

*LifeChange*

S E R I E S

A life-changing encounter  
with God's Word from the book of

# JAMES

A NavPress Bible Study Emphasizing:

**Personal discovery of God's Word**

**Application of Scripture to your daily life**

**Scene-setting historical insights**

**Leader's guides for small groups**

**Helpful word origins and definitions**

**Stimulating discussion questions**

**Challenging optional projects**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

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## Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals.

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

## Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

*Optional Application.* Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

*For Thought and Discussion.* Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles.

They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

*For Further Study.* These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application question.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

## Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of James. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author's *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study of James by asking yourself, “Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?”

In lessons two through eleven, you will analyze successive passages of James in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

In lesson twelve, you will review James, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

## Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God's Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

## Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 121. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

## Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A phrase such as The Living Bible is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

## Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

## For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen's studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for

discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (pre-formed shower wallboard works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Page 124 lists some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

# INTRODUCTION

## James the Just

When the first Christian evangelists proclaimed that people could enter the kingdom of God simply by believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, a lot of people accepted the offer. Inevitably, few became spiritual giants overnight. The apostle Paul wrote many letters to solve problems and amend errors in the churches he founded. And someone who calls himself merely "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1) wrote a message to correct a distortion of the gospel: the idea that spiritual rebirth meant we could remain babies forever.

### The Lord's brother

James (the English equivalent of *Iakobos* or *Jacob*) was a common Jewish name: in fact, two of Jesus' twelve apostles were named James (Matthew 10:2-4). However, James the son of Zebedee died too early to have written this letter (AD 44, Acts 12:2), and little is known about James the son of Alphaeus. Tradition attributes the biblical letter to the man Paul calls "James, the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19).<sup>1</sup>

James was probably the eldest of the four brothers named in Mark 6:3.<sup>2</sup> While Jesus was wandering through Galilee and Judea proclaiming the kingdom of God, James and the rest of His family thought He was a bit crazy (Mark 3:20-21; John 7:5). But when Jesus appeared to James after the Resurrection, James finally understood his brother (1 Corinthians 15:7). He became a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14; 15:12-21; 21:17-19)—indeed Paul called him one of the "pillars" of the church (Galatians 2:9). It was James and Peter whom Paul visited three years after his conversion (Galatians 1:18-19), James to whom Peter sent word of his miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12:17), and James whose judgment regarding the Gentiles was accepted by the whole Jerusalem council (Acts 15:13-29).

James was known as "the Just" or "the Righteous" by the people of Jerusalem, both Christian and non-Christian. The fourth-century Christian

historian Eusebius said that this was because James was scrupulous about observing the Jewish Law, and Eusebius recorded several legends about James's piety and asceticism. However, the Jewish historian Josephus wrote in AD 93 that James was stoned by the Jews in AD 62 on a charge of violating the Law.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence that James agreed with the Jewish Christians who said Gentiles could not be saved unless they kept the Jewish Law (Acts 15:1). He did apparently try to make Christianity more appealing to Jews by encouraging Jewish Christians to keep the Law and to avoid eating with Gentiles (Acts 21:17-24; Galatians 2:11-13). Still, James was not claiming that the Law was necessary for salvation, and he did not want to hinder the evangelism of Gentiles (Acts 15:19). James was eager to effect a compromise between Jews and Gentiles on "matters of secondary importance"<sup>4</sup> — cultural things like what to eat (Acts 15:20). However, he was unswervingly opposed to compromise with pagan moral values (Acts 15:20; James 1:21).

## A strawy epistle?

In Martin Luther's version of the New Testament published in 1522, he put the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end as a supplement rather than in their usual places, and he omitted them from the table of contents. He explained why in his introduction:

In fine, Saint John's Gospel and his first Epistle, Saint Paul's Epistles, especially those to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Saint Peter's first Epistle, — these are the books which show thee Christ, and teach thee everything that is needful and blessed for thee to know even though thou never see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore is Saint James's Epistle a right strawy Epistle in comparison with them, for it has no gospel character to it.<sup>5</sup>

Luther devalued James because he thought James was responding against Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works. Also, the epistle barely mentions Jesus at all, and never His death and resurrection. In fact, the conflict between Paul and James is only apparent. James shows no sign of ever having read Paul's letters to the Romans or Galatians. He uses words like "justification," "faith," and "works" differently from Paul, and he never addresses Paul's teachings directly.<sup>6</sup> Paul wrote Romans in about AD 57, and James died in AD 62, so it is unlikely that James could have seen a copy of Romans.

