

JAMES, PETER, JOHN  
AND JUDAH

*for*

EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.  
WRIGHT

STUDY GUIDE BY MICHAEL KIRKINDOLL

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE  
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 1*

*Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*

*Mark for Everyone*

*Luke for Everyone*

*John for Everyone, Part 1*

*John for Everyone, Part 2*

*Acts for Everyone, Part 1*

*Acts for Everyone, Part 2*

*Romans for Everyone, Part 1*

*Romans for Everyone, Part 2*

*1 Corinthians for Everyone*

*2 Corinthians for Everyone*

*Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone*

*Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone*

*1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone*

*Hebrews for Everyone*

*James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone*

*Revelation for Everyone*

*For  
Sam*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright  
2022

## INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

## INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The 'early Christian letters' in this book are short, sharp and to the point. They are full of clear practical advice for Christians taking their early steps in the faith and needing to know where the problems were going to come and what resources they could find to cope with them. But they also breathe the fresh air of delight in a new-found faith, hope and life. They are full of wonder at the fact of Jesus himself, at what he'd done in giving his life to rescue people, at what he had revealed about who God himself is. They are realistic in facing the dangers a Christian community will meet in the world around, trying to squash the church into its own ways of life and to stifle the rumour that the living God might be on the loose. And they are equally realistic in highlighting difficulties which may arise within the community itself. They draw richly on the ancient scriptures of Israel to help give the young Christians that all-important sense of depth in discovering who they really are within God's love and purposes; and they range widely across issues of everything from politics to private life. They are a vital resource for every church and every Christian. So here they are: James, Peter, John and Judah for everyone!

Tom Wright





JAMES

## JAMES 1.1–8

### The Challenge of Faith

<sup>1</sup>James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus the Messiah, to the twelve dispersed tribes: greeting.

<sup>2</sup>My dear family, when you find yourselves tumbling into various trials and tribulations, learn to look at it with total joy, <sup>3</sup>because you know that, when your faith is put to the test, what comes out is patience.

<sup>4</sup>What's more, you must let patience have its complete effect, so that you may be complete and whole, not falling short in anything.

<sup>5</sup>If any one of you falls short in wisdom, they should ask God for it, and it will be given them. God, after all, gives generously and ungrudgingly to all people. <sup>6</sup>But they should ask in faith, with no doubts. A person who doubts is like a wave of the sea which the wind blows and tosses about. <sup>7</sup>Someone like that should not suppose they will receive anything from the Lord, <sup>8</sup>since they are double-minded and unstable in everything they do.

I used to think the waves had come from far away. Standing by the sea and watching the grey-green monsters roll in, it was easy to imagine that this wave, and then this one, and then the one after that, had made the journey from a distant land. Here they were, like the magi, arriving at last to deposit their gifts.

But of course it isn't like that. Waves are what happens when wind and tide take hold of the waters that are there all the time and make them dance to their tune. Just yesterday I stood in the bright sunshine and watched them sparkling and splashing around a little harbour, making the boats dip and bob. A fine sight; the waves seem to have character and energy of their own. But they don't. They are the random products of other forces.

The challenge of **faith** is the challenge not to be a wave. There are many winds and tides in human life, and it's easy to imagine ourselves important because we seem, from time to time at least, to dance and sparkle this way and that. The question is whether the character that develops within us is the real thing, or whether, as James says in verse 6, we are simply double-minded and unstable, blown and tossed about by this wind or that.

We don't know for sure, by the way, who James was. It was as common a name in the first century as it is today. But there is a strong chance that this letter was from the best-known James in the early church: James the brother of Jesus, the strong central leader in the Jerusalem church over the first thirty years of Christianity. Peter and Paul and the others went off around the world, but he stayed put, praying

and teaching and trusting that the God who had raised his beloved brother from the dead would complete what he had begun. This letter, then, would be part of that work, written to encourage Christians across the world – whom he sees as the new version of the ‘twelve dispersed tribes’ of Israel – to face up to the challenge of faith.

Quite a challenge it was then, as it is now and always has been. The moment you decide to follow Jesus is the moment to expect the trials to begin. It’s a bit like opening the back door to set off on a walk and finding that the wind nearly pushes you back inside before you’ve even started. And James tells us we should celebrate such moments (verse 2)! We should learn to look at them with joy. What can he mean?

