

Chapter Summary: James

Within a few decades of Jesus' death and resurrection, His followers had spread out to different parts of the Roman Empire. James, the brother of Jesus and a highly respected leader in the Jerusalem church, sent a general letter to these scattered communities, reminding them to walk in the way of God's wisdom. James highlights practical ways that followers of Jesus should demonstrate their faith in everyday life.

To help the dispersed communities, James took up the well-known pattern of teaching from Israel's ancient wisdom tradition. Wisdom literature places great value on how we live in God's world. It therefore emphasizes action, admonishing the reader to follow the good way revealed by God and live it out in community. In the letter from James, we see that God's new people in Christ are faced with a choice that has always confronted God's people: Which path will we follow? One path leads to life and well-being while the other leads to death and destruction. James challenges his scattered brothers and sisters to firmly embrace the path that leads to life.

James teaches that choosing this way of life includes not only practicing such virtues as patience, humility, endurance through trials, and generosity to the poor, but also renouncing anger and boastful pride, avoiding the tendency to judge others, and not using the tongue destructively. The core idea that characterizes this lifestyle is: "Don't just listen to God's word... do what it says."

James emphasizes the strong call on believers in Jesus to renounce their favoritism of the rich and neglect of the poor. James had become aware that these communities were following the cultural norms of first-century Roman society, which gave places of privilege to the wealthy. He explains that the way of Jesus is different: those who hoard their riches will be judged while the poor will inherit God's Kingdom.

James casts all this instruction in an especially effective form; just as his content is closely related to Old Testament wisdom literature, his style is too. James presents pithy sayings and short reflections similar to those found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, for example, "You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry."

James may have drawn his material from messages he had delivered in a synagogue. He frequently uses public speaking techniques common at the time, such as sparring with an imaginary opponent: "Someone may argue, 'Some people have faith; others have good deeds.' But I say, 'How can you show me your faith if you don't have good deeds?'"

Since it is a combination of wisdom sayings and brief teachings, this letter from James does not develop sequentially (as Paul's letters do). Rather, it flows freely from topic to topic, urging careful attention to various concerns followed by a call to live out his instructions in practical ways.

James wants his fellow Jewish believers to live out the highest ideals of their own spiritual heritage, just as Jesus revealed it to them. He calls them back to a scriptural principle that the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" had confirmed as foundational: "It is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"