



# faith that works

*The letter of*  
**JAMES**

## Introduction

James was most likely written by James, the brother of Jesus, the leader of the Jerusalem church. The letter is believed to have been written in the early to mid-40s to Jewish Christians.

James offers straightforward and practical guidance for daily life. If you want to learn what it looks like to live as a Christian, James offers a roadmap. Yet James is more than just a seemingly random collection of snippets of wisdom. There is an overarching theme that unifies James' entire message. That is, true knowledge of God goes beyond merely knowing and must result in transformation. This is a faith that 'works'. If we don't put our knowledge of God into action, our knowledge of God is shallow. . Studying James should encourage and challenge us to keep living the life of a true Christian believer as we seek to trust God's wisdom, even during times of hardship and trial. A good summary verse is 1:21b-22 'Humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.'

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## STUDY ONE - JAMES 1:1-27

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### **Trials**

This passage uses some wordplay with the terms 'trial' and 'tempt'. In the original Greek, a single word is used but translated into two English words. This word is translated 'trials' in vs 2 and 12, and 'tempted' in vs 13 and 14. Both of these terms refer to difficulties that people may encounter in life. When the difficulty originates externally it is called a 'trial' eg poverty, illness, gossip, oppression. Yet in the face of these external challenges we may also face internal struggle called 'temptation.' Succumbing to this internal pressure of temptation will lead to sin eg envy, revenge, ungodly anger. God introduces trials with the purpose of testing us like a metal being refined by fire. He doesn't tempt us – this arises from our own internal and sinful response to life's difficulties. Therefore, God cannot be held responsible if we choose to respond to our trials with evil desires and behaviour. The onus is on us to respond to trials in a godly way.

### **The double-minded man**

The concept of double-mindedness does not refer to someone whose belief in God is sometimes hampered by doubt. Rather, it is someone who is trying to have 'a foot in both camps' – trusting God and the world at the same time. In 4:1-8 the concept is revisited to describe individuals who are asking God for wealth but are seeking to use it for their own self-indulgence. The issue is not in the asking, but in the ungodly motives which expose the desire to have friendship with the world as well as friendship with God.

## Share

1. What are some of the different ways (positive and negative) people respond to difficulties in their lives?

## Observe & Reflect

### *Read James 1:1-18*

2. What are some descriptions of what God is like in this passage? (vs5, 13, 17, 18)
3. Is there anything unusual about the way words are used in 1:1-18? What are some apparent contradictions / paradoxes from these verses?
4. What is the wrong way to respond to trials? (vs 13)
5. What is the right way to respond to trials? (vs 2, 12)
6. How does the word 'consider' help here?
7. 1:9-11 gives us a hint as to some of the trials faced by the believers. What role can money and material things play in trials and temptations?

### **Read James 1:19-27**

8. What has God done for us? What should our response be? (vs18-22)
9. What does it mean to accept the word 'humbly?'
10. What is the deception James warns against? (vs22-25)
11. What are some practical examples of continuing in God's perfect word ie 'doing it?' (vs26-27)

### **Next Steps (choose 1 or 2)**

12. What difficulties have you faced recently or are currently facing? How can you respond to these difficulties in a godly way? (Rev 16:8-11 outlines an ungodly response to suffering)
13. How can we resist the temptation to vent (with a friend, on social media etc) in response to a hard day / situation / relationship?
14. In what situations do you find yourself quick to become angry? How can you change your behaviour in these situations?
15. How can we help one another obey God's word 'not forgetting ... but doing it?'

**Pray** that we can avoid blaming and complaining when we are going through times of difficulty. Pray that we can seek to humbly accept God's word and do what it says.

## STUDY TWO - JAMES 2:1-26

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### Faith & Works

When we compare James 2:24 and Romans 3:28, they appear to be in contradiction.

“You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.” James 2:24

“For we maintain that a person is justified by faith, apart from works of the law.” Rom 3:28

This is why it's important to read scripture in the light of scripture. When we read each passage in its entirety, we can see that the authors are addressing two different questions. James is continuing on from chapter 1 explaining that merely saying you believe something counts for very little. True and living faith will be evidenced in a transformed life. Paul, on the other hand, is addressing those who seek to justify themselves before God through Old Testament works. He is clearly teaching that we can only be saved by trusting in salvation through Jesus. Paul does later speak about how this trust in God will show itself with a changed life (Rom 6, 8, 12).