When a Christian is tested it shows something real is happening. There are many kinds of tests: actual persecution, which many face today; fierce and nasty temptations, which can strike suddenly when we’re not expecting them; physical sickness or bereavement; family or financial troubles; and so on. But you wouldn’t be tested unless you were doing something serious. Mechanics don’t test scrap metal; they test cars that are going to face tough conditions. Those who follow Jesus the **Messiah** are not simply supposed to survive. They are supposed to count, to make a difference in the world, whether through the quiet daily witness of a faithful and gentle life or the chance, given to some, to speak and act in a way which reveals the **gospel** to many others. For all of that we need to become strong, to face up to the challenge.

So James draws attention to the result of the test: patience. Don’t panic. Don’t overreact. Don’t turn a problem into a crisis. Be patient. This is one of the great themes of this letter (see 5.7). And, says James, you should let patience have its complete effect. Let it work right through your system (verse 4). Imagine your life like a house. Faith is what happens when you look out of the window, away from yourself, to the God who is so much greater than you. Patience is what happens inside the house when you do that.

One of the other great themes of the letter comes here at the beginning, in parallel with patience. Wisdom! James is the most obvious representative in the New Testament of what in the ancient Israelite scriptures (the Old Testament) we think of as ‘wisdom literature’: the sifted, tested and collected wisdom of those who learned to trust God for everything and to discover how that trust would work out in every aspect of daily life. How should I cope with this situation, with that tricky moment? You need wisdom – and you should ask for it.

But how do I know that God will give it to me? Here, as the secret of faith, patience and wisdom combined, we have the heart of what James wants to say. God gives generously and ungrudgingly to all people (verse 5). How easy it is for us to imagine that God is stingy and mean.

We project on to the maker of all things the fearful, petty or even spiteful character we meet so often in real life, sometimes even when we look in the mirror. Learning who God really is and what he's truly like – and reminding ourselves of it regularly – is the key to it all. Without that, you'll be double-minded, swept this way one minute and that way the next. You'll just be another wave. With it, you will have a settled character. Wisdom. Patience. Faith.

## JAMES 1.9–18

### The Snares of the World and the Gift of God

<sup>9</sup>Brothers and sisters who find themselves impoverished should celebrate the fact that they have risen to this height – <sup>10</sup>and those who are rich that they are brought down low, since the rich will disappear like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup>You see, the rich will be like the grass: when the sun rises with its scorching heat, it withers the grass so that its flower droops and all its fine appearance comes to nothing. That's what it will be like when the rich wither away in the midst of their busy lives.

<sup>12</sup>God's blessing on the man who endures testing! When he has passed the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. <sup>13</sup>Nobody being tested should say, 'It's God that's testing me', for God cannot be tested by evil, and he himself tests nobody. <sup>14</sup>Rather, each person is tested when they are dragged off and enticed by their own desires. <sup>15</sup>Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and when sin reaches maturity it gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup>Don't be deceived, my dear family. <sup>17</sup>Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes down from above, from the father of lights. His steady light doesn't vary. It doesn't change and produce shadows. <sup>18</sup>He became our father by the word of truth; that was his firm decision, and the result is that we are a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

'Listen for the echo,' said my friend. We were standing at the back of a great cathedral, and the choir was about to sing a powerful, beautiful anthem. Sure enough: the conductor knew what he was doing. As each part of the anthem developed, the building seemed to pick it up, cherish it, play with it, and use it as the background to the next part. After a while it was hard to tell what was actual echo and what was in our memory, in our mind, while we were listening to the next bit. When, finally, the choir fell silent, there was a full ten seconds in which we could savour the last chord. The whole building was designed that way, so as to give the impression that, along with the human choir, there were other, older voices, hundreds of years of worship on earth, joining in. Not to mention the heavenly host themselves.

Listen for the echo! The early Christians lived and worked within a massive echo chamber, more vast than any cathedral. It was, of course, the Old Testament, the ancient scriptures of Israel, which the followers of Jesus believed had all come rushing together with new meaning in the life, death and **resurrection** of their lord and master. Here, as often happens in early Christian writings, we find a clear echo of a famous passage. ‘The grass withers,’ wrote the prophet, ‘the flower fades, but the **word** of our God will stand for ever.’ You’ll find that in Isaiah 40.7–8. It might be worth looking up the whole passage; it’s one of the greatest biblical chapters of all time. James is encouraging us to hear the particular teaching he is giving within this much larger echo chamber, to allow the ancient echoes to colour the way we think about what he’s saying.

