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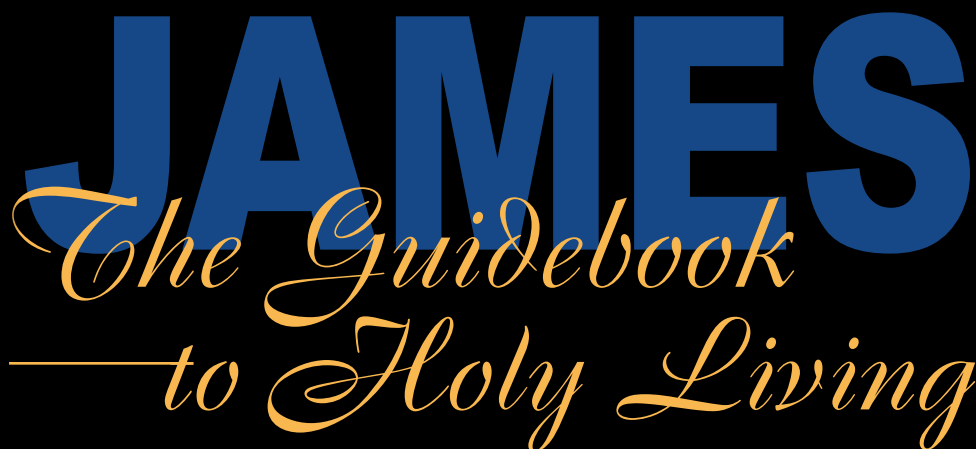
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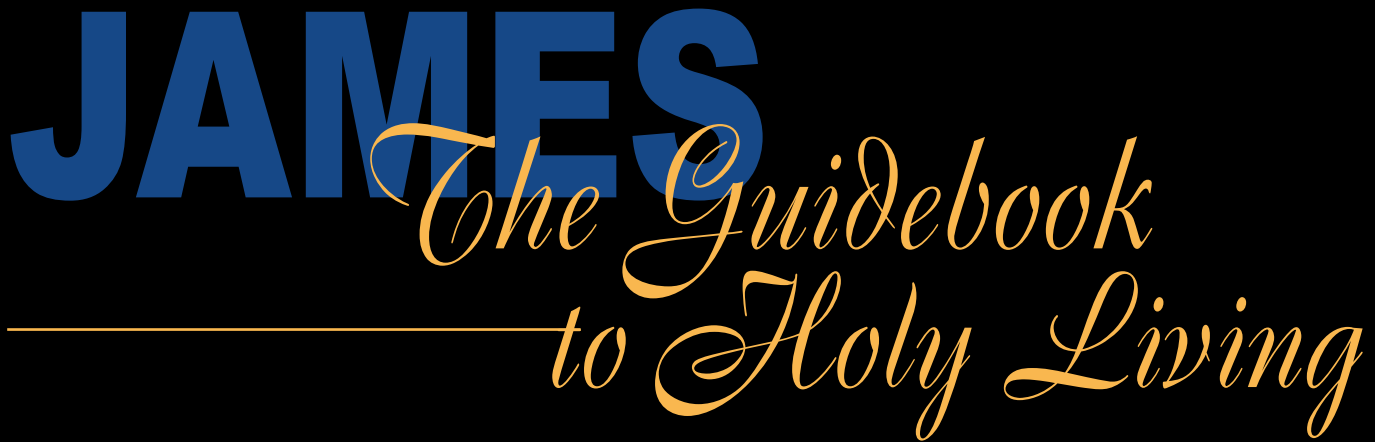
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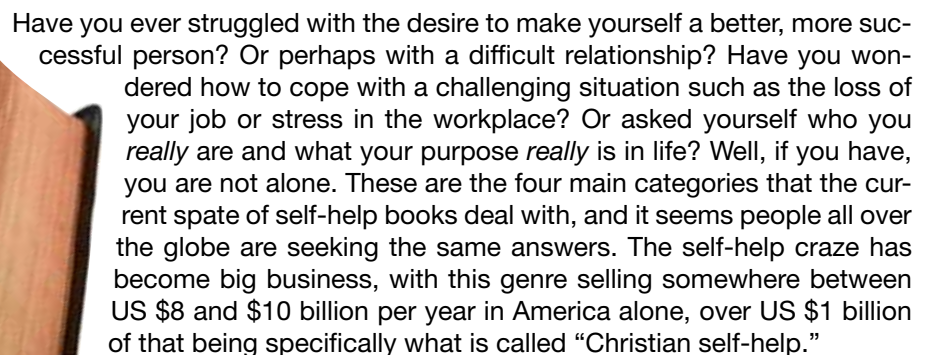
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There is
ONE BOOK
that can
help us.



