

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings” (James 1:1, NIV).

Author

- **James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John**
- **James, the son of Alphaeus**
- **James, the father of Judas the disciple**
- **James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus**

Date

Audience

Purpose/Message

- **Faith** (Max Lucado)
- **Spiritual Maturity** (Warren Wiersbe)
- **Obedience** (John MacArthur)
- **God and Ethics** (Scot McKnight)

Homework

- **Read James 1:2-12.**
- **Read Max Lucado's "Lesson 1: Growing Through Trials" (pp 1-10).**
- **Reflect on these questions posed by Lucado.**
 1. How does James encourage his readers to respond to trials?
 2. What does James mean when he says "the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (verse 3)?
 3. How can you gain wisdom to deal with problems?
 4. Why does God want his followers to ask for his help without doubting?
 5. Who does James say should not expect to receive anything from God? Why?
 6. Why does James say those in humble circumstances can be proud of their situation?
 7. How have some recent "thumps" challenged you to seek God?
 8. How do you usually respond to life's difficulties?
 9. How has your relationship with God changed as you have gone through trials?
 10. Why is it so hard to respond with joy when you are faced with problems?
 11. How have you seen God bring good into your life through trials?
 12. When was a time that God's wisdom helped you get through a problem?
- **Bonus Journaling Question:** How can you grow closer to God through the trials you are facing right now?

Introduction to James

James 1:1

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings” (James 1:1, NIV).

Author - There are four possible men named James in the NT who are candidates for the writer of this book.

1. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John

- a. He and his brother John were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee who were called by Jesus to be disciples (cf., Mt 4:17-22).
- b. Jesus nicknamed James and John “sons of thunder” because of their loud and impulsive nature (cf., Mk 3:17; Lk 9:51ff).
- c. James was the first disciple to give his life for Christ as a martyr. He was killed by Herod Agrippa I in Caesarea Maritima in AD 44 (cf., Ac 12:1-2).
- d. Most likely, James did not live long enough to have been the author of this letter.

2. James, the son of Alphaeus

- a. He was another disciple of Jesus (cf., Mt 10:3, Ac 1:13).
- b. The disciple Matthew is also called “son of Alphaeus” (cf., Mk 2:14). They may have been brothers.
- c. Long-standing tradition identifies James, the son of Alphaeus, as James the Lesser, meaning either younger or shorter. James, son of Zebedee, is then called "James the Great" (although that designation does not appear in the New Testament).
- d. We know little about this James, and it is unlikely that he wrote this epistle.

3. James, the father of Judas the disciple

- a. There is another James, who was the father of Judas, one of Jesus’ disciples.
- b. In Luke’s list of the twelve disciples, he notes, “Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor” (Lk 6:16). His name appears to be mentioned only to distinguish one Judas from the other.
- c. This is all we know of this James, and it is very unlikely that he is the author of the Book of James.

4. James, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus

- a. Jesus had half-brothers and sisters, and one of them was named James (cf., Mt 13:55-56, Mk 6:3).
- b. James did not believe Jesus was the Messiah at first (cf., Mk 3:21,31-35; Jn 7:1-5).
- c. Jesus appeared to James after his resurrection (cf., 1 Cor 15:7) and this led to his conversion, since he was in the upper room praying with the disciples at Pentecost (cf., Ac 1:14).
- d. James became the main leader of the church in Jerusalem.
 - 1) Paul called him a “pillar” (Gal 2:9).
 - 2) When Peter was miraculously delivered from prison, he sent word to James (cf., Ac 12:17).
 - 3) James presided over the Jerusalem Council (cf., Acts 15; ca., AD 49) which met to decide if Gentile believers had to follow Jewish law or not. He permitted each side to speak and then wrote the concluding letter seeking to bring the dispute to a peaceful conclusion.
 - 4) Paul brought greetings and his special “love offering” from the Gentiles to James in Jerusalem (cf., Ac 21:18-19).
 - 5) In church tradition he is known as “James the Just” and also as “camel knees” because his knees had thick callouses, like those of a camel, from all the time he spent on them in prayer.
- e. Tradition states that he was martyred in AD 62, when the Pharisees threw him down from the temple and beat him to death with clubs. As he lay dying, he is said to have prayed for his murderers just as Jesus had, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”
- f. James does not describe himself in the opening of this letter as the half-brother of Jesus or the leader of the Jerusalem church. He humbly claims only to be, a. “a servant (Gk., *doulos*) of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jm 1:1).
- g. This James or someone writing in his name is the most likely author of this letter.

Date

1. We will assume that James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, is the author.
2. The book could not have been written earlier than James' conversion after the resurrection (ca. AD 29) or later than his death (ca. AD 62).
3. Based on the audience and message of James, which we will examine below, a most likely date for its writing is somewhere around ten or twenty years after the resurrection (ca. AD 39-49) as James led the mother church in Jerusalem.
4. John MacArthur notes, "James most likely wrote this epistle to believers scattered abroad as a result of the unrest recorded in Acts 12 (ca. AD 44). There is no mention of the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15 (ca. AD 49), which would be expected if that Council had already taken place. Therefore, James can be reliably dated ca. AD 44-49, making it the earliest written book of the New Testament canon" (*James: Guidelines for a Happy Christian Life*, 1).

