

JAMES

REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

A Companion Series to the Reformed Expository Commentaries

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James: Portrait of a Living Faith

JAMES

PORTRAIT OF A LIVING FAITH

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

JON NIELSON



P U B L I S H I N G

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING JAMES

James is a beloved book, since it is so practical, so full of vivid exhortations to live a godly life. In a few pages, it offers concrete counsel on an array of issues that confront Christians daily: trials, poverty, materialism, pride, favoritism, justice, planning, prayer, illness, and more.

Yet there are two sides to the book's candor and clarity. "Its call to realize professed ideals in appropriate action has spoken with prophetic urgency to generations of readers who have found James's directives difficult to perform rather than to understand."¹ The epistle of James, like the Sermon on the Mount, is sublime and penetrating—perhaps too penetrating. James stirs us to action, but as it reveals our sins, we see that we cannot do what it commands. We cannot achieve holiness or maturity by striving. Unfortunately, James declares that obedience is the hallmark of genuine faith: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (1:22).

Since the author demands an obedience that we cannot render, we struggle to resolve the tension between the stringency of his demands and our failure to attain them. If this were Paul, he would turn to the work of Christ the Savior. But James never mentions the cross, the atonement, the death, or the resurrection of Jesus. He never mentions justification by faith or redemption. Indeed, the absence of these themes prompts some to wonder where redemption is found in James. James does use Jesus' name twice (James 1:1; 2:1), but in both cases there is only a passing reference to him, rather than an exposition of his person or work. Similarly, while the term *faith* appears fourteen times in James, eleven occur in 2:14–26, a discussion that stresses that faith without deeds is dead (2:17, 26). Nonetheless, James does have a gospel, and it is revealed in the broad sweep of the book.

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 3.

With 59 commands in 108 verses, James presents the law of King Jesus (James 2:8). But if James merely commands, its moral clarity is a burden and its commands condemn. Yet James insists on obedience, declaring that good deeds mark true religion:

- “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27).
- “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (2:10, ESV).
- “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (4:17).

James especially expects teachers to do what they say: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1). This call to obey or face judgment deepens the point that no one keeps the law completely. James says we must control the tongue (1:26), yet no man can tame the tongue (3:8). He says we must avoid the pollution of the world (1:27), yet our envy and quarrels prove we are worldly (4:1–4). These paradoxes lead to the gospel. James says all are liable to judgment, but “mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:13), for “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (5:11). If we confess our sins, we will be healed (5:16). Further, whoever sees the sins of another and “turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death” (5:20).

Indeed, human inability is central to the structure of James, which hinges on three tests of true religion: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:26–27). Notice: True religion controls the tongue, but no one can tame the tongue (3:1–12). True religion cares for the poor, but we ignore the poor or content ourselves with kind words and warm wishes (2:1–26). True religion shuns worldliness, but we all have worldly impulses (4:1–4, 13–16).

At the climax of this indictment of sin, James says that God “gives us

more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (James 4:6). The double mention of God’s grace, just as we conclude that we fail every test of true religion, shows us the gospel of James, the message of God’s grace for sinners. James’s emphasis on God’s word supplements this idea. The word convicts us of sin and leads to the gospel: God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth,” that is, the gospel (1:18). James also says we should “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (1:21).

The **author** of James calls himself “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). This James is the half-brother of Jesus, the natural son of Mary and Joseph. When the author calls himself “James,” without further identification, it implies that his audience already knows him so well that he can simply be “James” to them. There are three men named James in the New Testament: two apostles and the brother of Jesus. Of the apostles, the James of “Peter, James, and John” suffered martyrdom very early (Acts 12:2). At that point, James the brother of Jesus emerged in a leadership role (15:13; 21:18). (James the son of Alphaeus is unknown outside the lists of the apostles in the Gospels and Acts.)

James the brother of Jesus helped lead the Jerusalem church, making an important speech at the Council of Jerusalem. That council resolved that Gentiles, like Jews, are saved by “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). James gave the concluding speech (15:13–21).

That speech and the church’s following letter (15:23–29) contain distinct language that also appears in James’s epistle.² There is also a shared passion for the law of Moses and for peacemaking (James 2:8–11; 3:17–18; Acts 15:21, 28–29).

James had joined his brothers in mocking Jesus during his ministry. The first time John mentions Jesus’s siblings, they say, “You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. . . . Show yourself to the world.” Thus, “even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:3–5). But Jesus graciously appeared to James after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and he became a pillar of the Jerusalem church.

2. They both include the rare use of *chairō* as a greeting (James 1:1; Acts 15:23), and “Listen my brothers” as an address (James 2:5; Acts 15:13). Other rare words appear in both Acts 15 and James: *episkeptesthe*, *epistrephein*, and *agapētos*.