Some people think James wrote around AD 45, before Paul began his missionary travels and before there were many Gentiles in the church.<sup>7</sup> If this date is correct, then James is the earliest New Testament book and is not a reply to distortions of Paul's writings. Instead, it is an exhortation to live what we believe.

On the other hand, some people date the letter around AD 55–60.<sup>8</sup> If this is right, then James wrote during a time when Paul's views were being widely discussed, misquoted, and misconstrued. Apparently, there were some people in the church who thought that justification by grace apart from works

meant they could disregard God's moral Law. Even Paul had to fight this distortion (Romans 6:1,15).

## The gospel of James

Whichever date we choose between AD 45 and 60, James's message is the same. His focus is much like Jesus', and he is steeped in Jesus' teachings, especially as recorded in Matthew. The poor inherit the kingdom (James 2:5; compare Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20); the persecuted are blessed (James 1:12; compare Matthew 5:10-12); deeds of mercy reflect faith in Jesus (James 1:27; 2:14-17; compare Matthew 7:21; 25:31-46); and so on.<sup>9</sup> James takes faith in Jesus the Christ as a given (James 1:1; 2:1) and does not discuss doctrines about Christ. This is natural for someone who grew up with Jesus and is writing to people who have already put faith in Christ. D. A. Hayes concludes, "James says less about the Master than any other writer in the New Testament, but his speech is more like that of the Master than the speech of any of them."<sup>10</sup>

James's faith is still very Jewish, as Jesus' was. While Paul bases his teaching on who Christ is and who we are in Christ, James draws his from who God is and who we are as God's creatures (1:13,16-18,27; 2:5; 3:9; 4:4,6,12,14; 5:4). Paul rhapsodizes on our mystical union with Christ in His death and resurrection, and only later gets practical. James goes straight to the practical: Here is how to live in light of the gospel. Paul appears most concerned to explain the gospel to people who don't fully understand it. James seems to think his readers basically know and believe the gospel, but they don't understand its implications for living. God wants more than justified infants. He wants mature daughters and sons. Faith is foundational, but it must be genuine, proven faith, evident to the world.

Far from being a "strawy" epistle, James's letter offers us a vigorous, vital view of Christian faith — a call to tested, mature faith to which Peter, Paul, and Jesus Himself could have said, "Amen."

1. Those who are interested in the debate over who wrote the epistle of James should consult some of the commentaries listed on page 121.
2. When the church began to put a greater value on celibacy, especially Mary's virginity, it was suggested that the brothers were sons of Joseph by a previous marriage or cousins of Jesus (the word *brother* can have this sense in Greek and Hebrew). Modern Protestant commentators generally think the brothers were sons of Joseph and Mary after Jesus' birth. For a fuller explanation, see R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 22-24.
3. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, in the Loeb Classical Library, trans. H. St. James Thackeray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 20.9.1.
4. Tasker, 26.
5. From the introduction to Martin Luther's New Testament of 1522, trans. J. H. Ropes, quoted in Tasker, 14.
6. For more on why Paul and James seem not to be arguing against each other, see E. M. Sidebottom, *James, Jude, 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 16-18.

7. Donald W. Burdick, *The NIV Study Bible*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 1879; Henry C. Theissen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), 277.
8. Sidebottom, 11–18; Tasker, 30–33; Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2–22.
9. Sidebottom lists three full pages of parallels between James's letter and Matthew's gospel in Sidebottom, 8–11.
10. D. A. Hayes, "Epistle of James," vol. 3 of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 1564.