Audience

1. The epistle was sent to "the twelve tribes scattered (Gk., *diaspora*) among the nations" (Jm 1:1).
 - a. The "twelve tribes" is a clear reference to the Jews, who were known as the twelve tribes of Israel.
 - b. The word "scattered" (Gk., *diaspora*) is used literally to describe a farmer scattering seed over the earth. However, it came to describe the scattering of both Jews and Jewish Christians outward from Jerusalem due to persecution for their faith (cf., Ac 8:1,4; ca., AD 44).
 - c. Jews who lived far from Jerusalem would face the double burden of being rejected by not only non-believing Jews but also by non-believing Gentiles.
2. James led the church in a time of transition from obedience to Jewish law to new freedom in the grace of Christ Jesus.
 - a. The temple was still in operation and many Jewish Christians still felt an obligation to fulfill the OT law (cf., Ac 21:20).
 - b. Other Jewish Christians, especially those living far from Jerusalem, were more inclined to give up their Jewish ways, which drew unwanted negative attention.
 - c. Warren Wiersbe describes them as ". . . saved people, but they were still in the shadows of the law, moving out into the bright light of God's grace" (*Be Mature*, 22).
 - d. Many of the Jewish believers were having problems bearing up under the persecution and trials that came with their new faith. They also had personal problems and problems in their congregations, and many of them were failing to live out their faith in their daily walk.
 - e. James sent this letter to Jewish Christians to instruct, correct, and encourage them.

Purpose/Message – Scholars are divided on the main message of James. It well addresses so many issues of life and faith. James deals with many practical issues that still apply in the church today:

- suffering/persecution, especially for Christian faith,
 - talking one way and acting another,
 - lack of self-control, especially the tongue, and
 - worldliness and improper use of wealth.
1. **Faith** – Max Lucado says, "James seems to have in mind for his letter an audience of . . . poorer 'dispersed' Jewish Christians but also their wealthier non-Jewish counterparts, as he challenges both the impoverished and those with resources to care for one another and draw on God's wisdom to handle their difficult situation . . ." (*Life Lessons from James*, xi). The keyword in his outline of James is faith.
 - I. Faith and Temptations (1:1-27)
 - II. Faith at Work (2:1-5:6)
 - III. Faith's Rewards (5:7-20)
 2. **Spiritual Maturity** - Warren Wiersbe says, "All of these problems had a common cause: *spiritual immaturity*. These Christians simply were not growing up. This gives us a hint as to the basic theme of this letter: *the marks of maturity in the Christian life*" (*Be Mature*, 24). Wiersbe outlines the book on this theme of spiritual maturity. He believes James teaches that a spiritually mature Christian is: 1) patient in testing (James 1); 2) practices truth (James 2); 3) has power over his tongue (James 3); 4) is a peacemaker not a troublemaker (James 4); and 5) is prayerful in troubles (James 5).

3. **Obedience** - John MacArthur sees obedience as James's central theme. He writes, "James, with its devotion to direct, pungent statements on wise living, is reminiscent of the book of Proverbs. It has a practical emphasis, stressing not theoretical knowledge but godly behavior. James wrote with a passionate desire for his readers to be uncompromisingly obedient to the Word of God" (*James: Guidelines for a Happy Christian Life*, 2).
4. **God and Ethics** – Scot McKnight notes, "James raises many themes central to the Jewish world and its interface with the early messianic communities. Such theme include God, messianism, church/community, Torah and halakah, salvation, faith and works, socio-economic justice, speech, prayer, wisdom, and eschatology. . . . I have chosen to sketch the themes of James around two themes: God and ethics."

McKnight proposes that James presents a Jewish and Christian view of God who is incapable of evil and tempting, gives commands, can be a friend to those who follow his commands, is also judge and lawgiver, while being merciful, gracious, and forgiving. God is single and simple, trustworthy and unchanging. James is servant of both God and the Lord Jesus Christ. So, James expresses an early, heightened Christology. It is often unclear when he says "Lord" whether he speaks of the God or Jesus.

McKnight also believes that James presents the ethical implications of God's call for believers to move toward "perfection" and "friendship with God." James calls his hearers to observe the Torah, God's law as they live out their faith by facing trials and testing with perseverance, administering socio-economic justice, speaking ethically, doing good works, showing compassion and care for the marginalized, loving God and others, resisting the temptation to violence, and giving pastoral care to the wandering (*The Letter of James in NICOT*, 42-47).

5. Which of these commentators is right?
 - a. McKnight concludes, "Whatever one chooses as the central category, and one should question if there is such a thing and ask why some think there needs to be a 'central' category, it is more a logical and explanatory device in the mind of the interpreter than something explicitly stated by James. This category should be held with an honest detachment as one moves through the letter itself" (*The Letter of James in NICOT*, 41)
 - b. So, all of them are right but none of them exclusively! The book of James has been layers and applications. Truly it is a powerful word from God that still communicates truth to his church today.

Homework

1. Read James 1:2-12.
2. Read Max Lucado's "Lesson 1: Growing Through Trials" (pp 1-10).
3. Reflect on the twelve questions posed by Lucado.
4. Respond in writing to the Bonus Journaling Question.