Everyone, it seems, wants advice. If you want to make yourself look better on the outside or feel better on the inside, there are now literally thousands of books available to give you pointers, illustrations, and examples that will supposedly help you get the job done. The jury is still out on whether or not self-help books actually make good on their claims, but as Bible-believers, we know there is one book that really can help us become “better people.” How? By giving us instructions and illustrations designed to remake us to reflect the image and character of the God of the Universe.

The Old Testament book most immediately associated with that process is Proverbs, 31 chapters of teaching and admonition dealing specifically with those same four categories mentioned above. Many Bible readers don't realize, however, that there is another book that deals with those same issues and has historically been called the "Proverbs of the New Testament." It is the book of James, and I like to call it "The Guidebook to Holy Living."

The Book

It is believed that James is the oldest of all the New Testament books, written somewhere around AD 46. As such, it reflects perhaps the most Hebraic outlook of any of the epistles, displaying little if any Hellenistic influence. The author constantly reiterates the Lordship of Yeshua (Jesus) in this new faith system yet to be called Christianity, referring to Him as the *Shekinah* personified and reminding the new believers of His power and authority as the Son of God.

The very Jewish nature of the book, however, is seen in its practicality, with an emphasis on duty over doctrine. In its 108 verses, we find no less than 54 commands, all designed to help the reader make the distinction between real godly living and mere religious theory. Authenticity is the goal, stressing genuine religion in chapter one, genuine faith in chapter two, and genuine wisdom in chapter three.

Many scholars have commented on the strong parallels between this book and the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7. The same topics of faith-in-action, social responsibility, godly living, generosity in giving, true wisdom, and patience in suffering are discussed in both discourses. In both places, believers are admonished to love God and one another, living lives marked by humility.