## LESSON ONE

# OVERVIEW

If you are like most people when you receive an important letter, you probably read it straight through first to see what the writer has to say in general. After that, you may go back to examine particular sections more closely. This is just the way to study a biblical letter. In this lesson, you'll take a broad overview of James's epistle to lay the groundwork for detailed study in future lessons.

1. James is an elder of the church in Jerusalem, a man who knew Jesus well during His earthly life and who saw Him after His resurrection. As a Christian in some distant province of the Roman Empire, you have probably never met James. Still, he cares enough about you to send some of the truths he thinks are crucial to Christian life. Read his letter through at one sitting. If possible, read it twice in different translations. Say some of it aloud to hear how it sounds. You may want to keep questions 2 through 6 in mind as you read, but wait until afterward to write answers.

2. What are your first impressions of this book? (For instance, how is it organized—tightly, loosely, with one unifying theme, without connections between topics . . . ? What is James's tone—humorous, harsh, friendly, dry, passionate, humble, arrogant, authoritative? How does he feel about his readers and his topics?)



6. Some people find no single theme in this letter, while others do see a theme running through all his words. What phrase or sentence would you use to summarize what James is saying?

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### Study Skill — Overviews

You will probably find overviews enormously helpful when you study books of the Bible on your own. You can use this lesson as a model for your own overviews. Include the following steps:

1. Read the whole book at least once, preferably at one sitting. (This may be hard with long books.)
2. Jot down your first impressions, such as the author's tone of voice, his attitudes toward his readers and himself, how he organizes his message, and how he presents his message (stories, pictures, instructions, descriptions of people or events, poetry, logical reasoning, etc.)
3. Sketch a broad outline of the book by giving titles to major sections. (You can compare your titles to those in some study Bibles, handbooks, and commentaries.)
4. Write down as many repeated words and ideas as you can find. (Of course, don't bother with words like *the* or *and*.)
5. Decide what you think is the author's purpose for writing.
6. State what you think are the themes of the book — the main ideas that the author is trying to get across.

7. If you haven't already read the Introduction on pages 9–12, do so now.

8. After reading the letter and the Introduction, what are some of the questions that you would

like to have answered as you delve more deeply into James's epistle? (Your questions can serve as personal objectives for your study.)

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### Study Skill — Application

In 1:22 James writes, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." In other words, application is an essential part of Bible study. Every lesson of this study contains both "Optional Applications" in the margins and at least one open-ended application question after the interpretation questions. Application will often require some time for thought, prayer, planning, and action. You may want to discuss the passage with someone else to help you decide how to apply it. You'll be looking for specific ways to do what God's Word says.

Some questions to ask yourself are "What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?" At times, you may find it most productive to concentrate on one application, giving it careful thought, prayer, and effort during the week. At other times, you may want to list many implications a passage has for your life, plan to memorize and meditate on the passage during the week, and look for ways to apply it. Choose whatever strategy is most fruitful.

Don't neglect prayer. As John 15:1-5 points out, you can't do what the Word says unless you are living intimately with Christ and drawing on His power. Go to God for guidance about what to apply and how, for strength to do what He says, for forgiveness when you fail, and for thanksgiving when you succeed.

9. Did your overview of James suggest any areas of your life that you want to work on during this study? If so, jot them down, along with any plans you already have to deal with them. Take each one to God in prayer, asking Him to show you His priorities for your application and to give you His strength to become what He desires. If any of James's words have convicted you, confess your failings to God.

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### For the group

This "For the group" section and the ones in later lessons are intended to suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select what suits your group and ignore the rest. The main goals of this lesson are to get to know James's letter as a whole and the people with whom you are going to study it.

**Worship.** Some groups like to begin with prayer and/or singing. Some share requests for prayer at the beginning, but leave the actual prayer until after the study. Others prefer just to chat and have refreshments for a while and then move to the study, leaving worship until the end. It is a good idea to start with at least a brief prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance and some silence to help everyone change focus from the day's business to the Scripture.

**Warm-up.** The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, to get comfortable with each other, and to encourage a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of James, and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. Why do you want to study the Bible, and James in particular? If you have someone write down each member's hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. Allow about fifteen minutes for this discussion so that it does not degenerate into vague chatting.

