

1. **Background:** This letter was written by James, the Lord's half-brother, very early in the history of the church (perhaps about 45 AD).
  - Many Jewish believers in Jerusalem were persecuted and scattered.
  - James wrote this letter to such believers to motivate them to stand firm in their faith despite the difficult situations confronting them.
  - It is a letter of sound doctrine but has not always been appreciated by the church. Martin Luther considered James' letter to be of little value (an epistle of straw). Why?
  - Luther's principal concern seems to have been that parts of James' letter seemed inconsistent with Paul's position that "salvation is by grace alone."
  - Careful examination reveals there is no conflict on the two men's view of the relationship of faith and works. Scripture confirms James and Paul agreed about the gospel.
  - James affirmed Paul's gospel (Gal. 2:9-10). James accepted Gentiles without male circumcision but called for avoiding idolatry and immorality (Acts 15:13-21).
  - James also warned Paul he needed to repudiate rumors he encouraged Jews to abandon Torah (Acts 21:20-25).
  - Apparent differences between Paul and James arise from their different perspectives.
  - Each addressed a different set of issues. Each used a different meaning of "works."
  - By "works," James means "moral deeds" performed as a natural consequence of having received God-given faith, moral deeds prompted by the "new life."
  - "Works" in Paul's terms, refers to deeds of active obedience to the law of Moses that are done in the hope of earning right standing (salvation) before God.
  - Paul denounces the Law as a basis for justification (Rom 4:15; Gal 13:23ff).
  - James extols the Law as the substance of sanctification (James 1:25; 2:12).
  - Paul and Luther both rightly insist that "good works" contribute nothing to receiving salvation. Salvation is by grace alone.
  - Paul recognizes "faith" to be a marvelous gift from God that brings "new life in Christ," Paul insists all who receive faith are to confirm their faith by the good works they do.
  - Luther said, "*We are saved by faith alone* (no contribution from works), *but not by faith that remains alone.*" That is, faith inevitably produces good works.
  - Similarly, James says true faith does not exist without good "works."
  - God's gift of faith is always accompanied by a desire to please God. That desire will inevitably result in works that please God.
  - Paul and James conclude that good works always accompany true faith and are a visible indication of that faith. Scripture confirms James and Paul agreed about the gospel.

- James does not specifically mention in his letter that salvation is acquired by “grace alone” because he is writing to Jewish-Christian believers who had already experienced “salvation by grace alone” but were wobbling in the faith.
  - These “wobbly” Christians were having difficulty standing firm in the faith they already possessed as well as consistently doing faith’s good works.
  - That has always been and remains a difficult problem for all Christians. The many demands in life do not all have obvious answers consistent with steadfastness.
2. **James’ Letter:** James wrote about practical godliness to believers who knew the basics of the faith but pressure from the unbelieving world was making it difficult to remain steadfast in the faith. James reminds them that the opposition they are experiencing is not unexpected.
- Practical godliness depends on obeying the Law of God. Faith is the motivating force.
  - Stand firm! God will make it possible to remain faithful to Him.
  - The letter’s style of writing is polished. Its Greek is of high quality. This has led many to believe James’ original material was edited and assembled by someone skilled in Greek.
  - That may be true, but the thoughts and message are from James.
3. **James 1:1: “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.”**
- It is a humble opening. James claims no title save that of servant, although he is the Lord’s half-brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church.
  - As far as we know, James was an unbeliever until after the resurrection.
  - 1Corinthians 15:1-7 reports that the resurrected Lord visited James. From that moment forward, James appears in Scripture as a redeemed man.
  - James was with the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 1:14) and there are references to him in Acts 21 and Galatians 2.
  - In 50 AD an important conference was called in Jerusalem to review the missionary work of Paul and Silas. James led that conference as head of the Jerusalem church.
  - When Paul made his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18), James was still in the leadership position in Jerusalem. James was martyred after the death of Festus (AD 62).
  - In their new locations, exiled believers were experiencing growing opposition to their faith. The letter’s intent is to encourage them to live a life worthy of their status in Christ. The advice James gave them remains important today.
  - The overall theme of the letter is standing firm in the face of trials even when the trial is very severe. Faith that is active and responsive to the needs of life is faith that keeps a believer doing the right things at the right time for the right reasons.
  - Faith should determine a person’s behavior in every phase of life.
4. **Threatening Times Experienced by James’ First Readers:** The people James wrote to were not only experiencing interference with their faith, but were also restricted in their employment and market-place opportunities.

