

# Why James Barely Mentions Jesus (and What That Means)

If you caught the last episode in this series, you came away with a sense of who James was. The world he was writing into. Why a letter this short, from a man this close to Jesus, carries this much weight. And I hope that episode did something useful for you, because the question it opened is the one we are going to go further into now.

Because here is what I have been sitting with. When you actually read the letter of James carefully, something about the way he thinks and the way he talks is worth stopping on. He is direct, almost blunt. He fires off images without explaining them. He assumes you already know certain stories, certain figures, certain kinds of arguments. He doesn't pause to introduce his references. He just goes.

And that raises a question.

Where did James learn to think like that? Where do his ideas come from? And what does understanding that background actually do to the way we read him?

That is what we are going to grapple with in this episode. And I think by the end of it, the letter is going to feel different to you.

Not harder. Richer.

We have already established that James was writing to Jewish communities scattered across the diaspora. People living outside Jerusalem but formed by the same traditions, the same scriptures, the same patterns of worship and thought that shaped every Jewish community of that era. So I don't want to cover that ground again. What I want to do is press the question further.

What did that actually mean for the kind of letter he sent them?

These were not people coming to faith from scratch. They had grown up inside a world saturated with scripture. The Psalms, the Proverbs, the prophets, the stories of Abraham and Job and Elijah. These were not ancient texts to them. They were the furniture of their imagination. The way they understood suffering, the way they thought about money, the way they talked about God's character, all of it had been shaped by a lifetime inside this tradition.

So when James writes to them, he doesn't need to explain everything. He can assume. He can gesture toward something and trust his readers to complete the picture. The gathering place he mentions in chapter 2 is still called a synagogue. The moral heroes he reaches for are Abraham, Rahab, the prophets, Job, Elijah.

There is no explanation of who the God of Israel is, no introduction of the Shema. He is writing to people who already live inside all of that.

And here is what that means for us. When James assumes something without explaining it, it is not because he is being careless. His original readers already knew. So when we hit a passage that feels abrupt, or a connection that seems to come from nowhere, the right question to ask is not what is wrong with the text. The right question is what did they know that we might be missing.

That is the key that unlocks a lot of James. And it starts with understanding the tradition he is working from.

The most significant background for James is what scholars call the Jewish wisdom tradition. And before your eyes glaze over, let me tell you what that actually is. Because it is not abstract philosophy. It is not academic theology. It is something much more practical than that.

Think of books like Proverbs, or Job, or the book of Sirach, which sits in the Apocrypha. These are books concerned with one fundamental question: how do you live well? Not in theory. In practice. How do you handle your tongue? How do you treat the poor? How do you understand suffering when it comes without warning? How do you keep trusting God when the ground beneath you shifts?

That is the wisdom tradition. And James grew up breathing it.

It shows everywhere in the letter. His instinct to reach for vivid, concrete images rather than abstract argument is a wisdom habit. His interest in the relationship between what you say and what you actually do is a classic wisdom concern. Even his bluntness has precedent. Wisdom literature does not soften things. It fires a statement and trusts you to sit with it.

Here is a concrete example. Running through the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is a recurring concern with how we listen and how we speak. Proverbs returns to it again and again: the person who speaks before they have heard, the fool who cannot hold their tongue, the one whose words outrun their wisdom. And then James 1:19 says:

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” James 1:19.

The idea is not new. James is working within a tradition that already knew this truth. He is not inventing a principle. He is pressing it further, and pressing it into a new moment, for a community that needs to hear it.

Or take the connection to Job. James 5:11 invokes Job's endurance directly. But it goes deeper than one reference. The wisdom tradition had always grappled with the suffering of the innocent. Job was the sharpest version of that question: can someone suffer terribly and unjustly and still remain faithful? James writes to people under real pressure and points them back into that same tradition of the righteous sufferer. And he does it because Jesus, who endured and was vindicated, has now given that tradition its fullest meaning.

Then there is the question of wisdom itself. In Proverbs, wisdom is something you search for and cultivate over time. In James 1:5, the approach shifts.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” James 1:5.

You don't earn wisdom by searching hard enough. You ask for it. God gives it. That is not a break from the tradition so much as a deepening of it. The inheritance James has received gets taken somewhere new.

What I find striking about all of this is that James is not citing chapter and verse from these texts. He is not quoting them the way you might quote a commentary. He has absorbed them. They have become part of how he thinks. And that is actually a more intimate relationship with a tradition than citation. It is the difference between knowing facts about someone and genuinely knowing the person.

Now I want to raise something that I think we need to deal with directly. Because if you have read through James with any care, you have probably felt it, even if you haven't quite put words to it.

If you read through this letter looking for the cross, you will struggle to find it. If you look for the resurrection, it is not there by name. If you look for the Holy Spirit, you will find almost nothing. James mentions the name of Jesus only twice in the entire letter, and even those references are brief. Scholars who have spent careers working through this text in the original Greek have noted the same thing. One puts it in striking terms: the letter is so thoroughly Jewish in its frame of reference that, with only two small exceptions, almost every sentence in it could have been written by someone who had never heard of Jesus at all.

That is not a marginal observation. It is a serious one. And it deserves a real answer.

Now, some careful readers have concluded that these silences mean something troubling. They have argued that James represents a form of early Christianity so undeveloped that the cross and resurrection hadn't yet found their central place. That this letter comes from a moment before the full weight of what Jesus's death and resurrection meant had been worked out. I want to be fair to that concern. It is not a fringe position. Thoughtful people have held it.

