

Introduction to James

Where is it in the Bible?

James is the twentieth book in the New Testament between Hebrews and 1 Peter. It is the first of the catholic or general letters (James through Jude).

Who wrote it?

The first verse of the book identifies the author as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Traditionally, this James, also known as James of Jerusalem or James the Just, has been identified with the brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:19) who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13; 21:18). He was martyred in 62. However, his authorship of this book has been questioned since the earliest days of the Church. Those who feel that James was not the author think that the book was written by an unknown author who used James’s name to lend authority to his teaching.

When was it written?

If James of Jerusalem was indeed the author of this book, then it had to have been written before 62, perhaps sometime between the late 40s and the mid 50s. Those who reject James’s authorship date the book much later, perhaps between 80 and 100 or even into the second century.

What is it about?

Like Hebrews, James has some elements of a letter, but it seems to be more like a sermon or an essay. Its main point is to encourage people to live out their faith, to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (1:22). Faith should be demonstrated in practical acts of love and mercy, especially on behalf of the poor and needy. The book also warns the recipients about disagreements and partiality in the community.

How is it structured?

- I. Greeting (1:1)
- II. Testing of Faith (1:2-18)
- III. Hearing and Doing the Word (1:19-27)
- IV. Warning Against Partiality (2:1-13)
 - a. Preferring the wealthy over the poor (2:1-7)
 - b. The Law of Love (2:8-13)
- V. Faith and Works (2:14-26)
- VI. Controlling the Tongue (3:1-12)
- VII. Learning True Wisdom (3:13-5:6)
 - a. Two Kinds of Wisdom (3:13-18)
 - b. Conflicts and Disputes (4:1-12)

- c. Boasting about Tomorrow (4:13-17)
 - d. Warning to the Rich (5:1-6)
- VIII. Exhortations (5:7-20)
- a. Patience in Suffering (5:7-12)
 - b. The Prayer of Faith (5:13-18)
 - c. Those who Wander from the Faith (5:19-20)

What are some things to look for?

- **Faith and Works:** James 2:24 seems to be a contradiction of Paul's teaching that justification is through faith alone and not by works. However, it is not so much a case of theological disagreement as it is using the same words to mean different things.

Many things in Paul's letters indicate that he would agree with the point that James is trying to make. Paul's concept of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6) is not much different from James's notion of faith "brought to completion" by works (James 2:22). Paul's insistence that faith without love is nothing (1 Cor. 13:2) is not much different from James's claim that faith without works is dead (James 2:26). And Paul's assertion that "it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who are justified" (Rom. 2:13) concurs well with James's call for believers to be "doers of the word, and not merely hearers" (James 1:22; cf. 1:23, 25; 4:11).¹

- **Rich and Poor:** With the exception of Luke and Acts, the themes of concern for the poor and hostility toward the rich are emphasized in James more than in any other book of the New Testament. Wealthy people who strive to get ahead at the expense of others are condemned. James also criticizes Christian communities who show partiality to the rich over the poor. The rich should use their money to serve God and care for the needy.
- **Wisdom from Above:** The letter of James has much in common with the Jewish wisdom tradition, for example, the book of Proverbs. There is a particular interest in "wisdom from above" (3:17) which is given by God and which enables Christians to withstand trials and promote peace. It is primarily concerned with ethical issues connected to how people ought to live in relation to God and one another. In particular, this wisdom is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." (3:17) James says that living in this way is impossible without knowledge of God.

¹ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 455.