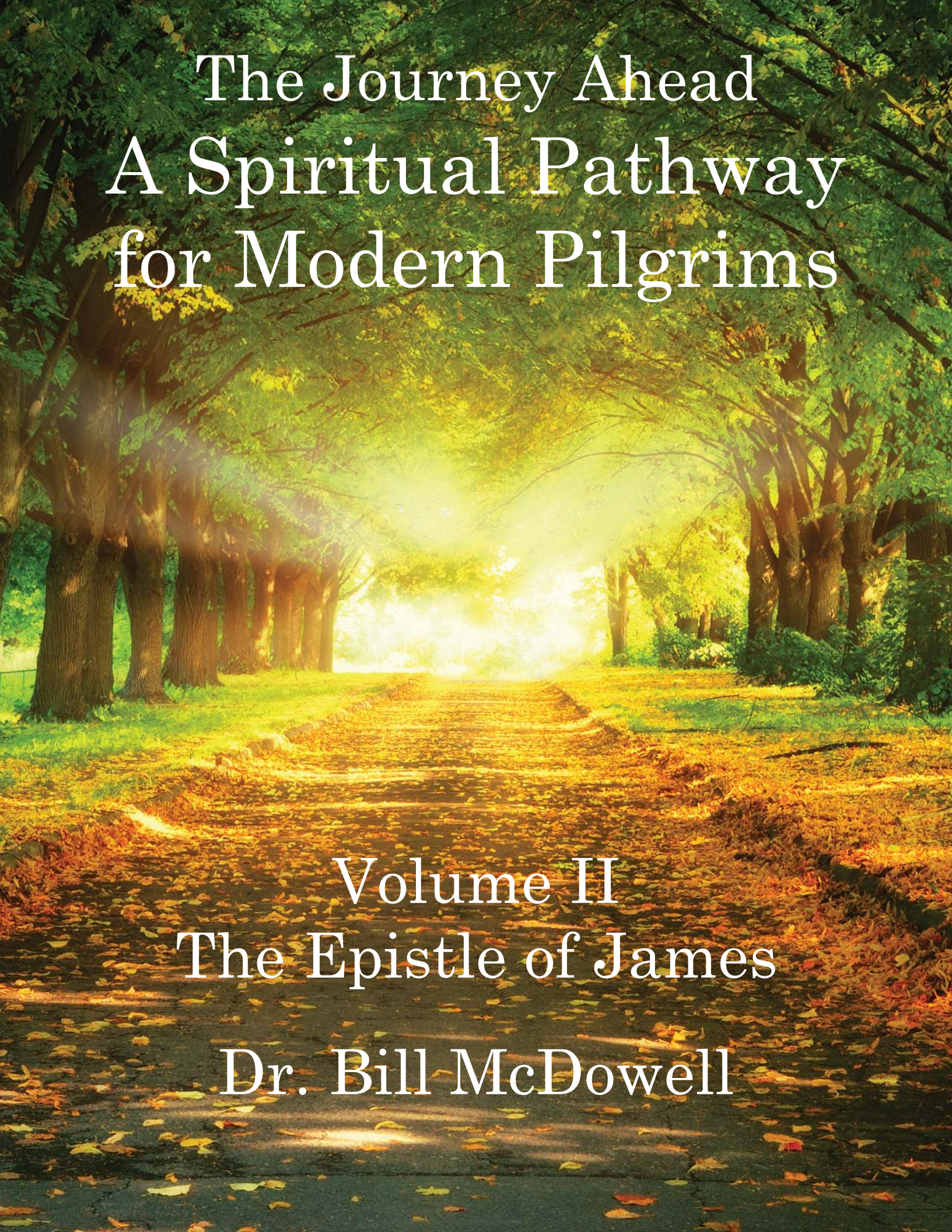

The Journey Ahead
A Spiritual Pathway for Modern Pilgrims

Volume II
The Epistle of James

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"*As the body without*
the spirit is dead, so
faith without deeds
is dead."
James 2:26

DEDICATION

To the Norway Shepherds:

Paul Durst, Bruce Johnson, Mike Shepherd and Bill Wright.

I am proud to dedicate this volume to the Norway Avenue elders who exemplify the Epistle of James in their love of Jesus, endurance in the faith, commitment to the teaching of the Word of God, and caring for the community of faith. And, along with that praise one can see how deeply loved they are by the Norway Avenue church.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Dr. Bill McDowell

I initially began thinking about the issues and ideas that led to this book during my student days at David Lipscomb University (then college). Dr. Batsell Barrett Baxter, chair of the Bible Department and my homiletics professor, taught us aspiring preachers to do in-depth study of the Scriptures and stressed the need for expository preaching. To the uninitiated expository preaching is a form of preaching that details the meaning of a particular text or passage of Scripture. Whereas a topical sermon focuses on a topic usually with shorter texts, the expository sermon exposes the full text. It explains what the scripture said to the original audience with application of meaning for the present time. Along with other professors, especially Dr. Harvey Floyd and Dr. Harold Baker, Dr. Baxter taught us expository preaching would impact our life. It would help us, they said to grow personally in knowledge and obedience by our disciplined exposure to God's Word; conserve time and energy in choosing a sermon for each week; and such preaching would not only feed the sheep but balance our preaching of preferred topics with the breadth of God's thoughts in the Bible. If this were a book on expository preaching I could say much more. Suffice it to say that expository preaching is about the preaching of a biblical text that is derived from proper methods of interpretation and effective communication to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence behavior toward godliness.

I soon discovered it took hard work to preach expository sermons. It meant becoming intimate with a book or chapter of the Bible. Some fellow students prepared in an offhanded manner and typically expected to be divinely filled at the threshold of the sermonic moment. A preacher-friend who held this philosophy of sermon preparation was in for a rude shock as he waited in the pulpit for a last-minute word from heaven. There was silence. He dialogued with God concerning the divine promise to fill his servants with divine messages. And there was silence. At last, in abject desperation he pleaded, "God, tell me something about this morning's message." And God told him. "Son, you didn't prepare."

I wanted to make my congregation biblically literate. So I learned to prepare. Dr. Baker and Dr. Floyd told me how. Begin with the text. What do the Scriptures say? Dr. Baker added "read the text carefully - memorize it in English."

That was a task. Dr. Floyd intoned, “Memorize it in Greek.” That was more of a task. They carefully instructed: after each memorization make an outline of what you believe the text is saying to you, to the original audience and to your present audience. Only then can you study commentaries and other biblical aids to see what they have to say. And then – and only then - are you ready to write your sermon!

The first book I studied thoroughly and preached over some weeks was the epistle of James. This was preaching the Word! I was hooked! I grew! My church grew!

This book, Volume Two of *The Journey Ahead: James*, is an attempt in providing teaching and insight from my years of studying James and expository preaching. It is prepared especially for the Norway Avenue Church of Christ and of course, to other believers and nonbelievers who purchase the book. I confess my memory is no longer as agile at eighty years of age as when I was twenty, but my love for the Scriptures and learning from God’s book has increased a hundred-fold!

I am particularly grateful to those who have helped me by their encouragement in so many ways. Most important have been my sister, Loretta (Sis) Tetrick for her writing, prayers and abiding love; brother-in-law, Barney Hartline for his devotion to the Greek text and joint venture in preparing the Guidebook; Albert Simon, my devoted friend, editor and publisher; brothers and sisters in Christ at Norway, with special recognition to my true sponsors Bob and Janet Dozier, thanks also to Mike Shepherd, Bill Wright, Bruce Johnson, Phil Manilla, Wes Thacker, Grady and Debbie Starkey, Virginia Thompson, Virginia Midkiff, Pat and Ben Martin, and Martha Roberts for their encouragement and special attention to promoting the study of the message, and many whose names I forget at the moment (please forgive me). I deeply thank Dr. Jeff Garrett, our expository-preaching minister at Norway, who stands with me in the belief that Christians must read scripture in the light of their ends as Christians – ever deeper communion with the triune God and with each other. And, as always to my wife Marie, who constantly reminds me in word and deed that our sins and ends as a family are closely and inseparably linked to our ends as Christians.

PREFACE
Loretta Tetrick

During the past few years I have developed a deeper, richer relationship with my brother Bill. We are growing older and we appreciate how blessed we are to share our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. When Bill mentioned he was going to write on the book of James, I was delighted for it was among my favorites. In fact, one of our conversations was from the first chapter as to how we both had to work on being "*quick to listen and slow to speak*" since we're not known for our quietness; nevertheless, our desire to be guided by the Holy Spirit was ever present.

Those of you who have already studied previous books my brother has written are familiar with his scholarly mind and his dedication to, with precision, dig deeper. You will not be disappointed in this journey he will encourage you to take as he capably bridges the gap from the early church to now. His explicitness with James genre and purpose of reaching the scattering Jewish believers is smoothly accomplished. As a writer, James visual teachings capture the reader; Bill's elaboration on each category is like the lens of a camera capturing truth.

As we know, James was the half-brother of Jesus and can only wonder about the influence of sharing their life together as a family. We are shaped by the family that rears us, and James is able to firmly declare living out one's faith is foundational for believers. He knew if you walked in bondage, you were not walking by faith but disbelief. Also, the core of studying James is hearing his heart's cry to desire not one thing but the One who matters.

Bill and I were greatly influenced by hearing our mother's voice sharing stories of our maternal grandfather. He preached for thirty-eight years, holding hundreds of revivals and had been known to walk twenty-one miles so the gospel might be heard at a small country church. His faith was not just by word but by deed.

Our father was converted in his early thirties and remained a faithful servant of the Lord, loving to study the Word. Shortly before he died he shared this scripture with me from Psalm 71:17-18: "*O God, from my youth You have taught me, and I still proclaim Your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim Your might to another generation. Your power to all those to come*."

We are to count it as all joy being called a modern pilgrim today. I mentioned two godly men who yearned to do God's will and their passion was a testimony to our family. My brother Bill and I are thankful and blessed to have this legacy but we know our true citizenship is in heaven. I know my brother will never stop holding up the Sword of Truth and gifting us with books the Holy Spirit guides him in writing. He gladly shares his knowledge yet is humbled enough to still be taught by his Teacher.

SHARING PERSONAL GAIN IN MEMORIZING THE BOOK OF JAMES

I asked two people who memorized the book of James to share their personal experience in memorizing this book what this has meant for them. The first is **Shayna Garrett,** one of Norway Avenue's out-standing young people who demonstrates her love of Jesus and desire to minister to those around her and **Loretta Tetrick,** who, on the other hand, is a seventy-three year old Christian who has matured in her years of devotion to Jesus and teaching in his kingdom.

Shayna Garrett

I wanted to be transformed. I wanted to think about holy things. I wanted my eyes to be fixed on Jesus. I was sick with sinful thoughts. I felt weak in temptation, but I knew God's Word was a sword. So, I started memorizing James. My goal was to take scripture and replace sinful thoughts with holy ones. However, I had no idea how much it would change the way I think, the way I see the Word, the way I love people, and the way I read God's Word. The most important thing that changed about me through memorizing scripture was my new urgency for people around me and people I did not know to be transformed. There grew in me an urgency to see people use their "sword" to fight sin and to see the glory of the Lord through his infallible Word. Throughout my day I find myself reciting James. This is not on purpose! It is one of the most beautiful things God had done in me.

Memorizing scripture is like having your favorite song stuck in your head, and you can't help but sing it! Because I grew in a knowledge of God's Word, I grew to have a deeper understanding which ultimately led to a greater love for the Lord. Of course, this is only the power of the Holy Spirit. One last thing memorizing James has done for me is to change how I seek to discern God's will in everyday decisions. How can sheep follow the voice of their Shepherd without knowing the Shepherd's voice? It gets confusing. We are listening for a voice, but we become confused because we hear too many voices. Knowing God's Word from the inside out has allowed me to hear more clearly the voice of my Shepherd. He is a good, faithful, loving Shepherd. To know Him is to love Him!

Loretta Tetrick

Nearly five years ago I participated in a Women's Bible Study of *James – Mercy Triumphs* by Beth Moore (Lifeway Press, 2011). Her teachings are not to be taken lightly and her suggested levels of participation indicated this. The highest level was a challenge to memorize the book of James. I still can hear a few women whispering they could check off that level since they weren't good at memorizing or they were too old to do so. Personally, I began to feel a wave of excitement wash over me and a question mark forming in my head asking God if this was possible. I knew I was capable of memorizing but not to this extent; however, Beth encouraged doing one chapter a month. That was feasible for me but the class was only seven weeks. I realized I would have to be accountable to myself. Early in the morning I would take my printed chapter and begin. I had become a widow a year before, so God was the Husband I recited to each day. If I became stuck in traffic, I would keep a copy in my car and practice. The Word lighted my way in the day, and if I had difficulty sleeping at night, James became my midnight snack as I tasted the truth of God's Word. No longer had this effort become my means of self-esteem to shout "I can do it!" but a means of growing deeper with Him.
I would encourage believers to simply seek Him and wait to see where He will take you.

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME TWO

CONTINUING THE JOURNEY: THE PILGRIM LIFESTYLE

About This Book

This commentary is written for the serious Bible student who seeks scholarly content in limited technical terms. While I have considered each word of the Greek text of James in my own study, limited Greek words are included in this work. Because, however, with modern technology and the personal computer Bible students have become aware, interested, and often knowledgeable in the original language and its impact on study, I have included such material where I believe it will aid understanding of the text. Although this book represents considerable scholarly research, the results of that research are expressed in the ordinary language of regular people. Authors, books, and journal articles are credited in the **endnotes** at the end of each chapter. A **glossary** is also given to aid in understanding terms and words not in our daily vocabulary.

We are impelled to write soberly with the hope of those who are the true leaven will be inspired to drink deeper of the water of life and affect for good the society in which we are forced to move while on our earthly pilgrimage.

WELCOME TO VOLUME 2 OF THE JOURNEY AHEAD

I am delighted to invite you to this study on the continuing life journey for modern Christian Pilgrims. Volume one demonstrated, through the study of the Hebrew epistle, our needed strength for our journey. Volume two reveals through the epistle of James, the lifestyle for pilgrims as we walk on God's pathway. I find myself affirming with Beth Moore: "I believe in Bible studies and God-centered books. I believe He can use them to alter a path" (Beth Moore, *James: Mercy Triumphs*, (Lifeway Press, Nashville: TN, 2011), p.11)

I first studied James in my university years. In a small rural church in Tennessee I preached my first series of expository sermons on this wonderful epistle.

My professors lead me in my preparation to memorize the book in both English and Greek before I dared preach from it. Following their advice I have visited James in both print and in my mind these sixty years and I continue to learn!

Before you begin this in-depth study with me I want to share with you the design and thoughts of these volumes I had as I first conceived *The Journey Ahead: A Spiritual Pathway for Modern Pilgrims*.

As I am writing it is shortly before Thanksgiving Day, 2014. When I wrote the word pilgrims for the title my thoughts naturally conjured up black-clad English Puritans at Plymouth on the edge of Massachusetts Bay in December 1620. When the pilgrims left England, Plymouth was not the journey's destination the pilgrims sought. Their goal was Virginia but being the pilgrims they were, they accepted this destination as God's will. With the help of local Indians they survived the hard winter and so originated our annual holiday. One of my first personal experiences with pilgrims as an adult was reading Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* struggling through Middle English revealing a medieval group of men and women making their way on horseback from London to Canterbury Cathedral under a lapis lazuli sky. But it wasn't until I was taking a survey course in English Literature at David Lipscomb College that I read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress. (1)* Here I embarked on a fuller Christian connotation of pilgrims with its central character Christian, an everyman character seeking to find his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. His journey was not easy but fraught with countless obstacles along the way. He is directed to find the Wicket Gate (the entrance to Jesus' "narrow way") but is led astray by Mr. Worldly Wiseman and Mr. Legality and his son Civility, inhabitants of the village of Morality. But finally Christian finds his Wicket Gate and is granted a vision of Jesus himself.

Bunyan's book helped me to more fully understand how the word *pilgrimage* could be used in a metaphorical sense: every life without exception a nonstop pilgrimage from womb to tomb could be a successful pilgrimage from this world to the world to come. In fact the Christian life is a journey looking to Jesus, a wandering progression of perfecting faith as we follow him who is the Pioneer of our faith. If there is no progress, apostasy results. As the Hebrew writer exhorts:

> "*. . . fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (*Hebrews 12:2 NIV)

The books in the last third of the New Testament, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, speak of the church as a pilgrim people. There are at least two ways to get at the message of these books. One way of trying to consider them is to treat each one individually. That is, we might attempt to determine the setting and objective of each writing as a key to understanding what the authors intended to communicate. We might also focus on the literary character of each book, noting the overall structure and ways the parts fit into the whole of each writing. This way of reading these books might help us capture some sense of each book's distinctive message and is certainly a worthwhile endeavor.

Another way to get the message of these books – from Hebrews to Revelation - is to consider the books as a canonical unit. That is, we can look at them as a group that forms a distinctive part of the New Testament. They can be viewed in terms of their different plays on a common theme, the idea of pilgrimage. We have, as it were, a symphony of movements playing this theme from a variety of perspectives. The letter to the Hebrews speaks glowingly of God speaking through Scripture in time past, but insists that now, at last, God has spoken through his own son (1:1-2). True authority belongs to God himself and is delegated to Jesus Christ. Here is the fundamental believe that the music of God has one composer/conductor, who knows specifically how the music should sound. The musicians (writers) are not robots but write as moved by the Spirit. True authority belongs to God expressed through many inspired voices; but it is he who has composed every line, groomed, practiced, and taught each musician, working every experience to shape the final presentation. Each book, like each instrumental line, is wonderful and beautiful as each voice is blended and understood as one unity, with point and counterpoint making the true message understood.

