



New Testament Theology

Living Faith

A Theology of James

ROBERT L. PLUMMER

Series edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

“Some biblical books have literary forms that make them difficult to grasp in the verse-by-verse format of a commentary and, thus, need a thematic, theological exposition. That is what Robert Plummer has done for James, laying out its teaching logically and clearly in the best tradition of evangelical biblical studies. He avoids side issues that would distract from the main themes and makes those main themes clear for lay reader and scholar alike. For that I congratulate him.”

Peter H. Davids, Chaplain, Our Lady of Guadalupe Priory,
Houston, Texas

“Robert Plummer offers an accessible analysis of the epistle of James. He shows that it is not an epistle of straw but an epistle for those who need to do more in their faith to follow in the way of Jesus’s teachings. He explains how James provides instruction on a living faith that seeks wisdom from above, endures trials, spurns the trappings of wealth, speaks without anger, perseveres in prayer, and keeps Jesus’s command to love one another.”

Michael F. Bird, Deputy Principal, Ridley College

“Robert Plummer’s theology of the book of James is both scholarly and accessible, reminding the reader that genuine faith is a living faith. Themes such as faith and works, trials and temptations, and poverty and riches are explored not only in this letter but also within the broader narrative of Scripture. A great resource for those pursuing greater biblical and theological insights from this epistle.”

Roger Severino, Leadership Development Minister, Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee

“An influential German commentator once declared that James has no theology. Robert Plummer has laid to rest any such idea. By expanding our definition of theology to include biblical teaching that is firmly grounded in an understanding of God and his saving purposes, Plummer has clearly demonstrated that James most certainly has a theology! James speaks of the Father and the Son and many of the traditional doctrines that embody the Christian faith.”

William Varner, Professor of Biblical Studies, The Master’s University;
author, *James: An Exegetical Commentary* and *James: A Devotional Commentary*

“The title *Living Faith* says it all: The book of James captures both a faith that is alive and a faith that enables living rightly in our day. Robert Plummer unpacks the theology of James, depicting a faith that is vibrant, dynamic, and yet intensely practical. *Living Faith* explores the great themes of James—faith and works, trials and temptations, poverty and riches, speech and anger, and, most importantly, prayer—to issue a compelling call for a faith that reveals the reality of one’s salvation through obedience to Jesus Christ and deeds motivated by his word and Spirit. As a former student in Plummer’s class on the exegesis of James, I know that his engaging exposition of James rings true because Plummer’s life, ministry, and teaching are a beacon to the trustworthiness of his Savior who inspires such faith in his followers.”

Robert B. Crotty, Men’s Equipping Director, Watermark Community Church, Dallas, Texas

“The outstanding feature of Robert Plummer’s study *Living Faith* is its combination of scholarly depth and pastoral insight. He reveals the letter of James as ‘a faithful recapitulation of Jesus’s teachings,’ emphasizing the necessity for true believers to demonstrate a living faith through observable acts of obedience and love. The first two chapters are true gems, particularly insightful, enriching readers’ understanding and appreciation of the letter. Plummer’s work is invaluable and most timely.”

Patrick J. Hartin, Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, Gonzaga University; author, *James and the “Q” Sayings of Jesus*; *Sacra Pagina: James*; and *A Spirituality of Perfection*

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Robert L. Plummer

Living Faith: A Theology of James

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*To my dear mother,
Sonja Plummer,
a woman who
has living faith*

Faith is not the human notion and dream that some people call faith. When they see that no improvement of life and no good works follow—although they can hear and say much about faith—they fall into the error of saying, “Faith is not enough; one must do works in order to be righteous and be saved.” This is due to the fact that when they hear the gospel, they get busy and by their own powers create an idea in their heart which says, “I believe”; they take this then to be a true faith. But, as it is a human figment and idea that never reaches the depths of the heart, nothing comes of it either, and no improvement follows.

Faith, however, is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God, John 1[:12–13]. It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.

