

INTRODUCTION

Reading the book of James is like taking a cold shower: uncomfortable but invigorating. Early on James makes it clear that Christians don't have the luxury of believing one way and living another. We must put feet on our faith and love God with our lives. James spurs us on to maturity with practical insights and timely reminders.

This letter was one of the very early epistles circulated among the first-century Christians. This assures us of its importance and practical worth, for James wrote from a unique vantage point. Steeped in knowledge of the Old Testament law and the prophetic writings, he was an important leader in the church at Jerusalem. He watched it develop from one hundred and twenty faithful believers to a congregation numbering thousands. Impressive growth! But just as impressive was the spread of the message to the outskirts of the Roman Empire. Believers scattered by persecution travelled far, witnessing as they went. From the center of the action, James saw the progress.

James wrote out of unusual experiences. He was the brother of Jesus, and recollections of living in the same home with the God-man must have remained strong in his memory. In addition, the expansion of the new church brought the pressing question, "How is this Christianity to be worked out in everyday life?" Much of his ministry must have involved finding answers to that question, prayerfully seeking the wisdom he discusses in his letter.

James wrote with a distinctive style. He was direct. He spoke out sternly about displeasing God. He probed inner attitudes and outward actions. He punctuated his concern with a repetition of important ideas.

James wrote to people like us—with similar fears, doubts, and hardships—and this letter is a bridge from the first-century believers to today's Christians. He affirms that Christianity can work in a world that includes both rich and poor; where instability is the rule of the day; where the cutting power of speech is felt in the mass media and over the backyard fence; where the excitement of the competitive, commercial world beckons for attention; where the inner staleness of Christians allows them to drift from the Lord. He has something important to say to all of us.

But after James has had his say, we know he still loves us, and that he longs for us to live up to the truth we find in the perfect "law that gives freedom." He urges us to be impartial, to pray, visit, love, and sing. James wants to lead us in active allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ in both thought and deed until we see our faith expressed in action.