

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Telling the New Testament  
Story of God



**SESSION 15**  
Hebrews and James

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# Hebrews and James

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Letter to the Hebrews**

**Letter of James**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## INTRODUCTION

This is a foundational study for understanding the setting and message of the New Testament. This study will introduce you to the New Testament biblical literature, Bible study methods, and the environment of the Early Church. Special attention will be given to the political, cultural, religious, and geographical setting, the literary genre, and the meaning of the text in its original cultural, historical, and literary context for the purpose of discovering the principles of truth to be applied to our contemporary setting.

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- gain an understanding of the types of letters written in the first century.
- know the purpose and main content for the General Letters, Hebrews, and James.

## LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

### NOTES

In spite of a lack of familiarity with Hebrews by many, it has a distinctive and significant message. John Calvin states: “There is indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, so splendidly extols the power and worth of that unique sacrifice which he offered by his death, deals more adequately with the use and also the abrogation of ceremonies, and, in short, explains more fully that Christ is the end of the Law.”

### WHO?

*Author:* Tradition claims Paul as author although his name is not found in the oldest extant (existing) manuscripts. Very few current scholars accept Paul’s authorship of this work. Some of the names suggested for the author of this letter are:

- Barnabas, a companion of Paul
- Luke because of the good style of Greek
- Clement of Rome (suggested by Origen)
- Apollos (suggested by Martin Luther)
- Sylvanus, companion of Paul
- Philip
- Priscilla
- Probably, the best suggestion was by Origen: “Only God knows.”

The author’s characteristics that we can discern from the text itself include:

- He or she was a second-generation Christian, not an eyewitness of Jesus (2:3).
- He or she was not an early leader (13:7).
- He or she uses Platonic thought. As with this line of thinking:
  1. The material world is imperfect and changing, a copy of the true world (7:18-19, 8:5, 9:23, 10:1).
  2. Humans have access to the divine through the mind and reason (5:12, 13:15-16).


**NOTES**

3. Education of the soul, milk (elementary teaching), is for the immature. The soul seeks to be mature or perfect (5:12-6:3).

*Audience.* Jews, who believed in angels. This would indicate Pharisaic beliefs (1:1; 2:9; 16). They were very familiar with the Old Testament as indicated by quotations from Psalms, 2 Samuel, 1 Chronicles, and Deuteronomy (1:5-14) included in the book. They had heard of salvation as it was announced by Jesus, but it was delivered to them by eyewitnesses who personally knew Jesus (2:3).

**WHERE?**

*Author:* Jewish Christian community. Location is unknown.

*Audience:* Jewish Christian community. Location is unknown.

**WHEN?**

AD 40-60. Before the first Jewish revolt, but during a time of increasing tension between Jews and Romans, as well as between Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who did not. The audience has faced persecution, but none had yet died for their faith. References to the cultic ritual of the Temple also seem to indicate the letter was written before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. It is also difficult to imagine that an author wishing to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism would not refer to the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Romans in AD 70.

Some scholars think Hebrews was written much later, sometime between 80 and 100 AD. These scholars emphasize the Greek thought, style, and language of the book. They point out how the writer emphasizes that neither the Tabernacle nor the Temple in Jerusalem was intended to be permanent. Instead, they are copies of the heavenly realities (9:23-24).

In either case (earlier or later dating), Hebrews was written during a period when the Jewish Christians were undergoing extreme pressure to turn away from Christianity and go back to their old Jewish ways.

**WHAT?**

Hebrews is a general epistle with no specific audience named, nor do we know who wrote the letter for sure. It does not follow the regular form of a letter (although it has a typical closing). Rather it seems to be a sermon adapted to the letter form. It follows (unlike Pauline letters) the form of alternating from doctrinal teaching to practical application and exhortation (2:1-4).


**NOTES**

The author is legitimizing Jesus as the promised one, Messiah, prophet, priest. That is, he or she is showing how Jesus fulfills the promises of the Jewish tradition while at the same time is even better than the old Jewish tradition. Christ is presented as a better messenger than the angels (1-2), leader than either Moses or Joshua (3-4), and high priest than Aaron (5-7). He is the mediator of a better covenant (10:9) and offers a better way of life (11-13).

