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# Study notes for small groups on the letter of James

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## Introducing James

There are three men called James in the New Testament: James the son of Zebedee, brother of John and a cousin of Jesus through Jesus' mother Mary. This James is sometimes known as James the Great - meaning, older or taller. He, along with John and Peter were part of Jesus' closest disciples. See, for example, Mt 4:21-22 Mk1:19-20, Acts 12:2. Then there is James the son of Alphaeus, likely to be James the younger or 'little James' (Mk 3:18; 15:40) and James, son of Joseph and Mary, the Lord's brother (Mt 13:55; Acts 12:17; 15:13ff; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:9).

As you can see from the references, James, the son of Joseph and Mary was a significant leader in the early church and was well acquainted with Paul's work, which we see reflected in this letter (see 2:14-26). James the son of Zebedee was martyred in 44AD by Herod Agrippa before Paul's letters were written. James the son of Joseph and Mary was martyred in Jerusalem between 62-67AD, around the time of Paul's own martyrdom. There were not many who could write a letter to the church everywhere (the twelve tribes of the dispersion 1:1) and simply sign it 'James, a servant (lit. 'Slave') of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.'

James' letter seems to change topic quickly only to suddenly return to an earlier theme. It is a style of writing Biblical readers are familiar with from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, some of the Psalms, Job and sections of other books), where the abrupt change in topic and language is a teaching tool designed to make us think and link concepts that otherwise appear to be separate.

- As you read James' letter, make a list of the major topics.
- Write down questions the letter raises for you.
- Why do you think James wrote this letter?

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## James 1:1-18 | Trials and Temptations

### 1:1. **Who was James, who are we, who is Jesus?**

- Why does James give his qualification for writing, as: ‘a servant/slave of God?’
- What does it mean for the church that we are part of the exiled people of God scattered amongst the nations? Where is our true homeland?
- What is significant about the way James, as a Jew, describes Jesus?

### 1:2-4. **A discipleship course through suffering!**

- Does suffering threaten or enrich our lives?
- The word for trial/test is the same word as temptation – in what way has your faith been tested recently?
- How would persistence/endurance/constancy during your trials produce maturity in you?
- How does a test turn into a temptation for you?

### 1:5-11. **Ask God for Wisdom**

- James says that the strength to get through our trials is based in our prayer life. We ask God for the wisdom to keep our trials from becoming temptations so that our suffering will mature us (14-15). James’ teaching on prayer is straight forward, ask for wisdom to know how to endure, then do the wisdom you receive.
- What stops us from praying when we are suffering?
- What stops us from acting on the wisdom we receive?
- The word James uses for doubt in verse 6 means literally *two-souled*. In other words, our will can be a civil war when it comes to wanting to obey God. Why does God not hear the prayers of a divided soul?

- In wisdom style James inserts an example of the cause of a divided soul – the love of wealth (9-11, see also Mt 6:19-24). How can competing loves affect our prayers?
- In this passage there are two wills, two natures, two creations, two outcomes (trial or temptation) at work in us. Those divisions become obvious during our sufferings. How do you experience these divisions?

### 1:12-18. **And grow**

- James does not offer us a technique for avoiding hardship but asks us to let God shape us through the hardship. We normally consider people blessed (literally, *happy*) who avoid times of trial. What is the blessing of our trials according to James?
- How can suffering turn into a temptation for us?
- In wisdom literature to be a fool or a sinner is to be anti-life, it is to squander or waste life and to set our feet on the path of death. Does this help explain what James means by death here?
- *It is no more possible for us to be agents or contributors to our new birth than it was for us to be so in our natural birth (Alex Motyer)*. In verse 18, James uses the image for ‘first fruits’ drawn from Old Testament sacrifices to describe the effect endurance in the face of trial will produce under Christ’s care. What do the first fruits of the new creation growing out of our suffering in the old creation look like in our lives?

