

# NT LEADER'S GUIDE

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## JAMES, PHILIPPIANS, COLOSSIANS, & PHILEMON

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GOSPEL TRAINING CENTER  
AT LAKEWOOD  
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*NT Leader's Guide: James, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*

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Published by Lakewood Baptist Church

2235 Thompson Bridge Road

Gainesville, Georgia 30506

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Welcome to NT18!

Authentic Community is more than a slogan or pithy phrase It is really about LIFE TRANSFORMATION.

I am so excited about our NT18, especially as I consider the Life Trans- formation that I know will occur as you read God's Word.

God's Word is strong, powerful, and provides Truth and Light for every aspect our lives.

This Leader's Guide will be extremely helpful to each of our community group leaders as Authentic Community occurs in and through the local church.

I am so very thankful for your love of God, HIS Word, and HIS Church.

Blessings, Dr. T

# THE LETTER OF JAMES

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## Author & Audience

The author identifies himself in 1:1 as “James,” and the consensus through the history of the church has been that this is the James who was the brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) and who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18; Galatians 1:19). James probably wrote this letter from Jerusalem, and most likely, he composed it in the mid-40’s. There are no specific events mentioned in the letter that allow for a firm dating of its writing, but James’s death in AD 62 provides an endpoint of possible dates. More telling is the lack of discussion of the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15, which took place in AD 48. The council’s findings would have been relevant to some of the issues James addresses, and since he does not mention the council, it is most likely that it had not yet occurred.

James writes his letter to Jewish Christians who are no longer in Jerusalem. Acts informs us that the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem served to spread Jewish Christians out from their home country (See 8:1; 11:19). On first reading James 1:1, “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” it seems clear that James is writing to Jewish believers. However, this evidence is not as straightforward as it might seem, for “twelve tribes” could be used to speak of how both Jew and Gentile believers are now part of the one people of God. James’s use of the Old Testament (1:25; 2:8-13) and his description of where these Christians meet as a “synagogue” (2:2) provide stronger support that Jewish believers were the intended audience. The lack of a specific church location likely means that this was a “literary letter” intended to be distributed among several congregations.

## Purpose

James writes to encourage Christians to put their faith into practice. He addresses the persecution and poverty that many receiving his letter faced, and he calls upon them to endure well. Their faith must

manifest itself through faithful living. Their lives and confessions should align. Faith, James argues, demonstrates itself through good works.

In this call to put faith into practice, James urges believers to endure suffering, to control their speech, to care for those in need, to act in unity and impartiality in the church, to oppose wordiness and pride, and to avoid trusting in wealth. Faith must be lived out in a manner worthy of Christ.

## Discussion Questions

- 1:2-3 | What does it mean to “count it all joy” when you face trials? How does James say that you can do that? How does what you believe about God enable you to have this kind of joy in the midst of hardships?
- 1:19-26 | Consider what James says about anger (vv. 19-20), controlling what you say (v. 26), and caring for those in need (v. 27). In light of these teachings, where do you believe you need to be a “doer of the word” and not a hearer only (vv. 22-25)?
- 2:1-13 | Where are you tempted to show partiality between people? How does the gospel of Jesus Christ challenge our showing of partiality? How can you work to make our church more impartial?
- 2:14-26 | How are these verses compatible with what Paul teaches about being justification by faith alone?

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Both James and Paul cite Abraham as an example to prove their point. In Romans 4, Paul highlights the example of Abraham as someone who was justified by faith. He quotes Genesis 15:6, saying, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” James, however, refers to Abraham as an example of someone justified by his actions. James points to Genesis 22 where Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac at the Lord’s command, and about this account James comments, “Faith was completed by his works” (1:22). “You see,” James continues, “that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (1:24).

If the Bible is completely truthful, how can Paul say that justification is by faith alone and James say that it is not by faith alone?

The solution to this apparent contradiction is that Paul and James are speaking about “justification” in two different ways. Paul speaks of justification as when believers are declared righteous before God based upon the work of Christ.

There are two ways to understand James's use of justification so that his teaching still agrees with the rest of Scripture that salvation comes by faith in Christ alone.

1. James uses justification to mean "vindicate before people." In essence, this reading says that good works demonstrate that believers have saving faith. For a similar use, see Luke 7:29.
2. James uses justification to mean "vindicate at the last judgment." Jesus uses the verb "to justify" in this sense in Matthew 12:37.

In essence, both of these definitions point to the fact that good works demonstrate the reality of one's faith. Paul would certainly agree with this sentiment. After all, he argues that one is saved by faith alone in order to do good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). For both James and Paul, grace alone through faith forms the basis of salvation, but good works are the necessary result of salvation.

