

# WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

## INTRODUCTION

Besides the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), Acts of the Apostles (which is a continuation of Luke and a history of the first 30 years of the church's life), and letters attributed to Paul (Romans, 1,2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1,2 Thessalonians, 1,2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon), there are also what are called general letters or "epistles" written by various people to various groups of Christians, for various purposes. These are: Hebrews, James, 1,2 Peter, 1,2,3 John, Jude, Revelation.

For the next 8 sessions we will be studying some of these epistles.

Here is a breakdown of our sessions.

- 1) A Manual of Wise Instruction, Part 1 – James 1-2
- 2) A Manual of Wise Instruction, Part 2 – James 3-5
- 3) How to live in a Hostile World – 1 Peter
- 4) How to handle the Crisis in the church – 2 Peter
- 5) The Basis of Christian Fellowship – 1 John 1-2
- 6) Fellowship in the Family of God – 1 John 3-5
- 7) Two Personal Letters from John – 2 John, 3 John
- 8) The Book of Jude – Jude

Some of the epistles read like letters. Others do not. Some are personal, others provide broad teaching, wisdom and advice. All of them are written in the first century, and all of them are offering direction on how to live within Christian Community and as individual Christians in a world that is both hostile and indifferent to Christian principles. How good is it to make peace with the world and accommodate within society and how much is it right to cut off? There is survival to think about, but also how negative influences can corrupt moral standards and spiritual purity. These are key issues for early Christians living within various communities of the ancient world.

What about our world today? What about our relationships with family, friendships or workplaces? Is tolerance and trying to fit in always the best witness to our Christian love? Or is standing apart and against and speaking out the more courageous and faithful approach? How do we discern our way in various situations? Is courage the issue, good judgement or compassion that makes space for the weaknesses and moral failings of others?

## 1) JAMES 1-2: A MANUAL FOR WISE INSTRUCTION, PART 1

Author - Probably James, the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19). He appears in the Acts of the Apostles as the leader of the Jerusalem Church from AD 40 till his death in AD 62 (martyred).

Place of writing - If James is the writer then the place of the writing must have been Jerusalem.

The Readers - In 1:1, James addresses “the twelve tribes in the dispersion.” Even though this may seem like a reference to Jews in the diaspora (outside Palestine), more probably it is a reference to all Christians, since it was understood that the Church, made up of Jews and Gentiles together, is the spiritual Israel.

Purpose of the Letter - To strengthen the faith of Christians amid life’s challenges and adversities.

Questions and answers from James 1-2

1) What should happen when a Christian meets various trials? (1:2-3)

**They should trust that faith is strengthened by being tested, and produces endurance, which in turn leads to maturity and contentment. Is this true?**

2) Under what conditions will God answer a request for wisdom? (1:5-8)

*The request for wisdom must be made with belief and not doubt; for a*

*“double-minded person will not receive anything from God. Doubt is a natural part of faith. But the doubt James is referring to is a lack of commitment and perseverance in praying and waiting on God with patient trust.*

3) How does temptation develop into spiritual death? (1: 14-15)

*Each person is tempted by personal desire. Desire in itself is a good thing, but it can also be misdirected.*

*Misdirected desire gives birth to sin, “and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” It kills the spirit and blocks our connection with God. Our deepest desire is for good and for communion with God. But we sometimes get sidetracked by more immediate desires which become obsessions, addictions, or lead us to feel inadequate and empty.*

4) What happens to the person who looks into the perfect law (Commandments of God) that gives freedom and perseveres? (1:25)

*The person who looks into the perfect law that gives freedom and perseveres (i.e acts on it) experiences rich blessing. Thus, freedom comes through action, action in obedience to what the law of God requires. How does freedom come from obedience to the law?*

5) James provides a concise definition of pure (healthy) religion. What is it? (1:27)

*Religion that is pure and faultless is this: "to care for orphans and widows (the most vulnerable in society) in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world." For James, religion must be an active, practical thing. Our prayers are pointless if they are not connected to practices that serve others and ground us in our identity as children of God. What does it mean to "keep oneself unstained by the world"?*

6) Why should a Christian show as much respect to a poor person as to a rich person? (2:5)

*A Christian should show as much respect to a poor person as to a rich person because God has chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom God has promised to those who love God. It's easier to embrace God when you have little. When you have much you are not only distracted, but you are misdirected in terms of what matters, as well as what concerns you have. Does James' privileging of the poor over the rest of us feel right?*

7) What is the royal law believers are expected to fulfill? (2:8)

*The royal law is, "love your neighbour as yourself."*

8) What example of dead faith does James give? (2: 14-17)

*The example of dead faith is of one who says to a person who is hungry and cold: "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed;" but fails to clothe and feed the person.*

9) What two Old Testament examples does James use to show the kind of faith that is completed in actions? (2: 21-25)

*First there is Abraham willing to offer up even his son on the alter, trusting God through it all. Second, there is Rahab who risks her life to receive explorers from the enemy (Israelites), because she trusts their God. Both acted, they didn't just believe without action. But both acted because they believed. They trusted God even though the outcome of their actions could lead to tragedy as much as blessing.*

How does your faith and your actions in life connect?

How does your faith give you inner strength to endure and grow even through tough times?

How does your faith inspire you to keep an open mind and be compassionate when you are tempted to mistrust and judge others?

How does your faith give you perspective and direction so that you don't just go with the flow of society but take a stand for others and for right?