In a sense, each work picks up the theme, the tune, and adds its own distinctive interpretation of the main theme. By listening to the different movements of these volumes, we gain a much fuller sense of the larger theme of pilgrimage. And, by understanding each work is a part of a larger whole, we gain a richer perspective for reading each book.

Scott Nash *(2)* suggests following the full title of John Bunyan's classic, *The Pilgrim's Progress,* as a guide. Bunyan's extended title was *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come, Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream, Wherein Is Discovered the Manner of His Setting Out, His Dangerous Journey, and Safe Arrival in the Desired Country.* The last part of this title suggests three dimensions of the pilgrim life: (1) The Manner of Setting Out, (2) The Dangerous Journey, and (3) The Safe Arrival in the Desired Country. We have, then, a beginning, a middle, and an end to the adventure of pilgrimage.

The journey for the first-century follower of Jesus was dangerous because of persecution and false doctrine. Persecution took place both within the Land of Israel and also among the Jewish believers of the Diaspora or dispersion of Jews who live outside the Land of Israel. To deal with the problem of persecution in the Land of Israel, the book of Hebrews was written. To deal with persecution among scattered believers, both Jew and Gentile, the epistle of James and I Peter were written.

To deal with the second problem, false doctrine, we have 2 Peter and Jude. Second Peter was written from one part of the Diaspora to Jewish believers in another part of the Diaspora. Jude was written from the Land to Jewish/Gentile believers in the dispersion. Revelation offers a glorious vision of the destination for pilgrims.

The book of Hebrews, which appears first in this group, focuses on the beginning of the journey. While Hebrews deals with many subjects, its central theme is a call to and strength for the pilgrimage; a summons to begin the journey. The book of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John and Jude all focus on the middle part, the journey itself. They struggle with many of the dangers experienced along the way. The last book in this group, Revelation, focuses on the end. It gives a grand vision of the final destination and offers strength and encouragement for safe arrival in the desired country.

Some journeys are forced upon us because of our departure from God. The Israelites endured forced exile because of their rebellion against God. Their time in the wilderness journey had as its final destination a land "*flowing with milk and honey*." Deuteronomy (29-30) warned that if Israel disobeyed YHWH, he would send his people into exile, but if they then repented he would bring them back. When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the people into exile, prophets

such as Jeremiah interpreted this as the fulfillment of this prophesy, and made further promises about how long exile would last (70 years, according to Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10). Sure enough, exiles began to return in the late sixth century (Ezra 1:1). However, the post-exilic period was largely a disappointment, since the people were still enslaved by the Syrians. Daniel 9:2, 24 spoke of the "real" exile lasting not for 70 years but for 70 weeks of years, i.e., 490 years. Longing for the "return from exile," when the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. would be fulfilled, and redemption from pagan oppression accomplished, continued to characterize many Jewish movements, and was a major theme in Jesus' proclamation and summons to repentance.

Journeys are beset with difficulties from the inertia to begin to the commitment and strength to complete them. The journey of the Israelites in their exile demonstrates such pitfalls. Theologically, Jonah's experience in the great fish is analogous to Israel's experience in exile. It is God's judgment but for the sake of mercy and salvation. Like Israel in the exile, God sent Jonah on a journey to Sheol to reorient his life. In our journey to follow Jesus some pitfalls may come from without in terms of wrong turns or dangerous terrain. Some pitfalls may come from within in terms of disagreement about directions or dissension among travelers. Pilgrims, even near the end, may despair of ever reaching it. Any journey worth making is seldom easy.

You are in fact beginning a journey in the reading and study of these books. In comparison to other New Testament books, they have been sorely neglected. Far more commentaries and sermons exist on the rest of the New Testament than on these writings. Part of this neglect has been due to the sense the writings do not address the central facets of the Christian message. Their very presence in the canon involved a difficult beginning. While the Gospels, Acts, and the Letters of Paul early on received wide recognition among the churches, these writings were much disputed, some more than others. Questions were often raised about authorship. Who wrote Hebrews? Did Peter really write 2 Peter? Which "John" wrote Revelation? Questions were also raised about their messages. Does Hebrews teach apostasy? Does it exclude backsliders from readmission to the church? Does James have a truly Christian message, or does it actually promote a more Jewish lifestyle with a thin veneer of Christianity? Does Revelation encourage dangerous fanaticism about the Second Coming?

These kinds of concerns about these books from Hebrews to Revelation led many Christians and churches to reject them outright or to use them only with extreme caution. As late as the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the legitimacy of some of these books in the canon was seriously debated.

The Bible as Story

Even when these books have been firmly accepted as valid scripture, the difficulty of reading them has not been resolved. Thankfully, we have these books in the canon, and to ignore them or avoid them is to miss an important part of the total New Testament story. The power of a biblical story is what it reveals about God. Even when a biblical story does not name God (as in the case of Esther), it is still about God. As such, God is the subject of every biblical story, and that story says something about God's identity and character.

Biblical stories reveal God's goodness as well as God's holiness. We see God's faithfulness, a divine commitment to the divine goal among God's people. We see God's transcendence but also God's immanence; we see God's holy otherness but also God's deep involvement in the world. As we read these books we ask: what does this book (story) tell us about who God is and what God is doing in the world?

The power of these books is also what they reveal about the human condition. As we locate ourselves in the human condition; we find ourselves in the story. We see our own frailty, weakness, and unbelief in the story. We also see courage, strength, and faith in the story. When we indwell the story we so live inside it that it becomes *our s*tory. We would suggest this means living with the text in such a way that we can come to experience the story as fundamentally about us. *We* are the people whom God liberated from Egypt and led through the Red Sea; *we* are the people languishing in exile and crying out for release; *we* are the disciples whom Jesus rebuked from misunderstanding his mission and to whom he appeared after his resurrection; *we* are the newly formed church who received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Entering the story

These books mark that point in the story where we, pilgrims and readers, take up the challenge to enter the story ourselves. We experience Jesus as our shepherd, our general, our pilot, our guide, our one true, final friend and judge. He will always have gone on ahead, leaving the print of his feet on the path to follow. We are the ones who stopped for a bite to eat that evening at Emmaus. Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Rahab, Sarah are our brothers and sisters because like them, we all must live in faith, as the great Hebrew chapter puts it honestly, "*not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar."* The country we see and do not yet find is the heavenly country and homeland. The biblical writers from Hebrews to Revelation alert us to our own struggles on the way and show us ways we can confront the dangers of pilgrimage. And Christ is there with us as surely as the way itself is there that brought us to this place. To take the time to read and understand these books is to respond faithfully to our own call to be pilgrims. I invite you to take part on a journey that will lead you into the extraordinary new world where you can discover Jesus, the Pioneer and Pilgrim of our Faith.

This study is divided into six separate books: This is **Volume 2 – James**.

ENDNOTES

1. Shirley du Boulay, *The Road to Canterbury: A Modern Pilgrimage* (London: Morehouse Group, 1995).
2. Scott Nash, *The Church as a Pilgrim People* (Macon Georgia: Smith & Helwys Pub. Inc, 2001).
3. William Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA:Westminster, 1988), 15-26.
4. One way of understanding the biblical canon is to see it as a narrative with a beginning rooted in the creation stories of Genesis 1-2 and an ending anchored in the city of God and the wedding invitation in Revelation 21-22. And like all narrative it needs a problem (evil), a climax (Jesus), and a resolution (evil is overcome) with the tying up any loose ends (the wedding invitation). Unlike narratives as we generally conceive them, the biblical text was not written by one author at a particular time nor even in all the same language and so the narrative is formed by a canon that has served as a structure for interpretation of the biblical text since the early centuries of the church. For more on the biblical narrative see Hart, *Faith Thinking*, especially chapters. 5 and 6. Also helpful is Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, e.g. chapters. 5-7.

OUTLINE OF JAMES – J. W. Roberts

(*The Living Word Commentary,* Sweet Pub. Co., Austin: TX, 1977)

I. GIFTS OF GOD MANIFESTED IN TRIALS, 1:1-18
- A. Salutation and Greeting 1:1
- B. The Joy of Trials 1:2-4
- C. Wisdom in Trials, 1:5-8
- D. The Trials of Poverty and Riches, 1:9-11
- E. Patient Endurance in Trials Rewarded, 1:12
- F. Temptations Negatively Considered: They Do Not Come from God, 1:13-16
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II. ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WORD WHICH BEGETS, 1:19-27
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- B. Being Doers of the Word as Well as Hearers, 1:22-25
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III. THE SIN OF RESPECT OF PERSONS, 2:1-13
- A. Partiality in the Assembly, 2:1-4
- B. God's Judgments, 2:5-13

IV. THE RELATION OF FAITH AND WORKS, 2:14-26

V. ADMONITION TO TEACHERS, 3:1-18
- A. Bridling the Tongue, 3:1-12
- B. The Truly Wise Teacher, 3:13-18

VI. WORLDLINESS IN THE CHURCH, 4:1-12
- A. The Source of Wars and Strife, 4:1-10
- B. Judging Brethren, 4:11, 12

VII. DIRECT ADDRESS TO THE UNBELIEVING RICH, 4:13-5:6
- A. The Presumptuous Use of Time, 4:13-17
- B. The Sin of Shameful Wealth, 5:1-6

VIII. ATTITUDE TOWARD MISTREATMENT, 5:7-12
- A. Admonition to Patience, 5:7-11
- B. Swearing Forbidden, 5:12

IX. THE CHRISTIAN IN ILLNESS AND SIN, 5:13-20
- A. Prayer and Singing, 5:13
- B. Illness and the Efficacy of Prayer, 5:14-18
- C. Converting Erring Brethren, 5:19-20

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Overview of Volume 2

The book of James has unfortunately long lived under the shadow of Martin Luther's now famous assessment of it. In his preface to his German translation of the New Testament, the herald of the Protestant Reformation declared of James: "Therefore, St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others (the books that he argued "show you Christ"), for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it." He went on to assert that James was deficient because it was flatly against Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works and its failure to mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. He concluded that James was written by some Jew who had heard of Christ but who had never encountered him. Among Protestants these perceived deficiencies led to a neglect of James.

While most of the writings known as "Catholic Epistles" have received less attention than the Gospels or Paul's letters, James's lack of information about the historical Jesus and its inattention to theological issues have resulted in its special neglect. Nonetheless, scholars have come round to a greater appreciation of the epistle of James. Some have found it to be an important source for information about how the early church engaged in teaching its members about the Christian life. Johann Goittfried Herder (1884) wrote: "If the Epistle is 'of straw,' then there is within that straw a very hearty, firm, nourishing, as yet un-interpreted and un-thrashed, grain." Frank Stagg has argued that Luther simply overlooked the "grain" in James. In 1969 he wrote, "Its theological importance is wanting only if teachings and actions attributed by the Gospels to Jesus are deemed irrelevant to Christian theology."

The importance of James for the New Testament is its dual focus on the practical and the personal/communal dimensions of the Christian life. It offers guidance to the church and Christians of all times and places. James urges pilgrims to reflect on their own situations and to seek ways to live out the gospel amidst the struggles of existence. James helps us transform the grand vision of the call to pilgrimage that leads to the desired destination into tangible steps to take on the way.

The similarity between James and Matthew – particularly the Sermon on the Mount – has long been noted. However, the tendency among exegetes' interpreters to treat James as a collection of wisdom sayings not directed at any concrete situation is problematic.

James was writing to the scattering of believing Jews which likely included Palestinian Jews suffering from a famine. We know from Acts 11:28 that a famine hit the Mediterranean region during the early years of Barnabas and Saul, prompting relief to be gathered for the brethren in Judea. James hints at a famine in 1:11, "*For the sun rises with a scorching wind, and withers the grass …"* and in 5:17-18 when he observes that Elijah's prayers stopped the rain for three and half years and started them again. James therefore addresses a situation rife with conflict about wealth and poverty.

Economic hardship

Although likely trials or tests, a more generalized term, best interprets the book of James, natural and economic hardship is a satisfying explanation of one type of the "*trials*" James refers to in 1:2. In a short span of verses, James quickly turns to discuss the poor and the rich (1:9-11). Is this a completely new thought or an interrelated one? I believe it is interrelated. One of the trials they face come from an economic hardship. James challenges the rich in many ways, telling them to glory in their humiliation as they are taught and corrected in the church (1:10-11). The most concrete ethical instruction is to provide for orphans and widows; this is an economic issue (1:27). James rebukes his audience for bringing the oppression of the world into the church service (2:2-13). In this context, James notes in passing that the rich drag the poor into court (2:6). This seems to be one reason behind the "*quarrels and conflicts"* in 4:1. No other larger conflict is addressed in James.

Justification by works

Likewise, the entire section about "*justification by works*" (see end of Overview) is not a disembodied theological reflection. Still less is it uttered with Paul's doctrine of "justification by faith" in mind as a foil. "Justification" for both Paul and James

is a corporate, communal term. This was another error of the Protestant Reformers. Because of their context in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, they assumed that "justification" means something like "how an individual is made right with God," or "how God declares an individual innocent," or "how a person becomes a Christian," or something like that. Also, because of Luther's conscience-stricken paranoia, his preoccupation was with how an individual relates to God. But, while true, that is only a secondary aspect of "justification." (See Scot McKnight *The King Jesus' Gospel.* Zondervan, 2011 or N.T. Wright in *New Dictionary of Theology,* eds. Wright, Ferguson, Packer, 359-361).

The Jewish and biblical framework for understanding "justification" is God's covenant with Israel at the cusp of their return from exile, i.e., expecting "resurrection." The word "justification," might mean "vindication" in its simplest form (e.g. Romans 3:4), has an eschatological flavor when applied to us, referring to participation in the resurrected new covenant community that has "returned from exile" and has been vindicated in an ultimate, eschatological sense. The renowned New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has stressed that "justification" is not an individualistic idea; it requires the concept of covenant community. *(1)* Hence, when Paul is speaking in Romans about how Abraham is the father of a community of both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 4:16-17), he has in mind the word "justification," and it is linked most organically to the resurrection of Jesus, in which his people collectively are bound up: indeed, "*he was raised for our justification"* (Romans 4:25). Biblically, justification has to do with joining Israel, the covenant community, on the other side of her exile and death, an exile and death that Jesus takes on at the cross and emerges through in his resurrection. Paul says of the Gentiles, "*you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise . . . [but] you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God's household"* (Ephesians 2:12). Just as the old covenant community was redeemed out of Egypt as a community to be a community, so the new covenant community was redeemed out of the Law, sin, and death as a community to be a community.

Paul and James

The teaching of the new covenant situates James and Paul in their proper contexts. For Paul, discussion about justification occurs in the context of ethnic and cultural tension in the community, in his time between Jew and Gentile. Against those people Paul argues (a) that the law cannot in fact be kept perfectly – it merely shows up sin; and (b) the attempt would reduce the covenant to a single race, those who possess the Jewish law, whereas God desires a world-wide family." (*New Dictionary of Theology,* IVP, p. 160).

For Paul, preserving the unity of the Jewish and Gentile believers is absolutely essential to the gospel. This is the main thrust of Ephesians, not least when Paul talks about the "*dividing wall of hostility"* between Jew and Gentile being torn down, because all who believe in Christ are now placed "*in Christ,"* and there is no division *"in Christ"* (2:11-22). Disrupting the unity of the body is rebuked in the severest possible terms. It allows Satan to gain a foothold in the church (4:27) and grieves the Holy Spirit (4:30). But for centuries, Protestant commentators on Paul have emphasized Romans 1-8 and Galatians, and misinterpreted those letters as if Paul were really talking about "individual salvation" and its precise mechanics (I elaborate below). So too, statements like "*He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 1:6) were applied to the individual, even though they are really about the community (e.g. the argument between Euodia and Syntche; see also Gordon Fee's commentary on Philippians). If the Protestant Reformers had started with Ephesians, which is closest in succinctness to Paul's native concerns, they would have oriented Paul's theology around the Christian community and horizontal reconciliation, not merely around "individual salvation." In Ephesians, Paul is not dealing with some pressing problem but rather giving God's grand vision for the church. In fact, some manuscripts have a blank space instead of the destination "Ephesus" in the address, suggesting that what we call "Ephesians" was really designed as a more general chain letter. This would have had dramatic consequences. For Paul as well as the rest of the New Testament, horizontal reconciliation with others (especially across ethnic, racial, and national lines) goes hand in hand with vertical reconciliation with God because of the reality of the church as a new family stretching across national, ethnic, and racial lines.

James has the same theology of the covenant people. Because James is addressing the issue of favoritism between rich and poor in the new covenant community, he invokes the challenge of God by doing "meritorious" things. It does not mean that we must achieve a state of "moral perfection." Rather, it has to do with whether a person is growing in living in the reality of Jesus' covenant community. The unity of the covenant community makes favoritism in the community a sin calling into question one's membership in the first place. If a rich man gets favored treatment over the poor man that is a sin of partiality, which violates the principle of unity within the covenant community (2:4, 9). Partially and favoritism, as compared with murder and adultery (2:11), seem at first like small sins of omission, like merely forgetting to help as opposed to intentionally hurting someone. But in reality, James says, partiality and favoritism are gross sins of omission just like murder and adultery. "*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all"* (2:10).

Mercy

We can make the parallel between James and Matthew even clearer at this point. Echoing Matthew's conceptual language where realms of mercy seem to be emphasized, James says, "*For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy* [in this context, to the poor]; *mercy triumphs over judgment*" (2:13). One either lives in the realm of God's mercy and showing mercy, or in the realm of showing judgment and therefore incurring God's judgment. That is the organic link. What James calls "*justification by works*," Matthew calls "*forgive as you have been forgiven,"* and its converse, "*if you do not forgive men, your Father will not forgive your transgressions."* Favoritism is a lack of mercy and a failure to live in the realm of God's mercy.

