

Contents

1	James, the Lord's Brother — <i>September 27–October 3</i> —————	5
2	The Perfecting of Our Faith — <i>October 4–10</i> —————	17
3	Enduring Temptation — <i>October 11–17</i> —————	29
4	Being and Doing — <i>October 18–24</i> —————	41
5	Love and the Law — <i>October 25–31</i> —————	53
6	Faith That Works — <i>November 1–7</i> —————	65
7	Taming the Tongue — <i>November 8–14</i> —————	77
8	The Humility of Heavenly Wisdom — <i>November 15–21</i> —————	89
9	One Lawgiver and Judge — <i>November 22–28</i> —————	101
10	Weep and Howl! — <i>November 29–December 5</i> —————	113
11	Getting Ready for the Harvest — <i>December 6–12</i> —————	125
12	Prayer, Healing, and Restoration — <i>December 13–19</i> —————	137
13	The Everlasting Gospel — <i>December 20–26</i> —————	149

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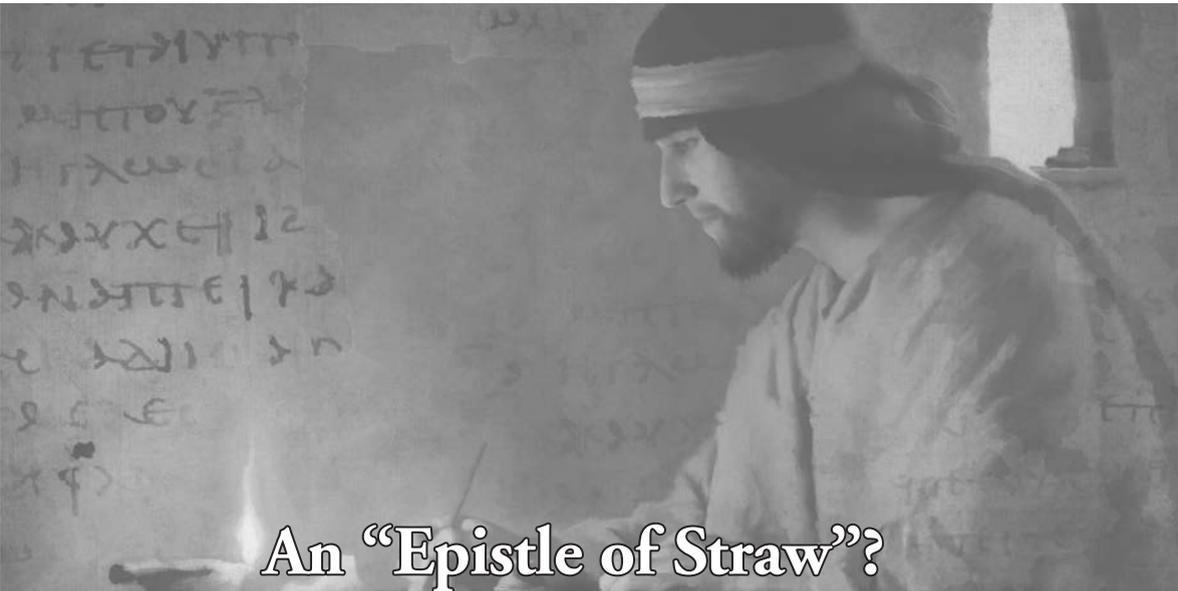
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An “Epistle of Straw”?

The epistle of James has been one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. In the Leipzig Debate of 1519, Roman Catholic scholar Johann Eck used it to challenge Martin Luther’s view of justification by faith alone, insisting that works needed to be added to the equation.

Luther, in response, eventually denied the epistle’s inspired authorship, mainly on the mistaken claim that it taught justification by works. In the introduction to his 1522 German translation of the New Testament, Luther indicated his preference for books like John, 1 John, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter, which reveal Christ and teach “everything that is needful and blessed . . . to know.”

His preface to the book of James was even more negative. Luther called it “really an epistle of straw” because it had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.” Although Luther never removed it from the canon of Scripture, he separated it from what he considered the core of the canon.

Luther’s emphasis on Paul’s epistles, especially Romans and Galatians, and his rejection of James for anything more than devotional value, has influenced a large segment of Christian thinking through the centuries.

Who was James anyway? Was he a legalist, combating Paul’s idea of justification by faith by teaching that justification is really by works? Or was he simply providing a slightly different perspective on the subject, similar to the several perspectives on the teachings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels? The answer is, clearly, the latter.

Not all of the Reformers shared Luther's low opinion of James. No less a luminary than Melancthon, Luther's closest associate, believed that the writings of Paul and James were not in conflict.

James had a firsthand knowledge of Jesus. In fact, his epistle of all the epistles may very well be the earliest Christian writing in existence, and, of all the epistles, reflects most closely the teachings of Jesus that we find in the Gospels. As in the parables of Jesus, imagery from agriculture and the world of finance are abundant. Other important themes include wisdom, prayer, and above all, faith.

James is unique in other ways, too, thereby opening a window for us into some of the struggles that the earliest Christian congregations faced. With envy, jealousy, and worldliness creeping into the fold, there seems to have been societal and cultural pressures that pitted wealthier Christians against poor ones. We also see the great controversy being played out as James attacks counterfeit forms of wisdom and faith.

Most important for Seventh-day Adventists, the epistle of James exudes confidence in the return of Jesus; it also provides crucial perspectives on the law, the judgment, and the Second Coming. Elijah is even presented as a model for us to emulate. This has special relevance for us, as Seventh-day Adventists, who are entrusted with preparing the way for Christ's second advent.

Thus, in some ways, our journey this quarter spans the entire Christian era, as it includes some of the earliest preaching, as well as special insights for these last days.

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How to Use This Teachers Edition

Get Motivated to Explore, Apply, and Create

We hope that this format of the teachers edition will encourage adult Sabbath School class members to do just that—explore, apply, and create. Each weekly teachers lesson takes your class through the following learning process, based on the Natural Learning Cycle:

1. Why is this lesson important to me? (Motivate);
2. What do I need to know from God’s Word? (Explore);
3. How can I practice what I’ve learned from God’s Word? (Apply); and
4. What can I do with what I’ve learned from God’s Word? (Create).

And for teachers who haven’t had time to prepare during the week for class, there is a one-page outline of easy-to-digest material in “The Lesson in Brief” section.

Here’s a closer look at the four steps of the Natural Learning Cycle and suggestions for how you, the teacher, can approach each one:

Step 1—Motivate: Link the learners’ experiences to the central concept of the lesson to show why the lesson is relevant to their lives. Help them answer the question, Why is this week’s lesson important to me?

Step 2—Explore: Present learners with the biblical information they need to understand the central concept of the lesson. (Such information could include facts about the people; the setting; cultural, historical, and/or geographical details; the plot or what’s happening; and conflicts or tension of the texts you are studying.) Help learners answer the question, What do I need to know from God’s Word?

Step 3—Apply: Provide learners with opportunities to practice the information given in Step 2. This is a crucial step; information alone is not enough to help a person grow in Christ. Assist the learners in answering the question, How can I apply to my life what I’ve learned?

Step 4—Create: Finally, encourage learners to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (*James 1:22*). Invite them to make a life response to the lesson. This step provides individuals and groups with opportunities for creative self-expression and exploration. All such activities should help learners answer the question, With God’s help, what can I do with what I’ve learned from this week’s lesson?

When teachers use material from each of these four steps, they will appeal to most every student in their class: those who enjoy talking about what’s happening in their lives, those who want more information about the texts being studied, those who want to know how it all fits in with real life, and those who want to get out and apply what they’ve learned.