*Special Verses*

- 2:17, 3:1, 4:15, 5:10, 7:26-27: Jesus as our High Priest
- 1:1-4, 3:2-6, 7:16-19, 8:6, 9:13-14, 19:34, 11:16: Christ as better than . . .
- 7:22-28, 8:6, 9:10-11, 13:9: Emphasis on the cultic ritual of Judaism which is inferior to what Christ has provided.

**WHY?**

Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture, so there is no way one can go back to Judaism. These new Jewish Christians were beginning to experience persecution and were wondering if the pain was worth it. The author of Hebrews tells them there is no forgiveness of sin while they are denying Christ. There is no other way to salvation. So returning to the Temple ritual of sacrifice is equal to denying Christ and, therefore, their salvation.

True faith believes God even when His works are not seen. This reassures these persecuted Christians that just because things are not going well, does not mean God is not at work. The true Christian will believe even when everything looks like it is going wrong.

Post-Pentecost Christians face more stern judgment for disobedience than those in the Old Testament did because they have had the benefit of the revelation of Christ and the experience of the Holy Spirit. Christians are admonished to persevere in their faith and stand fast in the face of persecution.

## LETTER OF JAMES

### NOTES

James is a letter written, not to a specific church, but to a specific group of people, twelve tribes in the Diaspora, or better, Jewish Christians in the Diaspora. It addresses issues that are important to the Jewish Christian Church, but are informative and useful also for the Gentile Church. Because of its very Jewish character with emphasis on good works, it took a while before it was accepted into the New Testament canon.

James is a paraenetic letter.

### WHO?

*Author:* James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. The traditional author is James, the brother of the Lord or often referred to as Jesus' half-brother.

- Eusebius (*History of the Church*) depicts James as a model of righteousness and devotion to God. His knees are calloused like those of a camel from praying for the sins of the people. James was taken to the pinnacle of the Temple on Passover where he was to deny Jesus. Instead, he confessed Jesus as the Son of Man and was cast down from there. Since he had not died but was praying for his enemies, James was stoned and then clubbed to death. Immediately after, Emperor Vespasian laid siege to Jerusalem (AD 69).
- From the text of James we see the author was a Greek-speaking, Jewish Christian who understood the significance of religion to be a worshiper of God and to have a commitment to superior moral conduct.

*Audience:* From the text itself the audience is described as the twelve tribes in the Diaspora (1:1) who gather in a synagogue (2:2) and the community is guided by elders (5:14). They are most likely Jewish Christians.

### WHERE?

*Author:* James probably wrote this letter from Jerusalem.

*Audience:* Unknown—Diaspora

### WHEN?

The traditional date would be sometime before James' martyrdom in AD 69.


**NOTES**
**WHAT?**

The theme of James could be: Salvation by Obedient Faith. Its technical rhetorical style is paraenesis or exhortation (encouragement and confrontation on issues of right and wrong) indicating James is not really telling his audience anything new, but encouraging them to follow what they have been taught by him and to keep that faith pure.

James was called an epistle of straw by Martin Luther whose fight was against the rules and ritual of the Roman Catholic Church and in favor of faith and experience. So you can understand as you read this letter that in his particular context, he would have some trouble with James. Later in his life, however, he came to have an appreciation for it.

Some persons have wanted to take James out of the Canon. It was one of the last books to be included in the Canon. Perhaps more than anything this shows the resistance of the Early Church against Jewish ideas and the Early Church's emphasis on salvation by faith.

*Special Verses*

- 1:2-3: The attitude we are to have in temptation
- 1:22-25: Hearing and doing the will of God
- 2:14-26: The relationship between faith and obedient works
- 3:5-13: The control of the tongue
- 4:1-17: The source of division and problems in the Christian life
- 5:13-16: The place of prayer in the Christian life

**WHY?**

*To emphasize that true faith will be reflected in our actions and lifestyle, including social and economic justice.* For example in 2:1-13, James addresses the serious problem of showing partiality or favoritism to the wealthy over the poor in the church. Chapter 2:2-4 reads: "For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also come in, and if you take notice of the one wearing fine clothes and say 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinction among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (NRSV). Such a stance is opposed to God's actions toward the poor (2:5).




**NOTES**

*To stress the relationship between faith and works as found in James 2:14-26.*

This passage begins: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?” James continues by commenting on the useless nature of seeing “bodily needs” and simply responding with words. In verse 17, he states: “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (NRSV).