MARTIN LUTHER, “PREFACE TO THE EPISTLE
OF ST. PAUL TO THE ROMANS”

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Series Preface

THERE ARE REMARKABLY few treatments of the big ideas of single books of the New Testament. Readers can find brief coverage in Bible dictionaries, in some commentaries, and in New Testament theologies, but such books are filled with other information and are not devoted to unpacking the theology of each New Testament book in its own right. Technical works concentrating on various themes of New Testament theology often have a narrow focus, treating some aspect of the teaching of, say, Matthew or Hebrews in isolation from the rest of the book's theology.

The New Testament Theology series seeks to fill this gap by providing students of Scripture with readable book-length treatments of the distinctive teaching of each New Testament book or collection of books. The volumes approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology. They pay due attention to the historical and literary dimensions of the text, but their main focus is on presenting the teaching of particular New Testament books about God and his relations to the world on their own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus. Such biblical theology is of fundamental importance to biblical and expository preaching and informs exegesis, systematic theology, and Christian ethics.

The twenty volumes in the series supply comprehensive, scholarly, and accessible treatments of theological themes from an evangelical perspective. We envision them being of value to students, preachers, and interested laypeople. When preparing an expository sermon

series, for example, pastors can find a healthy supply of informative commentaries, but there are few options for coming to terms with the overall teaching of each book of the New Testament. As well as being useful in sermon and Bible study preparation, the volumes will also be of value as textbooks in college and seminary exegesis classes. Our prayer is that they contribute to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the kingdom and glory of God in Christ.

The letter of James is one of the most practical in the New Testament, and believers often study it to learn what it means in everyday life to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Some have raised questions about James—most famously Martin Luther—but the church has recognized the authority, power, and simplicity of what James wrote. We should remember, of course, that the letter is occasional. James doesn't pack all that he believed into five short chapters. The cross and resurrection of Jesus are not even mentioned, but that doesn't mean that James didn't believe in both of these. In fact, we know that he did, for we read in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 that Jesus appeared to James after he was raised from the dead and that James and the rest of the apostles all believed and taught the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:11). In his letter, James centers on how believers express their new life, and Rob Plummer aptly titles his volume *Living Faith*. James reminds us that if our faith doesn't make a difference in the way we live, it is useless and, in fact, we don't have saving faith at all. In reading this book, you will be reminded of the vitality of the new life to which we are called and will be challenged to live a life of faith, hope, and love.

Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner

Abbreviations

BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
EGGNT	Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
SP	Sacra Pagina

Introduction

Author

THE AUTHOR OF THE EPISTLE OF JAMES describes himself simply as, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (James 1:1). Although John Calvin suggested that perhaps James the son of Alphaeus (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) wrote this letter, prior writers throughout church history are essentially unanimous in accepting James the son of Mary and half-brother of Jesus as the author.¹ While James was not a follower of Jesus during his earthly ministry (Mark 3:21; 6:3–4; John 7:3–5), Jesus appeared specially to him after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and thus James was considered an apostle (Gal. 1:19; 2:9). In the book of Acts, James takes a prominent role in the Jerusalem church, moderating the first “church council” and listing his name as the primary sender of a letter from the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13–29; 21:18–19).

In the Greek text, James’s name is *Iakōbos*. Even if you don’t know Greek, you can sound out the transliterated form of his name in the previous sentence. You will discover that the name is a Hellenized rendering of the Old Testament name “Jacob.” Centuries-long transmission

1 His proposal can be found in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed. John Owen (repr.; Baker, 1999), 277. For extensive treatment of the authorship of the letter, see Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2009), 8–32. McCartney observes, “Since the first explicit acknowledgement of the Epistle of James by Origen in the early third century, Christians have held that its author is James, known to Paul as ‘the Lord’s brother’” (McCartney, 14–15).

of the name through Latin, French, and finally into English affected its spelling and pronunciation, resulting in “James” in our modern English translations.² Readers should note that the adjective to describe something related to James or his epistle is “Jacobean,” a word I use throughout this volume.

