Introduction to The Letter of James

Timeline



Author, Date, and Recipients

This letter was most likely written by James, the brother of Jesus ([Matt. 13:55](https://www.esv.org/Matthew%2B13%3A55/)) and leader of the Jerusalem church ([Acts 15](https://www.esv.org/Acts%2B15%3A1%E2%80%9341/)). It was probably written about A.D. 40–45 to Jewish Christians living outside Palestine. This makes it among the earliest recorded writings in the New Testament and this close to the earliest gatherings of Christians in areas we know as Syria and Israel, many of whom might be mentioned in The Book of Acts.

Purpose

Some of James’s readers were wealthy, some were poor. Both groups were in regular circumstances of suffering persecution for being associated with Jesus and His Gospel of hope. They were in social and spiritual conflict. Many were struggling to leave behind old attitudes and actions towards each other. James corrects them and challenges them to seek God’s wisdom to work out these problems. In particular, as can be seen in the central part of the letter, both poor and wealthy Christians are urged to change the way they think of themselves and each other due to the Gospel.

Key Themes

1. God is a gracious giver, the unchanging Creator, and merciful and compassionate. He is also a Judge, the one and only God, a jealous God, a gracious God, and a healing God ([1:5, 17–18; 2:5, 13, 19; 4:5–6; 5:1–3, 9, 15](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A5%2C%2B1%3A17%E2%80%9318%2C%2B2%3A5%2C%2B2%3A13%2C%2B2%3A19%2C%2B4%3A5%E2%80%936%2C%2B5%3A1%E2%80%933%2C%2B5%3A9%2C%2B5%3A15/)).
2. Wisdom comes “from above.” It enables believers to withstand trials and to have peace rather than divisions among themselves ([1:5; 3:13, 17](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A5%2C%2B3%3A13%2C%2B3%3A17/)).
3. God allows tests and trials ([1:2–4](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A2%E2%80%934/)), but temptation comes from self and Satan. The required response is patient endurance ([1:3, 13–14; 4:7; 5:7–8](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A3%2C%2B1%3A13%E2%80%9314%2C%2B4%3A7%2C%2B5%3A7%E2%80%938/)).
4. These trials include poverty and mistreatment by the rich. The poor are the special focus of God’s care. They must be cared for by his people. They must not be taken advantage of or ignored. The wealthy are condemned for pride and for stealing from the poor ([1:9, 27; 2:1–5, 15–16; 4:13–17; 5:1–6](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A9%2C%2B1%3A27%2C%2B2%3A1%E2%80%935%2C%2B2%3A15%E2%80%9316%2C%2B4%3A13%E2%80%9317%2C%2B5%3A1%E2%80%936/)).
5. There is both future judgment and future reward ([1:12; 2:5, 12–13; 3:1; 4:12; 5:1–7, 9, 20](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A12%2C%2B2%3A5%2C%2B2%3A12%E2%80%9313%2C%2B3%3A1%2C%2B4%3A12%2C%2B5%3A1%E2%80%937%2C%2B5%3A9%2C%2B5%3A20/)).
6. What a person says has power both to destroy and to bring peace ([3:1–4:12](https://www.esv.org/James%2B3%3A1%E2%80%934%3A12/)).
7. Rather than merely hearing God’s word, believers must obey it in their daily actions ([1:19–27; 2:14–26](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A19%E2%80%9327%2C%2B2%3A14%E2%80%9326/)).
8. Prayer is the proper response to trials, but it must not be self-seeking. It is to be central in all of life’s circumstances, good or bad. God has great power to heal physical and spiritual problems ([1:5–7; 4:2–3; 5:13–18](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A5%E2%80%937%2C%2B4%3A2%E2%80%933%2C%2B5%3A13%E2%80%9318/)).
9. James and Paul agree that justification comes only by God’s grace through faith, and that true faith always results in good works. If no works result, there was no justification in the first place ([2:14–26](https://www.esv.org/James%2B2%3A14%E2%80%9326/)).

The Setting of James

c. A.D. 40–45

The letter of James was likely written to predominantly Jewish Christian house churches outside of Palestine, based on its mention of the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” ([1:1](https://www.esv.org/James%2B1%3A1/)), its distinctly Jewish content, and its focus on persecution whether wealthy or in poverty. Perhaps it was read widely, but surely in Syria and Palestine..

