



JAMES

message statement

Believers are commanded to reject spiritual double-mindedness and wholly devote themselves to obedience to the perfect law of the Lord.


book introduction

James' letter to the scattered believers in the early Church has been a favorite of many for centuries. The book is loved for a variety of reasons, but three stand out:

1. The letter is intensely practical, filled with commands and admonitions that resonate with daily Christian living in any place in any time. James, in fact, has more imperatives (commands) than any book per verse in the entire New Testament and this will be noted as we navigate the book.
2. The letter is amazingly concise. James gets right to the point, and his style is typically rapid-fire with many different issues and circumstances being addressed quickly. The brevity of the letter has made it a classic.
3. The letter is vividly taught through a variety of metaphors and illustrations, thus making it fun to teach and remember.

I might personally add a fourth: the letter is incredibly convicting to study and calls followers of Jesus to radical obedience in their lives, not simply in word but in deed and action. As such, this letter may be most appropriate for our church in our day.

Many find the letter surprising in that it not only parallels the Sermon on the Mount in many ways, but alludes to the teaching of Jesus more than any other epistle in the New Testament. Douglas Moo notes, "James depends more than any other New Testament author on the teaching of Jesus. It is not that James directly quotes Jesus – although James 5:12 is virtually a quotation of Jesus' teaching about oaths in Matthew 5. It is, rather, that he weaves Jesus' teaching into the very fabric of his own instruction...The author of the letter seems to have been so soaked in the atmosphere and specifics of Jesus' teaching that he can reflect them almost unconsciously." The beauty of such appeals to our Savior's teaching must not be lost on our people as we walk them through the teachings of Jesus' brother.



date & authorship

Conservative scholars have held that the author of this letter is, in fact, James the half-brother of Jesus, although the author does not specify that precisely. The likely reason for this is that by process of elimination this is the only James that is possible. (Given that James the Apostle was killed by Herod Agrippa, possibly as early as 44 AD.) James, the brother of Jesus, is well known as a leader of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and the address of this letter lends credence to his authorship. It is worth noting, as well, that anyone wishing to forge a letter in Jesus' own brother's name later would certainly mention this in their introduction of themselves.

As far as dating of the letter, this is where things get a little sticky. Christian historians date James' death around 62AD, (contemporary with Paul's Roman imprisonment) so that gives us one end. Most of the debate, then, centers on the 'controversy' between Paul and James that originates in Chapter Two. The nature of the debate is this: Does James know of Paul's letters when he writes and if so, why does he use such seemingly contradictory language? If we date Paul's letter to the Galatians early (around the late 40's AD), then does this necessitate a dating of James before Galatians?

For most conservative Bible scholars, therefore, the most likely explanation is that the Galatian controversy over observance to Torah was raging in the late-40's during and after Paul's first missionary journey (47-48AD), with delegations being sent back and forth from Galatia to Jerusalem. If the Galatian debate had heated all the way up, to the point of forced Gentile-Torah observance and forced submission of Gentiles to observe Jewish customs, one would expect to read multiple appeals to the observance of Torah in James. However, these are absent. Likely, therefore, Paul has yet to journey to Galatia, and certainly yet to write the letter to the Galatian Church.

What is the occasion for James' writing, then? As Paul and Barnabas taught and worked in Antioch in the mid-40's, preaching the gospel of grace alone in Christ alone, some Jews found their teaching untenable. As word spread to Jerusalem through various delegations sent back and forth, inevitably, various poor representations of Paul's message emerged with appropriate responses from Jerusalem. In effect, James seems aware of the teaching of "justification by faith alone" but may not have truly understood the teaching of Paul clearly. Into this fray, James wrote. Moo again, "It is this 'perverted Paulinism' that James attacks in chapter 2. James probably did not even know that Paul's teaching was the jumping-off point for the view he is opposing." To read James before Galatians seems important.



