



SAM ALLBERRY
JAMES
FOR YOU



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COMPANY

James For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *James For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

The letter of James has strong claims to be both the most celebrated and most criticised of all New Testament books. This alone makes it worthy of close attention—we are unlikely to be left unaffected by it! It has generated enormous controversy among Christians over the years. Some early believers questioned its inclusion in the New Testament. Centuries later, the great Reformer Martin Luther famously described James as “an epistle of straw”.

A quick glance at the letter shows us why some have found it to be so problematic. Generally, if you flick through any other New Testament letter, you will likely see the words “Christ” and “Jesus” appearing multiple times on every page. But James seems to have precious little to say about Jesus. Jesus is explicitly mentioned only twice. Given that one of those times comes as James introduces himself at the start of the letter, that leaves only one mention in the entire body of the whole epistle. It’s therefore not surprising to find little is also said of Jesus’ death and resurrection, two central and defining events for Christian belief and living. So we might worry that this is not going to be a particularly gospel-centred letter. (This suspicion is not helped when we discover the Dalai Lama is particularly drawn to this letter because of what he believes to be its deep resonance with the teaching of Buddhism!)

Others have criticised James for a lack of cohesion. The letter (so they say) seems to chop and change subject from paragraph to paragraph, with no obvious overarching structure or agenda. Paul at least is linear in his writing. The book of James has been dismissed as random snippets of instruction with no apparent rationale.

But perhaps the most famous criticism levelled at James is that he contradicts Paul. It even looks as though James is setting out to do this intentionally, taking one of Paul’s cherished teachings—that we are justified by faith alone—and then seemingly turning it on its head by writing: “You see that a person is considered righteous by what

they do *and not by faith alone*" (2:24, my emphasis). This was enough for Luther to fume that: "James mangles the Scriptures and thereby opposes Paul and all Scripture". Strong words! Needless to say, those looking for evidence that the Bible is not the inspired word of God leap on this verse with delight.

But we should not be too fast to dismiss this book. Despite the criticisms made against it, this letter has persistently found its way into the

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hearts and affections of countless Christians through the ages, and it remains one of the most cherished books of the Bible. When we read it carefully and expectantly, it is not hard to see why.

James has a very punchy and direct style. He shoots from the hip. He tends not to get bogged down in lengthy, technical theo-

logical exposition. It is not (generally) a letter that leaves you scratching your head or having to look up long words. It is very practical. James addresses everyday issues of living—how we speak, how we should think about wealth or lack of wealth, how to approach conflict, sickness and suffering. It is wonderfully down to earth.

Related to this is the vivid way in which James writes. His text is full of pictures and illustrations, far more than any other letter. It is hard not to get swept along as James describes blazing forests, mighty ships, resilient farmers and wild flowers. These all add to the immediacy of what James writes. They also provide one of the clues as to what makes this letter so valuable.

James' frequent use of everyday illustrations reminds us of someone else, and this is the clue to the letter's enduring value to Christians in every age.

James was the half-brother of Jesus. And herein lies a tale. The biological connection provided James with no natural advantage or inside

track. One of the first things we hear of Jesus' brothers is that they did not believe in him (see John 7:5). Yet by the start of the book of Acts they are listed (with Mary) with those who worshipped alongside Jesus' first disciples. What accounts for this dramatic change? Paul provides the explanation. Following his resurrection, Jesus himself appeared to James (1 Corinthians 15:7). It was not long after this that James became one of the leading Christians in the early church in Jerusalem (see, for example, Acts 21:17-18).

So as we begin to study this letter, we soon realise why its popularity has been so enduring. It is soaked in the words and wisdom of James' older brother. He may not be named much in this letter, but his presence is felt throughout. As we will see, James is every bit as passionate as Paul about Christians living in the light of being justified by faith alone. Yes, James is wide-ranging, and some of the connections between the various parts of his letter are not as obvious as in other New Testament letters. But part of the richness of the Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit did not override the character and style of the writer of each book, but took up those characters and styles and used them to breathe out God's word.

So, whether we are attracted or troubled by all its apparent quirks, James' letter demands our attention for one monumental reason. It is all about what it means truly to follow the "glorious Lord Jesus Christ" (2:1). It will show us what genuine faith looks like in real life—and it will challenge us about how real faith works hard and lives distinctively. James' aim is that his readers would serve Jesus more wholeheartedly and radically, and that must be our goal; and it is my prayer as you read this book that you will find yourself both excited about and enabled to follow more closely James' brother and our Lord.