John Calvin expressed this helpfully “We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.” A true and saving faith will always be expressed in action, in the good deeds that God has prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8-10).

## Share

1. Share an experience where you have been on the inside or the outside of a situation involving favouritism.

## Observe & Reflect

### *Read James 1:22-2:13*

2. What is said about the law? (1:25, 2:12)
3. How is the law summed up? (2:8)
4. Why is showing favouritism in direct contrast to the law?
5. What should our attitude be towards the rich and the poor? (see also 1:9-11)
6. How do vs10-11 expose the seriousness of those who show favouritism?

### *Read James 2:14-26*

7. How does James describe faith that is genuine? (vs14, 17, 26)
8. How does vs15-16 illustrate his point about true faith? Does practical care matter?
9. How does James describe the faith of:
  - the demons?
  - Abraham?
  - Rahab?

## Next Steps

10. Do you tend to speak to the same people at church who you feel more comfortable with? How could you become more aware of those who might be feeling on the fringe of things?
11. How could we as a church address the material needs of those within our care?
12. How would you respond to someone who says, 'It doesn't matter what you do because God has promised he will always forgive you.'
13. Are there any areas of your life which are inconsistent with your trust in God?

**Pray** that we will treat anyone we encounter with a spirit of grace and acceptance. Pray that we will work out our faith in our everyday lives.



## STUDY THREE - JAMES 3:1-12

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### Teachers of the Word

Christian teachers go beyond just imparting knowledge, they serve as leaders through their words and actions. The most effective teachers are not just giving information in a detached way but actually connect with their students. The best teaching thrives in relationships where the teacher genuinely cares for his or her student. In Christian teaching, this is even more important as the teacher is to be an example of how to live. To teach the Word, he or she must understand it and have it transform their lives such they are characterised by love and obedience to God and love of others. It is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. We don't have to look far to see the damage that is caused when a teacher of the Word's actions have completely gone against the Word they claim to know.

### Share

1. Can you think of a situation where you have spoken / sent a text / emailed and wished you could retract the words?

### Observe & Reflect

#### *Read James 3:1-12*

2. Why should not many people presume to be teachers in the church?
3. Why is it so easy to make mistakes as a teacher?
4. What do horses, ships, forest fires and the human body have in common?
5. What do beasts, birds, reptiles, sea creatures and the human tongue not have in common?

6. The tongue is described as 'a restless evil full of deadly poison' (vs 8). Have you seen examples of this in your own life or the life of others?
7. If no human being can tame the tongue, the phrase 'this should not be' (vs 10) seems like an impossible demand. How can we stop praising and cursing coming out of the same mouth?
8. What is the purpose of the illustration in vs 11-12? How does this challenge us?

### **Next Steps**

9. When can we be tempted to lie? (eg to avoid conflict, to get out of a situation, pride)
10. When can we be tempted to speak angry words? (eg home life, work life, social media)
11. When can we be tempted to slander?
12. How can we help one another speak words of healing rather than words of harm?

**Pray** for self-control as we practise being slow to speak. Pray for teachers of God's word, that God will protect them from jealousy and selfish ambition and that they can lead by example. Pray that we can speak words of healing rather than harm.

## STUDY FOUR - JAMES 3:13-4:12

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### Wisdom

It seems some of James' readers were claiming to be wise. James makes the point that wisdom is not about intelligence or the extent of one's knowledge. It doesn't hinge on eloquence or the power to persuade. In fact, it can be seem as foolish and feeble (1 Cor 1:18-25). Wisdom originates from God and involves an understanding of God, ourselves and others that is revealed through humble acts of kindness. Genuine wisdom will manifest itself through gentleness, compassion and the pursuit of peace. This is because when we truly grasp the magnificence, power, glory and goodness of God and the love he has shown us who do not deserve it, we realise there is no place for envy, selfish ambition or hostility.

### Share

1. How would you define wisdom? Think of someone you would consider a wise person. What is it about them that makes you see them in this light?