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## James 1:19-27 Listen, see, do

### 1:19-21. **Listen**

- In verse 18 James writes of us being born through the word of truth and in verses 21 and 22 asks us to humbly receive the word and to do it. Verse 25 he asks us to persevere in looking into the perfect law, not forgetting but doing it. What is the word he writes about?
- James asks us to listen deeply to God's word (19), to take it deeply into us and allow it to transform our actions. Why does listening mean we change what we do rather than only understanding but being left unchanged?
- Why is listening to God's word linked by James to listening to people (19 & 20)?
- How do anger and moral filth (lit. 'ear wax') filter what we hear when others are speaking? How do Australians filter the speaking of God?
- What things do you struggle to listen to in others? How could what James describes here contribute to on-line outrage culture or the echo chamber of social media?

### 1:22-25. **See**

- James compares hearing but not doing to a person examining themselves intently in a mirror who then goes away and forgets what they have seen. In other words, they have little self-understanding. Why is self-reflection and self-knowledge important in our listening? (23-24)
- James is a provocative writer – he coins the term: *the law of freedom* which, to us, sounds like a contradiction. How does law define and protect freedom?
- Freedom is more complex than we think. The perfect or complete law is the completion of the law in Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17-20, Romans 10:4, 2 Corinthians 1:18-21). It is this law that makes possible our freedom (25). In this letter, what does freedom mean?

## 1:26-27. **Do**

- By religion James means the outward display of our trust in God. According to James, empty or futile religion is full of words but lacks action (26). Religion that God accepts is full of action on behalf of the needy without being compromised by the world (27). What does wordy and inactive religion look like when it takes hold of a church?
- Are our worship services acceptable worship on their own?
- How are we helping the needy and working to keep ourselves unstained by the world?
- Why has James linked social welfare with morality when our culture separates them?

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## James 2:1-13 | How to judge others

### 2:1-4. **Two kinds of glory**

- James writes of two types of glory, the glory of Jesus Christ (verses 1,5,13) and the glory of wealth (verses 2,6,7). His point in this passage is that we use one glory or the other to assess people. How do we defer to the wealthy, famous and powerful?
- The Bible also teaches that *honour is due to those to whom honour is due* (Romans 13:7). How does this differ from favouring the wealthy, famous and powerful?
- What are the evil thoughts James refers to? (4)
- Why does the glory of Christ put the poor on the same standing as the rich in the church?
- James uses harsh words about the wealthy and there are more harsh words to come (4:13 to 5:6) – does he mean that it is wrong to be wealthy and right to be poor? (see also: 1 Timothy 6:17-19 and Luke 16:1-14)
- What does this passage teach us about how to welcome people into our churches?

### 2:5-7. **God has chosen the poor**

- James does not romanticise poverty or excuse the abuse of power that riches can bring. In his day it was a legal procedure for a lender to seize a debtor in the streets and, literally, drag them into court. Matthew 18:1-35 illustrates this legal right as well as teachings of Jesus about how we view the poor and the rich. James points out that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom (5). While we can think of faithful people in the Bible and church history who were wealthy (e.g. Abraham, Lydia, various Kings and Queens of Europe) what evidence can you think of for God's choice of the poor in Biblical history? (e.g. Israel, a nation of slaves in Exodus 3)
- What is the wealth of the kingdom, the riches of faith, which any believer can have now and which cannot be purchased?

- If this world is not the final world what should be our attitude to the things we gain in this world?

## 2:8-13. **Love as you love yourself**

- James is making the point that if we break one part of the Old Testament law then we are guilty of breaking all of it. If we fail the Royal Law (that is, the Law of the King and his Kingdom – see: Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:29 or Mark 12:33, Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14) to love our neighbours as ourselves, because we are showing favour to the wealthy, then there may be no mercy for us if we have not been merciful to others in turn (13). What does James mean by *the law of liberty* in verse 12? How does this law set us free?
- How has mercy triumphed over judgement in Christ's kingdom?
- Why are we judged by the standards we use to assess others? (13, see also: Matthew 6:12, 7:1-5).