Date

According to historical records, James was killed in AD 62 by a mob fomented by Jewish religious authorities who were angry at his Christian influence on Jews in Jerusalem.³ Thus, the letter of James must have been written prior to AD 62. Commentators have frequently noted features of the letter that one would expect from an early Palestinian setting—climatological references that fit the unique topography (“the early and the late rains,” 5:7); assumptions of a Jewish-Christian audience’s familiarity with the *Shema* (“you believe that God is one,” 2:19); the labeling of an early Christian gathering as a “synagogue,” *synagogē* (“a man . . . comes into your assembly,” 2:2), rather than a “church,” *ekklēsia*; and a close recapitulation of Jesus’s teachings found in the Gospels (see chapter 1 below).

Genre

Although clearly written as a letter, the epistle of James lacks some of the typical features of letters we find in the New Testament and, for that matter, throughout the ancient world (e.g., a more specific identification of the addressees by name or location; a formulaic closing). The recipients of the letter are only identified as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). It’s not clear if we are to understand this language literally or symbolically. Perhaps James is writing to physical descendants of Abraham (i.e., people from the twelve tribes of ethnic Jews)

2 Although some popular writers have claimed that the spelling of the name “James” in English is due to King James I of England wanting his name to appear in the King James Version of the Bible, this claim is not accurate. Even in the 1526 Tyndale New Testament, the name of James is rendered as “Iames” (“James,” with orthographic variation).

3 See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.18–19, where he quotes the account of Hegesippus; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.9.1.

who are scattered outside the traditional land of Israel. Even if that is his intent, from James's subsequent statements in his letter, it is clear that such Jews are believers in Jesus, and thus they themselves would likely understand some level of eschatological and symbolic fulfillment in James's statement. As believers in Jesus, they are part of the true Israel that is circumcised in heart (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 9:25–26; Rom. 2:29). Likely, they are scattered outside the traditional Holy Land (possibly because of persecution for their faith; cf. Acts 8:1), but they are also awaiting their true rest in the promised new heaven and new earth in the fulfillment of God's kingdom (Heb. 4:6–11; 11:39–40).

Organization

Scholars have offered many suggestions for the organization of the letter of James, including a comprehensive chiasmic structure.⁴ In light of the lack of agreement among learned commentators, it seems advisable to not be overly dogmatic. It's probably best just to recognize the clear discourse units that focus on particular theological or ethical motifs: for example, wicked speech (James 1:26; 3:1–12; 4:11–12), perseverance (1:2–4, 12; 5:7–11), prayer (1:5–8; 4:2–3; 5:13–18), living faith that produces works (1:22–25; 2:14–26), and the dangers of wealth (1:9–11; 2:1–7, 15–16; 5:1–6). In some ways, the letter of James is like a pastoral blog—with a series of reflections about practical Christian living. It seems likely that James had knowledge about his addressees and the context in which they lived, but we can only approximate that knowledge through a cautious mirror-reading of his letter. For example, we know for certain that James taught against sinful favoritism (2:1–13); we do not know to what degree the recipients of his letter were engaging in favoritism or how much James knew of their behavior. We should be circumspect in reconstructing the setting of the letter beyond the explicit indicators James provides.

4 For a more extensive discussion of the structure of the letter of James, see McCartney, *James*, 58–67. He writes, "The difficulty of finding a convincing linear structure in James has resulted in a plethora of unconvincing or only partly convincing suggestions as to its organization and overall structure" (McCartney, 58).

In my treatment below of the prominent Jacobean themes, I have generally placed more dominant or pervasive theological themes earlier in the discussion. For example, James's Christological reflections underlie all his exhortation, so Christology is treated in chapter 1. The relationship of faith and works is one of the most prominent motifs in the letter and is thus treated in chapter 2. The ordering of chapters 3–7 seems a matter for less dogmatism, in my opinion.

Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory

AT LEAST TWO BIBLICAL SCHOLARS have accused the epistle of James of being essentially a synagogue sermon with a couple of references to Jesus awkwardly inserted.¹ Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the letter of James is a faithful recapitulation of Jesus's teachings. In Matthew 7:24–25, Jesus said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock." James's letter is an instruction manual about how to build one's life on the words of Jesus. In fact, one of the reasons that the letter of James is so popular for sermon series and group Bible studies is that genuine Christians are hungry to know how to live faithfully as Jesus's disciples.² The letter of James provides plenty of such instruction that is both clear and immediately applicable.

1 Louis Massebieau, "L'Épître de Jacques est-elle l'oeuvre d'un chrétien?," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 32 (1895): 249–83; Friedrich Spitta, "Der Brief des Jakobus," in *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur des Urchristentums* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1896), 2:1–239. These works are cited and discussed by Martin Dibelius, *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Fortress, 1975), 21–22.

2 A Christian publishing executive told me that commentaries and Bible studies on James are consistently top sellers.

Explicit References to Jesus

Unlike Paul's letters, the letter of James has few explicit references to the person of Jesus. As we explore the Christological nature of the letter, it seems advisable to start with the two passages where James unambiguously mentions Jesus by name.

In James 1:1, the author of the epistle identifies himself as "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." Several things are noteworthy about James's reference. Jesus is identified with the title "Lord" (*kyrios*). Although "Lord" can be used as a title of polite address (similar to "sir" in modern English; see, e.g., John 4:11), the context of James 1:1 indicates that the author is using "Lord" as an exalted title. Jesus is a Lord whose followers are his slaves or servants, implying his authority and majesty in the spiritual realm. Furthermore, James calls himself one of these slaves/servants (i.e., a *doulos*) of this Lord, putting himself in both a place of submission and delegated representation. Because James was also a son of Mary, for him to identify himself as a slave/servant of his half brother was to recognize that Jesus was much more than a gifted rabbi (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16).

In James 1:1, Jesus is also called the Christ (*Christos*). *Christos* is a translation of the Hebrew word for "Messiah" and means "a person anointed" (by God). Scholars debate whether "Christ" always retains its titular sense in the New Testament or whether for some authors it almost functions like a second proper name of Jesus.³ Regardless of one's conclusions about this question in other texts, it is unthinkable that the Jewish audience to which James wrote would not have understood a titular nuance to "Christ."

In the Old Testament, different classes of persons were anointed to set them apart for God-ordained tasks, most notably priests (Ex. 29:7), kings (1 Sam. 10:1), and prophets (1 Kings 19:16). Despite these anointings, Old Testament authors expected a preeminent anointed

3 L. W. Hurtado writes, "Close examination of *christos* in Paul's letters . . . shows that he uses the term almost as a name, or as part of the name for Jesus, and not characteristically as a title." L. W. Hurtado, "Christ," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (InterVarsity Press, 1992), 108.

one would eventually arrive (Isa. 42:1–4; Dan. 9:25)—an anointed one who would perfectly fulfill the priestly, kingly, and prophetic duties that forerunners had only anticipated and approximated. Jesus is that promised anointed one (Messiah/Christ); and in James’s application of that title to Jesus, the apostle affirms the multifaceted biblical expectations for that role. To call Jesus both “Lord” and “Christ” in the opening lines of his letter is a clear affirmation of Jesus’s authority, dominion, and messianic status.

James further instructs his readers in these opening lines by putting Jesus on a parallel plane with God, implying their equality and shared majesty. Both an equality of majesty and distinction of persons is communicated. James describes himself as a servant/slave of both the Lord Jesus Christ and of God. James does not employ the nuanced language of later creeds, but the way he speaks of God lays the groundwork for later Trinitarian reflection. God (the Father) is given equal glory alongside God the Son (Jesus), who is honored with the title *kyrios* (Lord), a term frequently used to translate the tetragrammaton (four-letter Hebrew name for God) in the Septuagint (e.g., Isa. 40:3). The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is not mentioned here, but he is possibly appealed to later in the letter (James 4:5).⁴

