

James Overview¹

James
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Charlie Brown once said, *I've decided that life is like an ice cream cone—you have to lick it one day at a time.*² That's good practical advice, isn't it? Forrest Gump learned from his Momma, *Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get.*³ That's pretty clear too, isn't it? It isn't some heavy idea from Voltaire or Nietzsche that's impossible to wrap your head around. You have to divide up your troubles & tackle them in manageable sizes. Like Jesus tells us, each day has enough trouble for itself (Mt 6:34). The religion that people are looking for is practical. People today want a faith that works. That's what the little letter of James is all about. I encourage you to open your Bibles to the little book of James. It's hidden right after the book of Hebrews. If you hit Peter, you've gone too far. James is probably the one book of the NT that corresponds to what in the OT is called wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is where you take the principles and apply them to see how they work in practical situations. Wisdom literature means we're not so much trying to define the gospel, but instead we're seeing how the gospel fleshes out in the way we live. That's the reason James is in some ways a unique book in the NT, because it takes the gospel of Jesus Christ and says, *How shall we then live?*⁴ In its 108 vss it gives us 54 imperatives telling us what we must do. James isn't a deep theological book like Romans. Instead it is a *Do this! Do that!* book.⁵

Francis of Assisi once invited an apprentice to go with him to a nearby village to preach. The young man quickly agreed, seizing an opportunity to hear his teacher speak. When they arrived in the village, St. Francis began to visit with the people. 1st he stopped in on the butcher. Next a visit with the cobbler. Then a short walk to the home of a woman who'd recently buried her husband. After that a stop at the school to chat with the teacher. This continued throughout the morning. After some time, Francis told his disciple that it was time to return to the abbey. The student didn't understand. *But we came to preach*, he reminded him. *We haven't preached a sermon.*

Haven't we? questioned Francis. *People have watched us, listened to us, responded to us. Every word we have spoken, every deed we have done has been a sermon. We have preached all morning.*⁶

¹ Adapted from a sermon by Mark Dever, preached 5/14/1995, at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.

² *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader Colossal Collection of Quotable Quotes*

³ *Forrest Gump*, 1994

⁴ Keller, T. J. (2013). The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

⁵ Hughes, R. K. (1991). *James: faith that works* (p. 15). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

⁶ Lucado, M. (1996). *Life lessons from the inspired word of God: Book of James* (pp. 7–9). Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.

James would have liked that. As far as he was concerned, Christianity was more action on Monday than worship on Sunday. **What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him?** (2:14). His message is bare-knuckled & his style is bare-boned. Talk is cheap, he argues. Service is invaluable. It's not that works save the Christian, but that works mark the Christian. Or as St. Francis is noted as saying, *Preach without ceasing. If you must, use words.*⁷ James provides clear, practical instruction throughout this little letter. That's why so many people love this book. Of course, that's also why so many people avoid it! We want practical advice but we want the kind that agrees with what we already think, right? But James isn't concerned about telling us what we want to hear, but what we need to hear. Along the way he exposes at least 3 common myths. PRAY

1. Myth #1 – Trials Are Bad I say that's a myth, but there's some truth in the idea that trials are bad, isn't there? Unless you're a masochist, you want to avoid pain, physical & emotional. You want to stay out of situations where you'll encounter things that are hard. We all have an instinct for self-preservation, & in one respect, that's appropriate. Behind this natural reaction to say trials are bad is the assumption that *good* is something immediately apparent to us. & if something appears *bad* it must be bad. But James wants to work against our natural tendency to avoid trials. In fact, he writes, **1:2**.

Trials are reasons for joy! & he says this for 4 reasons.

A. According to 1:3-4, trials are described as the way to maturity. Consider it all joy when you face trials. Then he says, **3-4**.

We all know that working out develops muscles & stamina. If we want to perfect something, we've got to put in the time & practice. Difficult times actually help bring us to maturity. Once James has explained himself, we understand what he means, even if his command to **consider it all joy** surprises us at 1st.