The ethical trajectory becomes clear. If a brother or sister is without clothing or in need of daily food, and gets only lip service and not real assistance (2:15-16), that also violates the principle of unity within the covenantal community and demonstrates a lack of having received God's mercy. That's why James calls it "*dead faith*" (2:17). The partiality revealed in favoring a rich person in some social setting, or conversely, in not making efforts to care for the neglected, is a gross sin. It is a failure not to love as Jesus loves. It is a capitulation to the selfish relational

patterns of the world, which God breaks through and countermands by loving us in and through Jesus. The question is not, "How can you teach God's free grace and say we are obligated to give to the poor?" The question is quite the opposite: "How can you teach God's free grace and not say we are obligated to the poor?" In James, favoritism against the poor reveals a fundamental flaw in one's spiritual development, and can only call into question one's participation in the covenant community – i.e. one's very salvation – in the first place. This is exactly what James does in chapters 1 and 2. This is also Paul's logic when he talks about how believers must work towards unity and reconciliation in the body; it is a logical outgrowth of our union and reconciliation with Jesus (e.g. Ephesians, Romans 12-15, etc.). The community of Jesus is marked outwardly by a different social ethic than others. The evidence of our identification with Jesus' community (i.e. our "justification") is by such relationship.

That James thinks of "justification" as "how to join the new covenant community" is evidenced by his use of Abraham and Rahab as examples. At first these examples strike us as strange. Is this how "works" justify us, according to James? Certainly if we were reading James as if he were preeminently teaching "earn your way to God," these examples would be extremely bad ones. Abraham's act was not simply a "moral" act, he was not even living under the Mosaic Law, and his willingness to sacrifice his son would have been forbidden under the Mosaic Law. As Kierkegaard said, it was beyond standard categories of morality, and, given the uniqueness of Abraham's experience, it would be hard to understand how he serves as a model for us. Rahab's act cannot be placed in standard categories of morality either. She harbored Israel's spies – how does that have any bearing on being a moral person? Or for that matter, the rich/poor issue? But closer examination reveals James' clear-headedness. Rahab's act was a gesture of joining the covenant community, Israel. In siding with the spies, she switched allegiances from the community of Jericho to God's covenant community, Israel. Thus, her example is appropriate. She demonstrated the "works" commensurate with joining the covenant community. And Abraham's act of offering Isaac is also appropriate. One could simply understand Abraham as obeying God's word out of trust for God, even into an act that seemed to jeopardize himself so much. But I believe it is also possible that James – if not all early Christians as a whole (e.g. Romans 4:16-25) – understood Abraham as identifying himself with the "covenant community" that

flowed out of the resurrection of a supernaturally born son. He did not just "intellectually believe" that God's word is authoritative. He acts on that word of promise, and, believing that God must be able to resurrect Isaac (Hebrews 11:19), identifies himself with the family community that must emerge on the other side of the resurrection of Isaac. That resurrection faith then becomes a precursor of the Christian faith. Abraham identifies himself with a resurrected Isaac and the covenant community flowing out from resurrected Isaac, which has profound parallels with the renewed covenant community flowing out from and participating in the resurrected Jesus.

Actions and speech

James seems to divide his address between actions and speech in chapter 3, perhaps employing a Hebrew merism referring to the totality of what proceeds out of a person. In addressing speech, James says that some [the rich landowners] speak arrogantly, saying they could escape hardship [the famine] by going to the city and even making money in the process! They hoard up riches, he continues, to the detriment of their laborer and, because of their sin, themselves (4:13-5-6). If the challenge, "*Come now, you who say"* in 4:13 is addressed to the same people as 5:1, "*Come now, you rich*" which is a reasonable assertion, then the lines seem to be drawn between wealthy landowning families who have enough mobility to escape the situation and poor tenant farmers who do not. The arrogant talk of the mobile rich exacerbates the tension in the Christian community, just as talk about expensive vacations, new business opportunities, house décor, and lunches in fine restaurants could be divisive in churches today. The rebuke to the rich cannot be missed, nor can it be downplayed in our contemporary world that is also rife (often unspoken) with class conflict.

What is especially surprising, however, is that James challenges the poor to rejoice in their suffering and low position (1:2-4, 9), to renounce jealousy in favor of wisdom and gentleness (2:13-4:4), to not pray for wealth with certain evil motives (*"so that you may spend it on your pleasures"* in 4:3). James dramatic warning to the rich envisions the wealth of the current creation rotting or being burned in fire (5:1-3, cf. 2 Peter 3:7) but this is audible to all, which reinforces my contention that those who are aligned or identified with the coming new heavens and new

earth through Jesus *must live as pilgrims and aliens* because the judgment preceding it will overtake all those who are aligned or identified with the current world. Indeed, James cuts through the materialistic desires of both rich and poor by telling both groups to await the coming of the Lord, accepting with endurance and patience the present suffering (5:7-11). Like Jesus, James challenges both rich and poor, demonstrated by the sheer number of quotations or allusions to Jesus' preaching. He does not make the advantaged share their resources with the disadvantaged. He challenges the poor as well, which is only possible by addressing the conflict in the context of the discontinuity between the old creation and the new.

Note: Pay close attention to the Endnotes after each chapter. They will fine tune your understanding in addition to giving you sources for quotes, language, etc.

ENDNOTES

1. The early doctrine of justification (building on Catholic doctrine on Augustine) is an account of how the unrighteous are transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit and thus become righteous. With the Reformation the doctrine of justification moved center stage. Renaissance humanism brought a renewed interest in and study of the Greek language. This led to the realization that justification was a forensic term referring to our standing before God, a "not guilty" verdict in the court of God's justice. We are justified or accepted as righteous by God because the righteousness of Christ is reckoned or imputed to our account. They adopted the controversial slogan of justification by "faith alone," meaning by this that it is only because of Christ's work, received only by faith, that we are accepted by God.

   The recent understanding of the doctrine of justification is a new approach by a number of NT scholars. E.P. Sanders questioned the idea that first-century Judaism taught a religion of merit and works of righteousness. He described it rather as entering into a covenant by grace but remaining in it by obedience to the Torah (law). Sanders also offered a reinterpretation of Paul, which has been met with less favor. Others, such as James Dunn and Tom (N.T.) Wright, have responded to Sanders with their own reinterpretations of Paul. For Dunn, the "works of the law" to which Paul objected were not moral deeds aimed at acquiring merit but Jewish distinctives (such as the Sabbath

and the food laws) aimed at excluding Gentiles. What he affirmed has been received with greater sympathy than what he denied. Wright, meanwhile, understands justification in the context of the covenant and as referring not to how one enters the people of God, but how one can tell who belongs to them. There is yet no consensus about the new perspectives; controversy remains about questions like Paul's attitude to the law and the extent of the continuity between Judaism and Paul's doctrine.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCING THE LETTER OF JAMES

Between the setting out on pilgrimage and the safe arrival in the desired country lies the dangerous journey. Most often the journey is long and complex. Hearing the call to pilgrimage and having a view of the final destination are vital for the pilgrim, but so is having a sense of the twists and turns in the road. Pilgrims need guidance along the way.

James wrote to a church beset by problems on the journey. They needed spiritual guidance as they struggled with divisiveness, intolerance, favoritism, desire for wealth and status, and persecution. The lifestyle they live, if based on the following of Jesus, will determine the journey's successful termination.

The Letter of James is possibly the earliest writing found in the New Testament canon. It was likely written after Paul began to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles but before he and James met at the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 49 (cf. Acts 15). In short, the Letter was likely written sometime in the early to mid-40s. *(1)*

The prospect of studying the Letter of James is inviting for several reasons. To begin with because it was composed before Paul's writings, James discusses the subject of faith and works independently from Paul's teaching. We shall see that - James and Paul do not contradict each other, but rather supplement each other."*(2)*

The Epistle of James enlarges our practical understanding of faith. To be sure Paul is practical, but normally he begins with an imposing theological argument (for example, Romans 1-11 or Ephesians 1-3) and then gives practical exhortation (for example, Romans 12-16, Ephesians 4-6). James, however, begins right off with a series of practical admonitions and continues on nonstop to the end. *(3)* Some see twenty-five major divisions, others twelve, some four, and some as few as two. But one thing is clear – the dominant theme is, *faith that is real works practically in one's life.* That is, *true faith is a faith that works.*

James shows us how to have a living, visible, productive faith in our journey through a fallen world. In this respect, it is significant that this brief book has fifty-four imperatives. *(4)* James is a "Do this! Do that!" book which, taken to heart, will dynamically effect our lives on every level. We will not be the same at the end of the study if we prayerfully ask the Spirit to apply what we learn.

James joins with the other books standing in the canon of New Testament Scriptures between Hebrews and Revelation that provide guidance for the pilgrim's journey. It is considered one of the general or catholic epistles, including 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John and Jude. These letters were sent out as circular epistles to be passed around and read in several locations. No other book in this section, and perhaps none in the entire New Testament, gives as much specific guidance about so many aspects of the lifestyle pilgrims are called to follow.

James the Man

James is a man of few words. He is the brother of Jesus, yet identifies himself only as "*James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:1). Someone named "James" *(5)* is mentioned more than forty times in the New Testament. It is useful then to trot out the presumably separable Jameses *(6)* and evidence for each; we will present them in an ascending order of possibilities, leaving the last two as the only real possibilities.

First, *James, the father of Judas* (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). *(7)*

Second, *James the Less or Younger, son of Mary, wife of Cleopas* (Mark 15:40; Matt. 27:56; Mark 16:1; Luke24:10).

Third, *James the son of Alphaeus, one of the Twelve* (Mark 3:18; Matt. 10:3; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13).

Fourth, *James the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostle John and also one of the Twelve* (Mark 1:19; 3:17; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13). This James, according to Acts 12:2, was beheaded by Herod Agrippa I).

Fifth, *James the brother of Jesus, son of Mary* (Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55

Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Jude 1; John 7:3-5, I Cor. 9:5).

Out of the five men named James only two have ever been suggested as the author – James, the brother of John (sons of Zebedee), and James, the Lord's half-brother. Since the brother of John was martyred very early, about 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2), he is ruled out. The other James, the Lord's half-brother, later became the leader of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). There are parallels in the language of this epistle and the speech of James at the Jerusalem Council (compare James 1:1 and Acts 15:23; James 1:16, 19 and Acts 15:25; James 1:27 and Acts 15:14, 29; James 2:5 and Acts 15:13, 14, 25; James 1:7 and Acts 15:17; James 5:19-20 and Acts 15:19). The author speaks with a tone of authority befitting the position of James, the half-brother of Jesus. Douglas Moo agrees as he *(8)* suggests that though the authorship to this point is inferential: a well- known James must have written the letter, and the brother of the Lord is the only James we know of who fits the profile.

James, the brother of the Lord, was none other than a blood-brother, a half-brother, of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospels mention this fact (see Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). Apparently he was at first an unbeliever – "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him"* (John 7:5). However, during the forty-day period between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, Jesus "*appeared to James, then to all the apostles"* and James believed (1 Cor. 15:7). James is mentioned as being in the upper room praying with his mother and the rest of the disciples (Acts 1:13) and was presumably present when the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. He had become the leader of the Jerusalem church when Peter was released from prison (Acts 12:17), and eventually he chaired the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13ff; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). Perhaps James was married. While we have no way to be certain 1 Corinthians 9:5 presents the possibility as Paul asks: "*Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas"?* (NIV)

James can be placed with the context of the earliest forms of Christianity. This is supported by the striking parallels to the teachings of Jesus. The best example is probably 5:12, which closely resembles what Jesus said concerning oaths in Matthew 5:33-37. He is fully at home in the world of Judaism. There is no shortage of evidence to support this contention. He is consonant with the Jewish understanding of God. He is a monotheist (cf. 2:19; 4:11). He frequently refers to the Old Testament. He refers to what "Scripture says" (4:5) and even quotes from

it (4:6) and refers to the heroes of faith, such as Abraham (2:23), Rahab (2:5), the prophets (5:10), Job (5:11), and Elijah (5:17-18).

James is also familiar with the Hellenistic world. The letter is written in good and even fluid Greek, betraying a relatively wide vocabulary and skill. To be sure, in the New Testament only the gospel written by Luke and the epistle of Hebrews show connections to a traditional Greek education, but the commonalities of early Christian writers reveal a widespread facility among early Christians in reading the Septuagint (LXX Greek translation of the Old Testament). Jewish people were more or less fully integrated into a world run by Rome, shaped by Greece, and influenced by any and all who walked its roads. In other words, it is a mistake to infer that residence in Galilee or Judea implies lack of engagement with the reigning trends in culture or an incapacity to speak, read, or write Greek. The early Christian leaders, not the least of whom were James and Paul, were evidently middle-class Jews who had the capacity to read, speak, and write Greek.

In fact, Stanley Porter has recently built upon the path-breaking work of J.N. Sevenster (9) to argue Jesus himself spoke Greek, and he points to Matthew 8:5-13-17; John 4:4-26; Mark 2P:13-14 pars.; Mark 7:25-30 par.; Mark 12:13-17 pars.; Mark 8:27-30 pars.; Mark 15:2-5 pars. (10) It is not unreasonable to think that if Jesus was trilingual then his brother James was also. In fact, Porter's conclusion is that "a sizeable number of Jews in Palestine used Greek." (11) This makes it reasonable that James, too, had some capacity in Greek. (12) Add to this the long-term presence of James in Jerusalem, where many Jews spoke and wrote Greek and where some Christians would have done the same, and one has a reasonable argument that James could have spoken and written Greek, even Greek as good as is found in the letter of James.

James was a "late bloomer," but he flowered well! James knew Jesus as only a few could. For years he had eaten at the same table, shared the same house, played in the same places, and watched the development of his amazing older brother. And he truly became known as James the Just, a man of immense piety. The historian Eusebius records the testimony of Hegesippus that James "used to enter alone into the temple and be found kneeling and praying for forgiveness for the people, so that his knees grew hard like a camel's because of his constant worship of God,

kneeling and asking forgiveness for the people. So from his excessive righteousness he was called the Just." *(13)*

James was part of a large family. According to Mark 6:3, the male children of the family included, and here I give rough transliterations of the Hebrew names: "*Yakov* and *Yosef* and *Yehuda* and *Simeon*" [James, Joseph, Jude (Judas and Simon]. Add to this *"Yeshua*" and there are five boys with traditional names. Mark also mentions "sisters," though he gives them no names. That means there were at least seven children. If there is any truth to the tradition that Joseph died and left Mary a widow, James would have been part of a family in stress, and that might help explain why James sees pure religion as caring for the poor and widows (James 1:26-27).

Studying James – the Bible as Story

Many today advocate reading the Bible as Story, *(14)* as a macroscopic plot that puts the whole Bible together and that, with proper nuances and differences, animated the ideas of each biblical author. In so putting the Bible together as Story, the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh becomes the "Old Testament." If we were to make chapters of this plot there are (in our scheme) five: creation of Eikons (see endnote, *image of God*) *(15)* (Genesis 1-2), cracking of the Eikons (Genesis 3), the covenanted community of Eikons (Genesis 12; 17; 22; Exodus 19-24; Jeremiah 31; Mark 14:12-26; Acts 2; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34), the redemption through the perfect Eikon, Christ (Matthew 1-2; John 1; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 3:18; 4:4; Colossians 1:15), and the consummation of the union of Eikons with the triune God (Revelation 21-22). It is wise to see the plot from the angle of mission, and to see that mission as the mission of God. *(16)*

James' letter understands God's Story as the Story of Israel. In fact, each book of the Bible tells this single Story, even if each author configures that Story in its own way. James knows the breach by God's covenantal community and he finds the breach mended or fulfilled in the "*twelve tribes in the Dispersion*" (1:1). James reads the Bible as Story with a plot that comes to a new chapter in Jesus Christ. Yet, James's reading of the Story is not one of replacement so much as of fulfillment; his letter summons the twelve tribes to live out the Mosaic Torah as

God's enduring will. But even here James has touched the Story with singular impact: James reads and renders the Torah *in the way Jesus taught it*, namely through the combination of loving God (1:12) and loving others (1:25; 2:8-11). In other words when it comes to ethics James reads and interprets and applies the Torah through the lens of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18). The combination of these texts of Deuteronomy and Leviticus constitute what McKnight has deemed the "Jesus Creed." *(17)*

In studying James we must read James on his own terms in the world. In other words – read James! – before comparing James with his contemporaries and other documents. James is a one-of-a-kind document. The most significant theological posture of James is he thinks his audience should not only listen to him but do what he says. James' audience should listen to him because he is "*a servant of the God"* and "*of the Lord Jesus Christ."(18)* This posture of authority derived from Jesus aligns James with other servants of God such as Moses, David, and the prophets. James has authority as a distinguished leader in the community that believes Jesus is the Messiah.

Everything that James says flows from this source. The theological themes of James are formed in the messianic, Jewish context of a man who has been called by God to be a leader of the messianic community. Three major themes are unfolded throughout the letter: Trials in Christian Life (1:2-4); Wisdom (1:5-8); and Riches and Poverty (1:9-11).