### Observe & Reflect

#### *Read James 3:13-4:3*

2. How is real wisdom revealed?
3. What is the origin, character and result of false wisdom?
4. What is the origin, character and result of true wisdom?
5. How does false or true wisdom affect the church?
6. Does this add anything to your initial definition of wisdom?

## Read James 4:1-12

7. What do the fights and ineffective prayers of James' readers have in common? (note 'desires' in vs 1 is the same Greek word as 'pleasures' in vs 3)
8. Why would James describe this kind of passion as adulterous?
9. Describe the relationship between our actions and God's promised response from vs 6-10.
10. What does vs 11-12 refer to, remembering the context of a congregation full of quarrels and self-centred warring desires?

## Next Steps

11. How can we humble ourselves before God? What does this look like in practice?
12. In what ways can our Christian life be compromised by our own desires and passions? Or the influence of the world?
13. How could we respond if we sensed disunity between our Christian brothers and sisters? (eg gossip, heated disagreements, hypocritical judgements)
14. How can we seek to grow in wisdom?

**Pray** in thankfulness that God promises he will come near to us when we come near to him. Pray that God will reveal the areas where we are tempted to be double-minded and that he will help us live in the world but not be of the world. Pray that our church will be characterised by love and peace.

## STUDY FIVE - JAMES 4:13-5:12

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### Wealth & Materialism

According to Credit Suisse's annual global wealth report, the median Australian adult ended 2021 with a net worth of \$US273 900, making them richer than the comparable resident of any other country. (AFR Australian and global wealth)

Very often we don't feel particularly rich and financial strain and pressure can occur no matter what our income. James has a particular warning for the rich and those who (mistakenly) believe they are in control of their destiny. He reminds us that God is in control and only he knows what tomorrow will bring. This frees us from needing to pursue wealth as a means to an end. James also warns of the very real temptation of greed which can lead to dishonesty and corruption.

Perhaps surprisingly, James also has a word for those in lower positions in society. Even for those who may have a genuine grievance, grumbling is not the godly response. Grumbling against others is another form of misusing the tongue and is not how Christians are to love one another. It is also a way of playing judge and telling God how he should make things fair. It may be natural to envy those richer than ourselves and have a spirit of bitterness or discontentment, but this can drive us back into double-mindedness. As 1 Tim 6:10 reminds us, it is the love of money which is a root of all kinds of evil and this can affect both rich and poor. This is not to say there isn't a place for speaking in defence of those living under oppression and caring for those in need (cf James 1:27) Yet we should see both wealth and poverty in the light of the end of the world.

## Share

1. How much influence do you think money (the having of it, the wanting it, the lack of it) has over people's day to day life? Consider those in a similar demographic to you.

## Observe & Reflect

### *Read James 4:13-17*

2. Who needs to listen?
3. How is their behaviour inconsistent with the truth?
4. What should their attitude to the future be?

### *Read James 5:1-6*

5. Who needs to listen?
6. What have they done?
7. What does the future hold for them?
8. What is the great deception of wealth?

### *Read James 5:7-12*

9. Who is being addressed in vs 7 and 10?
10. What should their attitude be in times of suffering? What examples of perseverance are given?
11. How is the coming of the Lord related to patience and grumbling?

### **Next Steps**

12. What is good and what is bad about money?
13. How are we tempted to idolize wealth?
14. How can we seek contentment in Jesus, whatever our financial situation?
15. What active steps can we take to enable us to 'sit loose' to our material possessions?

**Pray** in thankfulness for the money God has given us. Pray that we would use it wisely and have generous hearts. Pray for contentment, patience and perseverance as we wait for the return of Jesus.

## STUDY SIX - JAMES 5:13-20

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### Healing, prayer, sin & faith

This passage has been used to claim a variety of things. In the Catholic sacrament of 'Last Rites' there is the idea that someone on their deathbed can be visited by a priest and given absolution for their sins. This passage has also been used in healing services to declare that when someone with the gift of healing lays their hand on a sick person, healing will occur. Interestingly in this passage, it is not someone with the 'gift of healing' who prays for the sick person but elders within their own church. The passage certainly seems to present us with a great promise. James says that the sick person will be healed, raised up and forgiven. The example of Elijah is remarkable and shows what great power there is in prayer. Elijah prayed and a drought came, and then he prayed and brought rain. If we are to take this passage seriously, then we should pray expectantly. Why does it seem like there is so little miraculous healing taking place today? Why does this not 'work?' Indeed, why did James himself die? If this promise is true, why do Christians die at all? James seems to say that if we follow these instructions, prayer is so powerful that we will be healed.