B. Trials cause us consciously to depend on God. James teaches in **1:5-8**.

⁷ Richard Scott Thornton, *Inclusive Christianity: A Progressive Look at Faith*, p 121

If we do everything in our own strength, we'll never learn to rely on God. In His kindness & love, God puts us in trials & circumstances in which we have no option but to trust Him. & that's when we learn we can trust Him & we grow in our faith. It's always been this way. When the children of Israel were in slavery in Egypt, oppressed by Pharaoh, what did God do? He promised to rescue them & then He did. What did He do next? He led them to the edge of the sea. Mountains were on the right & left, the sea was in front of them, & Pharaoh's army was right behind them. What option did they have other than to trust in God? & as we know, their trust in God wasn't in vain, He parted the sea. The Bible is filled with stories like this. In John's Gospel, Jesus says a number of hard things that cause many of His disciples to turn away. He then turns to the 12 & says, **You do not want to go away also, do you?** & what do they say? **Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life** (Jn 6:67-68). In other words, *We have no other option but to trust you!* How about you? How do you consider the things God is calling you to do, including the hard situations that seem to be without a solution? Do you consider them joy? God often, in His love, puts us in hard situations so we may learn how trustworthy He is.

C. We can consider trials as joy because this life, its trappings, & its trials will all pass. God will right all wrongs, as we see in **1:9-12**.

God's ways of measuring things aren't like ours.

D. Trials are reason for joy because we're promised they're part of God's good purposes. **1:13-15** Temptations don't come from God. Trials, however, are from God, & in His love He uses them to bring us to the maturity of knowing we can rely on Him in all of life's circumstances. Trials strengthen our faith because they cause us to practice putting our trust in God for what we cannot immediately see. So James calls us to embrace our trials by considering them **all joy**. That doesn't mean we pretend they aren't trials, no. It simply means we don't let our understanding of them be determined by how they feel. If something feels hard or bad, we'll react to it negatively. That's natural. But the strange & wonderful thing is that God in His sovereign love again & again uses those things that feel bad at 1st to teach us to trust Him. Don't we as parents do this with our children? Doctors with their patients? & you with your friends, if you're a faithful friend? Our

emotional reaction may be negative at 1st, but that emotion has its God-given purpose. It forces us to confront the question, *Do I really trust God as I say I do?* How easy it is to let our emotions be the all-determining factor which gets us nowhere. We can think of our emotions as the jet stream for an airplane pilot. If the jet stream is going in the airplane's direction, it's helpful. If the airplane turns into headwinds, the wind slows the plane down. & if the winds blow from the side, flying can rough. Emotions are like that for us. On one hand, emotions can be extremely helpful. On the other, trials can produce winds of emotion that feel like headwinds or crosswinds. So we can't take our directions from our emotions. We have to take our direction from God & the truth of what He's told us in Scripture. & as we see trials strengthen our faith & so prove God's faithfulness, something deeper than an emotion will emerge. What is it? Joy!

A great illustration of this is found in the life of Sir Norman Anderson of Britain, who died in 1994. Sir Norman was a missionary for many years in the Muslim world. He was a recognized world expert in Islamic law and became the Director of the Advanced Legal Institute in London University. He was knighted by the Queen and became Sir Norman Anderson. But his personal life was full of tragedies & suffering. All of his children died before he did, & his wife had a terrible degenerative disease that consumed the last years of his life.

Sir Norman is the modern day equivalent of Job, except, unlike Job, God didn't restore his family back to him in his lifetime. But his faith was anchored in eternity.