In time, James became known as “James the Just,” due to his personal righteousness and his passion to promote righteousness in others. We see the same zeal in James’s epistle. He calls the law “the perfect law that gives freedom” (James 1:25) and “the royal law” (2:8). James subordinated his passion for the law to his greater passion for the gospel. James had a zeal for legal righteousness, but greater zeal for God’s grace.

James’s intended **audience** and the **context** of his epistle are indicated by its address to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1, ESV). The expression “the twelve tribes” traditionally signifies Israel, and “the Dispersion” refers to Jews scattered throughout the world. But James wrote especially for Jewish Christians. He was, after all, a church leader. Moreover, Paul and Peter established that the church is the true heir of God’s promises to the tribes of Israel. Also, the word *dispersion* can serve as a metaphor to indicate that believers are never fully at home in this world. Peter addresses his first letter to “elect exiles of the Dispersion” (1 Peter 1:1, ESV), but it is clear that these exiles are mostly Gentiles (1:17–18; 2:11). So James envisioned a wide audience.

James assumed that his audience was familiar with life in Israel. For example, he mentions early and late rains; two rainy seasons are a distinct trait of eastern Mediterranean weather. James also refers to a synagogue (James 2:2) and assumes his audience takes pride in its monotheism (2:19). All of this implies that he is writing to people who live in the land of Israel and call Jesus “Lord” (2:1).

In short, while James surely writes for the whole church, he primarily addresses Jewish Christians. As the scribes and Pharisees demonstrate in the Gospels, there are people who know a great deal and take pride in that. But James stresses the need for knowledge that is personal and moral, not just intellectual: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19, ESV). James repeatedly insists that a “faith” that has no works is useless and dead (2:17, 20, 26). So he prods theologically informed people to *live* their faith, rather than resting in doctrinal rectitude. If this summary is correct, the **purpose** of James falls into place. He both describes true faith and exposes superficial, worthless faith. Paradoxically, he says that true faith proves itself with deeds, but notes that we cannot do what we should and must therefore repent and humbly seek God’s grace (4:5–10).

James mentions an array of theological themes, often briefly. His chief interest is the nature of true faith, a faith that works. He also accents God as the Lord of ethics and the Lord of our life course. These themes lead to humility, God's mercy, and the gift of rebirth. James also presents the unity of the law, creation in the image of God, and God's judgment when our brief life ends. He often reapplies teachings from the Old Testament and Jesus on such themes as trials, wisdom, wealth and poverty, speech, care for the poor, favoritism, and prayer during life's joys and sorrows.

The dominant structure of James runs from 1:26 to 4:10. There James names three tests of true religion, shows that no one can meet them, and then calls for gospel repentance. He prepares for this in 1:1–25 by showing that life constantly tests or tries everyone, whether in the form of sudden trials or ongoing challenges, such as the need to handle poverty and riches faithfully. From 4:11 to 5:20, James shows how true faith manifests itself: in humble planning, constant prayer, and care for our brothers. How blessed we students of James will be if we follow where he leads and humble ourselves before the Lord when we falter.

Daniel M. Doriani

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Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Bible Study series

Author of *James* (REC)

LESSON 1

THE TRIALS OF LIFE

James 1:1–12

THE BIG PICTURE

If you have recently studied one of Paul’s letters (Romans or Galatians, for example), you can be in for a bit of a jolt when you begin reading and studying the book of James. Unlike the epistles of Paul, James’s entire letter mentions the name of Jesus only twice, and the substitutionary atonement is never clearly spelled out. James is chock-full of imperatives (commands). It actually reads more like a New Testament version of the Old Testament’s Wisdom Literature—and in some places even like the Prophets! It’s an epistle that has, at times, confounded and frustrated students and preachers who follow in the Reformed tradition, because it almost seems to ignore the central doctrines of salvation by faith alone, through grace alone. Upon careful study, though, we find that James (the half-brother of Jesus), has his theological footing carefully planted in the gospel of grace. His instructions for Jewish Christians are rooted in the hope of a God who “gives more grace” (4:6). James tells Christians to walk in step with the character of the God who, in Christ, saves sinners by his grace.

In the first twelve verses of his letter, James tackles the difficult subject of trials in the lives of Christians. He tells them to consider these trials as joy, seeing that God is at work in the midst of them to increase their godliness, maturity, and steadfastness. As believers cling to faith in God and persevere in the midst of trials, they can do so with the confidence that “the crown of life” awaits them (1:12).

Read James 1:1–12.

GETTING STARTED

1. Consider a time when you were challenged or confronted (for example, by a friend, family member, spiritual leader, or mentor) because your actions were not lining up with your words and/or beliefs. How did that person seek to convince you of your error? How did you feel when confronted? How did you respond?

2. While each of us faces different levels of trial and trouble throughout our lives, we all deal with hardship, struggles, and various forms of pain (physical, emotional, and relational). What are some of the ways in which you have sought God, in the midst of trials, over the years? What false views or perspectives on God have you had to battle as you have faced various degrees of suffering?