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- 3:1-12 | Compare James's teaching with Proverbs 18:21. How can you use your words to give life?
  - 4:4 | What does James mean by "world" here? If we're supposed to be loving and kind, how is it that we are not to be friends with the world? How does being a friend to the world hinder your relationship with God?
  - 4:13-17 | Is James teaching us not to plan and to prepare? What must you believe about God in order to live as James instructs? Compare this teaching with Jesus's parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:13-21.
  - 5:1-6 | How would you summarize James's warning to the rich? Do you believe this warning applies to you? Why or why not? If so, how do you need to pay attention to this warning in your life?
  - 5:7-11 | James calls for patience in waiting for the Lord's return. How can you be patient for the Lord in the midst of suffering? Whose example of patient waiting on the Lord in the OT most resonates with you? How does knowing that "the Lord is compassionate and merciful" help you exercise patience? Do you think patience is natural? (See what Paul says about the source of patience in Galatians 5:22).

# THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

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## Author & Audience

The Apostle Paul wrote Philippians, and most likely, he wrote this letter around AD 62 while imprisoned in Rome. His reference to the “imperial guard” or “praetorium” in 1:13 lends credence to Rome as the place of writing. Additionally, the mention of the saints “of Caesar’s household” in 4:22 further supports the idea that Paul was in Rome. Acts 28 provides a picture of Paul’s boldness in proclaiming Christ while imprisoned in Rome.

Paul wrote this letter to the church at Philippi, which was located in Macedonia just across the Aegean Sea from modern-day Turkey. This was the first church Paul founded in Europe (Acts 16:6-40). It was in Philippi that Lydia was converted (Acts 16:14), and in this same town Paul and Silas were imprisoned and miraculously freed, which led to the conversion of the Philippian jailer and his whole family (Acts 16:25-40).

This letter reveals a mutual love and strong partnership between Paul and the Philippian church. Paul describes the Philippians as being in “partnership” with him as he proclaims Christ around the world (1:5; 4:15). They pray for each other (1:3-11; 1:19), and the church at Philippi sent Paul aid through Epaphroditus (2:25; 4:18).

## Purpose

In this letter, Paul seems generally well pleased with the Philippian church he founded, and he writes to encourage them in their faith. He has a number of personal and pastoral concerns that he addresses in this letter.

On the personal level, he wants to inform the Philippians about Epaphroditus (2:25-29). The church had sent Epaphroditus to help Paul, but in this service, he fell ill. Paul writes to let the church know that Epaphroditus is doing better and to commend his service to them. In honoring Epaphroditus, Paul also commends Timothy to

them (2:19-24). Paul is sending Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi, and he wants to them to be welcomed and their message heard. Paul also writes to express his thankfulness for the church's gift to him (4:14-18), and he gives the Philippians an update on himself during his imprisonment (1:12-30).

Paul writes to address a number of pastoral concerns as well. He warns against opposition from within and from without. He cautions the church against challenges from outsiders (1:28-30) and warns them about false teachers (3:2-3, 18). Paul also urges the church to address problems in their own community. He emphasizes the need for unity (2:1-4) and to overcome divisions (4:2). Likewise, he calls them to live lives of humble service (1:27-2:18). Simply put, Paul wants to see the believers in this church grow in their faith (1:25).

## Discussion Questions

- 1:12-14 | How does Paul view his imprisonment as beneficial? How might the Lord be using a current hardship in your life to open the door for you to share the gospel?
- 1:12-30, esp. 29-30 | Does Paul expect the Christian life to be filled with comfort and ease? How does his vision of the Christian life differ from yours? How is he able to willingly and joyfully endure suffering and even death?
- 2:1-11 | How are we to act toward one another as a church? Where do you have the most trouble looking out for the interest of others rather than your own? How is Christ's example an encouragement to believers to act in humility?

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The idea of "grasped" in 2:6 is best understood as Christ not exploiting or taking advantage of his divinity. He did not use his divine nature for his own benefit, but he took on the nature of servant.

In 2:7, God the Son "made himself nothing" (ESV, NIV) or "emptied himself" (NASB, NRSV). "Emptied himself" is a slightly confusing translation, for it could convey the idea that God the Son got rid of his divinity to become man, which is certainly not in line with the teaching of Scripture. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. This making himself nothing or emptying himself is Christ's taking on human form. He did not lose or set aside his divine nature, but he gave up the privileges of being the king of the universe to become a slave for his people.

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- 2:12-13 | What does Paul mean when he calls us to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”? The “for” in v. 13 gives us the reason why we should work out our salvation; what is the reason Paul gives? Why do you need to work if God works in you?
- 3:7-11 | How has what you value in life changed since coming to know Christ? Where does the “accounting” of your life need to be more in line with Paul’s in vv. 7-8? What does it mean in v. 9 that we can have “righteousness from God that depends on faith”?
- 3:17-18 | How does Paul describe the end of those who reject Christ? Those who believe in him? How does the prospect of judgement and reward encourage you to “stand firm thus in the Lord” (4:1)?
- 4:4-7 | How can you “rejoice in the Lord always”? What is the antidote to anxiety that Paul prescribes? Where do you desire the peace of God in your life today?
- 4:10-20 | In v. 15, Paul describes the Philippian church as being in “partnership” with him in his gospel work (ESV). Or, as the NIV puts it, “not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only.” What would it look like for our church to be in gospel partnership with missionaries? How could we share in giving and receiving with them?

# THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

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## Author & Audience

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter around AD 62 while he was imprisoned in Rome. Acts 28 records Paul's activity while under house arrest in Rome. This letter was probably written about the same time as Ephesians and Philemon since all three letters were sent by Tychicus and Onesimus.

In this letter, Paul addresses Christians in Colossae. This church began during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (52-55). Colossae is about 100 miles from Ephesus. Apparently, Epaphras was from Colossae and was converted under Paul's preaching in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; Colossians 1:7). From this one convert, the church at Colossae began.

## Purpose

Epaphras had come to see the imprisoned Paul in Rome (1:7-8; 4:12), and during his visit, he seems to have reported to Paul about a dangerous false teaching being promoted in the church at Colossae. The exact nature of this false teaching is unclear, but what is clear from Paul's writing is that this teaching lessened Christ.

Some commentators think this false teaching could have been a combination of Jewish and pagan folk beliefs that had infiltrated the church. One possibility is that a mysticism was being promoted that claimed to have heightened spiritual insights, and as part of this teaching, people within the church may have begun to practice rites and rituals to overcome evil spirits and to put an end to their afflictions.

For Paul, the answer to this false teaching is that Christ is supreme. Jesus Christ is God himself who created and rules over all things. Believers are united with Christ by faith, and with him, they are exalted.

## Discussion Questions

- 1:9-14 | What does Paul pray for the Colossians in these verses? What would it look like for this prayer to be answered in your life? For whom will you pray this prayer this week?
  - 1:13-22 | What do these verses teach us about Jesus and what he has accomplished for his people?
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The word “firstborn” in 1:15 has been a point of confusion for some. They read this to mean that Christ was born - that there was a time when he did not exist - but it is clear from the rest of Scripture that the Son of God has existed eternally. He has always been the Son. It is better to understand “firstborn” as a matter of rank rather than a statement about Jesus’s beginning. “Firstborn,” then, speaks of Jesus’s preeminence over all things.

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- 1:24-25 | What does Paul mean that there is something lacking in Christ’s afflictions?
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Paul is not teaching that there was something lacking in Christ’s atoning death. His death is sufficient to cover sin. However, Paul is teaching that the messengers of the gospel will suffer as they proclaim the gospel message. More suffering, Paul says, will come as the good news of Jesus is proclaimed.

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- 2:6-15 | What is now true of believers according to these verses? Notice how often in these verses Paul describes believers as “in him” and “with him.” What do these two phrases teach us about how believers experience the benefits of Christ?
- 2:20-23 | What false views of putting an end to sin were being promoted in Colossae? Why don’t these work? How should a Christian put sin to death? (Consider Romans 8:13).
- 3:12-17 | According to these verse, what traits should mark believers' interactions with one another? According to v. 16, what is the purpose of singing together as a church? In light of these verses, what would Paul make of Christians who do not feel the need to attend the gathered worship of their church?

- 4:2-4 | What does Paul encourage us to pray? How can we model our own prayers on this passage?

# THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

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## Author & Audience

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter around AD 62 from his imprisonment in Rome. This letter likely was written around the same time as Colossians and Ephesians because all three of these letters were sent by Tychius and Onesimus to their recipients.

Paul directs this letter to Philemon, who was a wealthy, slave-owning Christian in Colossae. Although the letter is written mostly to Philemon, Paul also addresses it to the church that meets in his house (v. 2). The church in Colossae, which is about 100 miles from Ephesus, began during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus from AD 52-55. Epaphras, a man from Colossae, was converted under Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; Colossians 1:7). It seems that Epaphras's return to Colossae was the beginning of the church in that city.

## Purpose

Paul writes to reconcile Onesimus, a runaway slave, with his owner, Philemon. Onesimus fled from Philemon's home to the city of Rome, and he may have stolen some property in the process. As the largest city in the Empire, Rome would have been an ideal place to hide and escape notice. However, in this city filled with thousands of people, Onesimus, by God's providence, runs into the Apostle Paul. Through Paul's ministry, Onesimus comes to saving faith in Christ. Paul is working in this letter to bring about reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon.

A key theme of this letter is that a Christian's reconciliation with God through the work of Christ should lead to reconciliation with others. Faith in Christ has real world consequences for our relationships.

In light of Paul's instructions to masters and slaves in Ephesians and Colossians, a perennial question arises with Philemon: does Paul want Philemon to fully free Onesimus? And more broadly, what is Paul's attitude toward slavery? Verses 16 and 21 seem to indicate that Paul

does desire Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom, but at the very least, he envisions a new relationship between master and slave. Paul does not outright challenge slavery in the Roman world, but the standards he sets for masters run so counter to the expected practices of slavery that he does subvert the institution.

## Discussion Questions

- Reconciliation | What does it mean to be reconciled to God through Christ? How does being reconciled to God need to shape your relationships? With whom do you need to be reconciled? How does the Holy Spirit work in our lives to enable us to reconcile with others?
- v. 7 | Why has Paul received much joy and comfort from Philemon? What does the fact that Paul received comfort and joy from Philemon's care for others tell us about how unified Paul felt to other believers? When has the unity you have in Christ with other believers allowed you to experience joy for them?