- To get the right picture, think about the situation of the Jews under the Nazis.
  - Step-by-step, Nazis prohibited the Jews from owning property, restricted the jobs they might hold, forbade them to mingle with non-Jews, forced them to live in designated areas and identify themselves as Jews by a symbol on their clothes.
  - Synagogues were destroyed. Religious leaders were targeted. Eventually most Jews were rounded up and transported to prison camps where the able were put to slave labor and the weak were executed.
  - A similar progression of oppression for Christians was beginning in the Roman Empire. It was still relatively early in the cycle but increasingly difficult and would culminate in severe oppression near the end of the first century.
5. **James' Reasons for Writing:** (1.) Oppression led some Christians to deny their faith. (2.) Oppression also caused bickering among believers as the stronger in the faith condemned the weaker for giving in to worldly pressure.
- James realized that the ability to endure trials is strongly impacted by attitude. James says, when a trial confronts you, should choose an attitude of "joy." Why?
  - Successfully facing trials with an attitude of joy produces steadfastness in faith.
6. **James 1:2-4:** *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*
- James gives positive pastoral direction.
  - "Count" has to do with reckoning, thinking critically about what is and will be.
  - It may seem James says trials in and of themselves will enable believers to become perfect and complete. But that is not what he means.
  - Trials are by nature difficult, and trials don't appear to the one experiencing them to be good, not a reason for joy.
  - The point is not that trials are good but that successfully enduring a trial without damaging your faith strengthens that faith.
  - Trials test faith. During a trial, there will likely be a strong desire to do whatever is necessary to make a trial go away. James says, resist that urge.
  - Resist behavior inconsistent with faith, even if you believe that behavior will make the trial go away. Successful resistance produces "steadfastness" of character.
  - Count it all joy when a test of your faith presents you with an opportunity to strengthen your faith and grow in perfection and completeness.
  - Whatever the circumstances, you can choose an attitude of joy.
  - An attitude of joy is based on knowing God uses for our ultimate good, everything that happens to us, even bad things.
  - Standing steadfast in the face of trials will be rewarded by God as He makes us spiritually perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

- Our emotions and intellect will demand we do something - anything to get out of the mess confronting us. Temptation will be great to take any available “out” even if it is inconsistent with faith.
  - But God always provides a God-honoring way to bring us through trials. It may not be possible to avoid the hurt and difficulties of the trial, but God will stand with us through the trial enabling us to endure what must be endured.
  - God designed our “ability to choose” such that we can override our emotions.
  - We can use our power of choice to choose a God-honoring attitude and the behavior that corresponds to the attitude. “Joy” is the attitude James suggests.
  - Power-of-choice works in most situations, but extreme physical and mental torture may be more than body and mind can bear.
  - It may help to count the pluses and minuses of being faithful to God under extreme persecution and compare to the minuses of denying faith.
  - Believers are to deal with trials in God-honoring ways. How do we do that if the trial we face has every nerve in our body tingling and we shake with fear, dreading the mental and/or physical pain we face?
  - It is better to be on God’s side even if it costs our mortal life. God rewards faithfulness, and He will reward our steadfastness to Him.
  - A believer’s mission in life is to trust and obey. Steadfastness is a reason for joy.
7. **James Primary Concern** is not a believer’s feelings or what they think about a particular trial. The concern is for behavior in the face of trials.
- Since a believer’s “power-of-choice” can override emotions/intellect, a God-honoring attitude can be chosen even if emotions and intellect cry out for a “no pain” option. Attitude and behavior interact, strengthening or weakening the other.
  - The tendency is for attitude and behavior to come to an equilibrium in which attitude and behavior are roughly equal in impact.
  - If attitude is changed, behavior follows. Change behavior and attitude follows.
  - Attitude and behavior are closely linked, but our will can override and control both attitude and behavior. The following true story demonstrates this truth.
8. **Viktor Frankl and the Power of Choosing an Attitude:** In 1942 Frankl was Director of the Neurological Department of the Rothschild Hospital. He was arrested by the Gestapo.
- Everything was taken from him – freedom, family, possessions, and appearance (they took his clothes and shaved his head). He was taken into an interrogation room where he stood naked before the Gestapo seemingly utterly in their control.
  - Then an unexpected thought popped into his head. He realized that unless they killed him, he had one freedom left. He could choose his attitude.
  - There in his dreadful situation, he chose an attitude of “hope.”

- He would trust his future to God. That attitude of hope and trust in God enabled him to survive 3 years of brutal, sadistic treatment in Nazi concentration camps.
  - After liberation, Frankl was famous as a famous psychiatrist and benefactor to many.
  - James recommends an attitude like Frankl's trusting God with hope in his heart.
  - "Count it all joy," not the trial itself which may be terrible, but the result.
  - In Philippians 2:5 Paul says we should have the same attitude as Christ. He means we should have an attitude or mind-set of humility and willingness to sacrifice self for the benefit of others.
  - In the interactions of the power-of-choice, emotions, and intellect, power of choice maintains a dominant position. It can overrule intellect and emotions.
  - At times, the choice to do right is easy, but other times is extremely difficult. If emotions and thoughts agree with the willful choice, the choice is easy.
  - When emotions and thoughts oppose a willful choice, making that choice, even when we know it is what God desires, is difficult. Frankl made the right choice but under dreadful circumstances where it seemed at first that he had no choice.
9. **Ephesians 4:17-24**: *"Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. <sup>19</sup> They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way you learned Christ!— <sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."*
- To aid in making right choices, Paul says put off wrong attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and actions. Put on godly attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and actions.
  - In a situation where emotions and/or thoughts are strongly opposed to making a particular right choice, we become susceptible to making alternate bad choices.
  - For this reason, Scripture instructs us to train our intellect and emotions to align with Scriptural principles. In this way, making godly choices will be consistent with what we already think and feel.
  - Paul says to put aside thinking, feeling, and choices that do not fit a godly pattern of life, and put on thinking, feeling, and choices that are consistent with a godly life. "Putting on" or "putting off" is not simple.
  - It requires thoughtful "training." Ingrained bad habits are hard to eliminate.
  - The mind must be "cleansed" of the bad to make room for new godly habits.