What he is saying is that we must learn to trust God and his word rather than the snares of the world. He has two kinds of snares in mind: the snare of wealth, and the snare of actual temptation. (The two often go together, of course, as when someone is tempted to cheat or steal to become rich.) And he is warning that these powerful impulses are deeply deceptive. They are like the wonderful wild flowers which spring up out in the open country: here today, gone tomorrow, or even sooner if the sun is hot. The question is, what is going to last? What is permanent? And his answer is clear: God and his word. And the ‘word’ is not merely the word that conveys true information. When God speaks, things happen. Things happen *to us*. Things happen *in us*. The word of God is like medicine which goes down deep inside, healing our inner hurts and changing our inner motivations, so that we become different people (verse 18).

That is urgently needed, because without it we will look (metaphorically) at the glorious wild flowers and think they are what matters. We will see people becoming rich and famous, with fine houses, big cars and luxurious holidays. Today’s celebrity culture tells its own story. A famous footballer one day, out on the street the next; a flashy wedding one day, a messy divorce the next. We know these stories, and yet we are seduced by the glitter of it all.

James has sharp, even sarcastic, words to say about it. When you find you’re poor, you should celebrate, because that is actually the height to which you should aspire! When you find you’re rich, celebrate the fact that you’re being humbled, because it will all be swept away! Learn (in other words) to look at the world inside out and upside down, as Jesus constantly taught. Don’t allow your imagination to be drawn into the snare. See things as God sees them.

In particular, recognize what’s happening when you are tempted. Developing what he said about ‘trials and tribulations’ in verse 2, he

warns us not to imagine that God is responsible for the temptation itself. The testing comes from within (Jesus made that clear, too). None of us starts off with a pure internal ‘kit’ of impulses, hopes and fears. If you are true to ‘yourself’, you will end up a complete mess. The challenge is to take the ‘self’ you find within, and to choose wisely which impulses and desires to follow, and which ones to resist.

Some desires, says James, start a family tree of their own (verse 15). Desire is like a woman who conceives a child, and the child is sin: the act which flows directly from that part of the ‘self’ which pulls us away from the genuine **life** which God has for us. And when the child, sin, grows up and becomes mature, it too has a child. That child is death: the final result of following those desires which diminish that genuine human life. The contrast could hardly be sharper: God promises ‘the crown of life’ (verse 12), but those desires lead in exactly the opposite direction. Here, as so often in scripture, the teaching of ‘wisdom’ fits together with what the ancient Israelites saw as God’s ‘**covenant**’ promise, requiring the choice between life and death.

So, once again, James grounds his teaching in what is true about God himself, God the generous giver, the ‘father of lights’. Everything that truly lights up the world is a gift from him; but, whereas the sun, the moon and the stars all come and go in their shining, God’s light is constant. And – back to the echo of Isaiah 40 – ‘he became our father by the word of truth’. God has started his own fresh family tree, the new birth that brings new life, through the powerful word of the **gospel** of Jesus.

It doesn’t stop with us. Those in whose lives the word is doing its work are just the start. We, says James, are ‘a kind of first fruits of his creatures’. Another echo, this time of the early harvest festival in the **Temple**. You bring the ‘first fruits’, the beginning of the crop, as an offering to God, as a sign that there is much more to come. One day, God’s word will transform the whole creation, filling **heaven** and earth with his rich, wonderful light and life. Our lives, transformed by the gospel, learning to look at the world differently, standing firm against temptation, are just the start of that larger project.

## JAMES 1.19–27

### The Word that Goes to Work

<sup>19</sup>So, my dear brothers and sisters, get this straight. Every person should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. <sup>20</sup>Human anger, you see, doesn’t produce God’s justice! <sup>21</sup>So put away everything that is sordid, all overflowing malice, and humbly receive the word which has been planted within you and which has the power to rescue your lives.

<sup>22</sup>But be people who do the word, not merely people who hear it and deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>Someone who hears the word but doesn't do it, you see, is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup>He notices himself, but then he goes away and quickly forgets what he looked like. <sup>25</sup>But the person who looks into the perfect law of freedom, and goes on with it, not being a hearer who forgets but a doer who does the deed – such a person is blessed in their doing. <sup>26</sup>If anyone supposes that they are devout, and does not control their tongue, but rather deceives their heart – such a person's devotion is futile. <sup>27</sup>As far as God the father is concerned, pure, unsullied devotion works like this: you should visit orphans and widows in their sorrow, and prevent the world leaving its dirty smudge on you.

