



BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

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J A M E S



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INTRODUCTION

What does a Christian life look like? Should our lives stand out and look different from those lived by others, or is it okay to blend in with everyone else? The Letter of James calls us to an active life of love for Jesus' sake.

James, who wrote this letter, was probably one of Jesus' brothers listed in Matthew 13:55. (Jesus' brothers and sisters could have been children born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus—in which case they would have been His younger half-brothers and sisters. Some traditions say Joseph was a widower when he became betrothed to Mary, and Jesus' brothers and sisters were children of this first marriage. In this case, they would have been Jesus' older step-brothers and sisters. In either case, Jesus would have had charge of His mother's care after Joseph's death.)

During Jesus' ministry, James did not believe He was the Messiah (John 7:5). Most likely, Jesus' words and actions did not live up to James' preconceived notions about the Messiah. Only after Jesus rose and appeared to him specifically (1 Corinthians 15:7) did James come to understand and believe. (Another brother, Judas, also became a believer and wrote the Letter of Jude).

After Pentecost, James gained a prominent place in the Christian Church in Jerusalem. It is likely he wrote this letter before Paul's first missionary journey and the resulting Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:13, where some Jewish Christians were demanding that Gentile believers should be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. James and Peter agreed with Paul and Barnabas that Gentile Christians needed only to believe.

Under James' leadership, the Jerusalem Church reached out to unbelieving Jews who, like him, had rejected Jesus because He did not match their own preconceived notions about who the Messiah should be.

CONTEXT

These are the early years of the Church. At this point, the Christian Church is made up predominantly of Jewish believers and is growing rapidly. Persecution from the chief priests and scribes is being ramped up. James writes this letter to encourage these scattered Jewish Christians and to remind them of the importance of their mission to share Christ with their Jewish brothers and sisters—in word and in deed.

PURPOSE

James writes this letter to remind Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and beyond that the practice of their faith should match their profession; that is, they should not just talk the talk but also walk the walk. They were discouraged by growing opposition. They needed to remember that the Christian life is one of repentant faith lived out in good works, which show our love toward our Savior and our neighbor.

James writes about the practical issues and struggles that face every believer: impatience, failure to do what we know is right, favoritism, apathy, and selfishness. For all Christians, this epistle reminds us not to live a lazy and workless faith, but rather to live out our repentance with deeds of love in gratitude to Jesus Christ. For that reason, since James writes a how-to letter, his epistle is often considered the Proverbs of the New Testament.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1

Read James 1:1–18.

Q 1: James speaks of trials of various kinds. Describe some of these challenging circumstances that Christians face today.

- Trials include subtle pressure to accept sinful lifestyles, which are forbidden in the Bible; family members who encourage greed and selfishness; the risk of losing friends, job advancement; even the risk of physical or financial harm.
- In the light of these trials, James encourages his readers to step back and see the big picture. The suffering of these trials produces steadfastness—that ability to keep going under the strain of opposition and persecution.

Q 2: James tells us we must pray in faith and confidence, not doubting. When we pray for something and are not sure whether it is God’s will, how do we ask in faith and confidence, rather than doubt?

- God loved us enough to give His Son into death for us. He promises to give us what is best for us. Knowing God wants to give us the best—even if we are not sure what that is—we pray with boldness and confidence. Asking God’s will is not a sign of doubt, but a way of saying we want our wise heavenly Father to choose what is best for us, even if it is not what we originally asked for. So if His answer is no, it is because He wants to give us something better—never because He wants to harm us or deprive us of something that would be good and beneficial for us.

Notice the practical, long view James gives us in 1:10–11. In the short term, we may be envious of the ungodly who are wealthy, prosperous, and successful in this life; but wait long enough and we will see their wealth and prominence fade away. In contrast, James reminds us when God gives us power to remain steadfast in faith under trial, He promises to give us the crown of life, which will never perish or fade away.

In 1:14–15, James give us another long view, this time warning us about the power of our own sinful desires, which can start us on a cycle that leads away from faith to eternal death.

Q 3: Describe some of the small, seemingly harmless sinful desires that can entangle Christians and drag them down the path to spiritual death.

- Lust, greed, desire for popularity, sensual pleasure. These small desires make us more ready to branch out into larger, more devastating sins that war against our faith and drive us away from God's love. For example, an Internet romance can lead to meeting up, having an affair, destroying a marriage. Then as an unrepentant heart justifies itself, it can completely drive away faith.

The only solution is repentance, recognizing the destructive nature of our desires, and fleeing to God in repentance and faith. And God, who is unchanging, will forgive us for Jesus' sake.

Read 1:19–27.

James writes of the difference between passively hearing God's Word and actively doing it. Those who merely hear God's Word without putting it into practice are more likely to lose that long view, God's perspective, and fall to temptation that destroys faith.

Q 4: In 1:21, James calls the Gospel, which saves our souls, “The implanted word.” Being implanted, it comes from outside us. What does it mean to receive that seed in meekness?

- We confess that we are powerless to save ourselves or make ourselves worthy to earn or even receive God's grace and forgiveness. So we turn from self-reliance, repent of our sins, and gratefully receive the free gift God gives for Jesus' sake—knowing we must rely upon Him alone to save us.

In 1:26, James warns us that if we think we are religious but fail to bridle our tongue, we deceive ourselves and our religion is worthless.

Q 5: Discuss a situation that would have gone better if you would have controlled your tongue more carefully.

- Bridling a tongue, like bridling a horse, doesn't only mean refraining ourselves from speaking when we shouldn't, or carefully deciding what to say and what to leave unsaid. It can also mean speaking up to confront evil when we want to remain silent and get along or avoid opposition.

CHAPTER 2

Read 2:1–13.