1. JOY IN TRIALS

James gives every impression of being a writer in a hurry. He doesn't linger at the start of his letter, warming his readers up gently before getting down to business. Instead, he gives the briefest of greetings and gets straight into things. Top of his agenda are trials and how we respond to them, and right away we see what kind of letter this is: practical, pithy and very direct. But before James gets stuck into the issue of trials, we need to take a look at how he introduces himself and his readers.

Introductions

It was the custom in ancient letters to begin by introducing yourself, and James does this by describing himself as: “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (**1:1***). This is what really matters. He has come to know God through the work of Jesus, and finds himself now living wholly for them both. Though James is the younger brother of Jesus, far more important than that biological connection is the spiritual one he enjoys. More significant than being the younger brother of Jesus is being one of his people. And the sign of being one of his people is that we devote ourselves to his service.

The identity of James' readership—“the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (**v 1**)—looks a little less obvious. The “twelve tribes” is how the people of God were described in the Old Testament. That James further describes them as the “scattered” twelve tribes helps us pinpoint whom he has in mind. The Jews of this time who

* All James verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

lived outside of Israel thought of themselves in such terms, scattered as they were throughout the Roman world. This strongly suggests that James is writing to Jewish Christians outside of Israel, and fits in with his role as the leader of the predominantly Jewish church in Jerusalem.

But though Jewish Christians of the first century were the primary audience James was writing to, the letter is not restricted to them. It has been preserved in Scripture to bless and nourish Christian believers in all times and places. As we understand what James' words would have meant for them, we can quickly **discern*** what they mean for us. In this secondary sense, then, we find the letter is very much for us as well.

Following the briefest of greetings, James gets straight into his agenda: **trials**. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (**v 2**).

James offers us the prospect not just of scraping through trials, but of growing in our trials.

The key here is to see that James says "whenever". Not if, but when. Trials are normal. They are not unexpected or freak occurrences. They are, sadly, part and parcel of the regular Christian life.

But they are not a reality we welcome. Many of us will have experienced times when things seemed as if they couldn't get any worse, only to watch in horror as they did. It may be that for some reading this right now, this is how life seems at the moment. We feel overwhelmed. It doesn't matter if the trials are primarily physical, social, relational, or spiritual; we wonder if we will be able to keep going.

James' plea to us, whatever our situation, is to not let such times finish us as Christians. In fact, just a few verses later, he offers us the prospect not just of scraping through trials, but of actually growing as

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 165).

Christians in our trials: “**Blessed** is the one who **perseveres** under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (v 12). This is a mouth-watering prospect: persevering and receiving wonderful blessing from God at the end of it all. We want to be the person who “perseveres under trial” and who has “stood the test”.

But it can feel like only a remote possibility. It sounds like the kind of Christian many of us worry we are not. How can we become someone who perseveres, stands firm in **faith** through hard times, and knows blessing from God in our suffering present and eternal future? That is exactly what James shows us in these opening verses.

Consider it Pure Joy

The first thing we need to do is “consider it pure joy” (v 2).

Notice James says: “Consider”. He is not telling us so much how to feel as how to think. He is not saying: *Pretend this is fun*. Nor is he calling us always to have a sickly grin or stiff upper lip. As scholars Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell put it:

“James does not command us to wear our ‘happy faces’ that so many seem to think are required in church or in other Christian circles.” (*James*, page 59)

No, James is telling us to think about our trials in a certain way. There is a point of view we need to adopt, a particular way to consider what is going on.

Notice too that James talks of trials of “many kinds”. There is a whole range of trials that James has in mind. As we read through the letter, we get a feel for some of the trials James’ readers were facing at this point in time—poverty, injustice, conflict, sickness and grief. But James deliberately keeps his language general, and it is great that he does. It is easy when undergoing hardship to think that our particular situation is different to everybody else’s, that the normal rules don’t apply, and that we are the exception to the rest. But by keeping his

language broad, James is showing us that what he is about to say applies to us all. If he had specified a particular trial he had in mind, it would be too easy for the rest of us facing different situations to excuse ourselves from what he is saying. But James' advice is not just for one or two specific situations; it is for trials of "many kinds". Whatever yours might be, this applies to you. James says there is a way to think about it that can bring joy. We will actually be robbing ourselves of joy if we ignore what he is about to say.

