

## Study Guide for the Book of James

### Luther on the Book of James

The primary commentary and resource used for the basis of this study is the *Concordia Commentary* on **James** by Curtis P. Giese, M.Div., Ph.D., a professor in the theology division of Concordia University in Austin, TX. Dr. Giese comments extensively in his Introduction to his Commentary on **James** regarding Dr. Martin Luther's well known "sound bites" on **James**. Probably the most famous of Luther's comments is this excerpt from Luther's Preface to the New Testament:

*In a word, St. John's Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul's Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' Epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it. But more of this in other prefaces.*

However, Dr. Giese and other Lutheran scholars point out the following about Luther's attitude toward **James**:

1. The **Book of James** was being used by the Roman Catholic Church at the time of Luther (and probably still is being used by RCs) as a "proof text" that works must accompany Christ's saving work in order to be saved. This struck at the heart of the Luther's position as well as the Protestant Reformation that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ without the deeds of The Law. Thus, **James** created a "burr under Luther's saddle".
2. Luther questioned the authorship of **James**. He did not think it was authored by the James, half-brother to Jesus. However, he never questioned its inclusion in the Canon of Scripture (more on that later).
3. Luther never questioned **James'** authority as Scripture.
4. Luther seems to have a split opinion on **James**. Note the beginning of Luther's preface to **James** and **Jude**:

*Though this Epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and hold it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men and lays great stress upon God's law. But to state my own opinion about it, though without injury to anyone, I consider that it is not the writing of any apostle.*

It is notable that the early Lutheran scholars, Philip Melancthon and Andreas Althamer had a more positive view toward **James** than Luther. As we go through **James**, we will revisit Luther's thoughts on the verses that were of greatest concern to him. Comments anyone?

## Inclusion of James into the Canon of Scripture

**James** is one of seven books of the NT referred to as “The Catholic Epistles” because these Epistles were not addressed to any specific congregation. Catholic in this sense means general or universal. The other Catholic Epistles are **1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John,** and **Jude**. In general, the Catholic Epistles were the last books of the NT to be included in the Canon i.e. accepted by all of the divisions of the Christian Church around the Mediterranean Sea. However, it should be noted that Churches in the Eastern Mediterranean accepted **James** as authoritative much earlier than the Church at large. It is also important to note that within the history of the early Church, the NT was developed with a “Canon within the Canon”. That means that there are core books of the NT, namely the Epistles of Paul and the Gospels that are recognized as being the core books of the NT and as other books were considered, it was important that additional books did not conflict with the core books. That does not mean that the later books are considered any less inspired by God. It just means that there was more/longer debate on their inclusion.

## Authorship of the Book of James, the person of James, and Date of Authorship

The authorship of **James** has long been disputed. That was one of the main reasons for its delay in being accepted into the Canon of Scripture. Luther had his doubts about its authorship that were likely influenced by the writings of Eusebius (c. 265 – 339) who is considered the Christian Church’s second historian with Luke being the first. Eusebius wrote that the author of **James** was disputed at that time in history. However, Dr. Giese’s position in his *Concordia Commentary* is that later scholarship and analysis of **James** indicates that the most likely author is James the half-brother of Jesus. As we study **James**, we will look at the internal evidence that he is the author.

With that in mind, what do we learn about Jesus’ half-brother, James, from the following passages?

**Matthew 13:53 – 56** \_\_\_\_\_  
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**John 7:2 – 5 and Mark 3:13 – 35** \_\_\_\_\_  
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What comfort or insight do these verses give us as we pass through this life?

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Going forward note **Mark 3:34 and 35** and how it relates to our study of **James**. Any preliminary comments?

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**1 Corinthians 15:3 – 8** \_\_\_\_\_

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What do these verses tell us about the Resurrection and post-Resurrection accounts in the Gospels and in Acts? Hint: See **John 20:30 – 31**.

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**Acts 1:6 – 14** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Acts 12:1 – 17** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Acts 15:12 – 20** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Galatians 1:15 – 19** \_\_\_\_\_

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**Galatians 2:7 – 14** \_\_\_\_\_

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Note/remember verse 10 and how that theme recurs in **James** as we proceed in our study.