The Audience

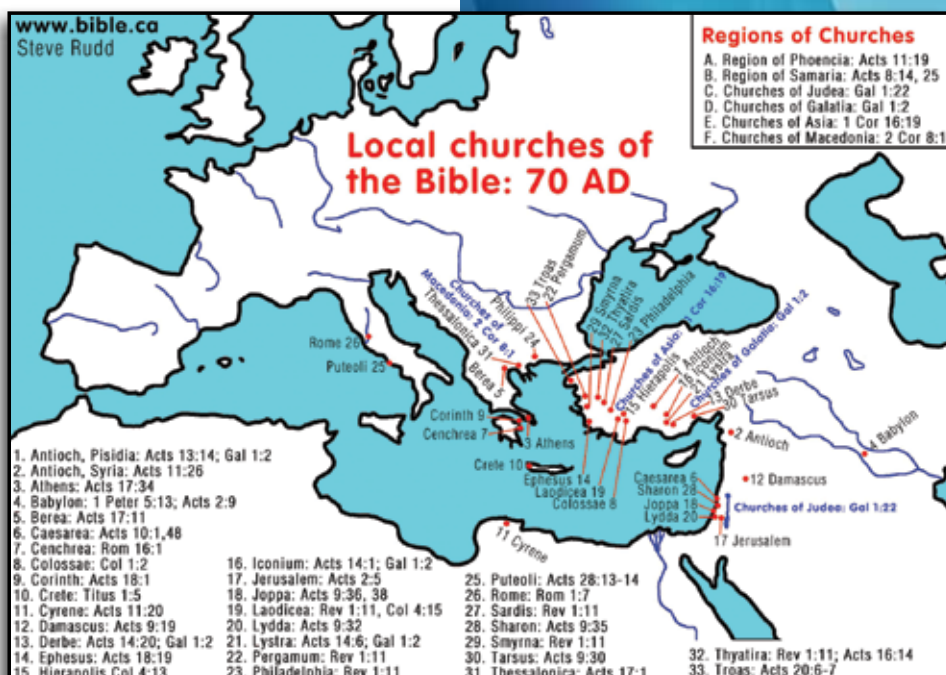
The epistle of James is clearly directed to Jewish people living outside the borders of Israel, who have come to believe in the Messiahship of Yeshua. Since its writing predates the dispersion of AD 70 by nearly 30 years, they would be located primarily in the area we today call the Middle East. Many would be living in the Diaspora [countries outside Israel] because they chose to, not just because they were forced to. The author is, therefore, addressing people who are living as a minority within a minority. His emphasis on personal growth in spiritual life and sensitivity to social responsibility not only gives his readers sound direction for their daily lives, but keeps them firmly connected to their Hebraic foundations.

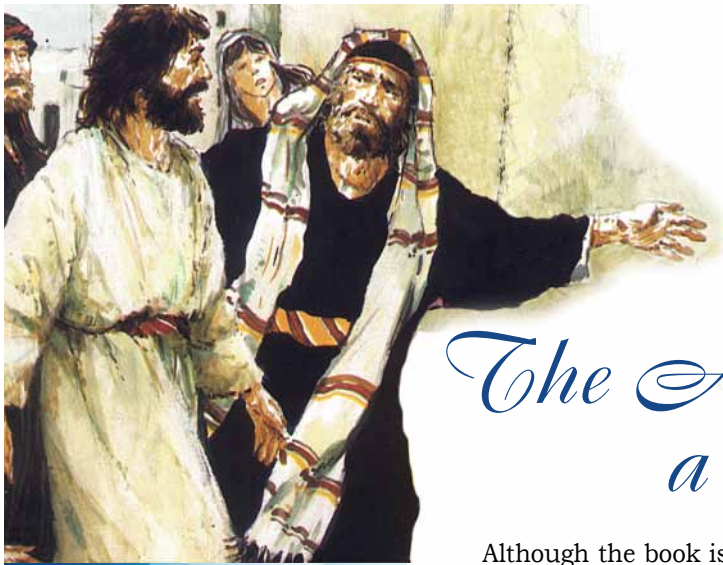


Seeking direction for

- a successful life,
- difficult relationships,
- challenging situations,
- or life's purpose?

Read James





The Author— a Torah Teacher

There are more
**VERBAL
REMINISCENCES**
of Yeshua's
teachings
IN JAMES
than in all the
other epistles
combined.

Although the book is obviously written by a Jewish man named James (*Ya'akov* in Hebrew), there has been disagreement over the ages as to who he really was. There were four men named James in the Gospels: James the son of Zebedee, James the son of Alphaeus, James the father of Judas, and James the brother of Yeshua. Scripture tells us that the latter James was an unbeliever during the earthly ministry of his brother (John 7:3–5) and yet is numbered among the believers in the Upper Room in Acts 1:14. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, Paul makes it clear that it was a post-resurrection visit from Yeshua that resulted in his conversion. It is known that he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem at a very early date and is referred to as a pillar of the church in Galatians 2:9. It is most commonly accepted today that he is, in fact, the author of the book.