James raises many themes central to the letter: To name but a few, God is one (2:19); God is the living God, who makes "*even the demons believe – and shudder"* (2:19 NRSV) and is the "*Lord of hosts*" (5:4); God is constant and without change (1:17) and has nothing to do with evil (1:13) or human anger (1:20). God is merciful and compassionate (5:11); the Father of lights, the creator of the world (1:17); the champion of the poor (5:1-6); and the lawgiver and the judge (4:12; 5:9). He calls believers to harmonize their faith and action. James' ethic is not focused in an individualistic sense but in a communitarian way. James promises the poor the inheritance of the kingdom (2:5) and challenges the conscience of every hearer/reader to respect the poor.

We will discuss only three themes here: suffering/testing, poverty/piety, and wisdom.

Suffering/Testing

The first major theme encountered in the Epistle of James is that of suffering or testing (1:2; 1:12). It is also the theme that binds all the others together according to Nystrom *(19)* underlying much of the rest of the epistle. It is connected to the eschatological waiting of 5:7 (and likewise the need to return the erring one in 5:19-20); it is taken up in the transition verse of 4:17; it underlies the defection of 4:1-10; and it is behind the two parts of chapter 2. Thus the problem of testing forms the thread which holds the epistle together.

The great English preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "Trials teach us what we are; they dig up the soil, and let us see what we are made of, they just turn up some of the ill weeds on the surface." The English terms *trial* and *temptation* are derived from the same Greek word, πειρασμοσ *(peirasmos)*. James is careful to distinguish between testing (*peirasmos)* that comes from God and is intended to do good and temptation (*peirasmos)* that does not come from God and is intended to do harm. The good that God intends in such testing is endurance. Endurance, in turn, enables one to attain maturity. Pilgrims mature as they endure. What is at issue is the condition and the attitude of the one undergoing the trial. It is for this reason that rather than give in to temptation we should stand fast and rejoice in trials. Suffering/trials are opportunities God uses to mold and shape as he wills, until we are "*mature and complete, not lacking anything"* (1:2-9). This theme is seen in the discussion of community dissent in chapter 2 and the suffering of the poor in 4:13-5:12.

The background of the idea of testing/suffering in Judaism cannot be more than briefly summarized here. The literature is far too vast to attempt any in-depth development. At times Judaism connected suffering to sin. Proverbs, for example, argues that the righteous and diligent are blessed while the wicked suffer (Proverbs 10:1-6). The testing of Abraham and the testing of Israel in the wilderness are eloquent here. However, in Job God is seen as allowing his choicest servants to endure suffering at the hands of a Satan figure. God is no longer seen as

the direct cause of suffering but the person who suffers and remains firm is rewarded by God. Suffering, in a sense, is a sign of God's activity in the life of the believer.

Closely related to the problem of suffering is sin. Two developments are important in this epistle of James. One, sin is seen as a force within the human being, an evil impulse (ψεξερ*, yezer)*. This impulse is undirected desire and thus part of the created nature. This evil impulse leads into sin in that it breaks the bounds of the legitimate. The total removal of sin is not needed but a counterforce (variously described as the law, the good impulse, the Holy Spirit) which channels and limits the evil impulse into doing good. The struggle within is won when the person gives the upper hand to the good impulse.

Second, the problem of sin is external. Satan (by whatever name he was designated) was viewed as being in a contest with God for people. His strategy was to use whatever spirits or other means were available to lead people astray and to make those who remain faithful to God suffer.

Given these two directions, one must not think of them as mutually exclusive. Paul, for example, was clearly aware of both the evil (*yezer* in Hebrew, cf. Romans 7) with its counteragent of the Spirit (Romans 8) and of the role of Satan in temptation and apostasy (e.g. 2 Corinthians 2:11).

James used this theology in the connection between sin and suffering, especially illness. This he addresses in 5:14-16, which allows that confession of sin may in fact be part of the healing process. Yet the conditional sentences he uses point to his deeper concern: there is a danger that suffering may lead one into sin or that one may sin to avoid suffering.

The real burden of the epistle, then, appears in 1:2-4, 12-15. The community he addresses is facing the problem of suffering. The suffering is not acute persecution, but circumstances which James sees as a test. The test ought to create eschatological anticipated joy, for God's purpose is not in any way malevolent but purificatory. They will show the virtue of patient endurance and thus come through with a greater perfection than before: they will be tried and true (1:12).

There are, however, some in the community who find the situation hard. They are tempted to blame God in the testing situation as Israel did in the wilderness.

This act signals failure, a giving in to the evil impulse. Such people are sternly warned that God is not to be put to the test (1:3). Their failure is due to their own internal impulse not God. He is not the one leading them to evil.

Three other factors also appear in the testing context: (1) economic hardship will lead some to compromise and seek financial security in the world. True faith will remain charitable whatever the pressure. (2) The evil impulse, which is also the source of internal community strife (4:1ff.), for the internal strife is the product of the desire to have; (3) in 3:15 the tempter is seen as the source of the "wisdom" which is dividing the community. Then in 4:7 those led astray by the evil impulse are told to resist the devil. James clearly recognizes the power of spiritual-demonic evil behind the internal evil in the person.

The proper reaction to the suffering, then, is not to give in to the evil impulse and accuse God, but to endure patiently. Patient endurance is repeated three times in two verses and then is taken up again two verses later. This is the call of the book both in its introduction and its thematic reprise. The **what** and **how** appears between the two sections.

Thus James falls squarely into the testing/suffering tradition. The tests can lead to maturity if endured, yet they do not come from God, but from the evil one. The tests involve suffering, but the suffering will lead to glory, as in the case of Job.

Poverty/Piety

The piety and righteousness of the poor is a frequent theme in James (1:9-11, 27, 2:3-7, 15-16, 5:7-11). The background of the concepts in James is deeply rooted in Jewish thought. Naturally there are parts of the Old Testament which glorify wealth as a reward from God (e.g. the Abraham cycle), and these point to the fact that neither Old Testament nor New Testament is ascetic. Yet it is clear to the biblical writers by the period of the prophets that piety often led to poverty as ruthless people took advantage of the honest and upright person. It was also clear that the same people took advantage of the weaker classes in society in general, forcing them first from their land and then into slavery. It is this process, one which was perfectly legal according to the civil law of that period but morally

abhorrent according to religious law, which drove the prophets to cry out against the wealthy oppressors of the poor.

> *"This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride of wealth and food in plenty, comfort and ease, and yet she never helped the poor and wretched"* (Ezekiel 16:49).

The poor were considered innocent sufferers, especially at the hands of the unfeeling rich (James 5:4) and God is portrayed as the defender of these poor innocent and the champion of justice (James 1:27; cf. Amos 4:1, 5:11-12, 24). Three factors should be noted: The action of the wealthy in taking advantage of the poor, *simply in failing to help* them is a crime, a sin. The wealthy are not condemned for their wealth *per se* but for how they use it. Second, the word pair ανι ω εβψον (*ani w ebyon*, "poor and wretched"), had come into use as a technical designation of the poor by the exilic period. Third, the concept of poor was readily paired with that of innocent (or righteous).

The basis of the prophetic denunciation of the wealthy who failed to help the poor is embodied in Israelite law: God loves and cares for the poor. The demand of the covenant is to act like God in this respect. Thus in Deuteronomy 10:16-19 one reads:

> *"So now you must circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and not be stubborn any more, for the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and terrible God. He is no respecter of persons, and is not to be bribed; he secures justice for widows and orphans, and loves the alien who lives among you, giving him food and clothing. You too must love the alien, for you once lived as alien in Egypt."*

It is obvious that the conviction that God cares for the poor and defends them against their oppressors, fundamental as it is in Hebrew covenantal formulae, would form a fine basis for the prophetic denunciation of those who ignored it. But even if it is less obvious, it was equally true that the same fundamental principle formed the basis for the response of the oppressed to God in the Psalms. Thus there was not only a theology about the poor, but also a theologically informed piety of the poor.

The images emerge in the Psalms with respect to the poor. The first is that the ideal king will act like God and defend the rights of the poor (e.g. Psalm 72:1-2).
The second is the poor call boldly upon God and assume his help because they are poor. They know "*the Lord listens to the poor*" (Psalms 69:32-33) and thus on this basis the pious call upon him:

> "*Turn to me, Lord, and answer;*
>
> *I am downtrodden and poor.*
>
> *Guard me, for I am constant and true;*
>
> *save thy servant who puts his trust in thee*
>
> Psalm 86:1-2 (NEB)

This latter fact means that downtrodden pious individuals and groups found the term "the poor" an acceptable self-designation, which formed a basis for its future development.

Jesus himself gave a fresh impetus to the piety-poverty tradition in the early church, particularly in the version of his teaching in Luke, but also in the other gospels. That he valued charity and set an example which led to the Spirit-inspired economic sharing mentioned in Acts is not in the least surprising (e.g. Mark 12:4-44; 14:3-9). On the other hand, it is equally clear that he was known as a person who moved with some ease among wealthy and disreputable people. It thus comes as a natural development that he would bless the poor (Luke 6:20-21), particularly in the light of his demand that his disciples give up all to follow him (Mark 10:28-30). The piety of the Psalms that views God as caring for the poor is characteristic of Jesus, yet it does not surprise us when he curses the rich (Luke 6:24-25). Obviously much more could be said about the teaching of Jesus, but this is not the context for a full development of the material.

James applies the teaching of Jesus within the context of the themes of testing and suffering already developed. In doing so it becomes clear that the major pressure upon the community is economic pressure, and the major test has to do with the world.

It is clear first of all that James has great sympathy for the poor. In 1:9 it is the humble or poor brother who in the reversal of fortunes receives eschatological

exaltation. This is a cause for anticipated joy found in 1:2, 12. Similarly, in 2:5 God has chosen the poor "*rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him*" (the last clause also appears in 1:12 with respect to those enduring the test).

James has little good to say about the rich. They are mentioned three times. In 1:10-11 they are described by the reversal-of-fortunes motif: they are "humiliated" while the poor are exalted. This is complemented by the addition of the Isaiah 40:6-7 saying about their fading as grass. They will "perish." In 2:6-7 they appear again. Here there is an ironic accusation, for the Christians have become the persecutors of the poor through their favoritism and thus take the role of the rich. It is the rich who are accused of oppression, legal persecution, and blasphemy of Christ. These rich are not Christian, but rather the enemies of the church. In 5:1-6, using highly traditional language, James roundly cursed the rich and threatened them with hell.

The stress on economic distinctions appears in three places. First, 1:22-27 makes it clear that one concern of the author is that belief lead to action, to a doing which includes charity. The problem is then explicitly dealt with in 2:14-26 where the author rules that those who fail to practice charity, i.e. who do not show actions in accord with what they profess, have a totally worthless faith. In this context Abraham, the great example of charity appears. Finally, 4:1-8 attacks the root theology. These people are unwilling to share because they really are motivated by desire and love the world. They are thus making themselves enemies of God. Over them is written the charge: "*to the one knowing to do good and not doing it, it is sin"* (4:17).

The test, then, is especially the test of charity. Will the Christian really stand the test and share with the rest of the community? Or will the person show himself to be of a divided heart and really a lover of the world, an adulterer (apostate) from God? The issue is set in the sharpest terms by the use of the piety-poverty theology.

Wisdom

Wisdom is an important concept for James. It appears in three passages:

1) 1:5-8 it is the gift requested from God in the context of various kinds of trials (πειρασμοσ *peirasmos).*
2) 3:13-18 it is something which descends from above and produces certain virtues.
3) 1:16-18 there is reference to a good gift and perfect giving from above.

God is all skillful and grants wisdom to humans, he is the supreme example of wisdom, which is particularly displayed in his creation of the world (Provers 3:19; 8:22-31). Since wisdom is not primarily of human derivation but rather from God, it is a gift of his grace. Thus, a lack of wisdom cannot be made up by human effort (for it is a gift of God and must therefore be asked of him - Proverbs 2:6; 1 Kings 39ff; Ecclesiastes). The way to wisdom is prayer. There are two and possibly three functions of prayer in James: (1) to request wisdom (1:5); (2) to obtain healing (5:13-15; and possibly (3) to seek material goods (4:2-3). The third must remain only possible, since the parallel between 1:5-8 and 4:1-3 suggests that while they are requesting material benefits, their materialism is worldly and they might be better by asking for the wisdom to resist the world than for the goods to join it.

For James wisdom is necessary in order to see suffering as joy (v. 2). A man may seem perfect but he is worthless if he lacks the wisdom that comes from God (1 Corinthians; Colossians 1:28). As a gift from God wisdom comes freely (ηαπλοσ*, haplos)* in contrast of grudging human giving there is divine giving which is whole-hearted (see Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 8:2, 9; 9:11, 13).

Conclusion

In the book, James is communicating with Jerusalem, Palestine and Syria; while Peter is focused on Babylon and the east. Additionally, we hear that the apostle John is spending time in Ephesus and Asia Minor. The beautiful thing about James' message is that he manages to say so much in so few words. James wrote five short, but impactful, chapters on faith through: testing of trials, works, conduct (2 chapters worth) and persecution. As he begins he wastes no time trying

to explain that Christians will experience both trials and temptations, and this should produce a response of pure joy.

While it seems most likely that James emerges from Jerusalem or a least a Judean-based setting, the audience might be at any number of locations across the diaspora. *(20)* When we move into the church world today, James pushes back against Christians. In fact when we look at faith and works we hope to demonstrate that the more uncomfortable Christians are with James in a Luther-like way, the less likely they really understand Paul!

James offers instruction on a wide variety of issues. Each serves to assist the community and individuals within the community to understand the path and lifestyle to Christian maturity. *((21)* The theme and theology of suffering is the starting point of the letter while sin is closely related. At the pastoral level, the idea of wisdom is of key significance for James. The wisdom dimension of James attracts modern and postmodern readers; the rhetoric makes many today wary, and yet others are duly impressed by the skill of this writer.

Anabaptist scholar Ronald Sider tells the story that in the happy days of hippies Upton Sinclair once read James 5:1-5 aloud to a group of ministers and attributed the words to Emma Goldman. That Sinclair had socialist leanings and Goldman was an anarchist explains why the ministers immediately called for Goldman's deportation. What is not clear is why a group of ministers would not have recognized the memorable, if unsettling, prose of James 5. *(22)* Elsa Tamez might provide the answer to pastoral ignorance. She opens her prophet-like study of James with these words: "If the Letter of James were sent to the Christian communities of certain countries that suffer from violence and exploitation, it would very possibly be intercepted by government security agencies. The document would be branded as subversive." *(23)*

Which leads to this: even if we cannot reconstruct the historical context with confidence, the voice of James has some potent words about economic injustice and even public policy, and it makes many of us feel uncomfortable in our efforts. *(24)* That voice falls uncomfortably silent among many of us who are empowered. But that same voice of James delights the ears and transfigures the hopes of the un-empowered. *(25)* To ape the famous words of Mark Twain, it is not the lack of clarity of context that bothers me; it is the words that bother me.

Another significant theme is James' call to us to true community. He yearns for the creation of the true community in the church. Such a community calls for a community composed of relationships of mutual care and mutual responsibility. To reinforce our earlier statement these themes and theology make the letter of James eminently practical. Allow James to make you feel uncomfortable.

ENDNOTES

1. Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), pp. 18, 19, 27.
2. Ibid.
3. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 42, who quotes Edgar J. Goodspeed, *An Introduction to the New Testament,* p. 290.
4. Kistenmaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 5 says in note 6
   "I have counted only true imperatives and not the participles that take the place of the imperative. Expanding the use of the imperative, C. Leslie Mitton in *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), mentions sixty occurrences."
5. On the English name "James" we have the following history: Hebrew *Yakov* ("Jacob"), through the Greek form *Yukobos*, became Latin *Jacobus* and was softened in later Latin to *Jacomus* and then Old French *Gemmes/Jaimes*, Spanish *Jaime*,Catalonian *Jaume*, and Italian *Giacomo*. Hence, the use of "Jacobite" as the adjective for James in scholarship on this letter; some suggest we should use the name "Jacob" instead of "James." See Johnson, 93, for the history of the name.
6. Some, of course, equate two or more of these Jameses. For instance, one traditional view equates (2), (3), and (5). Berheim stretches the same references to seven possible Jameses *(James, Brother of Jesus, 21).*
7. Luke 6:16, "and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor." Luke thus distinguishes Judas *ben Yakov* from Judas Iscariot. Both Mark 3:18 and Matt. 10:4 have "Simon the Cananaean" where Luke has Judas son of James. The lists of the apostles vary. In the fourth group Matthew and Mark have James son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot; Luke-Acts has James son of Alphaeus, Simon *the Zealot*, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot (the last omitted in Acts.
8. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 9-11).
9. *Do You Know Greek? How much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* (NovTSup 19; Leiden: Brill, 1968). See further at S.E. Porter, ed., *The Language of the New Testament: Classical Essays* (JSNTSup 60; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), especially 126-62, 174-90, 191, 205-26.

10. Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (JSNTSup 191; Sheffield: Shefield Acadamic, 2000).
11. Porter, *Criteria,* 141.
12. E.g., P.H. Davids, "Palestinian Traditions in the Epistle of James," in Chilton and Evans, *James the Just and Christian Origins,* 42-45.
13. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Volume 1, trans. Kirsop p Lake, The Leob Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p, 171 (II. 23.3-9).
14. See Randy Frazee, *The Heart of the Story: God's Masterful Design To Restore His People (*Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.
15. Scot McKnight suggests this word *eikon* instead of *imago Dei*, "image of God," since the latter has become dog-eared and overly disputed.
16. See C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God;* L. Pachuau, *"Missio Dei,"* in DMT 232-34.
17. McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Paraclete Press, Brewster: MASS, 2004.
18. See Bauckham, *Wisdom of James, Disciple of Jesus the Sage* (London: Rouledge, 1999.
19. David P. Nysrom, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Zondervan Pub., Grand Rapids, MI: 1997), pp. 21ff.
20. Ibid. p. 39.
21. R. A. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (5th ed.; Nashville: W, 1997), 133.
22. Tamez, *Scandalous Message,* 1. A. Batten, in her study "Ideological strategies in the Letter of James," in Webb and Kloppenborg, *Reading James*, 7, repeats the dust jacket comments on Tamez's book by J.M. Bonino that half of the congregation in a wealthy Chilean church left when James was read publicly there. See also Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James.*
23. See D. Warden, "The Rich and Poor in James: Implications for Institutional-ized Partiality," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000) 247-57; see also C. L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). For an attempt to relate James to our world after sketching how James functions socially in its world, see R. Crotty, "Identifying the Poor in the Letter of James," *Colloquim* 27 (1995) 11-21.
24. The question is where to begin with further reading. For the big picture of one such voice, the African American voice, and issue of racism, see J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); B. Blount, *Then the Whisper Put On Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context (*American New Testament Scholars," CBR 4 (2005) 57-82. For James in particular, see M.P. Aymer, *First Pure, Then Peaceable: Frederick Douglass Reads James* (LNTS 379; London: Clark, 2007), and Byron.

CHAPTER 2

James 1:1-18

SPIRITUAL WHOLENESS THROUGH TRIALS

"James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord, he is a double-minded man in all he does." (1:1-8)

I have always loved the sea. I am a Pisces by chance of birth. My home is filled with models of sailboats large and small and my rooms are hung with pictures of the sea and ships. Many a summer I have stood in the bright sunshine and watched the waves of the ocean sparkling and splashing around a little harbor, making the boats dip and bob. James grew up in Nazareth, about thirty kilometers from both the Lake of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea. The sight of the rolling waves was familiar to him also. He is aware the sea is always full of waves: and when the wind blows, the waves move almost rhythmically in rushing sequence. When the wind changes direction, the waves alter their course accordingly. Also, the upward and downward movements of the waves create crests and troughs. In short, the sea is one of instability and restlessness. They are quite a sight, as though the waves have a character and energy of their own. They don't, of course. They are the products of other forces.

Tom Wright says, “The challenge of faith is the challenge not to be a wave.” *(1)* He goes on to say, “There are many winds and tides in human life, and it’s easy to imagine ourselves important because we seem, from time to time at least, to dance and sparkle this way and that.” According to James we are faced with the winds and tides on our journey that make us unstable, blown and tossed about by this wind or that (verse 6). I used to live in Florida; I loved the beach and as I attempted to understand James’ analogy of tossing, powerful waves I figured a few tidbits about strong currents, or waves, would be handy knowledge and what I discovered was profound spiritual truth! You see, a rip current is a source of danger for any swimmer, much like a trial or temptation can be a source of trouble for any Christian. I understand a swimmer can actually be dragged away from the beach and drown from a strong rip current because the fight of the current can bring death - actually coming from exhaustion.

Have you ever felt this way in the midst of a strong trial? You keep fighting and fighting until exhaustion creeps in, blame rises up, separation from God occurs and you are left broken, a part of you dying away? This is not what a trial is meant to result in. We are meant to ask God for help (wisdom) and to muster up joy, knowing that our faith will help us persevere.

James (Jacob) writes this letter to encourage Messianic Jews across the world to face up to the challenge of faith, trusting in the Lord as they continue their journey.

Greeting and epitome of exhortation

James is written in a clear and even somewhat elegant *koine* Greek that shows the influence of the Septuagint (LXX) in its explicit citations and allusions as well as its diction. It most resembles the letters of Paul in its style and outlook. James presents itself as a letter, although after the greeting it lacks specifically epistolary elements such as a prayer for grace and peace, a declaration of thanksgiving or a pronouncement of a blessing on God. It is, however, best understood as a form of protreptic (instruction, persuasion) discourse in the form of a letter. James seeks to persuade the readers to live up to the profession to which they have committed themselves – namely, the faith “*in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”* (2:1 NRSV).

James' epistle contains subtle, overarching rhetorical themes and logical movements and a carefully structured composition. Chapter one states tests – troubles of any kind – bring consequences. For example, perseverance brings honor to us as we bear witness to his truth. Peter echoes this theme, "*... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name*" (I Peter 4:16). In chapter one James says that Testing is needful for the Christian to be approved by God. He names five fruits of tests: Testing builds perseverance, testing also develops: wisdom, faith, humility and an opportunity to stumble. Together these fruits of tests frame the lifestyle needed for our journey.

As James begins his epistle he views himself as "*a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 1). There is little agreement among commentators as to his intended meaning. As he has claimed identification as the "*brother of the Lord"* he does not claim undo status for himself. Rather, by calling himself "a servant" he acknowledges a subservient status. He is a slave, not of necessity and force but by choice. He acknowledges Jesus as Lord of his life. The Greek word servant δουλοσ (*doulos)* was neither a free man nor a hired servant; he was a slave, the rightful property of his master. The term "slave," however, did not necessarily carry the degrading connotation attached to the word today. James was as a servant who was proud to belong – body and soul – to God and Jesus Christ. Jacob places himself in the Jewish tradition of honor. For in the Old Testament, this title "servant" εβεδ (*'ebed*) is sometimes used of Israel's great heroes of faith such as Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5; Daniel 9:11) and David (Jeremiah 33:21; Ezekiel 37:25). Elsewhere, in the New Testament, letter writers call themselves "servant," "apostle," or "prisoner," and, others, "servants." *(2)* Only James and Jude call themselves "servant" with no other designation, thereby possibly indicating their self-awareness they are not part of the original twelve apostles.

"Servant" indicates neither James nor Jude, both "half-brothers" of Jesus, used their family status to leverage power. "Servant," however, is not to be understood as some term of extreme humility, as in "not an apostle, but just a servant," or as "simply a believer," but instead points toward two features of James, first that he sees himself as one who serves the Lord Jesus Christ (confirmed a few words later with the word "Lord") *(3)* and second that he stands in line with some illustrious forbears of Moses, David, Amos, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Therefore, using this term of oneself is paradoxical: it is both a claim to subordination to Christ and a claim to

privilege and honor in the Jewish messianic community that carries forward the work of Moses, David, and the great prophets of Israel's history. *(4)* By placing "*God and the Lord Jesus Christ"* between "James" and "servant," James intentionally sets "servant" in a messianic/Christian context. James is a servant of *both* (the one) God *and* the Lord Jesus Christ.

James, then, is a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ as he has come to know both through experiences and Scripture interpretation. This confession may well put James in jeopardy on two separate fronts because as he "serves" the Lord Jesus Christ, he sets himself apart from other Jews who do not serve the Lord Jesus and secondly from all those Gentiles who serve neither the God of Israel nor Jesus the Messiah.

Thus James considers himself an obedient servant of the Lord who purchased him with his precious blood and was resurrected and ascended to be with the Father. As James greets the Messianic Jews scattered throughout the world he greets every Christian. Thus James, the brother of the Lord, addressing persecuted Jewish Christians reaches out to all people through the centuries.

James addresses his letter "*to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations*." The Jews scattering, known as the *Diaspora*, began in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians deported the ten northern tribes. Later the southern tribes suffered the same fate when the Babylonians took them captive in 586. Because of this, Jews were scattered all over Mesopotamia, around the Mediterranean, and into Asia Minor and Europe (cf. Acts 2:5, 9-11). Some of the major cities of the world Alexandria, for example – had large populations of expatriate Jews. Also, when Jewish Christians were first persecuted in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, they fled first to Judea and Samaria (Acts 11:19, 20). Tragically these Jewish Christians were not taken in by their expatriate Jewish kinsmen, but rather were rejected and persecuted. In the epistle, James is communicating with Jerusalem, Palestine, and Syria; while Peter is focused on Babylon and the east. Additionally, we hear that the apostle John is spending time in Ephesus and Asia Minor.

Further, refused protection by the Jewish community, these Jewish Christians were exploited by the Gentiles. Homeless and disenfranchised, they were robbed of what possessions they had, hauled into court, and subjected to the Gentile elite. They had less standing than slaves. They became religious, social, and economic pariahs.

A good way to get a feel for their position is to read modern post-Holocaust Jewish writers such as Elie Wiesel. It is to these Jewish Christian brothers, mistreated ex-parishioners of James' church, that Jacob sends his letter.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

Testing of Faith Brings Joy

Verses 2-4

James writes his letter to house-churches of Jewish Christians who have been driven from their homes and possessions. He writes to people who suffer because they are exploited by the rich, dragged into court, and slandered for believing in the noble name of Jesus (2:6-7). James wastes no time getting to his imperatives, his admonition is to rejoice:

"*Consider it all joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds …"*

What a strange way of addressing the recipients of this letter! Has James lost his senses? He is writing to beat-up brothers and sisters and he says, "*Consider it pure joy,"* or as the NEB says, "*count yourselves supremely happy."* How nice … a letter of encouragement from Pastor Whacko! "Don't worry … be happy!" Then and now James' command to "*Consider it all joy … whenever you face trials of many kinds"* sounds irrational! Put this verse on a sign next to the expressway and it would appear to be the work of a crazed fanatic. Indeed, to any culture (including ours) determined to insulate itself from trials, even from discomforts, this sounds crazy. Tragically, it even sounds irrational to many who identify with Christianity.

What does James' command really mean? In answer, we must first understand what it does *not* mean. James is not ordering *all-encompassing joyful emotion* during severe trials; nor is he demanding his readers must *enjoy* their trials or sufferings or that trials are *joy*. He knew, as did the writer of Hebrews, that "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful"* (Hebrews 12:11).

James was not commanding that we exult upon hearing our career position has been given to another less qualified, or that the neighbor's children have leukemia, or that one's spouse is adulterous. Rather, James is commending the conscious embrace of a Christian understanding of life which brings joy into the trials that

come because of our relationship to Jesus. James says, "*Consider* it pure joy," which means to make a deliberate and careful decision to experience joy even in times of trouble. Is this possible? Yes. Paul told the Corinthian church, "*in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds"* (2 Corinthians 7:4). Luke reports that the Sanhedrin "*called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name"* (Acts 5:40, 41). Later, Luke tells us, Paul and Silas, having been severely flogged and being in intense pain, were in prison, and "*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them"* (Acts 16:25). Their concert so pleased God that he brought down the house! This apostolic experience is still the experience of the church today.

Several years ago the Presbyterian pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie underwent the worst year of his life. His wife had undergone five major surgeries, plus radiation and chemotherapy, several of his staff members had departed, large problems loomed, and discouragement assaulted his feelings. But he wrote,

> "The greatest discovery that I have made in the midst of all of the difficulties is that I can have joy when I can't feel like it – artesian joy. When I had every reason to feel beaten, I felt joy. In spite of everything, [God] gave me the conviction of being loved and the certainty that nothing could separate me from him. It was not happiness, gush, or jolliness but a constant flow of the Spirit through me. At no time did he give me the easy confidence that everything would work out as I wanted it on my timetable, but that he was in charge and would give me and my family enough courage for each day: grace. Joy is always the result of that." *(5)*

James did not say, "Consider it pure joy *if* you face trials" but "*whenever."*
The Greek text differs from the English translation in that James suddenly commands *(6)* the messianic Jewish community to "consider" trials as an occasion for joy. To "consider" trials as an occasion of joy involves an act of faith – look through the trial to the potential outcome. As Paul considered his trial before King Agrippa an opportunity for defense, preaching, and potential release (Acts 26:2), as he urged believers to "consider" others better than oneself, (Philippians 2:3). Christ

did not "consider" equality something to be grasped but to be surrendered for the redemption of others (Philippians 2:6), as Paul "considered" his former glory an actual loss (3:7), as Abraham "considered" God faithful and powerful enough to enable Sarah to conceive (Hebrews 11:11), as Moses "considered" suffering for Christ more valuable than the treasures of Egypt (11:26), and as the author of 2 Peter wanted his readers to "consider" the patience of the Lord as salvation (3:15), so James urges the messianic Jewish community to "consider" their trials an occasion for joy as they look *through* their trials to their purgative and sanctifying impact.

Such trials or sufferings are a part of every believer's life. We are to thoughtfully find joy in our own *diaspora* experiences – when we feel alienated, disenfranchised, unpopular, even when difficulty and tragedy come our way which have no apparent connection with our Christianity. Such joy may seem irrational, but in Christ is perfectly rational.

Testing of Faith Produces Perseverance

The purpose of trials is to produce mature Christian character (1:2-4), but, knowing that discerning the purpose of trials is no easy matter even for the spiritually mature, James then exhorts the *messianic* Jewish community to ask God for *wisdom* when they encounter trials (v. 5). James is fully aware of the trials people face. He himself had witnessed the death of Stephen, the persecution that followed, and the scattering of the Jerusalem church throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). He has been vitally concerned with the economic trial of the Jewish community. He speaks words of encouragement. He exhorts people to rejoice. In this respect he finds support in the apostolic admonitions of Paul and Peter:

> *"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance"* (Romans 5:3)
>
> "*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials"* (I Peter 1:6).

The rational for such joy comes from knowing that the various trials we face have spiritual value. James says there is a two-step process through which our trials elevate us.

The first step is to understand that "*the testing of your faith develops perseverance."* Elaboration on what is meant by perseverance will unlock rich truth. J.H. Ropes renders this "staying power." *(7)* Martin Dibelius calls it "heroic endurance." *(8)* And the NEB translates this as "fortitude." James is talking about toughness – "the testing of your faith produces *toughness*." We note a parallel between James and 1 Peter: Peter reminds his readers they "*had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."* He continues, "*These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine"* (I Peter 1:6-7).

Here is how this works on a personal level: we develop toughness or fortitude by repeatedly being tested and *prevailing*. These trials can come in a variety of ways and forms. No believer has received the guarantee that he will live a trouble-free and peaceful life. Everyone experiences difficulties, problems, and pains of one kind or another. The more tests we pass, the tougher we become. As a boxer engages in bout after bout, he toughens and becomes wiser and stronger. After a time he develops such fortitude, perseverance and staying power that he can take on the best. There is no way a fighter, or any of us, can develop toughness without testing! The endurance and fortitude of the apostle Paul did not come overnight and did not come apart from trials. Paul, in Romans 5:3, confirms this truth: "*but we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance."*

Nature teaches us this principle. Free a butterfly from its chrysalis, and thus from the struggling of liberating itself, and you destroy its life, for it will never develop the strength to soar as it should. When fortitude is lacking in one of God's children, he has a time-tested remedy – "*the testing of your faith."* With this in mind, James' irrational call – "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds"* – becomes brilliant.

As we speak of personal trials we must keep in mind that testing is to be viewed as well from a communal standpoint. The church family suffers various trials that often exceed even the personal. The rational becomes even clearer when we observe the second step: *perseverance produces maturity*. "*Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"* (v. 4). Spiritual perseverance or toughness produces a *dynamic maturity*.

"Mature" refers to a personality and a church which has reached its full development. Regarding the corresponding synonym "complete," Peter Davids explains: "Perfection is not just a maturing of character, but a rounding out as more and more "parts" of the righteous character are added. *(9)* Thus, maturity is a dynamic state in which a thousand parts of us are honed, shaped, tempered and brought together, making a dynamic wholeness. The believer experiences a testing in the sense of a refining process. That is, his faith is being refined, much the same as gold is subjected to the smelter's fire (Proverbs 27:21). As the goldsmith removes impurities that are foreign to the metal, so God purifies the believer's faith from sin.

It is commonly taught that trials bring maturity, but it is not so. Rather, fortitude and perseverance in times of testing produce maturity. In troubled times we must practice spiritual toughness. As we endure "trials of many kinds" – economic stress, disappoints, criticisms, domestic pressures, persecution for our faith, illnesses – the multiple facets of our being are touched with grace. As we said earlier, pilgrims mature as they endure.

Testing of Faith Develops Wisdom Needed to Bear Trials

Verses 5-8

Understanding the true nature of trials requires more than human wisdom, James asserts. Thus, believers should ask God for clearer understanding of their times of testing. They should ask in full faith, trusting in God's goodness. The most prized attribute of the messianic community as it faces tests is "wisdom," and that is why James brings it up in verses 5-8 (see also 1 Corinthians 2:6-13; Colossians 1:21-28). To anticipate what James will say, "wisdom" is supernatural in origin (3:15), is manifested through deeds of mercy and holiness (3:17), and leads toward a community noted by "peace" (3:18), perhaps the most important virtue/gift James could want for a community tempted by oppression to violence. The supernatural origin is thought of now as James urges the messianic community to ask God for wisdom.

When we are in the midst of trials, we may reflexively cry out, "God, why me? There is nothing redemptive in my trial! Why does it go on?" Or, "Lord, let me out of this." But how many of us say, while being tested, "Lord, I need *wisdom* – Please use this trial to increase my wisdom and understanding of you, your people, and life"? But that is exactly what James commands: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God"* (v. 5) [literally, "let him ask God," imperative mood]. What is this wisdom for which we are to ask? The idea becomes clear when we see what it is not.

