

THE LETTER OF JAMES

Meeting the Father of Lights in the Midst of Our Darkness

AN IN-DEPTH INTERACTIVE STUDY
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Meeting God in His Word

Why do we study the Bible?

Before we begin our study, let me say a few words about why we do Bible study. Bible study is at the core of the Christian life. But why is it so central? What is the purpose of studying the Bible? As Christians, we often believe that the primary reason to study the Bible is to learn *how to live in this world as followers of Jesus*. While we might also expect to learn about God and relationships with other believers or history and doctrine, we usually approach Bible study with the primary goal of gaining insight into what God expects of us as Christians.

Over the years I have asked many people their reasons for studying the Bible. The responses I have received indicate that most people go to the Bible looking for answers to a range of important questions. The questions mentioned have invariably started with the words *what, how, or why*. People study the Bible to learn a variety of things: how to pray, what good leadership looks like, how we should use our money, why we should tell others about Jesus, how to care for one another in the church, etc.

While all of these *what, how, and why* questions of living the Christian life are important, when they become our main focus in studying the Bible, *we don't learn what the Bible was primarily written to teach us*. If we are going to discover and benefit from the true main purpose, we must first consider not the questions we bring to the Bible, but the questions the Bible is written to answer.

The primary question that the Bible is written to answer is not a *what* or a *how* question but a *who* question. *Who* is this God who has spoken to Abraham and Moses and created a people for Himself? *Who* is this God who meets us Himself in Jesus Christ?

Amazingly, the Bible reveals to us a God who *wants to be known* by His creation. And He doesn't just want us to know *about* Him but to be drawn into an intimate relationship *with* Him of knowing and being known. The God of the Bible wants us to know His heart, His mind, His character, and His purposes. The writers of the Old and New Testaments are witnesses to this God—in their writing, they point beyond their words to reveal the living God so that their readers might come to know Him better.

Approaching the Bible this way leads us beyond just answering the *who* question with impersonal words, concepts, and narratives. The uniqueness of the Bible as God's word is that the triune God Himself *meets* us by and in His Spirit as we study. He has spoken and is speaking right into our lives to reveal His loving heart and His wonderful purpose of drawing us into fellowship with Him.

Bible Study and Sunsets

Good Bible study is a lot like enjoying a sunset. How do you enjoy a sunset? Do you take classes first? Read a book on the five or seven steps of *how* to enjoy a sunset? No. To enjoy a sunset, we put ourselves in a place where we can see the sunset. We gaze upon it, and the sunset itself draws out the fitting response of enjoyment and awe.

In Bible study, we place ourselves before the text to *listen*. We seek to hear from the speaking God in His written word. We seek to gaze not so much *at* the words, but *through* them to the wonderful character and purposes of our triune God. Scripture is a sign that points us to the reality of the God who reveals Himself to us in the person of Jesus. We come to Scripture not so much to address it with our questions, but to be addressed by God.

In getting to know God better, in looking more deeply into His heart and ways, our trust in and love for Him grows. The purpose of Bible study is to feed our faith in God, and this happens as we come to see and hear who He is. It is only out of this framework of knowing who God is that we can begin to answer the many other questions of *what*, *how*, and *why*.

My hope for this Bible study guide is that it will enable you to gaze more fully at the good and life-giving character and purposes of the triune God.

How to Use This Book

I have structured this book to bring you along with me on a journey to interact with the text on a deep level in order to see more clearly together the nature and character of the God we meet in Jesus. I offer my insights along the way not to shut down your thinking and interacting, but to encourage it. They are meant as pointers, as seeds. I want to help you go as far as you can in contemplating, wondering, and enjoying the goodness of God.

The book can be used for individual study or with a small group. If you are using this book with a group, you should work through each study/chapter on your own up to the “Connecting with Our Lives” section, before the group meets. Then bring your notes from the study with you to aid in your small group discussion. If you are using the book for individual study, just go through the questions in the “Connecting with Our Lives” section on your own.

I have divided James’s letter into 11 studies. Feel free to work your way through each of the studies at a pace that works best for you and your group. You could take it one study per week (or however often you meet), or one study every two weeks, if you want more time with each passage.

Disciplined Listening of the Text

Each study begins with a brief “Getting Ready” section to get you thinking about the subject addressed in the passage to be studied. This is followed by the text of the passage itself in “manuscript” form—that is, double-spaced and without paragraph breaks. The translation used in this book is the English Standard Version.

The text is formatted this way to enable you to take some time to read it over several times and to notice carefully what exactly the author is saying to his audience. Feel free to mark up the text to help you interact with what is there. There’s no system to follow. You can simply make up your own!

This approach may seem challenging to you at first, and you might be unsure of what to notice. But don’t worry. It gets to be fun as you get the feel of it. Here are some suggestions of things to look for and mark up as you read the passage through a couple of times:

- Notice any repeated words, phrases, ideas, or emphases. You can mark them by using different colored pencils or markers.
- Notice the verbs used in the passage. What are the tenses? Is the verb passive or active?

- Notice the kinds of statements used in the passage: commands, promises, questions, observations, and affirmations.
- What is the order of thoughts in the passage?
- Notice logical sequences: if ... then, for, in order to, therefore, but, so that, that.
- What response is the speaker in the text or the author intending to evoke?

After you have read through and mulled over the text several times, you can answer the observation questions that follow the text.

Interpretation

In the next segment, “Digging Deeper,” we work our way through the text section by section. Having made our observations of the passage, we now want to consider *what the text means*.

Interspersed with my own thoughts and insights are questions to help you go further into the text. The questions posed here are designed to help you put more and more pieces of the “puzzle” together with the primary aim of building up an ever richer and fuller portrait of the God of the Bible as conveyed in the book of James.

Application

The questions and suggestions in the “Connecting with Our Lives” section are meant to help you to take all that you have learned from this one particular passage in James and put it together with the preceding passages you’ve studied. The questions are designed to help you connect the message of James with your own life. My hope is that your time in James helps you enjoy the contemplation of our good and wonderful God and move forward in greater hope and trust in Him and His real and present work in your life.