Although Yeshua is never quoted directly in James' writing, scholars tell us there are more verbal reminiscences of Yeshua's teachings in this book than in all the other epistles combined, indicative, some believe, of an exceptionally strong influence. This close bond went beyond that of master and disciple, they say. It could well indicate the deep love between brothers, young men who grew up laughing, crying, playing, and working together, sharing the joys and sorrows of family life.

In this letter to his Jewish brethren outside Israel, James brings a clear challenge: Wherever you are, whatever your circumstances, your faithfulness as a follower of Yeshua will show itself through your actions. One cannot become a believer and continue in a life of worldliness, showing no fruit of righteousness. He exhorts his readers to godly living through a series of practical reminders, taking them back to the Hebrew Scriptures where the foundations of their faith were firmly rooted. Let's hear the voice of James, the teacher of *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.), and examine four principles that could well answer our four “self-help” questions.

1. Love without Partiality

“My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, ‘You sit here in a good place,’ and say to the poor man, ‘You stand there,’ or, ‘Sit here at my footstool,’ have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors” (James 2:1–9).



James says love is to be the hallmark of the believer, a love that is not dictated by prejudices or partiality. As a matter of fact, the Greek word for partiality is *prosopolepteo* and technically means to “lay hold of the face,” or “get to the essence of.” There are many verses in the Old Testament that use the word “face” in much the same way. God set His face against the one with whom He was angry or set His face toward a particular destination. Moses pleaded with God that His face go with the Israelites as they traveled in the wilderness. In each instance, the word means much more than the outward appearance, but rather the inward depth of emotion and intent. Here, James is admonishing his readers to be careful not to make judgments based on outward appearance, showing preference to those that are rich or hold positions of power or influence, but rather to love all men equally.

Here, James becomes our rabbi. The *Torah* teaches that all men bear the image of God, each human being holding within the “divine spark,” as taught in Genesis 1:26 when God said, “*Let us make man in our image.*” Some rabbis of the day taught that the word “in” used in that verse could also mean “as,” adding another layer of importance to the text. In ancient days, it was common for a conquering king to make images of himself to be placed strategically around his newly conquered lands, so that even after he had returned to his home, his new subjects would be constantly reminded that the land now belonged to him. So, the rabbis said God created man not just *in* His image, but *as* His image, to be placed strategically on the earth, constantly reminding all who would look that the earth and all that is in it belong to Him.

Since we are all God’s image bearers, *Torah* requires that men treat each other accordingly, respecting one another equally. Simeon Ben Azzai, a famous rabbinic teacher of the second century, gives us the basic moral justification for human dignity: The Divine presence in everyone gives him or her infinite importance, deserving of honor. *Kavod ha’adam* or human dignity is not only a philosophical concept descriptive of human nature, but it also dictates how we should behave.

Thus, the *Torah* prohibits murder because human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). Similarly, the *Torah* commands that we bury the corpse of a criminal that has been hanged because even he is entitled to be treated with dignity (Deut. 21:22–23). Deuteronomy 1:17 admonishes the Israelites against showing partiality in judgment, but encourages them to hear the small as well as the great, showing fear of God and not of man. In a similar vein, Leviticus 19:15 cautions them against preferring either the rich or the poor.

Finally, James reminds his readers of the “royal law,” the king of all commandments, Leviticus 19:18: “*You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*” This single verse encapsulates all of the Hebraic teaching on human dignity and is the foundation for the New Testament concept of unconditional love. The most influential of the rabbis—including Rabbi Hillel (c. 110 BC–AD 10), Rabbi Akiva (c. AD 50–135), and Rabbi Yeshua—all taught that this verse is, in fact, the greatest of all the commandments.

Be careful
not to make
JUDGMENTS
based on
OUTWARD
APPEARANCE;
rather,
LOVE
all men equally.





2. Guard the Tongue

"For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh" (James 3:2-12).

GUARD

your

TONGUE,

James says,
because if you
have wisdom,
you will understand that

**YOUR WORDS
HAVE POWER.**



Guard your tongue, James says, because if you have wisdom, you will understand that your words have power. What you say can bless, encourage, unite and bring life, James tells us, and yet that same mouth can wound, cause division, bring strife, and even kill.

