

All Nations Biblical Study Center
The General Epistles of the New Testament
Class 1 - Introduction to General Epistles & The Letter of James

The General Epistles

This term "General" or "Catholic (universal) epistles" designates the group of seven New Testament books consisting of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. These letters were all written to a wider, more general audience than most of the Pauline epistles.

The Letter of James

I. Introduction

In the words of James Lockett & Craig Evans, "The letter of James is one of the most interesting and intriguing texts of the New Testament because of its richness and complexity. . . James plays a critical role in the canon of Christian Scripture offering a unique perspective on earliest Christianity. It voices concern for whole-hearted devotion to God, just treatment of the poor and vulnerable and the very teachings of Jesus."

James as a "Letter"

It has often been noted that James reads more like a loose arrangement of essays rather than a personal letter. There was in fact one type of Greco-Roman letter (used by moralists and rhetoricians) known as a "letter-essay." So, while James is technically a "letter", it resembles ancient Jewish wisdom books like the Book of Proverbs and the Apocryphal book of Ben Sirach; both of which also communicate practical insights and instructions regarding daily life.

Authorship

In the opening of the letter the author identifies himself as James, a bondservant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1). The question then becomes, which James, as there were a number of prominent men by the name of James in the early church. While four individuals mentioned in the New Testament could have composed this letter, it is most likely that James, the ½ brother of Jesus is the author. Origen (c.a. 250), Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Augustine, and many other early Christian writers support this view. The New Testament gospels tell us that Jesus had ½ brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55–56, and John 7:1-5), one of whom was James.

The Proposed Ossuary of James

The Original Recipients of the Letter of James

The letter opens with an address to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” This should be understood as a literal reference to Jews living outside the physical land of Israel. As you may know, the term, ‘*diaspora*’ means “scattered among the nations.” It was used to denote Jewish people who lived outside the land of Israel.

That James was originally written to a predominantly Jewish audience is made clear by the following:

- (1) He assumes that the readers had a good understanding of the _____ (James 1:25; 2:8-13),
- (2) He refers to their gathering (assembly) as a ‘ _____ ’ (James 2:2),
- (3) He frequently uses _____ (word pictures) that are taken from the Hebrew Bible & Jewish life.

The Occasion for Writing

Based on internal evidence, it also appears clear that some of the original audience were facing physical poverty, oppression (1:9-11; 5:1-6) and spiritual hardships (1:2-4). They were also struggling with various temptations to sin. One of the major problems in the church was that some were failing to live out the faith they professed. Abusive speech was also a problem, to the point of creating wars and divisions in the assembly. Some were struggling with worldliness and were beginning to stray away from the Lord and the community of faith.

Date of Composition

It is likely that James composed this epistle sometime between 46-62 A.D, while leading the church in Jerusalem. The most likely date being between the late _____ to early _____.

The Letter of James & The Letters of Paul

More than a few over the centuries have seen an apparent contradiction in theology between James and Paul. This ‘supposed contradiction’ stems largely from James 2:14-26 (especially 2:24) when set against Paul’s words in Romans 3:28. In Romans, Paul declares that justification is by faith and not by _____, while James declares that justification is linked directly to _____. In fact, on several occasions in James, the author makes the case that faith on its own, without works, is useless (2:14, 17, 20, 26). So, is there a contradiction between Paul & James? In short, the answer is no. We must remember the context of each author’s comments.

James and the Teachings of Jesus

It has long been noted that the letter of James is filled with the teaching of Jesus. No other letter of the New Testament contains as many references to the teaching of Jesus *per capita* as James! At times James quotes Jesus directly (5:12), but for the most part he uses phrases and ideas that come from Jesus. Most of these phrases come from the teaching of Jesus now in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) or Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6).

James & Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

James 1:2	Matthew 5:10-12
James 1:4	Matthew 5:48
James 1:5; 5:15	Matthew 7:7-12
James 1:9	Matthew 5:3
James 1:20	Matthew 5:22
James 2:13	Matthew 5:7; 6:14-15
James 2:14-16	Matthew 7:21-23
James 3:17-18	Matthew 5:9
James 4:4	Matthew 6:24
James 4:10	Matthew 5:3-5
James 4:11	Matthew 7:1-2
James 5:2	Matthew 6:19
James 5:10	Matthew 5:12
James 5:12	Matthew 5:33-37

II. Major Themes in James:

1. Faith and Deeds

James charges those who hear the Word of God to do what it says, and not simply listen to or know it (1:19–26; 3:12–18). Deeds (or works) demonstrate the genuineness of faith (cf. 2:14–26). He reminds them that deeds “work together” (2:22) with faith.

2. Proper Use of Words/the Tongue

One of the most well known passages from James comes from chapter 3:1-12. James informs them that unless their speech is brought under control God's control, it will reign over the entire body and over all of one's relationships, causing conflict and division (3:15).

3. The Purpose of Trials

The believer, like the rest of humanity will face suffering and trials in this life. In chapter 5, James provides the example of God's faithful prophets, who endured all for the sake of obedience to God (5:10).

4. The Law

James draws upon Lev 19:18 as a summation of the entire Law: Love your neighbor as yourself (Jas 2:8; cf. Rom 13:10). All Jews realized that God's law was life. So, we find James making reference to the “royal” law, which “gives freedom.”

5. The Wisdom of God

Wisdom is the gift of God (1:5–8, 17; 3:13–18). By wisdom believers translate their present trials into opportunities to trust in God and do His will.

6. The Source of Sin

James made it clear that our failures in the faith and the temptations to sin come from within (1:13–15; 4:1).