

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 1 week study of the books of Hebrews and James

The story so far: The book of **Hebrews**, while sometimes associated with Paul or with the community of Paul's followers, does not actually ever identify the author. Timothy is mentioned in Chapter 13, and since Timothy knows Paul, that's how the association developed. Hebrews is not a letter, but a sermon meant to encourage and motivate its readers.

The book of **James** begins like a letter but is actually more like the book of Proverbs. James gives short exhortations on how followers of Jesus should live, along the way touching on a variety of subjects important in the Christian life.

The New Testament refers to a number of people named James. Traditionally the author of this book is thought to be James, the brother of Jesus (not James the disciple).

James assumes that his readers already have faith in Jesus, so he does not need to discuss doctrines about Christ. Where Paul writes great passages of theology focusing on the person and work of Jesus and explaining the gospel to people don't know or understand it, and then follows that with thoughts on how it might apply to a believer's life, James gets practical right from the beginning and stays that way to the end. Part of Paul's writing is application; *James' entire* letter is application. Paul wants people to know and understand what they believe; James wants people to know and understand the implications for living of what they already believe. Though James does not say much *about* Jesus, you can hear the echo of Jesus' words, especially as Matthew records them, in much of what James writes.

Monday:

Read: Hebrews 2:5-3:6

What to look for:

- How do you deal with things when you can't always see things appearing to go God's way in your day to day life (2:8)? We may not see the kingdom, but we do see Jesus (2:9).
- Living our Christian life, our life of faith, places us on a journey. Like a wagon train that is part way between the beginning of their cross-country trek in St. Louis and its end in California, Christians are caught between the initial experience of salvation and the final entry into the Promised Land. Jesus is the pioneer (2:10 – in the NIV the word is translated "author") of our faith. See 12:2 for a reference to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (NRSV). Jesus is the one who forges our way along the journey.
- 2:14-18 – Note the two reasons that the author of Hebrews spells out for why Jesus' suffering and death is of critical importance: By

his death Jesus frees us, and by experiencing the suffering of temptation Jesus can better help us with our own temptations.

Tuesday:

Read: Hebrews 11:1-3, 39-40, 12:1-13

What to look for:

- Chapter 11 condenses the whole Bible down into these few verses which trace the many ways that faith functioned in the lives of God's people. The author of Hebrews wants to encourage his readers who, early on had faced hardships and persecution for their faith, and who now are losing heart.
- The author portrays faith as an athletic contest in a stadium (12:1), in which those who have gone before us are in the stands, cheering us on. We're in the same race as were they, engaged in the same goal to persevere. Perseverance is the key; participation in the race is what the author is after. He seeks to bolster his readers with the kind of faith that will allow them to persist in the face of discouragement.

Wednesday:

Read: James 1:1-25

What to look for:

- In vs. 2-4, James jumps right into the issue of suffering. He affirms that a faith that is tested by trial produces endurance, and that in turn produces a person who is "mature and complete".
- Vs. 17-18 is James' central affirmation: new birth, new identity all come as a gift through the will of God. He follows that with vs. 22, which is his central theme. James is interested in how that gift takes shape in our life. In 1:22, James refers to the word of God as a mirror in which you can see who you are. You look in the mirror, you get a glimpse of who you are, a child loved by God. But then you turn away and forget who you are, so you don't live it out (1:24). If you look in the mirror and then go away and immediately forget what it means to be a person who is filled with the word of God and the love of God, and not to reflect that love in your life...that's a problem.

Thursday:

Read: James 2:1-26

What to look for:

- At the beginning of chapter 2, James condemns favoritism. Favoring the rich over the poor in the congregation was a commonplace occurrence. In 2:1 James in effect asks, "Do your actions convey your faith?" Using favoritism as an example, he suggests that if you act in that fashion, then you must not really believe that all are one in Christ. You have been loved by God;

express that to others. If you don't express it to others, it calls into question whether or not you really believe it. Your works betray your faith: Either they reveal it if it is genuine, or betray it if it is not. James finally spells out the way in which favoritism is sin and a breaking of God's law.

- This is where James gets into the business about faith and works that so troubled Martin Luther. But James has a decidedly different approach than does Paul. James writes: *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? (2:14)* Paul would say "yes"; James would say "no".
- In 2:15-17, James suggests that "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Paul and James are using the same word in two different ways. For Paul, "faith" means trust, as in trusting the promises of God. It's a relational term. For James, "faith" means belief in a proposition, the acceptance of a statement of truth. That's what James means by "faith" in 2:19— simply a belief that God is one. Since James does not have in mind the idea of a trusting relationship when he speaks of faith, it would follow for him that simply believing a fact does not save you.
- For Paul, the idea of being "justified" means to put something into a right relationship, while for James, to "justify" means to show that something is true. (2:23-24). James is not saying that we are put into a right relationship with God by means of our works and our deeds, James means that you show your faith by means of your works, because for James, to justify means to show that something is true. So, Paul and James think along somewhat different lines, but use the same words. That's what creates the tension. But in the end, Paul would not say that there CAN be faith without good works, because in Galatians, even Paul says that faith works itself out in love.

Friday:

Read: James 3:1-12, 5:13-20

What to look for:

- In this portion of his letter, James challenges the casual attitude that most people take toward speech. James suggests that the evils that come from the tongue can infect every area of life. He begins by acknowledging that "we all stumble in many ways." But what is so often attached to that notion, "and so that's ok", could not be farther from James' mind. Mediocrity is not a part of James' vision of the Christian life.
- In 1:8, James had reminded readers that they should not be double-minded. He carries that concept into his discussion here in chapter three by now pointing out that neither ought we be "double-tongued." For James, to be "double-tongued" is unthinkable, as impossible as praising and cursing God at the same time. James provides a series of metaphors for such an absurd situation, all pointing to the chief concern of this section:

Christians must learn to control the tongue, for it has lethal power. With the power that the tongue has over human beings, the ability to control it comes as a gift from God.

- In 5:13ff James ties healing and forgiveness together, not unlike Jesus does with the paralytic when Jesus heals him physically to show that he has the power to forgive sins. Sometimes our most profound need for healing, and the most important healing we can receive, beyond any restoration of physical health, is the healing Jesus offers for our sin-sick spirit. In verse 16, James spins that out from the specific to the general; individual healing and forgiveness to the issue of sin in general.
- Communal confession and prayer will heal. The power of corporate faith, of being a part of a community of believers, is in the resource of Christian brothers and sisters who will pray for us, and hold us accountable. We are to come clean to each other, perhaps because most of us are so good at self-deception that coming clean before God privately, by ourselves, most often involves excuses, justifications, and cover-ups. We need to confess to each other, because we need to hear the word of forgiveness spoken *to* us, not *by* us. And we need to know that others are supporting us in prayer.