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## James 2:14-26 | Faith Works

- Many people make faith claims and it is impolite in our culture to question people's convictions. Yet James dares to ask whether an entirely private faith can save us? (14). He insists that faith must be objectively verified to determine whether it is the real thing or not (18). He illustrates his point with four scenarios and statements that seem to contradict Paul's well known teaching on the relationship between faith and works (17, 24, 26 compare with Rom 3:19-21 or Gal 2:15-17).
- The four scenarios James uses to illustrate faith are:
  - Comfortable religion (15-17)
  - Orthodox demons (19)
  - Abraham's intention to sacrifice Isaac (20-24)
  - Rahab of Jericho helping the Israelite spies (25,26)
- What characterises the faith of the comfortably religious and the demons? (for insight into what the demons believe but don't do see Deuteronomy 6:4,5)
- What are marks of genuine faith in the last two scenarios?
- James has carefully chosen the two examples of real faith: Abraham's faith struggled for twenty five years between the time of God's promise (Genesis 12, confirmed in Genesis 15) and its fulfilment in the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21). In many respects he is compromised and yet, despite his mistakes, he persists in trusting God. What were some of Abraham's mistakes during his time waiting for God to honour his promises?
- At this time in Canaan it was common enough for people to offer their children to idols but it is shocking to find this as a command of the Lord God whose character is to be just and to defend the weak rather than destroy them. What are the indications that Abraham knew this was a personal test specifically for him?
- What insight does Genesis 22:5 & 8 give you into what Abraham expected to happen as he went to sacrifice Isaac? (see also Hebrews 11:17-19)
- Rahab of Jericho (Joshua 6) is a Canaanite (of a violent and tragic race), a foreign woman (forbidden in marriage to Israelites and of a tribe cursed by the law of Moses. For example; Genesis 28:1, Exodus 34:15,16), a

prostitute (commonly by necessity), a betrayer of her own people and a believer with true faith in the Lord God who ends up in the family line of the Messiah (Mt 1:5). Why has James chosen examples of struggle and compromise to illustrate true faith and examples of inaction to illustrate false faith?

- What is the place of God's grace in Abraham's and Rahab's lives?
- James is a provocative preacher and seems to parody Paul at several points in this passage. Compare what James writes here with what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-10 (you may also like to read Matthew 7:21-23, 25:31-46). Are James and Paul in conflict?
- More examples of Paul's writing on Grace/Faith and Works can be found in Ephesians 4:1,17-32; 5:20; Romans 12:1,2; Galatians 5:13-26; Titus 3:4-8

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## James 3:1-12 | Words that hurt

### **Our words are our works**

- Can you recall examples in which the words you speak to yourself or the words that have been spoken or sent to you, or from you, have been significant? How have words made hard things either harder or helped make them bearable?

### **Our words are more powerful than we realise**

- Our words are powerful. James uses two positive illustrations of their use: The first where words harnesses powerful forces and difficult circumstances (3 & 4), the second, a negative illustration where a small spark from the tongue can set on fire the whole course of our lives and the lives of others (5 & 6). Can you recall times when you have you seen both of these principles at work?

### **Teachers of the word need to be especially careful**

- Why does James single out teachers in the church with a particular warning?

### **How do we manage our words?**

- What happens to lives where there is a big gap between our works and our words? (9-12).
- Read Proverbs 12:13-23 – what skills do we need to practise and seek in the use of our words?
- Read Matthew 12:34 – what do our words teach others about us?

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## James 3:13-18 | Praying for wisdom