occasion & purpose

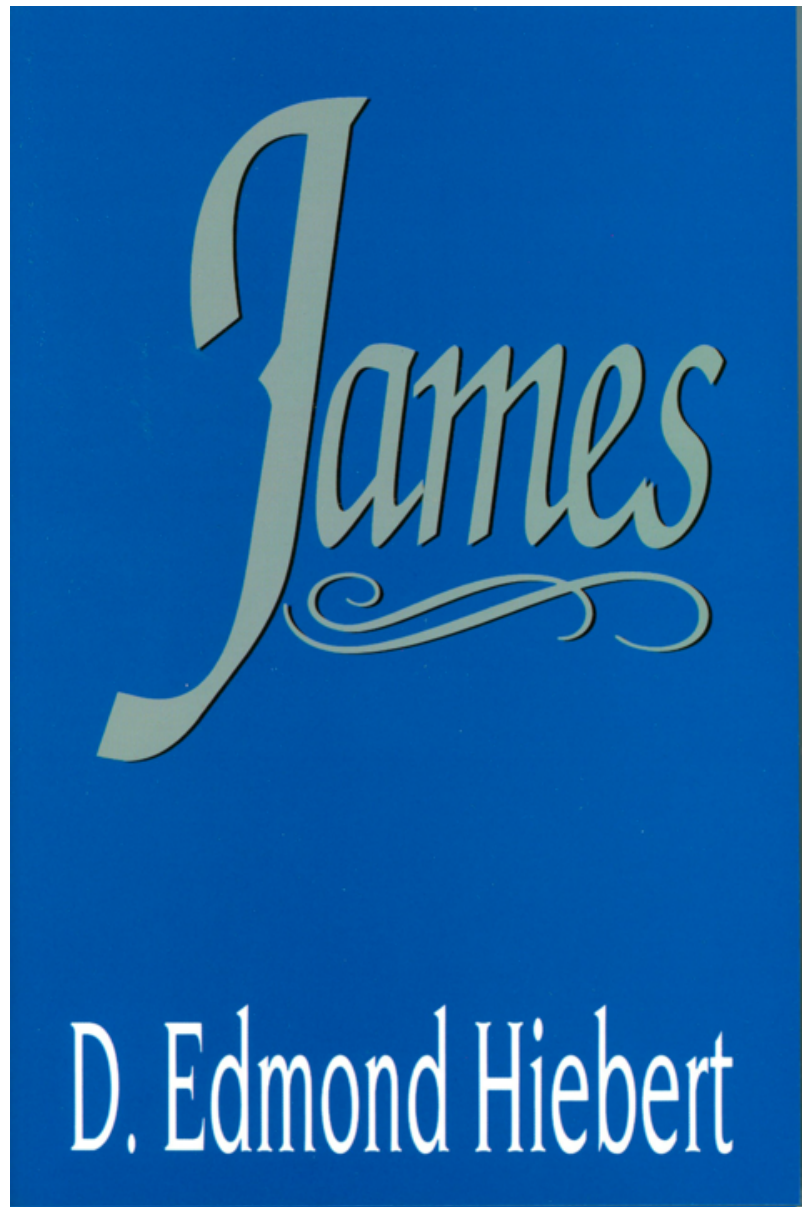
The letter is sent to scattered Jewish Christians in the Roman culture who had come to know Jesus through the ministry of the early Church. These Christians found themselves facing various trials of many kinds, particularly the trial of poverty and lack of resources. Facing such difficulties, the believing community undoubtedly found temptation to walk in compromise of their Christianity and once again return to the ways and works of the world.

This double-mindedness is the central issue that James seemingly attacking in this letter. One finds the comparison to “spiritual adultery” especially striking when reading James. The scattered Church was faced with a crisis: to steadfastly and patiently obey their Lord and Savior Jesus, regardless of the cost; or to return to the ways of the world? “Basic to all that James says in his letter is his concern that his readers stop compromising with worldly values and behavior and give themselves wholly to the Lord. Spiritual ‘wholeness’ then, is the central concern of the letter.” (Moo, 46.)