It is not knowledge. Wisdom is far more than the accumulation of information and intellectual perception. The fact is, man through his vast accumulation of knowledge, has learned to travel faster than sound, but displays his need of wisdom by going faster and faster in the wrong direction! Man has amassed a huge store of information about the world, but shows his abysmal lack of wisdom by failing to live any better in the world. *(10)*

Wisdom, therefore, in distinction to knowledge, is understanding for living. And *Biblical wisdom* is understanding for living which surpasses earthly wisdom. It is temporally and eternally practical. A.T. Robertson, the towering genius of Greek grammar, calls wisdom "the practical use of knowledge." *(11)* F.J. A. Hort, in his painstaking commentary, terms it "that endowment of heart and mind which is needed for right conduct in life." *(12)* J.H. Ropes describes it as "the supreme and divine quality of the soul which man knows and practical righteousness." *(13)* And Ralph Martin in his recent study states, "For the Jewish mind wisdom meant practical righteousness in everyday living." *(14)*

The Scriptures teach that this practical wisdom is rooted in the fear/reverence of God. Job asked the question, "*But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?"* (28:12). Then, as he variously discussed its whereabouts, he said in verse 15, "*It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed in silver,"* and similarly in verse 18b, "*the price of wisdom is beyond rubies."* Further, he said in verses 23, 24, "*God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens."* And finally he concluded in verse 28, "*And [God] said to man, 'The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom."* That proclamation is a persistent motif in the Old Testament. Consider Psalm 111:10, "*The fear of the Lord is the*

beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise"; Proverbs *1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline*"; Proverbs 8:10, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."*

Because of this we must understand that Einstein may have been a genius in atomic theory, but if he had no fear of God he was a man without wisdom – which at one point in his life he indeed was. During a conference attended by outstanding churchmen and scientists, Albert Einstein read a paper in which he said: "In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal god." *(15)* God's word says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God" (Psalm 14:1).

Wisdom begins with a healthy reverence for God. For the Christian, this is personally connected with Christ, "*who has become for us wisdom from God"* (I Corinthians 1:30). Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of the wisdom of God, and if we know him, we receive and are changed by this wisdom.

This practical knowledge for living is a gift from God. While we have its beginning in our reverence for God, and a further endowment as we come alive in Christ, he has even more wisdom to give us – practical wisdom that will enable us to ride the trials of life to new spiritual heights.

The thrust of James' language in verse 5 is that God is just waiting for us to ask: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."* In the original the phrase "God, who gives" graphically emphasizes giving as a grand characteristic of God. It reads literally, "*let him ask the constantly giving God." (16)* The Scriptures are replete with this facet of the character of God. "*… he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else*" (Acts 17:25) … "*he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave us all things?"* (Romans 8:32). God is like a pitcher tilted toward his children, just waiting to pour wisdom over the trial-parched landscape of their lives, if they will but ask.

Notice how James speaks of God – "*who gives generously to all without finding fault."* God will pour wisdom over us without putting us down or demeaning us. It is easy to wear out our human benefactors after they have repeatedly given to us, but not so with God. We will never encounter divine irritation, like "I gave you a brain, why don't you use it?" or "What did you do with what I most recently gave you? Have you ever been thankful?" Rather, his response is, "I'm so glad you asked. Here it comes!"

The "trials of many kinds" (v.2) which come to us all are nothing less than gigantic opportunities to become wise. The geniuses among us have no head start on wisdom. If anyone has an edge, it is those who are undergoing testing with fortitude.

You and I will become wise if we are open to the wisdom God offers us. "*This is the assurance we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us"* (1 John 5:14). We need to learn to ask for wisdom instead of getting angry and saying. "Why me?" By God's grace let us covenant to ask God for a large measure of that which he has promised.

Testing Further Develops Faith

Is there any condition we must meet in order to receive wisdom in our trials? The condition is James's elaboration of the meaning of "ask" - Faith: "*But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord, he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."*

James' seafaring simile dramatically drives home the futility of doubt. I have been fortunate – I have never been seasick but I have witnessed many who were. The eminent Greek scholar Marvin Vincent says, "The emphasis falls on *tossing*; moving before the impulse of the wind, but not even moving in regular lines; tossed into rising and falling peaks." Says another commentator, this created a "vivid picture of our dimensional instability." *(17)* The doubter is completely out of control. He is on a wild ride to nowhere.

The doubter being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. The focal term of verses 7-8 is "double-minded"

(διπσψχηοσ, *dipsychos)* or to borrow from John Bunyan's "*Pilgrim's Progress,"* "Mr. Facing both-ways." *(18)* The word, literally "two-souled," grows out of Jewish soil, especially Old Testament language of the "double-hearted" person. To ask without fully trusting is to be "double-minded"; it brings no results. Daily recital of the *Shema* makes a "whole heart" devoted to love of God. James is saying the double-minded person does not love God wholeheartedly, does not love the neighbor properly, and does not live out the Torah as God intends. The opposite of the "double-minded" person is the "single-mindedness" of God.

Truly, and tragically, James' graphic description of a man bobbing like a cork on a raging sea, torn within by two souls, is like many in the church. And James' warning in verse 7 is all too applicable and appropriate: "*That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord." "*That man" is a believer. He has received eternal life. He is indwelt by the Spirit. But his doubting, unstable, vacillating life means he will get no wisdom.

Testing of Faith Develops Humility

Vv. 9-11

> *"Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field: its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, the will wither away.*

James shifts from seeking wisdom from God about testing to the morally formative powers of that testing, and he shifts from warning about the necessary single-mindedness in the quest for wisdom to a warning about wealth. Just as the double-minded person in the previous section is divided in his or her objects of trust, the rich cannot give themselves wholly to faith in God because their trust lies in their wealth. Drawing from Isaiah 40:6-8, James likens the rich to withering flowers. The lowly, according to this world's standards, however are exalted by God. James thus introduces the paradoxes of humility and pride.

> *"The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower".*

The Scriptures contain many paradoxes, telling us that the weak are strong, the empty are full, the slave is free, the cursed are blessed, and that death brings life – all statements that first strike us as contradictory but become increasingly true as we mediate on them. G. K. Chesterton defined paradox: "a paradox is truth standing on its head shouting for attention." Paradox is a powerful vehicle for truth, because it makes people think.

James, concerned that his pressured readers not succumb to instability, resorts to paradoxes in verses 9 and 10 to convey stabilizing wisdom. First: "*The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position*" – the paradox of the *rich poor*. And second: "*But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position*" – the paradox of the *poor rich*. James' persecuted, scattered brethren feel out of sync with the prevailing culture, and especially those suffering for their faith socially and economically.

Who are the low? They are the poverty-stricken Jewish Christians who were poor because of their faith. And because they were economically low, they were low in the eyes of the world and, no doubt, in most instances low in their own eyes. Their poverty produced lowliness of mind.

But, James paradoxically says such a person "*ought to take pride in his high position*." James reasoning for this is implicit in the words of this verse: the man is a "*brother*." He is part of God's family, one of God's children. "*Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ"* (Romans 8:17a).

James views a mighty reversal is coming in which the low will be made high and the high low. He is so sure that he encourages the humble brother "*to take pride*" in it – literally to *boast in his height.* This is joyous boasting. He orders the lowly to paradoxically and cheerfully boast in their height.

Exaltation comes not simply because he is economically poor, but that poverty has produced in him a lowliness of spirit – humility - which keeps him open to God. Jesus' very first words of public ministry were a quotation from Isaiah 6:1:1 –

"*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor…"* (Luke 4:18). James did not pity his poor brethren or encourage their commiseration but saw them as poor outwardly but spiritually advantaged.

Here is wisdom for Christians of every age, all of whom live in a world which equates prosperity with happiness/God's blessing and humble circumstances with misery/God's displeasure. The lowly who are in the midst of hard times are tempted to doubt. No Christian who has been oppressed either economically or socially or both has not at some time doubted. The Spanish philosopher Unamuno, one of my favorites, said, "Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God idea, not God himself." *(21)*

A living faith has its ups and downs because it is a faith of a living being who is imperfect and in process. But to the doubting, James stands deep spiritual truth on its head and shouts that Christians are the *rich poor*, the *low high*, and paradoxically commands that "*The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position*." This attention shouts for attention in our upside-down world! Perhaps no one needs to hear it more than rich Christians, the people to whom James aims the second paradox to which we briefly turn.

We tend to think of the rich as over-privileged, but Jesus taught that they are underprivileged – spiritually. That is the indisputable point of the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17). Thus, after Jesus told him to sell all, he "*went away sad, because he had great wealth*" (v. 22). Jesus' resulting pronouncement – "*Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle that for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"* (vv. 24b, 25) – teaches categorically that it is impossible for a man or woman who *trusts* in riches to go into Heaven. It is difficult for the rich to present themselves as naked, humble beggars before God. Our rich culture is, therefore, disadvantaged and underprivileged.

The entire New Testament, as well as what we see in people's lives, suggests that riches are a potential danger to spiritual life. Jesus views them as a spiritual liability rather than an asset. His beatitude goes to the poor, not the rich. "You are blessed because your poverty directs your soul to me."

Realizing this, James' paradox of the poor rich makes good sense: "*But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position"* (v. 10a). The last part can be rendered "lowliness" (it is the same word just used to describe the position of the poor). Calvin has it right: "He tells them to glory in their lowliness, their smallness, to restrain those lofty motives that swell out of prosperity." *(22)*

This has monumental implications for Christians today who live in western affluence. For a believer to build his or her life on perishable riches is a debasement beyond description! Those who focus on their riches progressively diminish the measure of their eternal reward. If they are saved, it will be "*only as one escaping through the flames*" (1 Corinthians 3:15).

James crowns his discussion with a beatitude promising eternal life: "*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him"* (v. 12).

Testing of Faith Gives the Opportunity to Stumble

Vv. 12-15

> *"Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death."*

Not everyone will endure the tests God places before him. Therefore, James warns his readers not to blame God but rather to understand the cause and the result of temptation. *"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me …'"*

The believer who passes the test is blessed, but the one who fails it is filled with remorse. God who created all things, is not the cause of evil. In his holiness God stands far above evil and cannot be influenced by it. James puts it this way: it is impossible for God to be tempted.

James' argument is a justification of the goodness of God in the face of evil. It is the classic question, "If God is good and all powerful, then why does God allow evil to exist?" James explains that evil is rooted in human desire, not in God's will. So, testing (πειρασμοσ*, peirasmos*), when it is temptation (*peirasmos)* to do evil, is not caused by God.

Moreover, God does not tempt anyone. Some fault God for placing them in circumstances which are simply too much for them. We see this in the thief who steals, blaming God for his poverty; or the drunkard who blames his partying friends. The commonest delusion is that "God has given me passions and appetites so strong, I can do nothing but yield to them." The Scottish poet Robert Burns put it like this:

"*Thou know'st that Thou has formed me*

With passions wild and strong;

And listening to their witching voice

Has often led me wrong."(23)

Burns blamed God for his sensual disposition. He made God responsible for his sins. It was similar thinking that Nikos Kazantzakis celebrated in *Zorba the Greek*, whom he presented as a kind of peasant superman whose strength was displayed in his will to live out his appetites. In doing so, living out his *elan vital*, he was following God, according to this view. Nonsense!

Today our culture celebrates this kind of man – an Ernest Hemingway whose life of sensual indulgence is seen as "art." For him there is a right way to drink a Margarita, to shoot an antelope, to eat a shrimp, to commit adultery. A man or woman who fulfills his or her lusts with artistic style is "authentic" – which means good. *(24)* But the truth is, however we rationalize our behavior, yielding to our appetites is not divine but demonic.

The conclusion James comes to in the opening sentence of verse 13 is, "*When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.'"* No one can blame God by mouthing uninformed rationalizations about divine ordination or circumstances or disposition. The perverse intellectualizing of poets and writers are not true. Adam's pathetic attempt, no matter how deceptively rephrased by us, will not suffice. God's Word stands: we must never say, or even imagine, that God is tempting us. He never has, and he never will!

God has never tempted us to sin because he cannot! It is a moral impossibility. It is true of course, that while God does not *tempt* us, he does *test* us in order to prove and improve our character. The refrain from the Lord's Prayer – "*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (*Matthew 6:13, KJV) – means "Don't allow us to come under the sway of temptation that will overpower us and cause us to sin." As Paul says, "*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand under it"* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

"*Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."* James uses an illustration taken from the art of fishing. A fish sees the lure and is tempted to strike. When the fish takes hold of the bait, it is suddenly dragged away and pays with its life for its innocence and ignorance. *(25)* But man cannot claim innocence and ignorance. James puts in pointedly: "*Each one is tempted ... by his own desire."* He deprives man of any excuse to place the blame on someone or something else. He says, in effect, that the cause lies within ourselves. Note that James speaks of one's *own* desire. Our desires lead us into temptations, and if we are not controlled by the Spirit of God they lead us into sin. When we properly control our desires we live normal lives, but when we discard checks and balances, desires get out of hand and, so to speak, become pregnant.

James refrains from spelling out how desire conceives. Desire is able to conceive when man's will no longer objects but yields. When this takes place, conception begins and sin develops and eventually is born. Sin results in death (Romans 7:5, 10, 13).

Sustaining the Testing of Faith

Vv. 16-18

> *"Do not be deceived, my beloved. Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."*

James returns to the theme he introduced at the beginning of his epistle: perseverance under trial (vv. 2-4). He calls the preserving believer blessed and tells him that because of his love for God, the believer "*will receive the crown of life."*

Who is the man the Bible calls "blessed" (μακαριοσ, *makarios)*? He is the person who finds complete happiness in God. He may be poor, meek, hungry, or persecuted – but he is "blessed." This appears to be a contradiction. From a worldly perspective only the rich and those who are secure can be "happy." But Scripture says that "*the man who perseveres [endures] under trial"* is blessed.

God tests man's faith to learn whether it is genuine and true. For instance, we test the purity of a bowl made of lead crystal by lightly tapping the outer edge. Immediately we know its genuineness when he hear a reverberating, almost musical sound. We also know that the lead crystal bowl went through the fire when it was made.

Similarly, God tests the faith of man as, for example, in the case of Job. Faith that is not tried and true is worthless. God wants the believer to come to him in a time of trial so that he may give him strength to endure. God is not interested in seeing the believer falter and fail; he wants him to endure, overcome, and triumph.

See how Peter encourages his readers to persevere: "*But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God"* (1 Peter 2:2).

Why is the believer who perseveres during a time of testing blessed? Because "*he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."*

After his period of testing has ended, the believer will receive the crown of life. R. C. Trench writes, the crown of life "is the emblem, not of royalty, but of highest joy and gladness, of glory and immortality." *(26)* The phrase then, suggests fullness of life that God grants to those who endure the test of faith. God has promised this gift "*to those who love him.*"

Humankind cannot earn the crown of life, for God gives it to him full and free. God asks that man place his complete confidence in him and love him wholeheartedly. To love God with heart, soul, and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself constitutes the summary of the Ten Commandments. Interestingly enough, James returns to that royal law, as he calls it, in the next chapter (2:8). However, James teaches that God chose man who then began to love him (2:5). John says the same thing when he writes, "*We love because he first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). God comes first, then man.

ENDNOTES

1. Nicholas Thomas Wright, *The Early Christian Letters for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville: KY, 2011), p. 3f.
2. "Servant" in Romans and Titus. "Apostle" in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, Ephesians, I Timothy, and 1 Peter. "Prisoner" in Philemon. "Servants" in Philippians, 2 and 3 John have just "elder." Jude begins with "servant" and "brother of James." See especially Edgar, *Has God Not Chosen the Poor?* 44-73; also EDNT 1.349-53: Mounce, *Dictionary*, 632-33; Spice. 1.380-86.
3. In Greek, "God and Lord" appear before "servant."
4. Ropes, 117-18, contends the term, as in 1 Peter 2:16, refers to any and all who worship and serve the Lord, though the evidence he cites points instead toward the rather exceptional.
5. Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), pp. 176, 177).
6. Command is an aorist imperative. Throughout this study an aspectual theory of Greek syntax will be assumed; our approach is closest to the work of Stan Porter (see below). For the aorist in our passage, one should not understand the "command" as punctiliar or ingressive but instead as "global" or an "action viewed completely" or an "action viewed from outside." In this case, it is the "thatness" of considering it all joy rather than the "howness" of the considering that leads James to the aorist. Along with this, then, the focus is on the vocabularic meaning of the aorist rather than when or how something happens or happened. On aspectual theory and imperatives, see Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 335-63; Fanning, *Verbal Aspects*; for a readable introduction to aspect theory, see A.D. Naselli, "A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," *DBSJ* 12

(2007) 17-28; see S.E. Porter, "Greek Grammar and Syntax," in *The Face of New Testament Studies* (ed. S. McKnight and G.R. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 76-103).

7. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James,* in *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1968), p. 135, says the word means "steadfastness," "staying power," not "patience."
8. Martin Dibelius, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James*, trans. Michael A. Williams (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 73, says, "One can see that there is more heroism in this word than the translation "patience" would suggest. Paul, also, has this heroic endurance in mind in Romans 5:3 and I Corinthians 12:16."
9. Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 70.
10. Lehman Strauss, *James, Your Brother* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1972), p. 19.
11. A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Volume 6 (Nashville: Broadman, 1933), p. 13.
12. F.J.A. Hort, *The Epistle of St. James* (London: Macmillan, 1903), p. 7.
13. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James (*Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), p. 39.
14. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary,* Volume 8, *James*, p. 17.
15. Strauss, *James, Your Brother,* p.20.
16. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 81:"But more probably the article relates directly to God, and the participle between them, as attribute, stresses that "giving" is the inherent nature of God. The present tense of the participle sets forth God's generous nature as continuing giving. He has revealed Himself as a God who is continually giving to men.
17. *Ibid*, p. 85.
18. Also seen in Ropes, 143, which comes from Christian's encounter with By-end. There ae many editions of Bunyan's classic.
19. On this, see P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967).
20. Paul uses the argument from persecution to legitimacy in Galatians 4:21-31.
21. Paul Hendrickson, *Seminary of Search* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), p. 313.
22. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke Volume III and the Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A.W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 266.
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CHAPTER 3

James 1:19-27

SPIRITUAL WHOLENESS IN OBEDIENCE

James told his readers God had given them spiritual birth through the word of faith, the gospel (1:18). Now he tells them to live according to that word, whether it comes to them in written or spoken form. That word has been planted in their hearts and is able to save them.