- Ever practical, James has been seeking to close the gap on our faith and works (2.14-26), our good and evil words (3.1-12) and now the gap between the wisdom from below and above.
- Here is a summary of the words James uses to paint the picture of earthly wisdom
  - Selfish ambition – ambition can be good if harnessed to a good cause but here the cause is only the self.
  - Envy – literally, zeal, which can be good or bad depending on its focus.
  - Unspiritual or Earthly – limited to our animal nature; our reflexes, hungers, instincts, fight or flight, basic desires.
  - Demonic – beneath us, deliberate, intelligent wrong doing
  - Disorder – lack of organisation, lack of relational harmony – the effect is to drive people apart.
- Here is a summary of the words James uses to describe heavenly wisdom
  - From above - that is, it is a gift of grace, it does not come from within us. It is an answer to prayer (James 1:5-8)
  - Pure – uncluttered, focused. Leaves aside the complications of selfish ambition and envy.
  - Peaceable – peace loving. Not peace at any price (see below) but sets the maintenance of relationships above the claims of our egos.
  - Considerate – a difficult word to translate. It is a legal term used to discuss where good judgement needs to be brought to bear when the law either fails or is unclear. Older translations used the word ‘reasonableness’ meaning, to enact the spirit of the law when the letter of the law stumbles.
  - Submissive – older (and I think better) translations wrote: ‘open to reason’ ... a willingness to learn.

- Mercy – able to make allowances and be patient (but not unendingly so) for change.
  - Impartial – literally, undivided. This wisdom may make allowances but it is not confused as to what is true.
  - Sincere – literally without hypocrisy. Consistency of character.
  - Peace – wholeness. Right lives grow in the soil of a wise and peaceful existence.
- James gives us these lists so we may recognise the different types of wisdom. Where have we seen each type of wisdom in our church, in our family, in our work, in ourselves, in our world? What has been the fruit of each type of wisdom?
  - Why does right action (righteousness) grow in the soil of merciful wisdom which produces peace, rather than in the soil of legalism or of relational conflict? (3:18).

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## James 4:1-5:6 | Getting what we want

### 4:1-10. **Come near to God and he will come near to you**

- What is the relationship between this passage and James' description of the two kinds of wisdom in chapter 3:13-18?
- James uses forceful language to describe divisions in the church (4:2,4), misuse of our words (4:11), arrogance in business planning (4:16), and misuse of wealth (5:5). While there are passages in Jesus' teaching that shed light on James' passionate language (For example: Matthew 5:22; 7:1-5; 6:25-34; 25:31-46); what is James' pastoral aim in speaking like this here?
- In 4:1-10, why are some prayers not answered?
- How are our lives formed by the search for pleasure? What are the right boundaries of that search and how do we know when we have stepped over the line?
- In verse 6 James says that God offers us more grace – what does he go on to say enables us to receive that grace?

### 4:11-5:6. **If it is the Lord's will...**

- What is common between the three topics James describes here?
- Why do we judge the law when we slander a brother or sister? (11)
- How does arrogance in business planning lead to evil?
- Would humility and an awareness of God in our businesses produce better decisions or not?
- We need to be careful not to read James as being against wealth or wealthy people but he says there is a type of wealth that God despises and will bring undone. What are three characteristics of that type of wealth in 5:1-6?
- How could a wealthy person do the opposite of each of these three characteristics?

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## James 5:7-12 | The truth about happiness

- As James finishes his letter he returns to the themes he opened with – endurance, suffering and prayer. He gives us the encouragement of examples of endurance (the prophets in verse 10 and Job in verse 11) and warns that our sins of the tongue can undermine our ability to endure (9 & 12). He then returns to the theme of prayer (13-20) to show how we as the church are to sing and pray together as we deal with our individual and corporate trials.

### 5:7-9. **Endurance**

- In verses 7 and 8 James describes the Christian life as a process of growth. What seasons of preparation and growth have you been through? What part did suffering play in that growth?
- James asks us to be patient for the Lord's coming to complete his work in us (7, 8, 9), patient with growth in ourselves (7, 8) and patient with God's work in others (9). How do the sins of the tongue (9) undermine our patience with God's work in these areas?
- James assumes that the Christians he wrote to were well aware of the promise of Christ to return to this earth to renew the creation (2 Pet 3:12-13) and bring about the last judgement (Mt 24:3, 27). His second coming will be vivid and obvious to all – leaving no room for false messianic claims. The time it will occur is unknowable – leaving no room for false prophecies about the end times (Mt 24:36ff). It will separate the people of God from others (Mt 24:8ff, 1 Cor 15:23, 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Thess 2:1) who will be transformed to be like him (1 Thess 3:13; 5:23). We expect others to mock this hope (2 Pet 3:3-4), but this hope is a call to endure (Jam 5:8; Rev 13:10) and to prepare for Christ's return by learning how to be holy (1 Jn 2:28).
- Does an expectation of the second coming of Christ affect your prayers and daily life? Does this hope help you to endure and grow in Christ?