Reaching Maturity and Completion

James explains this thinking in **verses 3-4**.

In one sense, his point is straightforward: trials teach us to persevere (**v 3**). They put us in situations where it is not easy to keep going, and where we will only do so with a measure of determination. And perseverance is the means to a wonderful end: that we be "mature and complete, not lacking anything" (**v 4**). James is talking about being rounded and formed as a Christian, growing into the very people we were created and saved to be.

If we stop and think about it, this is actually what we most long for as Christians (or at least what we should most long for): to become more whole in Christ; to know him more fully and intimately. And it is trials that give us this opportunity to mature in our faith. In fact, we can't get there without trials. They are the spiritual equivalent of **growbags**.

This is how the Christian life works; faith grows through learning to persevere in hardship. The **apostle** Paul says something similar in his letter to the Roman church: "We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

It is suffering that proves, strengthens and deepens our faith. Faith is a little like a muscle in the human body. It is as it is worked out that it grows. It needs something to push against. Physical training is a painful and sweaty process. The Hollywood actor preparing to play the

superhero does not become ready by lazing around and being inactive. Muscle growth requires discomfort. Faith needs the pushback of trials for us to grow spiritually. Trials and difficulties are an opportunity to cling on to the promises of God more tightly.

This is a humbling lesson for us, for it reminds us that we need maturing as Christians. We all have further to grow up and move on in the Christian life. There is no room for being smug. God is not after just a little bit of change in our lives. And if all we pursue is comfort, we will never become truly mature in our faith.

The Most Valuable Thing on Earth

Yet as well as humbling us, this is also a great encouragement for us. It assures us that there is a purpose for our trials. They are not for nothing, and they are never wasted experiences. Why? Because God is achieving something in us as we persevere through them. He is investing in our faith. The British pastor and friend of D.L. Moody, F.B. Meyer, once said that trials are God's vote of confidence in us. None of this means they are not painful. We are not to pretend trials and grief do not hurt us; it is natural and normal that they do, and it would be a denial of our humanity to think we should be immune to the pains of hardship in our lives and in the lives of others. Pain is our reflex reaction to trials, and it is entirely legitimate. Nor is James saying we should go out looking for hardship: that we should deliberately create situations in which we will suffer. No—suffering in and of itself is not a good thing. James *is* saying that it is what God can accomplish through suffering that is good, not the suffering itself. It is an opportunity to gain the most valuable thing on earth: a faith that is complete and lacking nothing; maturity and depth in our relationship with God.

Suffering is an opportunity to gain the most valuable thing on earth.

There are any number of trials a Christian might have to face. In any typical church fellowship, there will be some people experiencing bereavement, the agonies of broken relationship or a lack of relationship. There will be instances of family breakdown, of long-term and serious health issues, of depression and of temptation. In some cases, there will be suffering caused by things that have happened in the past, things that have been done to individuals that have left deep and long-term scars, and also things that individuals have done to others that continue to haunt them. That's the reality of life in this world, as it was for James' first readers.

But through all this, James' counsel is to consider it pure joy. As Christians, we are to think about trials in the light of what God is achieving in us through them, in light of the prospect trials afford for us to surge ahead in our relationship with him. We are to cherish the prospect of a deeper and richer faith.

This is wonderful wisdom. One of the features of trials is that they so often become all-consuming. It can be hard to think about anything else. We can become utterly absorbed by what we are going through, and it can seem impossible to look beyond the immediacy of the pain in order to see anything else. It is even possible to become desensitised to the pains of others who are close. Suffering can so easily turn us in on ourselves.

And so the battle is with the will. James is not saying that Christians will automatically be able to experience joy in suffering. We are called to "consider" trials in this way. We need to fight to think about them in the right way: consciously to force our perspective and vision above and beyond the present suffering, so that we look forward to the good that God will, over time, produce through them. It is as we do this that, alongside the deep pain, we can have a sense of the presence and goodness of God, and be assured that we are in his hands and that he is at work within us.

And above all, we can relish the pulse-quickenng promise that God is using such trials to make us more and more like Jesus Christ.

Questions for reflection

1. How do you tend to think about trials? How realistic did verse 2 seem to you when you first read it in this chapter?
2. How about now?
3. "The battle is with the will." Is there a way you need to fight to consider a trial a joy? How will you use verses 3-4 in order to do so?