

PHILEMON AND JAMES

PHILEMON is one passionate chapter – a letter from Paul urging his friend Philemon to welcome back a runaway slave who is now a new Christian.

The entire book is only 22 verses.

I have paired James with Philemon because it is also about Christian behavior and conduct. Both books stress the importance of treating all believers well, without showing favoritism because of income or social status.

Philemon, although only one page, well deserves your time. If someone else is a Christian, how does that affect your relationship with him or her? What if it is someone whom you do not usually associate with? Different clothing and age? Different race? Labor and management? What if the other person had previously harmed you and now, having turned (or returned) to God, they come to ask forgiveness? How does loving a brother or sister in Christ, loving them as Jesus has loved you, change relationships of power, exploitation or control over others?

Philemon is a letter between people who know each other. Careful reading of this letter reveals important facts about them.

Philemon is a respected Christian who is wealthy enough to own a slave. Paul writes that the “hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.” Paul’s statement in verse 19 (“owing me even your own self”) indicates that Philemon heard the saving news of Jesus from Paul.

Paul writes that **Onesimus** is “my child, whose father I have become in my imprisonment.” While with Paul, he has also become a Christian. His name means “useful,” but a runaway slave is not useful to his owner. Paul never names why Onesimus ran away. Poor treatment? Rebellion? But now Paul has found him helpful and he sends him back to his owner so that he may be helpful to him. A runaway slave could experience severe consequences, but Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in Jesus instead of acting by society’s standards.

JAMES is five times as long as Philemon: five chapters.

This book of James is focused on what Christians do and say. For the story of Jesus, turn to the Gospels. To understand the resurrection and salvation, turn to Romans and the other letters of Paul. To know “how-to” act like a Christian, take these words to heart and do them. James has many short, pithy bits of instruction. Some call it the Proverbs of the New Testament.

James is identified only in 1:1 as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The apostle James who was the brother of John and son of Zebedee (Luke 5:1-11) died too early to write this letter. He was killed in 44 A.D. when “King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church” (Acts 12:1-2). James, “the brother of the Lord” (Galatians 1:19) who became the leader in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13), is often associated with this book. A later writer probably recognized James’ influence by using his name. The historians Josephus and Hegesippus recount that priestly authorities had James killed in the early sixties.

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (1:22)
Faith without works is dead. (2:17)

These two quotes may be the best-known statements from James. This book is not about the gift of salvation, which depends solely on Jesus. James is about how you live now that you are forgiven, saved and assured of God’s love. Has your faith resulted in a changed life? If not, something is very wrong.

From the rest of the New Testament, I know that I should never measure your faith by your actions. I may not know your starting point or what you have to struggle with as you try to express your faith with a courteous tongue and show love to others. At the same time, there is a standard of godly speech and action which we should follow. James challenges us to examine our lives and improve.