James 2:1 includes the letter’s only other explicit reference to Jesus by name. James writes, “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.” Again, we see that

4 Douglas Moo offers this balanced analysis of James 4:5: “It is not clear whether James thinks of ‘the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’ as the Holy Spirit given to believers, or as God’s creative spirit by which he has invigorated humankind (Gen. 2:7). Perhaps the latter is slightly more likely, however, since James never elsewhere refers to the Holy Spirit.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Eerdmans, 2000), 190. Favoring a different interpretation, The NET Bible note on James 4:5 reads, “Interpreters debate the referent of the word ‘spirit’ in this verse: (1) The [NET] translation takes ‘spirit’ to be the lustful capacity within people that produces a divided mind (1:8, 14) and inward conflicts regarding God (4:1–4). God has allowed it to be in man since the fall, and he provides his grace (v. 6) and the new birth through the gospel message (1:18–25) to counteract its evil effects. (2) On the other hand, the word ‘spirit’ may be taken positively as the Holy Spirit and the sense would be, ‘God yearns jealously for the Spirit he caused to live within us.’ But the word for ‘envious’ or ‘jealous’ is generally negative in biblical usage and the context before and after seems to favor the negative interpretation.”

Jesus is honored with the titles “Lord” and “Christ.” Significantly, Jesus is further identified with the title “the Lord of glory.” If there was any doubt about whether “Lord” had an exalted spiritual sense in application to Jesus, this appositional designation removes all such objections. Glory (i.e., the splendor of the divine presence) is something uniquely associated with God in the Scriptures and is only derivatively and partially experienced by God’s people. We see, for example, in Revelation 7 the heavenly hosts ascribe glory (and other divine attributes) ultimately only to God:

And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, “Amen! Blessing and *glory* and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” (Rev. 7:11–12)

Yes, humans hope in the glory they will experience in God’s presence (Rom. 5:2) and are glorified by God (i.e., changed to reflect his glory, Rom. 8:30), but God alone is inherently glorious.

By calling Jesus “the Lord of glory,” James ascribes to Jesus dominion over the realm of glory (i.e., the realm of God’s splendor, perfection, goodness, and presence). Jesus himself is glorious and reigns as Lord over the realm of glory. Nevertheless, God the Son (Jesus) reigns in such a way that his lordship is never at odds with—and in fact only magnifies—the glory of the other members of the Trinity.

Debated References to Jesus

There are several other passages in the letter of James that contain the word “Lord” (*kyrios*) and could be understood as a reference to Jesus (1:7; 4:10, 15; 5:4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15). Some of these references to “Lord” have an immediate literary context that strongly favors God the Father as the referent for *kyrios*. For example, in James 1:7, James describes a person who prays doubtfully: “That person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” In the same discourse unit, James

commands the person in need of wisdom to ask God (*theos*, 1:5). There can be little doubt that the referent for *kyrios* in 1:7 is God the Father who was just mentioned in 1:5. In other passages, there is arguably a bit of “Trinitarian ambiguity,” which makes it more difficult to determine if James intended for his audience to understand the referent of *kyrios* as God the Father or God the Son. The situation is perhaps similar to many of the uses of the third person singular personal pronoun (*autos*) in the Johannine Epistles. About these pronouns, I. Howard Marshall astutely observes, “[John’s] use of pronouns in this Epistle is sometimes vague.”⁵ Indeed, although the three persons of the triune God are distinct, when any one of those persons acts, the other members of the Trinity can rightly be spoken of as involved in the action. This is not modalism—equating the persons of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct—three persons, one divine Being. Systematic theologians have a term to describe this mutual indwelling of the members of the Trinity and the involvement of each member of the Trinity in the actions of every other member—that is, the doctrine of coinherence or perichoresis.

I encourage readers to open the letter of James and skim through the passages listed in the previous paragraph that contain the word “Lord” (1:7; 4:10, 15; 5:4, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 15). The majority of Christian commentators have detected contextual clues or stylized language mirroring the Old Testament to indicate that God the Father is the referent for most of the occurrences of *kyrios*.⁶ For two of these additional passages, however, a strong case can be made that Jesus is in view.