Not long before his death in his mid-eighties, he was asked, *When you look back over your life and reflect on the fact that you have lost all your 3 children, and now your wife of 60 years no longer recognizes you, do you ever ask the question, "Why me?"*

This was Norman's response: *No, I've never asked the question, "Why me?" but I have asked the question, "Why not me?" I am not promised, simply because I am a Christian, that I will be delivered from all difficulties in this world. I am, however, promised that in the midst of difficulties, God through Christ will be present with me, and will give His grace to help me cope with the difficulties and bear witness to Him. After all, the stars shine brightest in the desert.*⁸

Who knows what greater troubles our heavenly Father has spared us from by the trials He's allowed to come our way. That's what James is saying here. God in His love gives us trials to test our faith, to develop us, & to mature us. Robert Browning Hamilton's vs captures it well,

*I walked a mile with Pleasure;
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
for all she had to say.*

I walked a mile with Sorrow;

⁸ <http://passiondesirepursuitintimacy.blogspot.com/2011/08/norman-anderson.html>; Carson, D. A. (2016). *Trials*, Sermon Library (Jas 1:1–18). Faithlife

*and ne'er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When sorrow walked with me.⁹*

2. Myth #2 – Faith is What I Think If the 1st myth that James dispels is that trials are bad, the 2nd myth is this, *Faith is what I think*. Again, there's an obvious way in which this is true. Faith, or belief, must involve the mind. A rock sits. A plant grows. An animal has instincts. But people? We think! Much of belief, or faith, is tied up in thinking. & yet, James wants to line up a 2nd truth for us: Faith, he says, is what you think & what you do. The point of hearing God's Word isn't simply to know it. The point of hearing God's Word is to do it. James says, **1:21**.

Receiving it means trusting it so that you'll do it. **1:22**

Hearing without doing is can be self-deceiving. It's easy to sit & listen to a sermon or read a Christian book & think that because you've understood something said, you've moved closer to God. Certainly, understanding something the Bible says is good. Yet hearing & understanding something the Bible says & NOT making sure it translates into how you live is dangerous. Many Christians have a lethal buildup of religious knowledge that isn't lived out. James becomes a terrifying book when we consider all the hearers who haven't become doers, especially if that includes you. God desires a righteous life (1:19). *Religion* or *faith* that is believed cognitively but isn't lived out is **worthless** (1:26). It's unacceptable to God (1:27). In chapter 2, James applies this message to a specific situation in the churches he's writing to. What is it? Favoritism, treating people differently on the basis of external factors like wealth. **2:1**

After all, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ should live out what they know. Of all people, they should know & live better than to show respect based on externals like wealth. God didn't ask us to fill out a financial application form before bringing us into his kingdom. He hasn't measured us by features that are passing. & neither should we if we want our church to reflect the character of God. Favoritism is insulting to the poor & slanderous to **the fair name by which you have been called** (2:3-7). What could you possibly mean when you claim to have heard God's concern for the poor but you don't reflect that in your own life? No, you must fulfill **the royal law according to the**

⁹ *Along the Road*, <http://www.funeralhelper.org/along-the-road-robert-browning-popular>

Scripture (2:8a). What is the **royal law**? To **love your neighbor as yourself** (2:8b), which was spoken back in Lev 19:18. *OK, James says. You've heard Leviticus. Now you must obey it. The royal law makes no sense when it's heard but not obeyed.* What good is it to hear about love but not do it? Even a little favoritism is significant. **2:9**

Breaking the law anywhere makes us guilty before God. **2:10**

Even one trespass shows you rebel against the authority of God! So whatever the particular infraction, whatever the statute broken, you demonstrate a disregard & misunderstanding of who God is & of what your relationship to Him is supposed to be. James then gives his famous warning that there is a kind of faith that is useless & dead. **2:14-26**

Faith that isn't acted out isn't faith at all & these vss give us 3 examples. **A.** 1st, James says, are the demons. The demons believe there's one God. They know in their heart there's one God, & they **shudder**. Why? Because it makes no difference in their lives. It doesn't translate into repentance & action. *If you want to tell me you have faith, says James, but your faith doesn't show itself in deeds, your faith is no different from a demon's.* & that's not saving faith! **B.** 2nd, he points us to Abraham, the father of the faithful. Abraham showed his faith by what he did. His faith & action worked together. You might say his faith was made complete by his actions, because faith without action is simply not true saving faith. **C.** This is also true among the most surprising people of God, such as Rahab the prostitute, James' 3rd example. Even Rahab showed her faith by what she did, not simply by what she knew or said!