Again, James becomes our Torah teacher. In verse nine, he reminds his readers that they use their tongues to "bless our God and Father." In ancient Judaism, whenever the name of God was spoken in any of its forms, it was followed by the phrase, "blessed be He." Further, the rabbis taught that the person that loved God should find at least 100 reasons every day to bless Him. Those blessings began with the phrase, *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam...* or "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe." It continued with a phrase of thanksgiving or acknowledgment of a gift received: who creates the fruit of the vine, brings forth bread from the earth, saved us and brought us to this moment, gave us the *Torah*, etc. The list is as infinite as the goodness of the Lord, but the concept is a simple one. The mouth was created as a vessel for the blessing of God and those created in His image. It should never be used for cursing.

The power of speech was recognized as critically important in the Judaism of the first century, and the rabbis taught at length on what is, even to the present, called *lashon harah* or evil speaking. It was a very serious crime, even punishable by death in some ancient circumstances, and remains so to this day. The main prohibition against *lashon hara* is derived from Leviticus 19:16: *"You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD."*

The concept of *lashon harah* is exemplified in Numbers 12, where we read the story of Miriam's misfortune after speaking ill of her brother Moses and his Ethiopian wife. She is stricken with leprosy. Had it not been for the intervention of her brothers who cried out to God on her behalf, she most surely would have died a horrible death. As it was, she had to endure the agony and shame of the disease for seven days outside the camp before her healing was complete. Such was the gravity of *lashon harah* in the eyes of the Lord.

The rabbis taught that physical wounds would eventually heal, but those inflicted by the tongue may never do so. Further, damage done to a person's reputation was virtually incurable. No wonder Yeshua told His followers in Matthew 5:22 that hell might well await the one who called his brother a fool. The laws of *lashon harah* not only prohibit gossip, but any kind of talebearing. Not only should we refrain from speaking ill of one another or spreading evil lies, but we should resist the temptation to talk about each other at all. Even the truth need not be spoken of another person unless a dangerous situation can thereby be prevented.



3. *Acknowledge Total Dependence on God*

James 4:13–16 says: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”

Here, James confronts his readers with the danger of being self-sufficient. Believers must acknowledge their dependence on God at all times. The *Torah* teaches that such acknowledgement is an integral part of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His people. In Deuteronomy 8, God warns the Israelites not to forget Him once they had entered the Land and become comfortable because of His blessings. They were to remember Him, acknowledging His goodness and never deluding themselves that they had become rich and comfortable because of their own power. James was painfully aware that a lack of dependence on God had proven disastrous for the Israelites more than once, and he warns his readers to avoid such mistakes.

Throughout his epistle, James cautions the believers to humble themselves before the Lord, recognizing that His will for them is always best. Don’t make your own plans and ask God to bless them, James says. Instead, discover what God’s plans are and continue steadfastly in them, even if those plans involve uncomfortable circumstances or even persecution. In the end, he says, God will indeed use all things together for the good of those that love and follow Him.

James may have hearkened back to the Old Testament book of Proverbs as he encouraged the saints in the Diaspora. Proverbs 3:1–6 instructs the people of God to remember His commandments, to internalize the reality of His covenant love and faithfulness, to trust completely in Him and in every way to acknowledge Him. “*In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths*” (v. 6).

The Hebrew word translated “acknowledge” is *yada*, which means “to know.” The writer is not encouraging some sort of verbal recognition of God and His goodness, nor is he speaking of a simple mental awareness. The word *yada* speaks of a deep and intimate understanding, a union, and is used to describe the marriage relationship. Further, it is used to describe sexual intimacy within that marriage. In other words, to acknowledge God means to be in a relationship of total oneness with Him, a life of complete trust and unity, inseparable in all of our being and doing. As Yeshua said, “*Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me*” (John 14:11). We are to know Him at the most intimate of levels, and He will bless us with a life worth living filled with health, prosperity, well-being, and freedom from harm.