In James 5:1–6, the apostle issues a strong condemnation of the wicked rich. As I will discuss later, this prophetic denunciation was likely intended to be overheard by the faithful addressees, serving both as a comfort in their suffering and as a warning not to be guilty of the same sins as their oppressors. Then, James goes on to encourage his Christian brothers and sisters: “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the

5 I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1978), 108n1.

6 E.g., Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1982), 40–41.

coming of the *Lord*. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the *Lord* is at hand” (5:7–8).

We find here two instances of *Lord* (italicized above). In light of so many early Christian communities awaiting the imminent second coming (*parousia*) of Jesus (Rom. 13:11–12; Phil. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:16–17; Rev. 22:12), it seems likely that James’s early readers would have understood “*Lord*” in James 5:7–8 as a reference to Jesus. Peter Davids agrees, observing,

The majority of commentators note the strongly Christian tone throughout James, the doubtfulness of the references to the *parousia* of God, and the common technical sense of *Parousia* in the NT, and therefore argue that the event referred to is the coming of Christ. . . .

This seems to be the most reasonable position.⁷

By calling Jesus “*Lord*” in 5:7–8, the apostle reminds us of the majesty and authority of Jesus. And by echoing Old Testament Scriptures that speak of the imminent day of the *Lord* (Isa. 13:6–9; Ezek. 30:2–3; Joel 2:1–2; Zeph. 1:14–15), James implies that Jesus will exercise divine authority to judge and rule when he comes. Conceptually, this passage in James 5:7–11 coheres with Paul’s description of Christ’s return in 2 Thessalonians 1:1–10. There, Paul assures the Thessalonians that God will

grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the *Lord* Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our *Lord* Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the *Lord* and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to

7 Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 182.

be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. (2 Thess. 1:7–10)

The other Jacobean uses of “Lord” with a strong likelihood of Jesus as the intended referent are found in James 5:14–15: “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the *Lord*. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the *Lord* will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.” Although there is ample Old Testament precedent for “the name of the LORD” to be a reference to Yahweh (Deut. 32:3; 1 Kings 8:17; Ps. 113:1–3; Prov. 18:10), in the New Testament we find a motif of Jesus’s disciples acting and praying in his name (John 14:13–14; Acts 3:6; 4:10; Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17). Furthermore, the only other text in the New Testament that speaks of anointing people for miraculous healing is when Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and preach, heal, and cast out demons (Mark 6:13). In a passage that speaks of praying “in the name of the Lord” and promising that “the Lord will raise him up,” early Christians would most naturally have understood the Lord Jesus as the referent for “Lord.”

Parallels Between the Letter of James and the Teachings of Jesus

Nearly every verse in the letter of James could be laid alongside a teaching of Jesus from the Gospels to demonstrate that the epistle is a faithful, though selective, recapitulation of the Lord Jesus’s instruction. Much of the letter parallels Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, but prior to investigating that frequently observed pattern, let us consider teachings of Jesus and James on the new birth.

It is common in evangelical circles to emphasize the necessity of the new birth (conversion) as an essential element of true evangelical theology.⁸ Indeed, one does not become a Christian by being born to

8 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Routledge, 1989), 1–19.

Christian parents. As Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

One might query, Isn’t this teaching of Jesus a far cry from the epistle of James? Surely the letter of James is filled with moral injunctions and contains nothing about being born again, right? Absolutely not! In fact, the very same teaching about spiritual regeneration can be found clearly in James: “Of [God’s] own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18). Ultimately, why are some people Christians and other people not? James tells us that the decisive reason for this spiritual divide is the will of God: “*Of his own will* he brought us forth.” The underlying Greek verb translated as “he brought us forth” (*apekyēsen*) usually refers to the physical act of giving birth, and many English translations choose to reflect this sense. For example, the NIV of James 1:18 reads, “He chose *to give us birth* through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

What is the instrument that brings about this spiritual birth? It is “the word of truth.” God’s “word of truth” is his declared or written word that tells us the truth about who he is, who we are, and what he has done in Jesus to save us from our sins. As this saving word is heard, the Holy Spirit brings new life to elect sinners, formerly dead in their transgressions. They are born again! The apostle Paul similarly emphasizes the proclamation of the gospel as the means God uses to save sinners: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:13–14, quoting Joel 2:32).