The Gospel of James, pg. 13

Genuine believers order their lives under the will and word of the Lord. Then, when they fail to meet the standard, they plead for grace. As James says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (4:10). That is the gospel of James.

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. Begin by looking over the text carefully, observing repeated words, phrases, or ideas. As you do so, jot down your initial thoughts about the main point of these twelve verses.
4. The book of James is full of vivid imagery, metaphor, and word pictures. What vivid pictures does James use in this passage to illustrate the human subjects that he discusses? How are these images effective for us as readers?
5. Note how the passage begins and ends. What words and ideas are there in both places? How does verse 12 explain verse 2 and offer a conclusion to this section of the letter?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. Look through James 1:1–12 and identify the main imperatives in these opening verses. What do these commands tell you about James’s goal for his audience as they endure “trials of various kinds”?

7. What are the intended results of trials and testing, according to James (1:3–4)? Why does James say that his readers “know” this? Why might James not have been overly specific in his identification of these “trials,” and what does this tell us about the kinds of trials he has in mind?

8. What conditions are attached to the God-intended results of trials (1:5–8)? What is necessary for us, as believers, to grow and persevere through trouble? How does James in these verses call for believers to seek wisdom, and what warnings does he offer?

The Proof of Our Faith, pg. 16

The trials of life will probe whether we live by our professed doctrines or not. James says life will try us, proving our faith authentic or inauthentic. In life’s tests, abstract theology will not suffice. Genuine Christians fail some tests, of course. . . . But faithfulness during trials does prove that our faith is genuine and mature.

9. How can James 1:9–11 help us understand both poverty and wealth from a more biblical perspective? Explain James’s words to both “the lowly brother” and the “rich” person. What do his commands tell us about the dangers, and the spiritual opportunities, of both situations?

10. If we understand verse 12 as the conclusion of this first section of James’s letter, how does this verse confirm the main theme of these opening verses? What does this verse suggest about the reward that is ahead for believers in Christ? Who receives this reward, and what is it, exactly? How should the hope of reward motivate Christians?

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

11. The author of Hebrews, quoting from Proverbs, reminds Christians of yet another way to consider trials, pain, and trouble in this world: “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:5b–6). How is understanding trials as potentially God’s good discipline for us a helpful addition to what you have learned in James 1?

12. Proverbs 30:8–9 records a prayer for neither poverty nor riches (take a moment and read those verses now). What are the dangers and temptations that accompany material poverty? What dangers and temptations come with great wealth?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

13. As part of the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism (“What is your only comfort in life and death?”), we find this affirmation: [Jesus] has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.” How is this statement in agreement with the truths you’ve studied in James 1:1–12? How does it build upon these truths and explain more about God’s care and purpose for us, even in trials?

14. Why do we face trials? Why does God allow troubles—large and small—to enter the lives of his beloved children? This passage from James that you’ve just studied helps to answer those difficult questions. The great Reformer, Martin Luther, wrote about one clear purpose that God has for his children in the midst of trials: In trials, God “wants to make us conformed to the image of his dear Son, Christ, so that we may become like him here in suffering and there in that life to come in

honor and glory.”¹ How is this truth about God’s purpose for trials an encouragement to you? What can you do to remind yourself of this in the midst of trouble or suffering?

APPLYING THE TEXT

15. James wants you to “count it all joy” when you face trials of many kinds in this life (1:2); this instruction has to do with the way you consider, think about, and understand the ordinary struggles and trials of life in a fallen world. How can you obey this command from James more joyfully and faithfully, in every season of life? What might be some practical ways in which you could grow in “counting” trials as joy, as you follow Jesus?

16. What might it look like for you to ask for “wisdom” from God in the midst of the trials of life (1:5)? Where and how might your local church fit into that process?

1. Martin Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, *Sermons I*, ed. John W. Doberstein and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 206.

17. How are James's words to the poor and to the rich encouraging, challenging, or convicting to you (1:9–11)? How do these verses challenge you to embrace God's perspective on your life and your possessions?

PRAYER PROMPT

As you close this time of study in James 1, spend some time asking God to reshape your perspective on the ordinary trials of life, which we face in every single season. Pray that he would give you strength and humility to ask for his wisdom in the midst of trial, as your loving Father uses every trouble to build “steadfastness” in your heart and soul, for the glory of Jesus Christ.

The Life of Faith, pg. 29

The Jewish Christians who first read James needed to hear this teaching, and so do we. Many are strong in *knowledge* of the faith, but weak in the *life* of faith. James brings a corrective. The trials of life test our faith, pushing us to act, not just to think. If we withstand the tests of life, we see that our faith in Christ is genuine. Then, when God has confirmed our faith, he will grant us the crown of life eternal.