> "*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."* (1: 19-20).

"*Take note of this."* Speakers who have the talent to express themselves fluently and eloquently are much in demand. They receive recognition, admiration, and acclaim.

Paul was an experienced and effective communicator. And he knew the mind can absorb no more than the seat can endure! Yet, Paul couldn't help himself! This was the first contact with the infant church at Troas, and very possibly his last. With the rising of the morning sun he would be off to Jerusalem. He had so much he wanted to say. Each thought brought ten more to his scintillating mind – all of equal importance. He just couldn't seem to close. And besides his audience was eager to hear. But there were many torches in the room, creating a stuffy atmosphere in the third-story chamber. The Mediterranean heat, the grimy press of the weary crowd just returned from work, the lack of oxygen all made for drowsiness. Finally the warm room and the hypnotic flickering of the flames did their work, and a young man named Eutychus, sitting on the windowsill, nodded off into a "sound" sleep (Acts 20:9 – we derive our word "hypnosis" from this Greek word). He relaxed just a bit too much, and he went headlong to the pavement three floors down the outside stairs below. The congregation gave a horrified gasp and immediately

poured down the outside stairs to the broken form. Eutychus was quite dead! Some began to wail.

But not for long! Dr. Luke tells us, "*Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. 'Don't be alarmed,'* he said. *'He's alive!'"* (Acts 20:1). No one was sleeping now! Up the stairs and back into the building they all marched, and "*After talking until daylight, [Paul] left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted"* (vv. 11, 12).

I have great sympathy for those who have trouble staying awake in church. Some work such trying schedules when they sit down in church motionless, it is the first time they have relaxed all week. Others take medication which puts them in dreamland. Sometimes it's just so warm and comfortable … The truth is, some of the best saints have fallen asleep in church. I have heard a preacher tell of an elder who fell asleep, and when his wife nudged him during the service, he stood and pronounced the benediction.

Falling asleep in church really doesn't concern me. It can happen for any number of reasons, both good and bad. What does concern me is God's people need to have hearts that are receptive to the Word and a posture of soul which inclines them to hear the Word and profit from it. This was clearly James' pastoral concern as he wrote to his dispersed Jewish flock. The flow of his thought was this: having defended God's goodness in verses 16-18, he ended by noting God's ultimate goodness by giving them salvation "*through the word of truth"* (v. 18). This mention of the Word in their salvation now turns his thoughts, in verses 19-27, to urging them to *live* according to the Word.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

Attitude toward the Word Which Begets

1:19-27

This section of James 1 connects with the previous section by the occurrence of the "*word of truth*." That "word" has been described as the means of God's bringing us forth to be his children. If the word can do so much, then it ought to be accorded the proper attention in response. It must be received with meekness; it must be

acted on, being put into active use in a life of benevolence, morality, and self-control. Christians must continue to let God's word be at work in their lives (1 Thess. 2:13).

Listening and Doing

1:19

James, however, puts the emphasis not on speaking but on listening. This is more important than speaking. Listening is an art that is difficult to master, for it means to take an intense interest in the person who is speaking. Listening is the art of closing one's mouth and opening one's ears and heart. Listening is loving one's neighbor as oneself; his concerns and problems are sufficiently important to be heard.

We are cautioned to be fully aware of the words we speak. James echoes the saying of Jesus, "*But I tell you that men will have to give an account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned"* (Matthew 12:36-37).

James begins by using Hebrew parallelism to inform his people of their triple duty in responding to the Word: "*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."*

James wants us to be wise in our speaking. Jewish proverbs prevalent in the days of James were these: "*Speak little and do much"; "It is wise for learned men to be silent, and much more for fools"; "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent"* (Proverbs 17:28). Solomon said something similar in this proverb: "*When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise"* (Proverbs 10:19).

Careless words often accompany an angry mood. Of course, there is a place for righteous anger, but the psalmist tells us to know the limit of righteous anger: "*In your anger do not sin"* (Psalm 4:4; Ephesians 4:26; and see Matthew 5:22). James pleads for restraint in respect to anger.

James is direct. He says, "*Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."* Anger hinders the prayers of a believer (1 Timothy 2:8) and thus prevents him from promoting the cause of Christ. Consider Moses, who became

angry with the Israelites but did not listen to the instructions God had given him. He showed disobedience and thus was not permitted to enter the Promised Land.

When we live the righteous life God desires of us, we listen carefully and obediently to the Word of God. When we plan to do or say something, we ought to ask whether our actions and words promote the honor of God and advance the cause of justice and peace for our fellow man. When we permit anger to guide us, we are no longer guided by the law of God. "*An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins"* (Proverbs 29:22). Instead the believer ought to control his temper, pray for wisdom, and keep the law of God.

Our first duty is to be "*quick to listen."* In so challenging his first-century flock, James has put his finger on a great need in the church today, for many of us today are non-listeners. That people don't really listen was clearly demonstrated when it was reported a con-man in New York was arrested after gathering a crowd and raising money for the *widow* of the Unknown Soldier! When arrested (for not having a license!) he had already collected more than $600.00 from his audience. Celebrated psychologist Paul Tourmier has memorably said, "Listen to the conversations of our world, between nations as well as between couples. They are, for the most part, *dialogues of the deaf."* *(1)* Billions and billions of words are produced every second, but only a fraction is truly heard. All of us regularly have "conversations" in which we are speaking, but the vacant eyes of our "hearers" and their body language indicate they do not hear. Sometimes our listeners are "on another planet," sometimes they are so self-consumed they cannot listen, other times they are so intent on what they want to say next they are not catching a word of what we are saying. And to be honest, we are often like this ourselves.

Why are we such poor listeners? Today one of the major reasons is we are so busy. Our busyness substitutes frenzy for conversation and wrecks our relationships. It fills our calendars and the emptiness of our lives of the ability to listen to anything that turns us away from our little goals. Adlai Stevenson, when he addressed the students at Princeton, said, "I understand I am here to speak and you are here to listen. Let's hope we both finish at the same time."

Having introduced the subject of God's word of truth in verse 18, James turns to discuss the hearing and doing the word. The word comes from God; it is implanted, not innate. The words that are innate to humans are often faulty. Hence,

James gives three commands: be quick to hear, be slow to speak, be slow to anger. The human soil in which the word is implanted should be fertile, rid of the wickedness that hinders its growth.

James completes his thought with a two-part command regarding receiving the Word. The first is negative and the second positive. The negative is:

"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (v. 21).

Here is the conclusion to this section: an uncontrolled tongue and temper can drive a man deep into sin and far from God. Therefore, a spiritual housecleaning is needed so God's Word, whether in written or spoken form, can enter man's life.

Humans are meant to be a certain "first-fruits of his creatures" – that is, they are to represent all creatures before God. In vv. 19b-21, James describes the first stage of response to the call of God implied by God's gift. The "*implanted word*" can only save them if it is truly received. The moral life of Christians begins, then, with "*putting aside*" all those qualities of arrogance and desire and rage that oppose "*God's righteousness*" (v. 20), and put on the qualities of meekness and hearing that will enable them to be reshaped according to "*the word of truth*."

The verse teaches these points:

(1) A *command*. "Get rid of all moral filth," says James. He uses the word *filth,* (ρηψπρια*, rhypria)* figuratively to describe moral uncleanness (see Revelation 22:11). James orders his readers to get rid of all moral filth that soils their souls and set aside prevailing evil that blights their lives (compare Ephesians 4:22, 25, 31; Colossians 3:8; 1 Peter 2:1). *(2)*

(2) *An imperative*. When the house has been swept and dusted, it cannot remain empty (Matthew 12:43-45). Therefore, James tells his readers to receive the Word of God that has been planted in them. Note they had already been given the message of salvation that as a plant had taken root in their souls. Once again, the writer resorts to an illustration from nature. A plant needs constant care. If a plant is deprived of water and nurture, it will die. Thus if the readers who have heard the Word fail to pay attention, they will die a spiritual death. The Word needs diligent care and application, so the readers may grow and increase spiritually.

"*Humbly accept the word . . .*" James prompts them to receive the Word of God and tells them how to do so. They must accept it humbly, not in weakness but with meekness. As they accept the Word, their hearts must be free from anger, malice, or bitterness. Instead they ought to demonstrate gentleness and humility.

(3) A *result*. The Word of God faithfully proclaimed and attentively received is able to save those who hear it. That Word has the power to transform lives because it is living and active (Hebrews 4:12).

The word *save* has a much deeper meaning in Scripture than we often give it. The very phrase *to save* implies not merely the salvation of the soul but the restoration of life. For example, when Jesus healed the woman who had suffered from a flow of blood for twelve years, he said to her, "*Daughter, your faith has healed you"* (Mark 5:34). The Greek actually says, "Your faith has saved you." *(3)* To save, then, means to make a person whole and complete in every respect. And that is what the Word of God is able to do for the believer. The gospel is the power of God working in everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). The gospel saves!

Listening Obediently

1: 22-25

> *"Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they look like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.*

So James clarifies the conditions he is most concerned about in urging the messianic community to substantive parallel with 1:19b, in doing two things: put away sin and receive the implanted word (see 1 Peter 2:11-12). They are to communicate in love for justice which cannot be established through anger, so there-fore they are to get rid of the sins that prevent justice. The move from

1:19-21 to 1:22-25 is a natural one, if also artistic. As the focus there moved to the "*implanted word*" (1:21b), so here James picks up on the term "word" (1:22) and develops it. And, as the exhortation in 1:21b was to "welcome" the implanted word, which re-expressed ridding oneself of sin (1:21a), so here James maintains the messianic community are to be "*doers of the word, and not merely hearers."*

For faith to be real, it must be translated into deeds. It is not enough to be a "hearer of the word"; one must become a "doer of the word" as well. Otherwise, one's faith is only self-deception (v. 22). James here agrees with ancient moralists theoretical correctness matter little if one's life does not conform to the ideas one espouses (see 1 Cor. 13:12).

The tone and tenor of the writer's discourse resembles that of the Sermon on the Mount delivered by Jesus. For instance, Jesus concludes the sermon with the parable of the wise and foolish builders and says, "*Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"* (Matthew 7:24; see also vv. 21, 22).

We have discussed accepting the Word. Now we will consider *doing the Word.* Together, these two topics express the spiritual logic of James' flow of thought – the *hearing* of the Word must be followed by *obedience*; truly *accepting* God's Word logically means *doing* it. Those who hear only, like the "angry" and volatile of 1:19b, are deceiving themselves and will never see justice. Those who hear and do are the ones who pursue God's justice peacefully and will see it. Logically, "*be doers of the word*" of 1:22 re-expresses 1:21b, but is at the same time nearly synonymous with "*welcome . . . the implanted word*" in 1:21.

This spiritual logic was given memorable illustration by Chuck Swindoll in his book, *Improving Your Serve:*

> "Let's pretend that you work for me. In fact, you are my executive assistant in a company that is growing rapidly. I'm the owner and I'm interested in expanding overseas. To pull this off, I make plans to travel abroad and stay there until the branch office gets established. I make all the arrangements to take my family in the move to Europe for six to eight months, and I leave you in charge of the busy stateside organization. I tell you that I will write you regularly and give you direction and instructions.

I leave you and you stay. Months pass. A flow of letters are mailed from Europe and received by you at the national headquarters. I spell out all my expectations. Finally, I return. Soon after my arrival I drive down to the office. I am stunned! Grass and weeds have grown up high. A few windows along the street are broken. I walk into the receptionist's room and she is doing her nails, chewing gum, and listening to her favorite disco station. I look around and notice the waste baskets are overflowing, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed for weeks, and nobody seems concerned that the owner has returned. I ask about your whereabouts and someone in the crowded lounge area points down the hall and yells, "I think he's down there." Disturbed, I move in that direction and bump you as you are finishing a chess game with our sales manager. I ask you to step into my office (which has been temporarily turned into a television room for watching afternoon soap operas).

"What in the world is going on, man?"

"What do ya' mean . . .?"

"Well, look at this place! Didn't you get any of my letters?"

"Letters? O yeah – sure, got every one of them. As a matter of fact …

We have had *letter study* every Friday night since you left. We have even divided all the personnel into small groups and discussed many of the things you wrote. Some of those things were really interesting. You'll be pleased to know that a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences and paragraphs. One or two memorized an entire letter or two! Great stuff in those letters!"

"Okay, okay – you got my letters, you studied them and mediated on them, discussed and even memorized them. BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM?"

"Do? Uh – we didn't *do* anything about them." *(4)*

Such behavior is professionally absurd. It is, in fact, professional suicide! But how much less absurd are we when we hear God's Word without the slightest inclination to obey it! At the very least we are self-deceived. This is why James follows

his call to be hearers with the command of verse 22: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* If we are going to profit from God's Word we must accept and do it.

The Wrong Way to Hear

Vv. 23-24

> *"Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."*

Having made his substantive point through an exhortation (1:22) – that hearing *and* doing must remain together – James now moves on to *illustrate* the point with a parable about a mirror. A picture, especially one that portrays us as we are, is worth a thousand words. We see ourselves daily in the reflection in a mirror: before we leave the house in the morning, during the course of the day, and several times in the evening. Mirrors are part of life. But the repeated returns to the mirror establish the point that our memories are like sieves.

James uses the illustration of a mirror. In fact, his illustration approaches the parabolic form of speech Jesus used during his earthly ministry (compare Matthew 7:26). Mirrors in the first century were not made of glass but of metal that was polished regularly. The mirrors rested horizontally on tables so the person who wished to see his reflection had to bend down. There he would see but a poor reflection of himself (Job 37:18; I Corinthians 3:18).

Here is the point of comparison. The person who looks into the mirror to see his own image and promptly forgets is like a person who hears the Word of God proclaimed but fails to respond to it. He sees his reflection in the mirror, quickly adjusts his external appearance, and walks away. He hears the gospel preached, makes minor adjustments, and goes his own way. But the gospel is unable to penetrate his heart and cannot change the internal disposition of the man. The mirror is an object used to alter man's external appearance; the Word, however, confronts man internally and demands a response.

Many people hear a sermon on a given Sunday and a week later cannot remember a single word of that sermon. The person who listens to the Word goes away and fails to respond to its demands. The same is often also true in our Scripture reading and study.

The Right Example for Hearing

v. 25

Turning from the folly of the first man, James now treats us to the wisdom of the second*:*

> *"But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does."*

James now comes full circle. He is back to the point made in 1:22 but now provides greater specificity to "word," and warning turns into promise. So, to welcome the implanted word (1:21) is to become hearers and doers of the word (1:22); those who hear but do not do deceive themselves (1:22b, 23-24). In contrast to this self-deceiver, those who hear *and* do will "*be blessed in their doing"* (1:25). There are three parts to 1:25:

> Subject*:* "*But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere*" (25a).
>
> Comment: "*being not hearers who forget but doers who act"* (25b).
>
> Promise: "*will be blessed in their doing"* (25c).

The person whose ears and heart are open to what God has to say literally bends over to look into the law of God, much the same as he does when he looks into the mirror that is placed horizontally on a table. However, the difference is while he studies the perfect law of God he does not walk away from it, as does the person who casts a fleeting glance into a mirror. He continues to look intently into the Word. He meditates on it and obediently puts it into practice.

James resorts to using a synonym for the Word of God. He calls it the (τελειοσ*, teleios),* "*perfect law*." The descriptive adjective *perfect* has an absolute, not a

relative meaning. For instance, when Jesus says, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Matthew 5:48), he uses the adjective first in a relative sense (for man) and in an absolute sense (for our heavenly Father).

Laws made and enacted by man are temporary and conditioned by culture, language, and location. By contrast, God's law is permanent and unchangeable. It applies to everyone at any time and in any situation. It is perfect.

And last, the man who continues to look into the perfect law and keeps it will be blessed. Why is the man happy or blessed? He knows "*the precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart"* and *"the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes"* (Psalm 19:8; compare Psalm 119:1). He finds joy in his work, joy in his family, and joy in his Lord. He knows God is blessing him in all that he does (John 13:17).

The Test of Religion

Vv. 26-27

> "*If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."*

Once again, while some like to divide the various sections of James into at most loose connections, this section, if read in context, carries on the themes that have been present with us since 1:2-4: the poor, the need to live properly, speech practices, the need to resist the desires of this world, and the potency of a kingdom community. In fact, 1:26-27 is the summary statement of the whole of chapter 1 and in some way a conceptualizing of the entire letter's ethical position. It is a commentary on and clarification of what it means to be a doer of the word and to persevere in the Law, and the themes of speech ethics are never far from view. If the temptation of the messianic community was toward impulsive or unsavory language and violent establishment of justice, James offers an alternative to the "religious" person. If the deceived person of 1:22 thought he or she could hear the word and walk away unchanged, James contends the person who stares into the perfect Law of liberty should be a "doer of the works*."* Here James clarifies what

those works are: bridling the tongue, deeds of compassion for the marginalized, and a community noted by holiness.

1:26 is a general statement, and 1:27 makes it more specific by giving it concrete implications for the community. Verse 26 has two parts, the protasis (or "if" clause) in which James spells out a condition of a person who "thinks" he or she can be "religious" and practice a lack of control in speech, and the apodosis (or "then" clause) which simply pronounces in a negative fashion such a condition is "worthless." 1:27 gives the positive side of what genuine "religion" looks like.