What is this passage saying? We can have various different responses at this point. (1) We can lose confidence in the power of prayer and, as a result, modify the promise - you cannot really pray for healing, you can only pray for acceptance of sickness. (2) We can imagine that we have power over sickness and claim that healings have taken place which really have not. Many people have done this and brought great harm. (3) We can add qualifications - you need to pray in faith, and without faith it will not work. Maybe the oil really stands for medicine or maybe you have to pray in the name of the Lord. If the passage really promises healing then the continued illness of Christians raises problems for our belief in the bible. The ESV actually reflects the original Greek more closely. What the text really says is that the sick person will be saved. Of course, that could easily mean 'saved from sickness', that is, healed - that is why the NIV translators have said 'make the sick person well.' However, strictly speaking, we have this odd situation where the sick person is going to be saved (v. 15), and the sinner healed (v. 16). Why not the other way around? If we look to Elijah we see that by Elijah's prayer, a drought came to Israel as God's punishment for Israel's sin. By his prayer again, rain came as a sign of Israel being restored to relationship with God. Elijah's ministry was precisely what James 5:19-20 speaks of—to bring back the sinful nation and cover a multitude of sins, thereby saving people.



It seems as if in the context of James, the congregation as a whole are sinning without repentance. They are judging between themselves, getting angry, showing favouritism, grumbling etc. In amongst all of this there is also sickness. So as James raises the question 'Is anyone sick?' it is in this context they are called to confess their sin and the elders are called to pray. We know that God doesn't *punish* those who trust in Jesus for the sins they commit. This punishment is taken fully by Jesus at the cross. But there is a related experience, that sometimes Christians can mistake for God's punishment for sin, and that is the unpleasant experience of *discipline*. God disciplines his children, like a loving parent, to help them come to their senses, and to continue to grow in their godliness. For more on this read 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 and Hebrews 12:5-11.

Finally, we must balance this teaching in James, with other biblical teaching clearly warning of the dangers in drawing too straight a line between a particular sickness and a particular sin. God simply doesn't reveal these connections to us. This was the mistake of Job's friends who confidently asserted that Job's suffering was due to his sin. Jesus warns his followers of quickly assuming that someone's particular sickness or suffering is due to that person's particular sin (see John 9:1-3; Luke 13:1-5). So in light of this, we must remember that all sickness is part of our broken world and is the result of humankind's rejection of God. Sickness and suffering serves to warn us all of the coming judgement. Prayer is the right response to the reality of sin and sickness, but we need to be careful in over confidently connecting a particular sickness with a particular sin. Similarly we also need to be careful with assuming that a lack of physical healing is due to not having enough faith. Remember Jesus himself prays for the relief of his own suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane, he exemplified perfect faith and yet suffered excruciating pain despite his prayer offered in faith - 'Father if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.' (Luke 22:42)

## Share

1. Martin Luther said 'To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.' Do you agree?

## Observe & Reflect

### *Read James 5:13-20*

2. What is the appropriate response in times of trouble?
3. What is the appropriate response in times of happiness?
4. Why do we sometimes not respond like this during these times?
5. What should we do in times of sickness?

The ESV is a more literal translation than the NIV of verses 15 & 16

*15 And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

6. What will be the result for the sick person? (v15)
7. What should the whole congregation do? (v16)

8. Is sickness sent to us when we commit individual sins? What do these passages reveal?

- John 9:1-3
- Hebrews 12:5-11
- Mark 2:5
- 1 Corinthians 11:27-32
- John 5:14
- Luke 13:1-5

9. What are we to do when we see a brother or sister wandering away from the truth? What might this look like?

### **Next Steps**

10. Is prayer your first or last resort when you or someone else is sick?

11. What does a praying church look like?

12. What does confessing sin to one another look like in our church?

13. What could you do to make prayer a higher priority in your day to day life?

**Pray** in thankfulness that God forgives us for our sins and saves us. Pray for those who are sick or suffering. Pray for those who might be wandering away from the truth. Pray that we can be a community who seeks to have a faith that works.