The people to whom James writes had heard the gospel (i.e., “the word of truth”) and had experienced spiritual birth by the will of God. Furthermore, this new life, which they had received as a gift, was an anticipatory sign of the renewal of the entire cosmos that will happen when Jesus returns. In other words, Christians are “firstfruits”—the early part of the harvest dedicated to God that anticipates the final and

complete harvest. We see, then, that a careful reading of James's letter coheres with both Jesus's teaching on the new birth and the apostle Paul's teaching about salvation.

Commentators have frequently noted the many parallels between the letter of James and the teachings of Jesus—especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). As these motifs in the epistle will be discussed in future chapters, perhaps it is best to see a brief summary and visual representation of some parallels at this point in the following table:

Table 1. Parallels between the letter of James and the teachings of Jesus

Topic	James	Jesus
Followers of Jesus are slaves	1:1	Luke 17:10
Rejoice in trials	1:2	Matt. 5:11–12
Perfection as the goal	1:3–4	Matt. 5:48
Be wise	1:5	Matt. 7:24–27; 10:16
God generously answers prayer	1:5	Matt. 7:7–8
Faith is essential	1:6–8	Matt. 9:29; 17:20
Blessed are the poor	1:9	Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20
Woe to the rich	1:10–11; 5:1–6	Luke 6:24; 16:19–31
Endurance is required	1:12	Matt. 24:13
God is good	1:13, 17	Mark 10:18
Shun evil desires	1:14–15	Matt. 5:28–30
Be on guard against deception	1:16	Matt. 24:11
Spiritual birth from God	1:18	John 3:3–8
All creation will be renewed	1:18	Matt. 19:28
Be careful with words	1:19, 26	Matt. 12:36–37
Shun sinful anger	1:19–20	Matt. 5:22–26
Repent	1:21	Matt. 3:2; 4:17
The word grows in believers	1:21	Matt. 13:18–23
Be doers, not simply hearers	1:21–25	Matt. 7:21–27; 23:3
Jesus's teaching brings freedom	1:25	Luke 4:18; John 8:36
Care for the needy	1:27	Matt. 25:35–40; Luke 14:12–14
The glory of Jesus	2:1	Matt. 25:31

No favoritism toward the rich	2:1–13	Luke 14:12–14
Do not judge	2:4	Matt. 7:1
God's election of the unimpressive	2:5	Matt. 11:25
Love God	2:5	Matt. 22:37–38
Love your neighbor	2:8	Matt. 22:39
All God's law is binding	2:10–11	Matt. 5:17–20
Do not commit adultery	2:11	Matt. 5:27–30
Do not murder	2:11	Matt. 5:21–26
Imminent judgment	2:12	Matt. 24:42–44; 25:10–13
The measure you use shall be measured to you	2:13	Matt. 7:2
Words are not enough	2:14–26	Matt. 7:21–23
Deeds demonstrate identity	2:14–26	Matt. 7:15–20
The Lord is one	2:19	Mark 12:29
Demons perceive spiritual realities and tremble at them	2:19	Matt. 8:28–29; Mark 1:23–24; 3:11–12; Luke 8:28
Abraham as an example	2:21–24	Matt. 8:11; Luke 19:9; John 8:39–40
Rahab as an example	2:25–26	Matt. 1:5
Teachers held to a higher standard	3:1	Matt. 18:6, 23:1–35; Luke 12:47–48
Speech reveals identity	3:5–10	Matt. 15:10–11, 17–20
Gehenna—the place of final judgment	3:6	Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33
Be meek	3:13	Matt. 5:5
Be a peacemaker	3:17–18	Matt. 5:9
Spiritual identity shown by “fruit”	3:18	Matt. 7:15–20
External strife comes from inner corruption	4:1–2	Matt. 15:19–20
“Murder” of others	4:2	Matt. 5:21–26
“Adulterous” language to describe spiritual unfaithfulness	4:4	Matt. 12:39; 16:4
Loyalty to God vs. loyalty to “the world”	4:4	Mark 8:36–37; John 15:18–19; 17:14–16
Humble yourselves	4:6	Matt. 23:12
Need for pure hearts	4:8	Matt. 15:19–20