## 5:10-12. **Happiness**

- In verse 11 James says the prophets and Job are counted blessed (literally: ‘Happy’) because they endured. This reflects the way the ancient world assessed the value of our lives – they did not declare a life happy until it was over. The reason is that someone may have been born into difficult circumstances or suffered set-backs in their life but the key question was whether a man or woman was constant as they faced their troubles and joys. In other words, did they maintain their integrity, values, purpose or calling and faith? If they did, in spite of what ever happened to them, then their lives were held up as an example for younger people to learn from. There is wisdom in this; our version of assessing happiness depends upon our success – which, in many cases turns out to be a cruel standard, as often things outside of ourselves determine whether we succeed or not. We are prone to letting this modern idea of happiness undermine our values, integrity, purpose, faith or calling by setting happiness above our other human commitments.
- Thomas Jefferson, in the American Declaration of Independence made it a modern right for human beings to pursue especially economic happiness. How do you assess your happiness?
- Thinking about the hardships of the prophets and Job – how does our understanding of blessing (happiness) compare with James’?
- What does it mean for you to be happy?
- There is another sin of the tongue that can undermine our pursuit of happiness – the use of false oaths (12). In James’ day oaths had become a means of clever lying. Often too, in times of trial, we are tempted to do deals with God and make oaths to get us through. James’ point here is don’t even play the game. That is false religion and could get us into trouble (see also Mt 5:33-37; 23:16-22; Eccl 5:4). Have you done deals with God? How does that compare to relating to God with trust and obedience?



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## James 5:13-20 | Prayer, healing and reconciliation

- James concludes with encouragements to prayer that have often been misunderstood. Here are two ways this passage has been misapplied:
  - Traditional ideas – over the centuries as the rites of extreme unction (last rites or anointing of those who are dying) and confession (private confession to a Priest) developed in the Roman Catholic church, these verses became the Biblical justification for maintaining these practises as sacraments.
  - Contemporary ideas – in some Pentecostal theology the prayer of faith was claimed to always be effective to heal the sick person otherwise there is something wrong with the quality of someone's faith (either that of the unwell or of the elders) or there is hidden sin in the ill person that needs first to be confessed. In this way, confession can become a form of spiritualised therapy whereby divulging our quietest secrets to another (or even a whole congregation!) would bring mental and spiritual health.

### **Some things to notice:**

- In Verse 15 the sick person is very unwell – the elders of the church need to travel to him/her to pray.
- James uses phrases like: 'raise them up' or 'be forgiven' which implies he is not only thinking of immediate healing but also of the permanent long-term healing of the resurrection.
- This passage on healing comes after a passage on enduring suffering (7-12). It would be odd to think that Job and the prophets suffered because they did not have enough faith when James has just used their endurance through suffering as an example of faith.
- In the passage it is a group of elders who pray. James is encouraging us to confess to the people we have sinned against (rather than a Priest) about the wrongs we have done to them in order to restore relationships (3:13-18).

## Some things to do

- What would it take to confess a wrong to a person we'd harmed?
- How can our church develop its ministry of prayer for each other?
- Why are verses 19 & 20 the final act of caring love that James wants us to do?
- Spend time in prayer for each other, ask for the wisdom from above for each other to endure the trials each person is undergoing. Consider confessing the wrongs you have done to those you did them to and asking for their forgiveness. Pray for healing for those in need. Pray for those who have wandered from trust in Christ and discuss ways to approach them that may help them turn back to truth.
- Finally, sing together in praise of a God who has given us so much of himself in this world and even more for the world to come.