When glass skyscrapers were 1st built & popularized, a number of office-workers were scared of working in offices 30, 40, even 50 stories above the ground with nothing visible stopping them from plunging downward. Reader's Digest once carried a story about one of these earliest skyscrapers, describing how a number of people in one office couldn't work because their desks were too close to the massive windows. The people in the office would sit there looking down hundreds of feet, petrified! They knew there was a glass window between them & the drop, but they weren't used to the idea that glass could act as a barrier.

It was causing enough trouble in the office that the building manager was contacted. He came up & told them about the design of the frame & thickness of the glass; he explained how it could hold so much stress & even gave an example. But they were still nervous.

The building manager was perplexed about what to do. So he brought up a structural engineer who explained it all again. Still, they didn't feel comfortable looking down all that distance. Then the engineer said, *I have an idea.* He called everyone to stand near the inside wall, which they did. He stepped back, & then ran full speed toward the glass wall, hit it with his full weight, & bounced

off. He was fine! He was willing to throw his whole life against the glass wall because he knew it could take it!¹⁰

That's what James is saying real faith is. It isn't the faith of the person who can sit, read a religious document, & say, *I believe this*. *Saving faith*, James says, *is the faith that throws its whole life into living out the truth believed*. The satisfaction we experience when we know or understand a truth can be dangerous when the knowing serves as a substitute for living out the truth. Part of the problem is with our word *believe*, because in our vocabulary it refers to an intellectual concept. When I say, *I believe the world is round*, I'm stating that my mind *believes* the world is round even though I've never seen the earth from outer space or walked around the whole planet. My *belief* refers to an intellectual concept, not necessarily to a deep & abiding trust. But in the Bible, *belief* refers not just to an intellectual recognition but to a deep & abiding trust. When we fail to understand this, we begin to misinterpret parts of the Bible. For example, Jn 3:16 reads, **For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life**. We hear that & tend to think it refers simply to a cognitive belief. The Amplified Bible captures well what it means, *For God so greatly loved & dearly prized the world that He [even] gave up his only-begotten (unique) Son, that whoever believes in (trusts, clings to, relies upon) Him shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal (everlasting) life*. Did you catch that? Believing is a clinging to, a relying on, a trusting in. That's the biblical idea of *belief* & that's what James is talking about in chpt 2. A believer isn't one who intellectually recognizes God but doesn't employ their faith. Rather, a believer is one who lives out God's Word. We're saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. It's always accompanied by visible acts & evidences. God has made us to know Him, but we've sinned against Him. Being holy, He must judge us for our sins. Our only hope is to repent of our sins & have real saving faith in Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who was crucified & raised to life for our salvation. Do you believe that? Real faith works. So the 2nd myth is that *faith is what I think*.

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3. Myth #3 – Religion is a Private Matter The 3rd myth James dispels is that religion is a private matter. Again, this is obviously true in one respect because faith is very personal. It has to be personal if it's genuine. Some kinds of public religion are nothing but hypocrisy. But what people usually mean when they say *faith is private* is, *I don't want to talk about faith*. In the name of religion or spirituality they justify treating this life as ours to do with as we please. Religion becomes a tool for self-centeredness & supposed control over our own destinies. The playwright, Tennessee Williams, explaining why he'd given up visiting his psychoanalyst, reportedly said, *He was meddling too much in my private life*.¹¹ We have a tendency these days to think of our religion as a part of our private lives, on the same level as our ambitions, dreams, & fears. But if what James said earlier is true, that faith must be acted out, then saving, Christian faith ultimately cannot be private. Personal, yes, but not private. Both God & His people will be involved with what you do with your words, time, money, & everything else. Any religion that consists of more than thoughts & opinions, one that involves deeds & actions, cannot be completely private. So now that he's lined up the 1st 2 lessons, James gets to his main point.