Human wisdom regularly produces proverbs. 'A stitch in time saves nine.' 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.' And so on. One of the proverbs I learned very early in life went like this: 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' I think we boys at school used to chant it to one another as a response to a silly playground insult.

But of course that proverb is very misleading. You can recover from a broken leg or arm. But if someone smears your good name – if someone tells lies about you, and other people believe them – it may be much, much harder. You may never get the job you want. People may never quite trust you. Friends, even family, may turn away. Words can be terrible things. They can leave lasting wounds.

Here James introduces another of his key themes: the dangerous power of the human tongue. This is all of a piece with what he has just said about God's **word**. It isn't just conveying information; it actually does things, changes things, brings about a new and lasting state of affairs. So in this passage we see God's word going to work, at the same time as we hear a warning about our human words going to work in a rather different direction. As so often in James, when you hold what seem to be different ideas side by side, from one paragraph to another, a much bigger picture emerges.

So we begin with a theme which many early Christian writers emphasized: the danger of human anger. James has been emphasizing the need for patience; anger is, of course, one of the things that happens when patience reaches its limit. In verses 19–21 he applies his teaching about patience in a particular direction: we always imagine that when the world is out of joint a little bit of our own anger will put things straight. Paul, in Ephesians 4.26, allows that there may be a type of anger which is appropriate, but insists that it must be kept severely in its place. James hints at a similar concession when he says we should be 'slow to anger' as we are slow to speak. But the point is this. If what



we want is God's justice, coming to sort things out, we will do better to get entirely out of the way and let God do his own work, rather than supposing our burst of anger (which will most likely have all sorts of nasty bits to it, such as wounded pride, malice and envy) will somehow help God do what needs to be done.

The way God works in us and through us is not by taking our nasty or malicious anger and somehow making it all right. The way God works is, again, through his *word*. In the previous passage James spoke of that word in terms of God giving birth to us as new creatures, as the beginning of his whole new creation. Here, with help from another passage in Isaiah (55.10–11), he sees God's word in terms of something being sown or planted, producing a beautiful shrub or a fruitful harvest.

But how does this happen? Every generation in the church worries, rightly, about people who just glide along, seeming to enjoy what they hear in church but without it making any real difference. 'Nominal Christians', we sometimes say. It is comforting, in a way, to know that James faced exactly the same problem in the very first generation: people who were happy to listen to the word (this presumably means both the teaching of the Old Testament and the **message** about Jesus) but who went away without it having affected them very much.

Here he uses an interesting illustration. In his day there were, of course, no photographs. Hardly anyone had their portrait painted. Not many people possessed mirrors, either. So if you did happen to catch sight of yourself, you might well forget at once what you looked like. That's what it's like, says James, for some when they hear God's word. A quick glance – 'Oh, yes,' they think, 'that's interesting' – and then they forget it straight away and carry on as before.

James's remedy for this is to remind us what the word of scripture, and the message about Jesus, really is: it is 'the perfect **law** of freedom.' To us that sounds like a contradiction in terms. How can a 'law' be part of 'freedom'? Isn't a law something which restricts your freedom, which stops you doing what you want?

Yes and no. Supposing we didn't have a law about which side of the road we were supposed to drive on. Everyone would set off and do their own thing. It would be chaos: accidents, near-misses, and nobody able to go at any speed for fear of disaster. The law that says you drive on the left (in Britain and elsewhere) or the right (in America and elsewhere) sets you free. That's what God's law is like: by restricting your 'freedom' in some ways, it opens up far greater, genuine freedoms in all other ways. And the point is this: when you look into this 'law', the word of God, it is supposed to change you. The word must go to work. When that happens, God's blessing – that is, God's enrichment of your **life** in all kinds of new ways – will surely follow.

James is nothing if not practical. After this flash of glorious theological theory he comes back to earth with a bump. A pious person with a foul mouth is a contradiction in terms (verse 20). Such a person is deceiving themselves – but nobody else. James doesn't immediately say what the remedy is, but he says, in effect, 'All right: you want to follow in God's way? Here's how! There are people out there who need your help; and there is a messy world out there that will try to mess up your life as well. Make sure you focus on the first and avoid the second.' Good, brisk teaching. Almost like a set of proverbs.