Some see James’ teachings as being in conflict with the teachings of Paul. Early on, this was the case with Luther. Yet it appears that what seems like a conflict in reality is not. In Galatians and Romans, Paul stressed that we are saved by faith and not by our deeds or the keeping of the Law. Yet, Paul did not see this freedom from the Law as license to live as we please. A life transformed by Christ involved a new way of being and a new way of doing. For both James and Paul, only a life changing response to God is adequate. James and Paul are simply stressing different aspects of the Christian life. Ralph Martin indicates: “In actuality we have not a dispute over faith and works, but over two types of faith.” Martin points out that one type of faith claims to exist independently of works while the other produces works which give evidence to its validity. According to this latter understanding, faith and works are two sides of the same coin.

#### *Special Verses*

- 1:2-4, 13-16: The differing nature and goals of trials and temptations
- 2:18: “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”
- 3:1-12: Taming the tongue; the power of words
- 4:7 “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”
- 5:7-12: The proper way to respond to trials and persecution
- 5:14-16: The prayer of faith

## APPLICATION



### NOTES

1. Read Hebrews and James in two different translations. Look for answers to the five hermeneutical questions Who, What, Where, When, and Why. How do your findings correspond with those presented in this session? Any new findings than those presented in this session?
2. Abraham Lincoln once said: “God must love the common people because he made so many of them.” In his ministry in Los Angeles, the founder of the Church of the Nazarene, Phineas Bresee, evidenced a special concern for the poor. Churches should be places where all persons are made to feel welcome. Certainly, the poor have always been of special concern to God. James’ audience appears to have lost the sense of God’s concern for the poor. Using information from this session, study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>), research this topic in James, as well as the Old and New Testaments. Do the findings of your study affect your understanding of the mission and methods of the church? If so, how? What would be the nature of James’ words to your church?
3. In chapter 1, James uses the same Greek word *peirasmos* in two different senses. In 1:2-4, *peirasmos* is best translated as trial. In 1:13-16, it is best translated as temptation. Using information from study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; and Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>), research this topic. What have you learned? How do temptations differ in terms of their origins, nature, and goals? How might this information be helpful in your Christian walk?

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. James is best classified as a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. letter of advice
  - B. letter of friendship
  - C. paraenetic letter
  - D. letter of praise and blame
2. The author of Hebrews is generally recognized by most scholars to be \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Paul
  - B. Barnabas
  - C. Apollos
  - D. unknown
3. James was called an epistle of straw by \_\_\_\_\_ due to its emphasis on works.
  - A. Martin Luther
  - B. St. Thomas Aquinas
  - C. John Calvin
  - D. Paul
4. It appears that James was written to Jewish Christians who were undergoing extreme pressure and considering turning away from Christianity to go back to their old Jewish ways.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. Each of the following except \_\_\_\_\_ is among the General Epistles.
  - A. Ephesians
  - B. James
  - C. Jude
  - D. 1 John
6. Jesus as our High Priest is emphasized by James in a variety of ways.
  - A. True
  - B. False

 **NOTES**

7. The idea that we are saved through faith in Christ and not by works is stressed in both \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Galatians and Romans
  - B. Romans and Hebrews
  - C. Galatians and Hebrews
  - D. Romans and James
  
8. James emphasizes the need to tame one's tongue in view of the destructive power of words.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
9. As pointed out by Martin, James and Paul demonstrate a major dispute over faith and works in the early Christian church.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
10. The author of James has traditionally been seen as being one of the twelve apostles.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
11. Because of its Jewish character with an emphasis on good works, James was readily accepted into the Christian Canon.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
12. In James, we see the words: "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
13. The author of Hebrews shows how Jesus fulfills the promises of the Jewish tradition, while at the same time is even better than the old Jewish tradition.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. What types of issues do we as human beings find very hard to disagree with family members on and remain a close family unit? Why?
2. Reflect on what it would mean to your church to have a general superintendent write a personal letter to them. What kind of a letter would it be?
3. How do you react to the author of Hebrews strong emphasis on the superiority of Christianity over Judaism? Is such an approach acceptable today? Why or why not?
4. Does James' view of faith and works ultimately contradict Paul's teaching? Why or why not?
5. Salvation is through faith in Christ, but how we live is important. What does a life look like that takes both of these truths seriously?
6. Has a lack of understanding about the nature of trials and temptations created problems for you or for those you know? If so, in what ways?