He 1st established that trials aren't bad, but that God means them for good purposes. Then he established that hearing the Word of God means obeying it. Real faith is active faith. Saving belief is both mental & behavioral. & now that he has our shoulders pinned to the mat, he goes for the pin: Christianity is a public matter. It's about our life together. James doesn't say this directly, but it's the implication of what he's trying to correct in this stress-ridden, faction-prone church: division. As you read through this book, the evidence of this division is everywhere. These Christians are boastful about the future, perhaps comparing one another's future prospects (4:13-17; cf. 3:5). They're quick to become angry with one another & quick to use hurtful words (1:19). They're cursing at (3:9-10), slandering (4:11-12), & grumbling about one another (5:9). Not only are they showing favoritism to the rich, they're oppressing the poor (5:1-6). Behind this division in the church, it would seem, is careless teaching. **3:1**

¹¹ <https://akshaybudumuru.wordpress.com/2014/07/21/tennessee-williams-and-psychoanalyst/>

It's interesting that James opens this section with a comment about teaching. It could be that someone was teaching that selfishness is okay. Several vss later, James writes, **3:14-15**.

A true teacher is just the opposite of this & the teacher's life proves it. **3:13**

Along these lines, it's interesting to note how many of James's cautions focus on words. Our words have tremendous effects on others. **3:5**

We may view our words as a means of self-expression, but our words actually belong to God. **3:9-10**

Our speech isn't primarily for expressing ourselves, it's for expressing God's character & praising Him. In this letter of James, God claims ownership over every word that a believer speaks. Wise speech is from God & brings unity. What can be done about division & all of its associated problems? James offers at least 4 responses. 1st, he identifies the root problems: Selfishness, the kind that pretends religion is a private affair in order to mask ambition. **3:16**

Such selfishness knows no bounds. He continues in **4:3**.

Behind the selfishness, of course, is pride. **4:6**

After identifying these root problems of selfishness & pride, James offers a 2nd response. He tells us to submit to God. Before God, the way up is down. **4:7-10**

OK, we're to humble ourselves. How do we do it? We do it by facing the facts about ourselves. To begin with we realize that our lives aren't our own. James's readers are living as though their lives were theirs. So he warns them, **4:13-16**.

Worldly people believe their lives are their own. Christians must not believe that. That's why James calls his readers adulterous people (4:4). They're religious bigamists. James implores us to remember that we & all we have belong to God. James's 3rd response to the problem of divisions in the church is to warn that God's judgment is coming as quickly as this world's wealth is passing.

5:1-6

Everything we might rely on will pass away. What will remain is the fact that God will judge. & God's ownership of your life will be proved beyond doubt when He exercises His judgment. We live best in this world when we remember the next world & live with the next world in view. I've often

heard the statement, *He's so heavenly minded, he's no earthly good*. I don't think I've ever met such a person. There's little danger of that today. Instead, we're so often worldly minded that we're of little heavenly good. James tells his readers the same thing when he says, **4:4**.

Clearly, he doesn't mean they're adulterous because all of them are committing adultery. He means they're adulterous because they're cheating on God by being deeply influenced by the world. But the Judge is standing at the door (5:9). For some people, that means repenting. For others it means being patient & waiting for the Lord's coming, even as the farmer does. **5:7-8**

Even as James promised back in chpt 1, he again promises that those who persevere in suffering will be blessed. **5:10-11**

4th, James tells his division-riddled readers to love peace: **3:17-18**

On that same note, he closes his letter by encouraging the readers to treat one another with tender concern by praying for the sick (5:14), confessing sins to one another (5:16a), valuing the prayers of the righteous (5:16b-18), & bringing back those who wander (5:19-20). James knows that so much of our relationship with God is shown by our relationships with other people. As Christians, our primary obligation in this life isn't to ourselves. It's to God & to the body of Christ. You & I must realize that our selfishness hurts others & that God will judge us for it. We're to use ourselves for others. We must learn to cherish the opportunity of living in peace by valuing each other. I've frequently heard from Christians some sharp, slashing words about what they want or what must happen in the church for them to be satisfied. *Do it my way because it's the only right way! If we don't use hymnals I'm leaving! If pews were good enough for Jesus why would we get rid of them?* What could lead to that sort of talk? A loss of perspective & a lack of love for Christ & His body. Our Christianity, if it's to live up to its name, must affect other people in loving & godly ways. What does it mean to say we're followers of Jesus Christ, who literally gave His life for others, if we don't live like that ourselves? Religion is not a private matter. It is personal, yes, but it is also public. It is about life together. & you can't do life together when you're selfish, prideful, bitter, snarky, or suck on lemons all day.

