



**Lesson Title:** Book of James - Introduction



**Key Concept:** James is action-oriented “wisdom literature” filled with good advice that reflects the teachings of Proverbs and Jesus. This first lesson provides context for the epistle and is organized differently than normal.



**Scriptures:**

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am writing to the “twelve tribes” —Jewish believers scattered abroad. Greetings!  
(James 1:1 *New Living Translation*)

**Context Scriptures:** Proverbs, Book of Acts, Epistle of James



**Lesson Thoughts:**

**Who wrote the epistle of James?** This question is complicated by the fact that at least four people are named James in the New Testament: James the son of Zebedee (John’s brother), James the son of Alphaeus, James the father of Judas (not Iscariot), and James the brother of Jesus. James the son of Zebedee was martyred by Herod Agrippa in Acts 12:2 (about 44 AD) and most likely died too early to write this letter. James the son of Alphaeus is a background character in the gospels and Acts. James the father of Judas is only mentioned in Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13 to help distinguish his son Judas from Judas Iscariot (the betrayer of Jesus). This leaves James the brother of Jesus, who became a Christian after the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:7), was a prominent leader in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17), was a key leader at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), and was probably the only James recognized and respected enough to write a letter with authority.

**Who was this written for?** The first verse of the letter mentions the twelve tribes “scattered abroad” which refers to Jewish Christians outside Jerusalem. The “Jewishness” of the letter is also demonstrated by a reference to meeting in synagogues (*assembly* or *meeting* in English, James 2:2) and the centrality of

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monotheism (James 2:19, referencing Deuteronomy 6:4). Finally, woven throughout the letter are references to the “law” in a way that best makes sense to Jewish audiences (James 1:21, 24–25; 2:8–13; 4:11–12).

**When was this written?** Determining an exact date is impossible, but a few historical events provide guidance. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, James the brother of Jesus was stoned by Pharisees in about 62 AD. Since the letter was written for Jewish Christians, it was likely composed before the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that dealt with the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community. Educated guess... somewhere in the 40s before the council, making this letter one of (if not) the earliest writings in the New Testament.

**What is the style and purpose?** This letter is catholic (universal) and not situational. Unlike most epistles, James does not address a specific church with specific problems. In 108 verses, there are 54 imperatives (commands), and James seems to be written in a way best suited for reading out loud in a public gathering – likely a synagogue. This style closest resembles the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. In fact, this letter is often called the “Proverbs” of the New Testament and challenges the reader to find “true wisdom.” The audience was expected to already know the scriptures (Old Testament), so there is little focus on the *content* of faith; instead the focus is on the *practice* of faith.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Why is it important to understand the background of James’ epistle?
- 2) Why do you think the epistle of James is focused on the *practice* of faith?
- 3) James expected his readers to already know the scriptures (Old Testament). What does this suggest about our faith walk and knowledge of the Bible?

**Next Lesson:** James Chapter 1 (Do a slow read before the next lesson)

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**Notes and Reflections**

- 1) Watch the Bible Project video introduction to the Book of James:  
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/james/>
- 2) James' writing is clearly a reflection of two great influences in his life: Proverbs and Jesus. When you speak to others how much of your thoughts and language reflects scripture? Why do you think it is this way?
- 3) Imagine you were going to write a letter to your younger self. What practical advice about Christian living would you give? How would you organize your letter? Would it share common traits with the Book of James?
- 4) Before the next lesson in this series, do a slow read of James chapter one.