James addresses the sin of partiality. Our sinful human nature seeks advantages by winning the favor and approval of wealthy, prominent, and influential people. And since the poor and despised people of the world seem to have nothing to offer us, we tend to distance ourselves from them.

Jesus came among us not as a prominent, wealthy man, but as a poor preacher. Yet He has given us access to the most powerful, prominent Being of all—our heavenly Father. He has exalted us to be sons and daughters of God. No human stands as high as Jesus, so keeping our perspective as God's children we can reach out to all people without being intimidated by those our world considers prominent and successful, or despising those it holds in low esteem.

Q 6: What are some ways a congregation can fall into this worldly partiality as it deals with the economic and social diversity among its various members?

- It can be easy to subconsciously give greater weight to advice or wishes of wealthy members who are strong contributors to the congregational funds—when the poor widow who gives her last two mites may well be the most generous donor in Jesus' eyes.

Q 7: Describe a time God carried you through a series of struggles (financial, health, career, relationship, etc.).

- When God carries His children through these difficult struggles, the Holy Spirit strengthens their perseverance, boldness, and confidence in God's providence. When congregation's face financial challenges or opportunities, the wealthy may be too dependent upon money and its security that they become reluctant to invest in God-pleasing ministry opportunities. But Christians who have been brought through these struggles can be bold encouragers.

Read 2:14–26.

In 2:14, James challenges the notion that faith is simple head knowledge. This was a huge problem with the Jews after they returned from the Babylonian captivity. Their religious practice became a list of outward rules to follow, without repentant trust in God to save them, and all genuine love turned in on themselves, not toward God or their neighbor. Jesus addressed this sin in Matthew 23. True faith is a saving relationship with Jesus Christ characterized by repentance and trust, and embodied in love.

Q 8: In what way can confirmation instruction mislead a young man or woman into a false conception of faith?

- Students can easily think of catechism class as a set of facts they must memorize and repeat. It can become an academic task that engages their mind but not their heart. As James says, even the demons know Jesus is Lord, and they shudder. Confirmation is all about a young man or woman affirming the vow made in their stead by their parents, sponsors, and congregation when they were baptized as infants. Discipleship is a relationship between Christ and the maturing child of God.

Early on, Martin Luther had trouble with 2:24, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” But as Luther later came to realize, James was not debating the value of works over faith. He was confronting the people who tried to divide works from faith. The nature of the true faith the Holy Spirit works in us is such that it is always accompanied by works of love, never stands alone without them. The same way Jesus demonstrated His grace by acts of loving service to people in need around Him.

Q 9: James holds up the examples of Abraham and Rahab, who took great risks and did great things because of their faith. How do their examples inform and encourage your life as a Christian? How does Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection do the same?

- When we look at any of the great works God did through His believers, we are given the long view, to see how our life is leading toward heaven and how God is at work every day. We are motivated, encouraged, and empowered to follow in their footsteps and do great deeds of love for our neighbor’s sake.

CHAPTER 3

Read 3:1–18.

James revisits the topic of taming our tongues. He gives several other illustrations to help us think about it: the bit in the mouth of a horse, the rudder of a great ship, and the flame that ignites a great forest fire.

Q 10: Describe the devastation you have seen arise from something someone said.

- Careless words can break up marriages, divide families, poison workplaces, split congregations. Ask the group to offer some suggestions to go about mending the torn relationships and offering forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

James rightly points out in 3:14 the jealousy and selfish ambition that lie at the root of our relationship struggles. Since we Christians are sinners and saints at the same time, even our best motives are tainted by jealousy and selfish ambition. This calls for self-examination, prayerful repentance, and God's renewal to replace our sinful heart with the heart of Jesus Christ (pray Psalm 51:10–12).

Q 11: How does it hamper our life as Christians when we fail to recognize and repent of our jealousy and selfish ambitions?

- Our sinful nature tends to turn everything in upon ourselves. We want recognition and praise for the good deeds we do—rather than letting God receive the praise. But our selfishness and jealousy is so subtle we often don't even recognize it until we notice someone else getting recognized for their work and feel upset that our sacrifices went unappreciated. When our motivation is our own glory, then we need to repent.

CHAPTERS 4–5

Read 4:1–5:6.

James uncovers another problem that interferes with our Christian living. That is being preoccupied with worldly things. He describes it as friendship with the world.

Q 12: Describe some areas in which we develop friendship with the world and lose our heavenly focus.

- Possessions, friendships, goals and ambitions. This calls for regular self-examination because our love of worldly things is so subtle and pervasive.

Q 13: How can we Christians befriend lost sinners without developing this God-denying friendship with the world?

- Regular worship and Bible study reminds us of our eternal destiny, and deepens our love of eternal things. This long view transforms our relationship with people and things in this world. We remember God has given us our possessions to help us pass through this wilderness on our way to heaven—we will leave them all behind one day when He calls us home. Thus, the only lasting, important things are the people around us. And the goal of our friendship with unbelievers is to share the story of Jesus with them so they can join us in heaven forever.

In 5:1–6, James reminds us our possessions are temporary, and we will have to give an account for how we used them. Did we use them to help only ourselves, or did we use them to befriend the people He brought into our lives?

Read 5:7–20.

James closes his letter with a long view of this life. Like a farmer who does everything with the final harvest in mind, we should do everything with Jesus' return in mind.

Q 14: What difference does it make to approach our mundane, seemingly unimportant tasks with Christ's return in mind?

- We won't worry about being noticed or appreciated for the work we do; nor will we be concerned whether our work gets rewarded. The important thing is to remember Christ's victory over sin, death, hell, and the grave. Then everything we do will be blessed by God and benefit our neighbor, whom Jesus died to save.