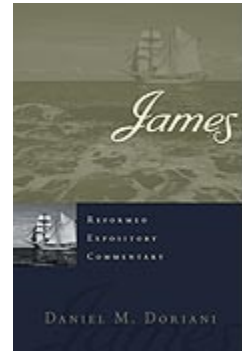


## *James (Reformed Expository Commentary)*

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It's hard to keep up with all of the new commentary series available these days. Critical, expository, application, practical, scholar's, layman's, preacher's, everyman's – commentaries come in all shapes and sizes. They also run the whole gamut of theological positions. One can find a commentary to fit almost anyone's personal taste. This is actually a good thing, as non-English speaking people could certainly attest. Availability of good resources (along with some less useful ones) is a blessing we must not take for granted.

When I asked for a book from P&R's Reformed Expository Commentary series, to sample, I wasn't sure quite what to expect. As it turned out, I was totally unprepared for how truly excellent a commentary actually can be.

*James*, by Daniel Doriani, is a joy to read – and use. I've been putting it to use in a men's Bible study on the book of James. And the book serves well to that end. Not only is it an able study tool, but it would serve as excellent devotional reading material. It has the right balance of practical theology and careful scholarship.

The Reformed Expository Commentary series purposely aims to keep the volumes more pastoral and accessible to lay leaders within the church. The authors of each book in the series are pastors committed to the Reformed understanding of Bible doctrine as embodied in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Don't let that scare you. Even if you are not reformed or Calvinist-leaning, you should be thankful for the Westminster Confession of Faith. People who ascribe to it are likely to be conservative Bible-believing scholars. They are chained to the text of Scripture, which the WCF does a good job of handling (albeit as a Baptist, I differ in at least one point).

As a pastor-scholar, Doriani is able to bring an exposition of the text to us in his commentary. He doesn't merely break down the text, but he applies it and is free to connect the text to parallel passages in Scripture that develop the same theme. While the book goes out of its way to apply the sense of Scripture, it doesn't become merely a written sermon. Doriani traces the flow of the text well, and seeks to cover all the questions laymen and scholars alike would have. Still, this is not a critical commentary that might delve deeply into the Greek; and so it will not be the only resource one should consult for study.

The tone of the commentary allows for more of the author's personality to come through. We see this in Doriani's treatment of James' teaching on the elders praying over the sick and anointing them with oil. He shares how his study of the book of James led him to encourage his church to follow James chapter 5 in their practice. He relates two touching stories of God's healing in answer to the prayer of the elders (and the simple faith of following God's teaching in this matter). The personal story however, does not turn into a soap-box in any sense. Doriani is careful to cover how faith is not something obligating God to heal in every case, nor is sin behind every illness. His treatment of this passage alone, is worth the price of the book.

The most transformational passage I encountered in my own study of James (with Doriani's help) has been chapter 1:12-17. Doriani confronts the confusing nature of verses 13 and 14 which seem to say God would never “tempt” anyone. Doriani brings out that God does “tempt” Abraham and also Moses and the Israelites, etc. Of course “tempt” can mean “test”, or “trial”, and context is king here. But Doriani helped me to really get the sense of the overall teaching of that passage. Here is an excerpt that is especially helpful.

So there are two potential paths in any test. Testing met with endurance makes us mature and complete; it leads to life (1:3-4, 12). Or testing met with selfish desire leads to sin and death (1:14-15). “Death” is

more than the death of the body, tragic as that is. Rather, just as faith and endurance lead to eternal life (1:12; cf. Matt. 10:22), so selfish desire and sin lead to eternal death (Rev. 20:14-15).

This is the worst possible result of testing, and a idea we might prefer to avoid. Therefore, James commands, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers” (1:16 ESV). James warns his readers against blaming temptation and sin on God. He hopes his readers see the truth. Sin begins in our hearts which are all too willing to follow evil desires. How foolish it is to succumb to temptation, then blame the results on God.

Because of our sin, tests can lead to spiritual death, but God designed them to bring us good. Tests stand among God's gifts, not his curses. But if our sinfulness leads us to fail life's tests, how can we escape our failures? The final two verses [17-18] offer an answer. (pg. 39)

This insight is going to stick with me my whole life, Tests offer two alternative responses: endurance & faith or selfish desire/doubt/blaming God. Our choice is important, we must not be deceived. But this topic (covered in verses 12-16) flows right into verse 17 which says every good gift comes from God. Tests, in the context of James chapter 1, then, are God's gifts to us!

The extended quote above also serves to illustrate Doriani's style in two ways. Notice first, the end of the first paragraph, where he looks beyond the focus of the text in James to the teaching of other Scripture as well. Second, the last paragraph above shows how Doriani is always looking for the gospel. We do fail life's tests, what then?

This gospel focus serves readers well as they encounter James through this book. James can be seen as merely a book of practical advice or a collection of commands, yet sprinkled throughout the book are elements of Gospel. And it is the gospel which makes sense of James. Doriani shows us how to see James as complementary to Paul, and warns against a legalistic approach to the book.

I cannot more highly recommend this resource. If other titles in the series are as well put together, and as helpful as this book, I am going to want to collect them all. I suspect you will too.

My thanks go out to Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers for providing me with a review copy of this book.

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