Do not judge	4:11–12	Matt. 7:1–5
Lifespan outside of human control	4:13–16	Matt. 6:27; Luke 12:20
Treasure on earth corruptible	5:3	Matt. 6:19
Wait attentively for the Lord's return	5:7–8	Matt. 24:36–51; 25:1–13
Do not grumble against fellow disciples	5:9	Matt. 18:15–17; Mark 9:33–35; Luke 22:24–27
Old Testament prophets as an example	5:10	Matt. 5:12; 23:29–36; Luke 6:22–23
Do not swear oaths	5:12	Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22
Pray in all circumstances	5:13–14	Luke 18:1–6
Christian leaders praying for the sick and anointing them with oil	5:14	Mark 6:13
Physical healing and spiritual forgiveness	5:15	Mark 2:1–12
Elijah as an example	5:17–18	Luke 4:25–26
Seek after the wandering brother	5:19–20	Matt. 18:10–20

Other Biblical Teaching on Salvation

James explicitly indicates that faith in the Lord Jesus and spiritual regeneration underlie all his moral instruction, though as modern readers of the letter, we are in danger of losing sight of that essential theological foundation if we dip into his correspondence haphazardly. Parallel to this pattern in the epistle of James, the Old Testament Scriptures are filled with moral instructions, but underlying those statutes are the story of God's gracious revelation of himself and his establishment of a relationship with his people through *his* saving work.

Moses declares to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7:6–8,

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a

mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Prior to the coming of the Messiah and his sacrificial death, God's people looked forward to the day when his chosen one would be "pierced for [their] transgressions" and "crushed for [their] iniquities" (Isa. 53:5). The blood of animals in their many sacrifices were a regular reminder of sin and the need for atonement, but as the author of Hebrews notes,

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb. 10:1–4)

The ancient Israelites failed to obey God's holy laws and anticipated a day when God would institute a new covenant and write his law on their hearts (Jer. 31:31). They knew a day was coming when God would remove the sin of the land in a single day (Zech. 3:8–9). Yet, like the book of James, this soteriological foundation of Old Testament teaching is not always on the surface of every biblical text.

Jesus provided much practical ethical instruction, but such teaching must likewise be understood in relation to the Lord's claims about himself and his role in God's saving plan. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Elsewhere he said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The apostle John instructs us that unless we trust in Jesus's propitiatory death, the righteous wrath of God remains on us: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him"

(John 3:36; cf. 1 John 2:2). Similar to the way we read the letter of James, we need to remember that Jesus's instructions about how his followers should live assume that his disciples have first recognized their need of his forgiveness (Luke 18:9–14), bowed the knee under his lordship (Matt. 16:24), and received the empowerment of his Spirit (Acts 1:8). Salvation is a free and undeserved gift, but the free gift of salvation initiates one as a loyal subject of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

When Jesus walked along the Emmaus road with two unnamed disciples, Luke tells us that Jesus rebuked them:

And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

If the Old Testament is all about Jesus (and it is), then how much more is the New Testament focused on Christ! The letter of James is no exception. Admittedly, the letter has only two explicit references to Jesus by name (1:1; 2:1), but the whole letter pulsates with the teaching of Jesus—sometimes in nearly word-for-word quotations (e.g., Matt. 5:34–37; James 5:12). More commonly, the teaching of Jesus is selectively reported and slightly repackaged for a new generation of disciples seeking to be faithful to their Lord.