4. *Walk in the “Perfect Law of Liberty”*

“*But he does of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves...But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does*” (James 1:22, 25). “*So as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also*” (James 2:26).

The book of James is the ultimate description of the relationship between faith and works. Rather than being at odds with Paul’s teaching on salvation through faith alone (Rom. 1:17), James clarifies it (2:14–26). If there are no works, no outward



To “acknowledge”
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*"If you love
Me,
you will keep
MY COMMANDMENTS."*

John 14:15

Divine **LOVE**,
rooted in **ACTION**,
is the hallmark of
the believer.

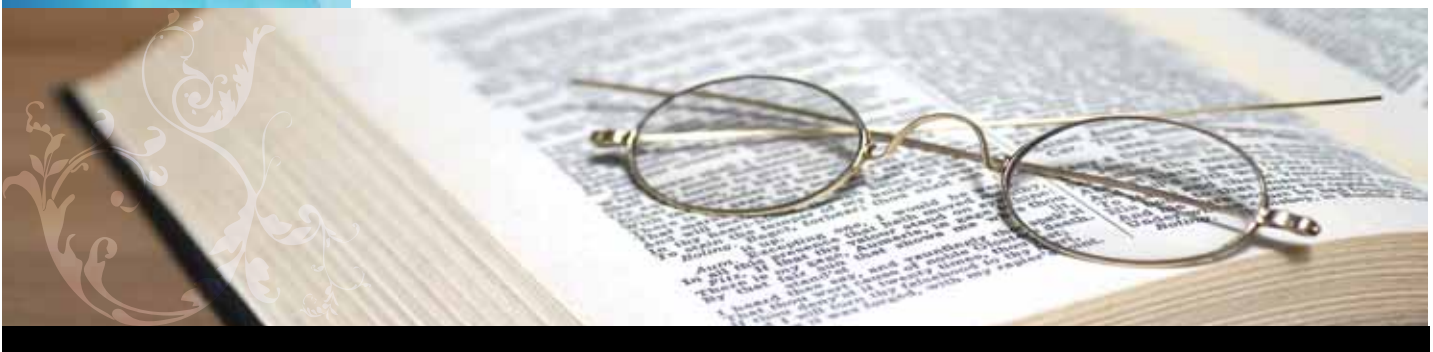
signs of the inward workings of the spirit of God, then there is no faith, James says. He is not, as some have accused, attempting to enslave believers to dead works of the law, but rather encouraging them that the good works outlined in the law (*Torah*) must naturally flow from those who are in right relationship with the Lord.

James builds on Yeshua's statement: *"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments"* (John 14:15, NASB). Here is where true freedom is found, James says. You have been set free from the law of sin and death and given the liberty to be a people of obedience. Your faith is not at odds with your good works, he tells his readers. Rather, it is the basis from which you may freely choose to adhere to the standards of divine love, rooted in action, the hallmark of the believing life. He might well have summed up the requirements of that relationship by quoting again from the Old Testament: *"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Mic. 6:8).

To Self-help or Not to Self-help...

For millennia, the God of the Universe has spoken to His creation with the message that an arbitrary decision to just "be a better guy" is simply not enough to change us into the "better guy" we long to be. Any of us who have made the proverbial New Year's resolutions knows from experience that it rarely works. What does work, however, is a commitment to become the person the God of the Universe wants us to be. Through intimate relationship with Him and obedience to His instructions found in our Guidebook to Holy Living, we find our hope. We serve a God whose life-changing power is infinite and who delights in transforming us into a true reflection of His character. James, our *Torah* teacher, has a strong and relevant message to all of today's advice seekers: Self-help may not be effective, but His-help will never fail.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer, International Development Director



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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem"* (Isaiah 2:3).

