may refer to sickness but also to general weakness including spiritual weakness in sin.
2. Oil was used for soothing in nursing and as a sign of God’s blessing. It must not be taken beyond these as a necessary or automatic mechanism.
3. The prayer in faith must not be taken out of context with the limitation of human intentions in 4v13-17 or the rest of Scripture where everything always remains “God willing”.
4. The language of “save”, “raise” and “heal” may refer to earthly recovery or to eternal salvation.
5. The unspecified association between sickness and sin must not be extrapolated as a rule for every sickness.)

5v19-20

How do these small closing sections fit together?

Summing it up - Sum up this closing cluster of sections (the combined point of the three sections).

Putting it together – *How does this closing cluster of sections connect with the introductory Chapter 1?*

How does it flow out of the preceding section?

What does this section suggest about the situation addressed by James?

What would’ve been the significance and impact of this teaching for them?

Applying to life - *Reflect on how this should impact your life and church community. What will you do as a result of this? (It helps to make this a measurable action.)*

Praying to life - *Ask the Lord's help to do this. (Perhaps write a prayer and then pray it daily.)*