**1 Corinthians 9:1 – 5** \_\_\_\_\_

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Dr. Giese in the Concordia Commentary relates the following points about extrabiblical literature that gives further illumination on James' life and position:

Christian historian, Eusebius relates or quotes the following sources:

- Clement of Alexandria recorded *“Peter and James and John, after the Saviour’s ascension, though pre-eminently honoured by the Lord, did not contend for glory, but made James the Just bishop of Jerusalem.”*
- Church father Hegesippus describes James *“as the head of the church’s government and likening him to a Nazārite.”* And Eusebius describes

James' role as *“James, the brother of the Lord, to whom the episcopal seat at Jerusalem has been entrusted by the apostles.”*

Dr. Giese notes that the Jewish historian Josephus *“records the events surrounding the tragic death of James in AD 62 after he had served many years as leader of the Jerusalem church, an account typically recognized in scholarship as authentic. According to Josephus, with the death of the Roman governor Festus and the newly appointed Albinus forthcoming to assume power, the high priest Ananus used this power vacuum to dispose of Christian leaders:*

*Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others [or, some of his companions]: and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned.*

*Josephus subsequently records how leading citizens, Albinus, and King Agrippa vehemently disagreed with this act and, therefore, Agrippa deposed Ananus from the office of high priest. It is noteworthy that Josephus does not record the death of any other early Christian leader, such as Peter, James, or John (the sons of Zebedee), or Paul. Nor does he mention these individuals at all. Such may again indicate the prominence of James, here from a source outside of Christianity.”*

Dr. Giese advocates that the **James** was likely written about 48 A.D by James, the half-brother of Jesus. However, there are those who disagree, and Giese summarizes those arguments against James being the author and then counters those arguments. One fundamental area of the discussion on date of authorship centers on whether **James** was written in the late first or early second century as a “Reaction against Paul” by a pseudonymous writer. Dr. Giese strongly advocates that pitting Paul against James is not appropriate. His arguments in support of the opinion are very helpful as we go forward in our study of **James** and are worth quoting at length as follows:

*[James] depicts the Christian faith with a somewhat different focus and use of terminology. He speaks to those already regenerated, reborn into Christ and bearing the first fruits of the new creation (1:16-18). **James** here revisits a concern of Jesus that one claims to belong to Christ but does not demonstrate the fruit that flows from faith. **James** uses the terminology “justify” not in opposition to Paul but rather with a different application: to validate a Christian’s regeneration through deeds. Whereas Paul wishes to exclude “works of the Law” in regeneration, James speaks about the deeds that flow from faith. Whereas Paul is more concerned about how Gentiles are brought to salvation in Christ, the Jew-Gentile controversy does not appear at all in **James**, thus additionally attesting to **James’** early date. Scaer aptly states*

*the detriment of pitting Paul against James: “The cross references and allusions common to **James** and Paul are obvious to most scholars, but the meaning of **James** remains hidden as long as the alleged antagonism between the two apostles is perpetuated as the one effective key to unlocking its meaning.”*

Let’s now start reading the **Book of James** with **James 1:1**.

What is the significance that James calls himself a “servant of God” and “Jesus” rather than identifying himself as the brother of Jesus?

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What is the significance that he does not identify himself as an apostle or the leader of the church in Jerusalem?

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Therefore, how does this first verse lead credence that **James** was written by James the Just, half-brother to Jesus?

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Considering that the twelve tribes of Israel ceased to exist as identifiable groups following the invasion and conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians around 721/722 B.C. why would James address his epistle to the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion”?

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Read **James 1:2 – 4**.

What do these verses say about the likelihood of encountering trials in life?

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In contrast, how does our western society (and even the Declaration of Independence) program us to think about trials in life and what our reaction should be to trials?

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What can happen to people (including Christians) in response to trials?

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What is meant by “the testing of your faith” in verse 3? Compare with **1 Corinthians 3:10 – 15** (esp. in the NIV) and **Matthew 7:24 – 27**.

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Looking at the big picture, what is (are) the purpose(s) of trials in our life in relationship to God?

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Why is perseverance or steadfastness important? To what aspect(s) about Jesus is that pointing us? See **1 Peter 1:6 – 7**.

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Relative to this question what does it mean in verse 4 when it says that you “may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing”? See also **Matthew 25:20 – 23**.

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How do our own personal trials, in this life, make us more useful to:

Our family and friends? \_\_\_\_\_

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Our local congregation? \_\_\_\_\_

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How do the trials of a congregation help the congregation?

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Our society? \_\_\_\_\_  
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What does it mean (and not mean) to “count it all joy” when we encounter trials and how do we do that? Compare **Romans 5:1 – 5**.

