

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 17 Reading Guide

7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

James 5:7-11

Farmers are remarkable. It isn't just that they are often hard-working, salt of the earth type of people, or that the pastoral and agricultural life they represent is as foreign to many of us as the customs of another culture entirely. Those folks who build their lives around the seasons and weather patterns and seed prices participate in something that is inherently theological. The rhythms of their lives give them a front-row seat to something that many of us have a difficult time grasping because farmers must live in the tension between dependence and expectation. They are dependent on those things that reside far outside the bounds of their control to provide a robust harvest, and they must operate with a sense of expectation that though there is much that they have no power over, growth and life and that harvest will come.

To be a Christian is to daily walk the road of dependence and expectation. James reminds us of that here. The men and women to whom he is writing knew the sting of persecution, the uncertainty of what was just ahead. Because of that, James wants them to remember that the Lord upon whom they are dependent for hope will, indeed, return. And though they may not feel it or see it or understand the mind of the Lord, they are called to remain steadfast with the expectation that the Lord will come and, when he comes, he will vindicate and redeem them.

Farmers are a patient people. They must be. They can't make the seasons turn or the rain come or the crops grow according to their schedule. So they wait, not wringing their hands with anxiety, but with active anticipation. There are innumerable challenges in this life. We face uncertainty and, for some, genuine persecution. We are dependent

for everything — strength, hope, purpose, provision — on a God who is immeasurably outside of our control. And yet that dependence must not drive us to hand-wringing anxiety, but the confidence that comes as we recount the truth that this God in whom we trust has promised that He is coming again, that He delights to meet the needs of His children, that He is a restorer of the broken, a lifter of the weary, a healer for the wounded. Our God is compassionate and merciful, and in these verses we are called to trust Him. 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

2 Peter 3

Scripture is filled with examples of calls to persevere because of the promised return of Christ. That serves as the foundation of James's exhortation in our passage this week, and it is echoed in Peter's encouragement to his readers, as well. May we be encouraged to press on in our battle against sin and our pursuit of holiness as we meditate on this hope.

Wednesday | Thursday

Hebrews 11

In this famous chapter, the author of Hebrews highlights the faithful endurance of a host of men and women who serve as our spiritual ancestors. This culminates in a call to look to Jesus and endure. James, in the same way, speaks of the faithful endurance and witness of the prophets throughout the Old Testament. We endure with those who form the foundation of our spiritual lineage.

Friday | Saturday

Job 1; Job 42

James speaks of the steadfastness of Job, whose life was marked by blessing, suffering, and faithfulness, and a profound encounter with the Lord. These chapters serve as the bookend of the book of Job, but they offer a glimpse of this remarkable story in Scripture.

Life Group Questions | James 5:7-11

- 1) Consider the surrounding context in James 5. Why do you think that James, in these verses, might be encouraging the believers to patient endurance?
- 2) Why does James appeal to the coming of the Lord in verse 8 as a reason for the believers to remain patient and to “establish their hearts?” Consider **2 Peter 3** for an additional example.
- 3) The examples that James uses to refer to patience in the midst of suffering, that of the prophets and Job, seems to indicate that James means something more than just waiting around for God to do something. It speaks of active anticipation. How can we live out the kind of patience that James encourages here?
- 4) Why is regular time in God’s Word imperative for living with this patience and endurance?
- 5) James is writing to a people suffering persecution and, in verse 9, he warns them against grumbling and judging one another. How does suffering contribute to conflict, in particular amongst those who might even be suffering together? How would the people with whom you’ve walked through hard times characterize your attitude in the midst of suffering?
- 6) How does the reminder that the Lord is compassionate and merciful (seen in the example of Job’s story) serve to strengthen us in our suffering? How can we regularly remind ourselves, and those around us, that the Lord is sovereign and kind, even in those moments when he feels distant?