

James, in one page: *Background for group leaders · James: A Faith That Works*

Who wrote it? James, the brother of Jesus.

Sit with that for a second. The man who wrote this grew up in the same house as Jesus. Same table, same mother, same small town. And during Jesus' ministry, he didn't believe. John says it plainly: Even his own brothers did not believe in him. Mark records the family showing up to take Jesus home because they thought he'd lost his mind.

Then Jesus rose, and Paul mentions almost in passing that he appeared to James. We're told nothing about that conversation. But the next time James shows up, he's leading the church in Jerusalem.

He opens this letter calling himself a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not his brother. Not someone with a claim on him. A servant.

Why this matters for your group: This is not a man writing about faith from the outside. He watched Jesus for thirty years and missed it. When he writes that faith without works is dead, he knows exactly what it's like to say the right things about Jesus while nothing in you has actually changed. He'd been that person.

Who he wrote to: Jewish believers scattered outside Jerusalem, pushed out by persecution, living as a minority, mostly poor, and being pressured by people with money and power.

That's why the letter keeps circling back to wealth, favoritism, and the treatment of the poor. It isn't James riding a hobbyhorse. He's writing to people who were getting stepped on, in churches that were starting to flatter the very people doing the stepping. Possibly the earliest book in the New Testament, many date it to the 40s AD, before the Jerusalem council, before most of Paul's letters, within about fifteen years of the crucifixion.

If that's right, this is the oldest Christian writing we have. It reads less like settled theology and more like a pastor writing urgently to people in trouble.

Why it sounds so different from Paul: This is the question that comes up every time, usually in week 4, and it's worth being ready for it.

Paul writes that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. James writes that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. On the surface, that looks like a

contradiction, and it has bothered people for centuries; Luther famously had reservations about the letter.

The resolution is that they're answering different questions.

Paul is answering the question: How does a person get right with God? His opponents said you had to add law-keeping to faith. Paul says no, you're justified by faith, full stop, nothing added.

James is answering the question: How can you tell whether the faith someone claims is real? His opponents said belief alone is enough, regardless of how you live. James says no — a faith that produces nothing was never alive.

Paul is talking about the root. James is talking about the fruit. Neither one thinks you can earn your way to God, and neither one thinks a changed life is optional.

It also helps to know they use the same words differently. When Paul says "works," he usually means law-keeping done to earn standing. When James says "works," he means the ordinary evidence a living faith produces — feeding someone, controlling your temper, treating the poor person and the rich person the same.

And Paul agrees with James more than people expect. He writes that we're saved by grace, not by works — and in the very next sentence, that we were created to do good works.

What the letter is actually like: It's closer to a sermon than a letter. No greetings at the end, no travel plans, no names. Just rapid-fire instruction, rhetorical questions, and direct address. James asks his readers questions and then answers them himself, arguing with an imagined opponent. When it feels like he's coming at you, that's not your imagination; it's the style.

It sounds like Jesus. More echoes of the Sermon on the Mount than any other New Testament book. Joy in trials, treatment of the poor, danger of wealth, doing rather than just hearing, not swearing oaths. James never quotes his brother directly. He just talks like him. He'd been listening for thirty years.

The one sentence: James refuses to let anyone settle for a faith they only talk about.