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How could this verse be used in a counterproductive manner when trying to comfort someone going through trials?

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Let’s read **James 1:5 – 8**.

Dr. Giese, as well as other prominent commentators, point out that **James 1:2 – 18** pertains to trials in life: how we discern their purpose, our attitude toward them, and the need for God’s strength and understanding to endure them. For instance, the “wisdom” being referred to in verse 5 refers to understanding the big picture as we endure trials. With this basic understanding how would answer the following questions:

How do we gain this wisdom? See also **Proverbs 9:9 – 10**.

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What do your commentaries say about having doubts and being double minded relative to receiving wisdom? Understanding what this means is crucial to our walk with Jesus. See also **Matthew 6:24** and **Matthew 7:24 – 27** for “wisdom” on this question. 😊

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In practical application, how does this concept help us through trials?

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How can these verses be taken out of context and be harmful for those struggling?

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Let's read **James 1:9 – 11**.

At first glance it would seem that these verses appear out of context from the previous verses by addressing the attitudes of the poor and wealthy. However, how do these verses still apply to persevering through trials?

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Why is it so difficult for the poor and the wealthy to endure their trial?

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Who in each situation is their god and how do we fall into the same trap?

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Dr. Giese points out that **James 1:12** is a transitional verse that points us back to the previous verses and forward to the next topics. How does this verse point us back to (or summarize) what we have been studying?

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What is the "Crown of Life"? See also **Revelation 2:9 – 11**.

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Let's read **James 1:13 – 15**.

What is meant by tempted or temptation in these verses?

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What does verse 13 say about the character of God and thus the purpose of trials?

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Therefore, what does it mean in The Lord's Prayer when we say, lead us not into temptation?

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What human analogy is James using in verses 14 – 15?

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These verses could imply that the desire is not sinful and that it is only sin when the desire is acted upon. Do you agree or disagree and why?

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How do your commentaries and/or translations define or translate “desire” in verses 14 and 15?

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Let's read **James 1:16 – 18**.

Considering the context of verses 13 – 15, what deception is James talking about in verse 16?

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What is the significance of “every” being stated twice in verse 17?

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What is the significance of the gifts coming down from above?

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What is the meaning of the very poetic imagery and message in “coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (ESV)? See NIV.

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What is the meaning of verse 18?

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Since we are God's firstfruits, what does that say about ownership of our lives?

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Let's read **James 1:19 – 21**.

Note James' use of "my dear brothers" in verse 19 and also similar use in previous verse we have read (verses 2 and 16). We will continue to see that phrase repeated throughout **James**. Who is included in "my dear brothers"?

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Of what other book(s) of the Bible does the content and style of these verses remind you? What type of Biblical writing is this?

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What is the significance of anger in our lives?

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How do we "get rid of all moral filth" as stated in verse 19?

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What should be our response or action if we do not see ourselves becoming less angry or quick tempered?

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**James 1:22 – 25** is a fairly well-known passage of Scripture. How do we often fall into the trap of which James is warning us?

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Describe in your own words what is meant by the analogy in verses 23 – 24?

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How can the “perfect law” give freedom? (Hint: Our concept of freedom being defined as “absence of restriction” might get in the way of how we think about the Law.)

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The NIV translates verse 25 as:

**“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does.” NIV**

Both Lutheran and non-Lutheran commentators point out that the Greek verb (and participle for all of you grammarians 😊) in this verse for “looks intently” is the same verb used to describe how the Apostle Peter looked into the tomb on Resurrection Day (**Luke 24:12**). Dr. Giese points out that the verb is also used five times in the NT. Besides Peter at the tomb, the verb is used to describe how the Apostle John (**John 20:5**) and Mary Magdalene (**John 20:11**) each looked into the tomb. He also points out that the verb is used in **1 Peter 1:12**. Let’s read **1 Peter 1:10 – 12** to gain some context. How does this help give insight on how to interpret **James 1:25**?

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Why will be blessed if do not forget what the “perfect law” says and do what it says? What will that blessing look like?

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Let’s read **James 1:26 – 27**.

Dr. Giese in the Concordia Commentary states:

*With 1:26 – 27, James revisits and encapsulates major points of chapter 1; he also inaugurates chapter 2. Having stated the gifts of God, especially the gift of salvation and thereby possession of the firstfruits of the new creation (1:17 – 18), James then described how that new creation looks (or fails to look) as it unfolds in the Christian life (1:19 – 25).*

Therefore, these verses are transitional in the book of **James**.