major themes

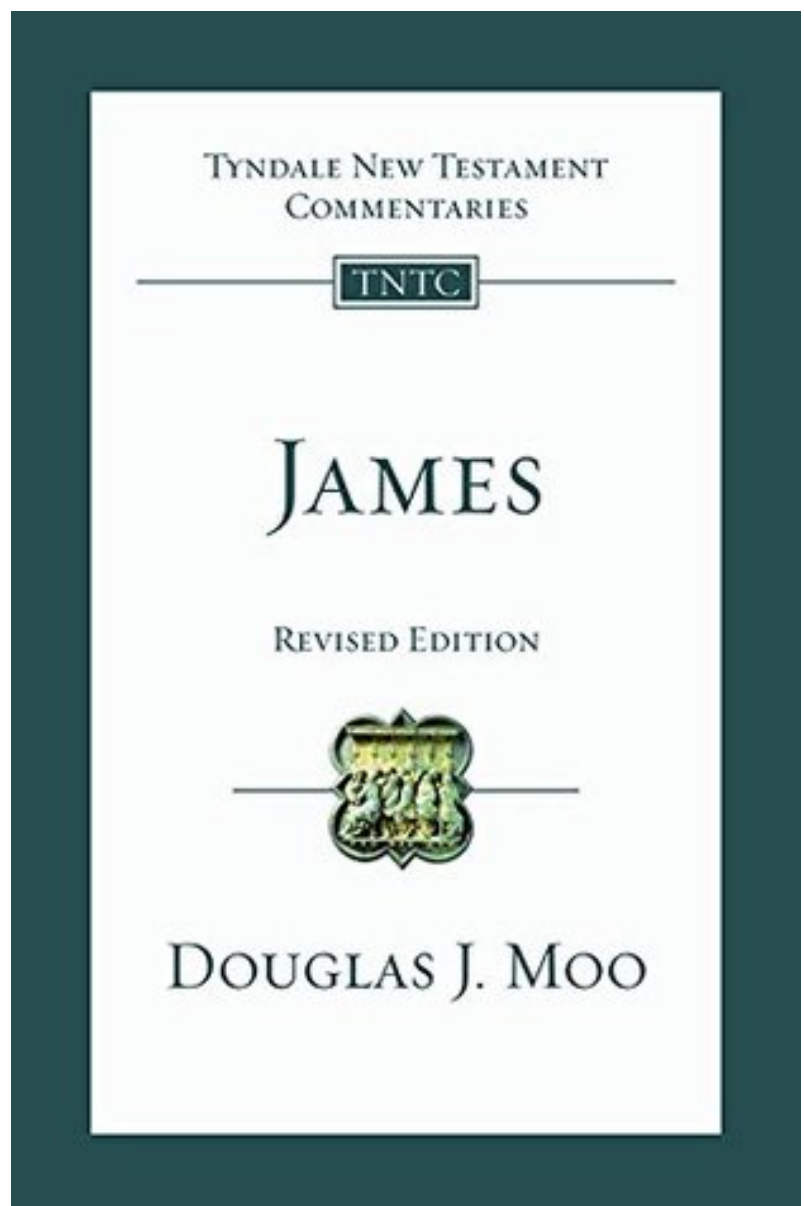
- 1. Double-mindedness and the Christian
- 2. God’s grace and passion for the wholeness of His people (jealousy)
- 3. Eschatology- the King will return
- 4. The perfect and royal law of freedom
- 5. Godly wisdom
- 6. Poverty and wealth (money)
- 7. Faith expressed in works: Paul strikes at legalism; James at quietism
- 8. Difficulty in outlining and some lack of apparent structure

recommended resources



James
By: D Edmond Hiebert

As in his other commentaries, Dr. Hiebert uses his knowledge of Greek to practical effect for pastors and Bible students. His expository approach is well-suited for personal or public study. The author writes in a way that reflects James’ practicality. He provides a bibliography for further reading.



James: An Introduction & Commentary
By: Douglas J. Moo

The genius of the letter of James lies in its powerfully simple call for repentance, for action, for a consistent Christian lifestyle. In this revised commentary Douglas Moo allows James’ words to cut through our theological debates, our personal preconceptions, our spiritual malaise and return us to an invigorating, transforming Christianity.

