

James: The Heart of God in the Life of His People

Introduction to The Letter of James

Jesus had siblings. It can be, at times, easy to skim over the early, formative years of Jesus' life and fast forward to the stories about a carpenter turned itinerant rabbi who, in his early thirties, began to gather followers and upend familiar notions about the Kingdom of God. But Jesus grew up in a home where he, presumably, learned Joseph's trade alongside his brothers, and we actually meet them in the Gospel accounts. In Mark's Gospel, in chapter 3, we are introduced to Jesus' family as they hear about their brother and son who had been gathering followers and upsetting the local pharisees by breaking Sabbath traditions and they, as Mark tells us, "went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind'." Gathered with Mary and her other children was, in all likelihood, a young man named James who had grown up alongside Jesus and knew him as a brother before he knew him as the Messiah.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote what may be the earliest of the New Testament writings in this letter that we are about to study together. But he did not write as a skeptical sibling or a concerned man trying to poke holes in the stories about his now-departed brother. James wrote as a deeply committed follower of Christ, a convinced believer that his brother was in fact the Messiah, and he's addressing a group of scattered believers as their pastor abroad. He wants to encourage them as they suffer, to call them persevere in the face of challenges, to remind them of who they are as children of God, and to challenge them to live in such a way that their actions match their confessions of faith in Christ. As one who cares deeply for the men and women to whom he writes, James desires that the heart of God — God's will for their lives and the world around them — would flourish amongst his people, a people whose lives have been transformed by the death and resurrection of his brother, his Savior, Jesus.

How to Use The Reading Guide

James will serve as the primary text for our worship gatherings for several months, and it is our hope that you will join us in anchoring down in James in your own personal study. Each week this guide will offer a brief overview of the passage discussed during the sermon from the preceding Sunday. We will offer two to three supplementary texts which we would encourage you to utilize as you spend time in the Word each day. These texts are meant to be read in conjunction with the passage from James which will serve as the foundation of the reading guide each week. We'll also offer discussion questions for our life groups at the end of each guide, though we would encourage you to take time to reflect on those questions individually, as well. It is our prayer that the Lord, through our time in James, will continue to shape in us an understanding of what it means to live as faith filled, fully committed followers of Jesus.

James: The Heart of God in the Life of His People

Week 15 Reading Guide

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James 4:13-17

If you've ever found yourself, either by choice or misfortune, floating down a river in a canoe or a raft, you'll know there is an inevitability to the current of the water. You can paddle around the boulders and jutting trees to an extent, but there is a disquieting voice in the back of your mind that lets you know that you are not, ultimately, in control. That the river could shrug its shoulders, as it were, chuckle at the childish futility of your paddle, and take you where it wants.

The world in which we live bears a way of doing things, a rhythm of life that can sometimes feel as inevitable as a river. There is a way of speaking and thinking about our existence that settles in our conscious and unconscious minds and informs our understanding of "normal." And this normal could represent anything from the seemingly mundane way that we structure our lives around a workday and school calendars, to how we think about our money and resources, to the ideas, like security and comfortability and freedom, that we prize so highly. We speak the language of the world around us without thinking about it.

As we read this passage in James's letter this week, it would be understandable to ask why it is that James is rebuking these men and women for simply doing what seems natural for so many of us — they're planning for the future. They were laying out the calendar filled with work trips pursuing new business ventures. They were considering how they might use the increased income to pad their present comfort and strengthen their future security. In so many ways, their lives echoed the "normal" that is all too familiar for us. But in their planning and pursuit of comfort and security and success, they failed to ask the question that we all too often neglect to ask of our own lives: *what does the Lord desire for my life?*

James isn't rebuking these folks because they were successful business owners. He wasn't arguing that they shouldn't plan for the future at all. He was warning them of the dangers associated with being swept away by the cultural currents and, maybe without even realizing it, going through life with a functional atheism that refuses to live as if the Lord has ultimate authority over everything, our time, our resources, our plans, our dreams, all of it. This mist that is our life, from our birth to our death, belongs to the Him.

As you spend time with this passage, would you pull away from busy and ever-present cultural current, seek a quiet space, and ask the Lord that question: *what do you desire for my life?* Or perhaps there are places in your life that you've kept locked away, tiny idols in the hidden darkness of your heart, that you would admit you've not brought before the Lord with open hands. The Lord loves you, and he will remind you of that fact over and again as you trust him with the most sacred and vulnerable spaces in your life. Consider these questions as you spend time in God's Word this week:

- What observations stand out?
- What does this text invite me to believe about God?
- What does this text invite me to understand about myself?
- How might the Lord be asking me to respond?

Monday | Tuesday

Psalm 39

The psalmist is in a painful situation. Some sin or oppression has caused him to consider the brief span of his own life. And in that, he acknowledges that his hope is only and ultimately in the Lord. As the psalmist turns from a recognition of his own mortality toward a plea of dependence upon the Lord, so too does James remind us that life is brief, but we serve an eternal God.

Wednesday | Thursday

Luke 12:13-21

It's quite possible that James had this parable from his half-brother mulling around in his mind as he warned these brothers and sisters in James 4:13-17. The dangers of amassing wealth and comforts with no consideration for the Lord were prevalent millennia ago just as they are today. Read in these words of Jesus a sober warning that is echoed in our passage in James.

Friday | Saturday

1 Corinthians 16

It would be natural to wonder if Scripture affords us examples of lives lived in submission to the Lord such as we read about in our passage in James. While there are many, one remarkable one is found in Paul's anecdotal recounting of his travel plans to the Corinthian Church. In all of his hoping and planning, he held everything open-handed before the Lord (see especially vv.5-9).

Life Group Questions | James 4:13-17

- 1) What are some indicators in this passage that help us note who James is addressing with this rebuke? Are they wealthy or poor? Believers or unbelievers?
- 2) Why is James rebuking these people? It seems that they are simply planning carefully for the future, so why might their actions warrant this warning? Read **Luke 12:16-21** for a helpful parable from Jesus which offers insight as to why James is challenging them.
- 3) In what ways have you excluded the Lord from your plans and preparations for the future (be it the coming weeks, months, or years)? Why is it so easy, at times, to do that?
- 4) Read **Psalm 39**. The psalmist, like James, makes reference to the brevity of human life. Neither James, nor the psalmist, intend this to be a discouraging point, but a vital component of living a life submitted to an eternal, holy God. Why is this such an important point for James in his argument? How does our culture push against this idea?
- 5) James's challenge here is directed at wealthy Christians, but the principle he addresses is much more broadly applicable for all of us: *am I submitting all of my life to God? Does the Lord have access to everything, my wallet, my plans, my time, all of it?* How would you answer those questions?
- 6) How might you grow your conscious awareness of the Lord's activity and voice in your life? If he were telling you to do something, or to give something, or to stop something, would you know it? What are some specific, biblical, measured ways that you might proactively grow your sensitivity to the prompting of the Spirit?
- 7) What role does community play in living in submission to the Lord with all of life?