But here is the problem with it.

James is not a theologically thin letter. It is precise. It is deliberate. A writer this careful about what he includes has also been careful about what he leaves out. When you look at the silences, they are too consistent to be accidental. Scholars working on this question have landed on a phrase I find useful: what we are looking at is a studied reserve. Not an absence of belief. A purposeful decision about what this letter would and would not say.

So why? What was the purpose?

The clue is in who James is writing to and what he is trying to do. His communities were not sealed off from the wider Jewish world. They were in it. Worshipping alongside Jewish neighbours who did not share their conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Navigating synagogue life across that divide. James is writing a letter that needs to be heard across that space. He is drawing on the shared ground, the wisdom tradition, the prophets, the stories everyone in his community already knows, and pressing those things in a Jesus-shaped direction, without making the letter so specifically Christian in its vocabulary that he loses the room before he has said anything.

One way scholars have put it is this: the convictions are Christian. The clothing is Jewish. And that, they conclude, was not an accident. It was a choice. Christian ideas deliberately clothed in the language and forms of the tradition James and his readers already shared.

And it helps to remember that this is not unique to James. Paul's letters to Corinth, both of which are considerably longer than James, say almost nothing about justification by faith. And justification by faith is one of the most central things Paul believed and taught. Nobody reads that as evidence that Paul had abandoned justification. We simply recognise that Corinth needed to hear something else. Paul was writing to Corinth. James was writing to his communities. Immediate purpose shapes what a letter says and what it doesn't. That is not a suspicious observation. It is just how letters work.

James is not a systematic theology. No letter is. What he wrote is a pastoral response to a particular community in a particular

situation. The things absent from the letter do not represent the boundaries of his faith. They represent the shape of what that community needed to hear.

And underneath everything James writes about how to treat the poor, how to handle the tongue, how to endure under pressure, the assumptions of the gospel are present. He just doesn't stop to articulate them. He is too busy applying them.

In fact, when you look closely, you start to see just how thoroughly Jesus's teaching has shaped the way James writes, even when he doesn't quote Jesus directly.

The connections between this letter and the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7 are striking. Not word for word quotations, but something closer than that: a mind that has been formed by certain teachings and is now expressing them in its own voice.

A few examples. James 1:22 says: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." James 1:22. That sits directly alongside Jesus's image of the man who hears his words but does not act on them, the builder on sand in Matthew 7:24 to 27. Same concern. Different angle. Or James 5:12: "Let your yes be yes and your no be no." James 5:12. That is almost a direct echo of Matthew 5:37. And the whole shape of James's concern for the poor and his sharp words to the wealthy echo the Beatitudes and the Woes in ways that are hard to miss once you have seen them.

What matters here is not a game of spotting references. What it shows is that James has so thoroughly made Jesus's teaching his own that it comes out naturally in how he writes. He is not performing an imitation of Jesus. He is someone who has been genuinely formed by him. His way of seeing the world, the way he asks questions, the things he cares about, all of it has been shaped by what Jesus said and did, and it shows on every page, even when the name of Jesus doesn't appear.

And I think that is actually one of the most interesting things about this letter. It is a picture of what it looks like when teaching truly takes root. You stop quoting it and start living out of it. The words become part of how you see. James is writing from inside that kind of formation.

Worth asking, isn't it, what that might look like for us.

So let me draw a few things together, because I think all of this changes the way we approach the letter.

First. When James seems blunt or abrupt, we can receive it the way his original readers would have received wisdom literature. It is not rudeness. It is a tradition that trusts the hearer to engage. When James fires a question or a proverb and doesn't explain it

for ten minutes afterward, he is treating you as someone capable of sitting with it. We can honour that by actually sitting with it rather than rushing past it.

Second. When James talks about wisdom, he is not using that word the way we often use it today, as a synonym for experience or good judgment. For James, wisdom is something you receive from God. It shapes the whole of your life and especially your relationships. That is why he connects it to peacemaking in chapter 3, to prayer in chapter 1, to the way you treat people in your community. Wisdom, for James, is always visible. It shows up in how you live. So when he calls us to ask God for wisdom, he is not inviting a private intellectual experience. He is calling us toward a particular way of being in the world.

Third. Because James is writing to people who already carry the tradition, he often writes at a kind of shorthand level. He expects his readers to make connections. Reading James well, then, sometimes means slowing down. Not to get ahead of him, but to let those connections form. He trusts his readers. We can trust him in return.

James didn't arrive in a vacuum. He came from somewhere. He grew up inside a tradition, was shaped by a teacher, and lived among a people trying to work out what it meant to follow Jesus while remaining rooted in everything they had always known. And what he wrote carries all of that, even when it doesn't name it.

When we read James, we are not just reading one man's letter. We are standing at the end of a long tradition of people who wanted to know how to live faithfully before God. And we are hearing from someone who believed that question had now been answered in Jesus, and was pressing that answer into the lives of real people, in real difficulty, in a real community.

So the next time you read a passage in James and something doesn't quite land, before assuming it is difficult or confusing, ask what he might have assumed his readers already knew. Because often, that is exactly it. The gap is not in the text. It is in the background we haven't yet been shown.

My hope and prayer is that understanding where James is coming from only deepens how seriously you take what he has to say.

In the next session, we get into the letter itself in a new way, looking at faith and works, and asking what it actually means for faith to be real. The context we've built here is going to matter for that conversation.