What James lays out in his letter is practical for daily life. It's about how to understand trials, how to live out your faith, & how to seek peace with God & others. So, in the spirit of James, I give you this instruction very seriously: Consider your trials joys. Look for how your life makes your beliefs visible. &, especially, watch your words & the divisiveness you sow within the church body. As James says, **The coming of the Lord is near ... the Judge is standing right at the door (5:8-9).** PRAY

Communion

Jl Packer has written, *I don't think we can ever say too much about the importance of an active exercise of mind & heart at the communion service....*

Communion demands of us private preparation of heart before the Lord before we come to the table. We need to prepare ourselves for fellowship with Jesus Christ the Lord....

*We should be saying in our hearts, 'as sure as I see & touch & taste this bread & this wine, so sure it is that Jesus Christ is not a fancy but a fact, that he is for real, & that he offers himself to be my Saviour, my Bread of Life, & my Guide to glory. He has left me this rite, this gesture, this token, this ritual action as a guarantee of this grace; He instituted it, & it is a sign of life-giving union with him, & I'm taking part in it, & thus I know that I am his & he is mine forever.'*¹²

Do we do that? Are we actively involved in this ceremony our Lord has given to us? All too often, I know that my remembrance of Him is simply calling to mind the facts of His life, death, & resurrection. That's not bad, but biblical remembrance is much more than that. In Jewish thought & culture *remembering* means participating here & now in certain defining events in the past & also in the future.¹³ What does that mean? Over the years I've learned the importance of *remembering* my wedding anniversary. Does that mean that once a year I mentally acknowledge our wedding day & remember it? Would Muriel be impressed with my thoughtfulness & that I didn't forget? I don't think so! She would expect that the concept of remembering our anniversary would involve some level of activity, such as a card or note or flowers or dinner. Likewise, in communion, we don't simply remember the facts of Jesus' life, death, & resurrection. As the Puritan John Flavel said, *Remembrance is when we so call Christ & His death to our minds as to feel the powerful impressions thereof upon our hearts.* In other words, as we partake of communion together we're to experience an affectionate remembrance because the gospel is recalled to mind & reapplied to

¹² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-should-you-be-thinking-about-during-the-lords-supper/>

¹³ Dustin Crowe, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-does-it-mean-to-remember-jesus-in-the-lords-supper/>

our hearts & minds. We remember the grace purchased at Christ's death is the same grace we need when we come to the table. PRAY PASS ELEMENTS

Keith & Kristyn Getty along with Stuart Townend wrote *Behold the Lamb (Communion Hymn)*.¹⁴ Let me read the words as remember God's grace toward us as seen in the life, death, & resurrection of His Son.

*Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away,
Slain for us: & we remember
The promise made that all who come in faith
Find forgiveness at the cross.*

*So we share in this Bread of life,
And we drink of His sacrifice,
As a sign of our bonds of peace
Around the table of the King.*

*The body of our Savior, Jesus Christ,
Torn for you: eat & remember
The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life,
Paid the price to make us one.*

Let's eat of the bread & remember, *The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life, Paid the price to make us one.*

The song continues,

*The blood that cleanses every stain of sin,
Shed for you: drink & remember
He drained death's cup that all may enter in
To receive the life of God.*

*And so with thankfulness & faith
We rise to respond: & to remember.
Our call to follow in the steps of Christ
As His body here on earth.*

*As we share in His suffering,
We proclaim: Christ will come again!
And we'll join in the feast of heaven
Around the table of the King.*

Let's drink of the cup & remember, *He drained death's cup that all may enter in To receive the life of God.*

¹⁴ #343 in our hymnal