**How to use this study.** If the group has never used a LIFECHANGE study guide before, you might take a whole meeting to get acquainted, discuss your goals, and go over the "How to Use This Study" section on pages 5–8. Then you can take a second meeting to discuss the overview. This will assure that everyone understands the study and will give you more time to read all of James and answer the overview questions.

Go over the parts of the "How to Use This Study" section that you think the group should especially notice. For example, point out the optional questions in the margins. These are available as group discussion questions, ideas for application, and suggestions for further study. It is unlikely that anyone will have the time or desire to answer all the optional questions. A person might do one "Optional Application" for any given lesson. You might choose one or two "For Thought and Discussions" for your group discussion, or you might spend all your time on the numbered questions. If someone wants to write answers to the optional questions, suggest that he or she use a separate notebook. It will also be helpful for discussion notes, prayer requests, answers to prayers, application plans, and so on.

Invite everyone to ask questions about how to use the study guide and how your discussions will go.

**Reading.** It is often helpful to refresh everyone's memory by reading the passage aloud before discussing the questions. Reading all of James may

take some time, but the effort will be rewarded. Have a different person read each chapter, using the tone of voice he or she thinks James would have used. Try to make the letter sound like a living person talking.

**First impressions.** If members don't understand question 2, ask how James's letter is like and unlike ones they write, or like and unlike a sermon, advice from a father, an essay, one of Paul's letters, and so on. Some aspects of style that you might draw attention to are:

1. Picture words ("like a wave of the sea," "like a wild flower," "ships," "a great forest is set on fire," etc.) rather than abstract words (such as "faithless" or "brief")
2. Lots of commands and exhortations stated in simple, blunt sentences
3. A tone of authority
4. James's affection for his readers ("brothers and sisters," "dear brothers and sisters")

The character of the author is an important part of understanding a letter. Ask someone to tell what he or she knows about James and the circumstances in which he was probably writing.

Some people dislike to give any attention to the human author of inspired Scripture because this seems to denigrate its divine authority. If necessary, explain that this series takes the view that just as Jesus was fully God and fully Man, so the books of the Bible are eternal messages from the Spirit of God and messages from particular men in particular times and places. Just as Jesus' humanity and divinity are both essential to His mission and nature, so the humanity and divinity of the biblical books are both important. When we discuss James as the writer of this letter, we are in no way denying divine inspiration.

Compare your answers to questions 3 through 6. You might also look together at some outlines of James in study Bibles or commentaries. Remember that there is no one right way to title a passage.

**Questions.** Give everyone a chance to share questions about the Introduction and the letter. It is good to clear up any confusion as early as possible. However, don't answer any questions that deal with

specific passages. Write those down and let the group answer them when you get to the passages.

**Application.** If application is new to some group members, you might make up some sample applications together. Choose a paragraph or verse and think of how it is relevant to you and some specific things you could each do about it. Share your answers to question 9. If there is real confusion about application, see the Study Skill on page 40.

**Wrap-up.** The group leader should have read lesson two and its "For the group" section. At this point, he or she might give a short summary of what members can expect in that lesson and the coming meeting. This is a chance to whet everyone's appetite, assign any optional questions, omit any numbered questions, or forewarn members of possible difficulties.

Encourage any members who found the overview especially difficult. Some people are better at seeing the big picture than others. Some are best at analyzing a particular verse or paragraph, while others are strongest at seeing how a passage applies to their lives. Urge members to give thanks for their own and others' strengths, and to give and request help when needed. The group is a place to learn from each other. Later lessons will draw on the gifts of close analyzers as well as overviewers and applicators, practical as well as theological thinkers.

**Worship.** Many groups like to end with singing and/or prayer. This can include songs and prayers that respond to what you've learned in James or prayers for specific needs of group members. Some people are shy about sharing personal needs or praying aloud in groups, especially before they know the other people well. If this is true of your group, then a song and/or some silent prayer and a short closing prayer spoken by the leader might be an appropriate end. You could also share requests and pray in pairs.