

## **The Message of the Book of James by Bob Young**

### **Introduction**

James is a book written to a group of first-century Christians who were struggling. The book assumes its readers already know the foundations of the faith. Its purpose is not a defense of the truth. James mentions Jesus twice, never the cross, atonement, Holy Spirit, or resurrection. The book does not emphasize doctrine, but focuses on practical living. It is a book that looks at the church from a different vantage point, describing the Christian life in practical terms.

The focus is not on what we believe, but what we do. Someone said Bible focuses on two themes: the way to God, the walk with God. If this is true, James is the latter. Ours is a difficult world; life is difficult. If persecution purifies the person, constant suffering suffocates the spirit. That was reality for many Christians in the first century, and it happens in our day too. Slowly, surely, often unseen, discouragement sets in. It is easy to buckle under the pressures and doubts of life. All need exhortation and encouragement. All need reminders to maintain faith. Further, ours is a shadowy world, filled with instability (1:8, 17, 6-8, 2ff, 22-24). This theme surfaces several times in the first chapter of James. How shall we accurately, adequately define the character or nature of this shadowy world which has so little substance? It is paradoxical, backward. It is undependable, temporary, tossing us, filled with trials and temptations, deceptive.

### **James Outlined**

As we live in this kind of world, we seek solutions. James gives them, but it is helpful to understand the rhythm of book. While we have five chapters, there are many more themes and subsections. An outline that I have found helpful identifies three admonition-application sections between an introduction and a conclusion. (In the outline below, the number-letter combinations represent chapters, e.g. 1A is the first part of chapter one, 1B the second part.)

- 1A-Trials, temptations (introduction)
- 1B-Listen to God (admonition)
- 2A-Impartiality (application)
- 2B-Faith (admonition)
- 3A-Tongue (application)
- 3B/4A-Wisdom from above, seek God (admonition)
- 4B/5A-Life--motives/worldliness/pride/personal relationships/depend upon God (application)
- 5B--Be patient, persevere, despite suffering, look to God who is substance/stability (conclusion)

Others have outlined the book based on the vocative phrases, “my brothers” and parallels. This results in a larger number of sections, 14 or more. Some have seen a chiasmic structure in the book.

Regardless of the way one outlines the book, admitting that wisdom literature is often difficult to outline, one can identify various repeated themes in the book. Some examples are trials and temptations; the tongue and speech; perseverance; morality and righteousness; wisdom (and deception), belief, faith, and doubt; the poor and rich; wealth; God’s word; maturity; God’s nature and God’s desires; humility, boasting, and judging; how one treats others; patience; and prayer. Many of these themes can be used to provide outlines for classes or sermons. Following are examples.

## **FAITH**

This outline suggests helpful solutions as we strive to life in an unstable world.

James speaks of testing faith, developing faith, responsive faith, submissive faith, consistent faith, dependent faith, and persevering faith.

### **I. Faith when tested does not break; the result is stability.**

This it does as we learn to listen to God, 1:16-27

- A. Because of his nature
  - 1. Many deceivers, 1:16
  - 2. Observe life, good perfect gifts come from God who does not shift, 1:17
  - 3. God blessed us with birth, new regeneration, given us as firstfruits, the promise of what is to follow, 1:18
  - 4. Because we see and know our natural tendencies, 1:19-20
- B. Because of the nature of his word, 1:21
  - 1. Cleansing
  - 2. Saving
- C. Because of the results of listening
  - 1. It encourages action, 1:22
  - 2. It encourages introspection, 1:23
  - 3. It encourages remembrance, 1:24-25
  - 4. It encourages realistic self-evaluation, 1:25
  - 5. It results in actions that are genuinely religious, 1:26-27
- D. James' primary application is to impartiality

### **II. Faith when pressed does not falter; the result is loving relationships.**

This it does as we practice faith, overcoming indifference and mere mental exercises with obedience

- A. Faith is the foundation of action, overcoming indifference, 2:14ff
- B. Faith is more than mental exercise or acceptance, 2:19
- C. Faith is best seen in life examples which demonstrate obedience, 2:20f
- D. Faith is dead without corresponding activity, 2:26
- E. James' primary application is to the use of the tongue

### **III. Faith when expressed does not explode; the result is control and humility.**

This it does as we seek God's wisdom.

- A. Three ways we express ourselves
  - 1. Words, 3:1-12
  - 2. Attitudes, 3:13-4:12
  - 3. Desires, 4:13-5:6
- B. Three aspects of wisdom
  - 1. The need for wisdom--the foundation of a good life, 3:13
  - 2. The characteristics of wisdom, 3:16-17
  - 3. The results of wisdom--4:1-12
- C. The results of this wisdom
  - 1. Affects our motives
  - 2. Fashions our attitude toward world
  - 3. Develops Pride vs. Humility
  - 4. Guides Personal relationships
  - 5. Depends upon God
- D. James' primary application is to questions of motive, pride and worldliness focusing upon a personal relationship with and dependence upon God

## **Conclusion**

In the midst of trials how shall we respond? Faith when distressed does not panic, but produces genuine patience. We may find trials in material things, in sickness, in sin, in deprivation, in worldliness, and even in the correction lovingly extended by others.

Faith allows us to be patient, to persevere despite suffering, to look to God, who is the only ultimate source of substance, stability.

I am reminded of 2 Cor. 4:7ff. The power is from God. We are pressed but not crushed; perplexed but not despairing; persecuted but not deserted by God; knocked down but not destroyed. Knowing this we do not lose heart.

We listen and obey, with wisdom from God. Depend upon God, come to him, depend on him for strength when life and sin overwhelms, depend on him for salvation because we cannot find it ourselves, depend on him for renewal because our will alone cannot restore the God relationship; depend on him for power for living in the midst of problems. This is stability in a shaky world, something solid in a shadowy world. Lean on him, the everlasting arms.

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## **SEEING AND SEEKING GOD**

The book of James focuses on how to live the Christian life. One key is seeing clearly in a world of shadows. Christians see an unchanging God in the midst of an undependable, ever-changing world. James 1 describes this world with references to waves, burning sun, temptations, and shadows. Life is difficult. This is a world of trials and temptations. Only seeing God clearly and maintaining a singular focus on God will guide the journey.

Consider life principles to help us see God and keep our eyes on the goal....

- Seeing God clearly helps us see ourselves and others clearly, 1:1-2:13
- Faith that sees God clearly acts in response, 2:14-3:12
- When one sees God clearly, God's wisdom shapes a consistent faith and life, 3:13-18
- Seeking God requires establishing priorities, 4:1-5:20