One's performance is the true test of faith. Being "religious" (today we seem to prefer the word "spiritual") can be exposed as meaningless if the piety is not focused on the tangible. James uses terms for religious, τηρεσκοσ (*threskos* occurs in three places in the New Testament) and religion, (τηρεσκεια, *threskeia*) that often referred to acts of worship such as sacrifices. Similarly, James gives a few examples of what the true Christian religion should be: he uses language of the sacrificial cult expressed in tangible acts such as controlling the tongue, caring for people in need, widows and orphans, and observing one's moral integrity. In these two verses, James lists some examples that serve as checkpoints on one's religion.

In explaining the meaning and implication of serving God, James tells his readers first how not to serve God. Then in the next verse, he instructs them how to profess and practice their religion.

v. 27a

James now moves from a general observation about useless religion to *the specifics* of "*pure and undefiled religion*." Purity was for many Jews, especially those whose faith was centered in the Temple, the core concern of Judaism and life. Furthermore, purity was defined by Torah, and James was well-known for his Torah piety. And there is every reason to believe this, even if James sees purity figuratively (as did Jesus, Mark 7:1-23) and as an internal condition that transcends or is "more important than" the external manifestation. James was both Torah-observant and concerned to live within the laws of purity. It has often been inferred, at times without careful consideration, because James (like Jesus) saw purity as deeds of mercy he must have rejected the typical sense of purity in Judaism. This is a *non sequitar*. To see purity as an internal condition does not

necessarily eliminate the desire to follow the Torah's purity guidelines. For James, to be pure means to be marked off in worldview from those who are unjust, oppressive, and worldly, and the marking off was more internal-moral verses external-moral. But being marked off is not just separation: it is the devotion to compassion and Torah observance that determines the separation.

A person who attends the worship services of the Christian church may consider himself religious. To be sure, many people believe that church attendance, praying, observing the Lord's Supper, or even fasting is the equivalent of being religious. Not so, says James, because such activity may be merely outward show. That is formalism, not religion.

What, then, is religion? Negatively, it is not what man construes it to be when he considers himself to be pious. Positively, religion comes to expression when man speaks with a bridled tongue.

> *"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless" (*verse 26).

The author of this epistle introduces the subject of the tongue here in connection with religion, and then returns to it more explicitly in the third chapter. If a man fails to keep his tongue in check, his religion is worthless. The unruly tongue engages in lying, cursing, and swearing, slander, and filthy language. *(5)* From man's point of view the hasty word, shading of the truth, the subtle innuendo, and the questionable joke are shrugged off as insignificant. Yet from God's perspective they are a violation of the command to love the Lord God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. A breach of this command render's religion to no avail.

"*He deceives himself and his religion is worthless."* This is the third time James tells his readers not to deceive themselves (1:16, 22, 26). As a pastor he is fully aware of counterfeit religion that is nothing more than external formalism. He knows many people merely go through the notions of serving God, but their speech gives them away. Their religion has a hollow ring. And although they may not realize it, by their word and by their actions – or lack of them – they deceive themselves. Their heart is not right with God and their fellow man, and their attempt to hide this lack of love only heightens their self-deception. Their religion is worthless.

James is nothing if not practical. A pious person with a foul mouth is a contradiction in terms (v. 20). Such a person is deceiving themselves – but nobody else. James does not immediately say what the remedy is, but he says, in effect, "All right: you want to follow God's way? Here's how! There are people out there who need your help and there is a messy world out there that will try to mess up your life as well. Make sure you focus on the first and avoid the second." Good, brisk teaching.

If those so smug in their excellence of worship were shaken by James' first manifestation of a "*pure and undefiled religion"* they will be shocked with James' word for care of "*orphans and widows."* The connection of "orphans and widows" is typical for the Old Testament (e.g., Ezekiel 22:7) and Judaism. This injunction flows from Old Testament legislation into the glowing prescriptions of Isaiah 1:17

> *Learn to do good;*
>
> *seek justice,*
>
> *rescue the oppressed,*
>
> *defend the orphan,*
>
> *plead for the widow.*

Turning from idolatry meant turning to mercy for the orphan:

> *"Assyria cannot save us; we will not, mount war-horses. We will say never again say 'Our gods' to what our own our hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion."* (Hosea 14:3)

Scripture is not a book with concise definitions that can be applied to specific instances. The Bible teaches us the way of life that is pleasing to God and to our neighbor. Thus, James gives us not a precise definition in this verse but a principle.

"*Orphans and widows,"* were a special concern of Jesus and of the early messianic community, and this concern extended into the first few centuries. There is no reason to assign a source for James' concern; it is biblical, it is found in Jesus' ministry, and it is socio-economically present for the first messianic community. Orphans and widows were the most helpless people in Jewish society, their "distress" (literally "pressure") coming from their desperate need for food and

clothing. James uses them as representative of all who are in need. Religious observances, no matter how perfectly observed and appropriately reverent, are empty if there is no concern for the needy.

God's people have had to relearn this lesson over and over. The apostle John put this truth in unforgettable words: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth"* (1 John 3:17, 18). James is telling us our care for the needy must not just be given over to supporting social programs to do the caring. Anyone who practices the Jesus Creed or James 2:8-11 will see the needs of orphans and widows and will respond with compassion.

James insists acceptable religion reaches out to people in their needs. James says the messianic community is to be characterized by compassion for orphans and widows, and he adds "*in their distress*." We are to be involved in "distress" which squeezes people in their circumstances – pressures due to illness or fractured relationships, unemployment, poverty, bereavement, or family tensions.

The finest worship we can offer to God is the giving of our "*bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual worship"* (Romans 12:1). Worship that pleases God involves throwing ourselves on the altar and before the needy world in service. We may plead lack of time, but if we have time for recreation and social visits we have the time! *(6)*

An Unsoiled Life

v. 27b

The second indicator of pure and undefiled religion is "*to keep oneself unstained by the world."* The concern to be "unstained" (ασπιλον, *aspilon*) expresses the reverence of earliest Christianity and its commitment to holiness. In 1 Timothy 6:14, "*without spot (aspilon) or blame"* is used of confessional purity, and in 2 Peter 3:14 "*without spot (ασπιλοι, aspiloi) or blemish"* is used of moral purity. What James says is like the latter since his concern is with being unstained "*by the world*." "The world" stands in contrast to "the kingdom" in 2:5 and to "God" in 4:4. And, though in 3:15 James does not use the word "world," the sense is

familiar: "*Such wisdom does not come down from above [*God? kingdom? heaven*?],* but is earthly, (επιγειοσ*, epigeios*), un-spiritual, (πσψχηικε*, psychike)*, devilish, (δαιμονιοδεσ, *daimoniodes*)." And this "wisdom" refers back to 3:14 where James is most concerned with "*bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts*" and being "*boastful*." Which stands in contrast to 3:13: "*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom."* Once again, we are in touch with themes that resonate throughout James 1: wisdom, good works, and a gentle life of good works – and this is in contrast to social disruption, violence, and arrogance. Worldliness for James pertains to human forceful efforts to establish justice, peace, or God's will.

Throughout 1:26-27 James has utilized cultic imagery, or at least language that seems especially for the Temple. This language is intended to compel the messianic community to strive for holiness in the sense of moral fidelity and compassionate behavior. Today's world is increasingly polluted. Even though James urges us to become socially involved in helping needy people around us, at the same time he warns us to stay away from a sinful world. Do we have to isolate ourselves from the world? No, we are always in the world but not of the world (John 17:14).

Conclusion

As wisdom literature, James challenges readers – who now occupy the place of "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion - more directly than do narratives about Jesus or discussions by Paul. Readers are presented with commands that are supported by warrants. Their response cannot stop with an analysis of what the command might have *meant* back then. They may ask, "Do we really think this warrant to be true? Is this how we view reality?" And then, more than that, readers must go beyond the testing of the text against the theory to the testing of their lives against the text: "Will we now see and think and speak and act in this way?"

Readers who so respond to James 1:2-27 should experience some real difficulty, for James is so uncompromising in forcing a choice where most people would prefer a compromise. James's call to consider all the various trials into which people fall as a matter "entirely of joy" flies in the face of hedonistic culture that

equates suffering with evil and seeks every means possible either to avoid trials or to anesthetize the self against them. It also challenges a longing for a faith that is secure from trial and test, by insisting faith only matures by what it endures.

The real challenge of chapter 1 to the readers of James is whether this view of reality is really one they "know" (1:3, 19) and seek to live by (1:22-25, or whether they are "self-deceived" (1:22, 26) by trying to live with a divided consciousness (1:8). Do they really believe those who endure in faith until death will receive a crown that is life (1:12:12)? If so, then they can, with simple hearts, dispose of themselves joyfully in generous giving. But if they do not, then it makes sense for them to be self-protective, to husband their resources. Do they really think God's implanted word is able to save their lives (1:21)? If they do, then they will turn in every circumstance to pray for the wisdom so to live by that word (1:5). But if they do not, then they should abandon humility and meekness in favor of a "human anger" by which they can gain security for themselves. It is almost as though, before developing the implications of these convictions, James insists that readers pause and ask: Do we really believe this? Is this understanding of reality one to which we are committed?

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Tourmier, *To Understand Each Other* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1970).
2. Some translators and interpreters wish to make the noun *evil* the key word and have all the preceding words dependent on it. A somewhat literal translation is this: "Therefore, put aside all the filthiness and excess of evil." Consult Robert Johnstone, *A Commentary on James* (1871); reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 105. Ropes *James*, p. 170, is of the opinion that this construction is not necessary.
3. William L. Lane, commenting on this incident, writes, "It was the profound experience of well-being which is related to salvation from God." See his *Gospel According to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 194.
4. Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), pp. 70, 171.
5. Thomas Manton, *An Exposition of the Epistle of James* (reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth, 1968), pp. 172-73).
6. Robert K. Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 166.

CHAPTER 4

James 2:1-13

THE FOLLY OF PARTIALITY

Somewhere, some time, church service is about to begin. All the usual faces of our Christian brothers and sisters and their children are there. Suddenly two unfamiliar profiles darken the door. The first is regal, to say the least! His hands are, as we say in Greek, χηρυσοδακυλιοσ (*chrusodakulios*) – that is, "gold-fingered." Some of his fingers even have more than two rings, and that big Rolex is not just any Rolex! This chic display is of Roman origin and is the culture's way of indicating one's wealth. I have been told that in Rome they have shops where rings can be rented for special occasions. *(1)* The Roman philosopher Seneca has written, "We adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is fitted to every joint." *(2)* This visitor, though a Jew, clearly likes the Roman custom and is obviously into "big bucks!" And his clothing is something else! It is λαμπρα (*lampra* – "bright" or "shining"). He is decked out totally in white, as our wealthy countrymen like to do. *(3)* The man almost glows! (cf. Acts 10:30). How great he looks with his Caribbean tan and the white linen Gatsbyesque suit and the panama. We are impressed!

Oh yes …the other man's robe is ρηυπαρα (*rhupara* – shabby, filthy, dirty). It apparently is the only thing he has to wear because it is so tattered and grimy. But frankly, no one really notices him because all eyes are fixed on the dazzle of the first visitor.

One of the brothers' rises quickly to his feet and, nodding deferentially to the rich man, says, "Here's a good seat for you." As the man settles himself, the brother brusquely gestures to the shabby visitor, "You stand there" or "sit on the floor by my feet." Soon the worship service begins – or does it?

How could any group which calls itself "Christian" do such a thing? Yet well-respected scholars such as Ralph Martin says the language of verses 2 and 3, as well as the context, indicates an actual happening in the early church. James

probably witnessed this tragic event himself. *(4)* But even if the event were hypothetical, subsequent church history has documented this sin repeats itself in the church. We do not have to look back to the so-called Dark Ages to find it. Because the eighteenth-century Church of England had become so elitist and inhospitable to the common man, in 1739 John Wesley had to take to graveyards and fields to preach the gospel. And thus we have poignant accounts of his preaching to 30,000 coal miners at dawn in the fields, and the resulting saving power evidenced by tears streaming white trails down their coal-darkened faces. Wesley was no schismatic, but because there was no room in the established church for common people, he reluctantly founded the Methodist-Episcopal Church.

Tragically, the irony went on (unbelievably, in Methodism itself!) so that 100 years later William Booth noticed the poorest and most degraded were never in church. Richard Collier in his history of the Salvation Army, *The General Next to God*, describes Booth's experience:

> Those who made part of Broad Street congregation never forgot that electric Sunday in 1846, the gas jets, dancing on whitewashed wall, the Minister, the Rev. Samuel Dunn, seated comfortably on his red plush throne, a concord of voices swelling into the evening's fourth hymn:
>
> *Foul I to the fountain fly;*
>
> *Wash me, Savior, or I die.*
>
> The chapel's outer door suddenly shattered open, engulfing a white scarf of fog. In its wake came a shuffling shabby contingent of men and women, wilting nervously under the stony stares of mill-manager, shop-keepers and their well-dressed wives. In their rear, afire with zeal, marched "Willful Will" Booth, cannily blocking the efforts of the more reluctant to turn back. To his dismay the Rev. Dunn saw that young Booth was actually ushering his charges, none of whose clothes would have raised five shillings in his own pawnshop, into the very best seats; pewholders' seats, facing the pulpit, whose occupants piled the collection-plate with glinting silver.

> This was unprecedented, for the poor, if they came to chapel, entered by another door to be segregated on benches without back or cushions, though the service was audible, they could not see – nor could they be seen.
>
> Oblivious of the mounting atmosphere, Booth joined full-throatedly in the service – even, he later admitted, hoping this devotion to duty might rate special commendation. All too soon he learned the unpalatable truth: since Wesley's day, Methodism had become "respectable." *(5)*

This experience, followed by many more similar catastrophes, led to William and Catherine Booth's expulsion by the Methodists, and fourteen years of poverty before founding the Salvation Army.

The evident assumption in this favoritism in James was that the rich man was considered to be morally superior, or obviously smarter, more disciplined, more hard-working, and thus a "better man" – more fit for the kingdom.

James detests such thinking. In fact, he sees this matter of partiality as a test of real faith. Favoritism is an indication of a heart that at best is in need of spiritual help and at worst is a heart without grace.

The motivational power of James' command not to show favoritism lies in the fact that he calls them "*believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ"* (v. 1). The gist of this is, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, *who so lowered himself in poverty and humility*, don't show favoritism to the rich." They undoubtedly knew, as Paul would later say, "*that though [Jesus] was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9). They knew that while on the earth their Lord said, "*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*" (Luke 9:58). They knew he performed a miracle to get the money to pay his taxes (Matt. 17:27). Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11). Seeing the glory of Christ sprang from his downward mobility, James' readers knew that favoritism to the upwardly mobile rich, the proud and self-sufficient, was wrong.

Charles Colson, in his book *Kingdoms in Conflict,* tells how he influenced diverse groups through White House visits to insure Nixon's reelection. When his guests arrived, he would escort his guests past saluting guards, down a long corridor lined with dramatic photographs of the President in action. Then he would pause at the executive dining room door, point to the door on the right and say in hushed tones, "That's the situation room" – the legendary super-secret national security nerve center. (Actually it was just a crowded office. The real command center had been moved to the Pentagon.)

Next came dinner in the richly paneled executive dining room, lined with red-jacketed Navy stewards, the table filled with Cabinet members and senior staff. Here Colson's "clients" began to melt. Even avowed enemies sometimes offered their help. If they needed more work, he treated them to a walk upstairs and a reverent walk through the Oval Office. If the President was there, Colson would ask (always by pre-arrangement) if the visitor would like to see the President.

> Nixon was master at the game. He always gave his dazzled visitor gold-plated cuff links with the presidential seal. The person would be over-whelmed as he left, almost bowing, not more than sixty seconds later. It's not easy to resist the allure of the Oval Office … Invariably, the lions of the waiting room became the lambs of the Oval Office. No one ever showed outward hostility. Most, except the labor leaders, forgot their best-rehearsed lines. They nodded when the President spoke, and in those rare instances when they disagreed, they did so apologetically, assuring the President that they personally respected his opinion. Ironically, none were more compliant than the religious leaders. Of all people, they should have been the most aware of the sinful nature of man and the least overwhelmed by pomp and protocol. But theological knowledge sometimes wilts in the face of worldly power. *(6)*

The use of these stories is not meant to impugn our great denominations, because at one time or another the same can be said of virtually every denomination, large or small, every Christian movement, each independent church. Christian bodies all to succeed, calcify, and become elitist, as a woman who lived across the tracks and wanted to join a very fashionable church found out. She talked to the pastor about it, and he suggested she go home and think about it carefully for a week. At the end

of the week she came back. He said, “Now, let’s not be hasty. Go home and read your Bible for an hour every day this week. Then come back and tell me if you feel you should join.” Although she wasn’t happy about this, she agreed to do it. The next week she was back, assuring the pastor she wanted to become a member of the church community. In exasperation he said, “I have one more suggestion. You pray every day this week and ask the Lord if he wants you to come into our fellowship.” The pastor did not see the woman for six months. He met her on the street one day and asked her what she had decided. She said, “I did what you asked me to do. I went home and prayed. One day while I was praying, the Lord said to me, ‘Don’t worry about not getting into that church. I’ve been trying to get into it myself for the last twenty years! *(7)*

One worldly spot to be diligently avoided is that of *partiality*. Deference to the rich and disdain for the poor have always been features of worldliness, so James insists that such discrimination against the poor is unworthy of *the faith* which his readers have in *our Lord Jesus Christ*. This is all the more true because Christ is *the Lord of glory.* Again we see commands of the lifestyle we must pattern on our journey. Let us now look at the text in greater depth.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

2:1-13

The second chapter of James begins with a warning against the sin of partiality or respect of persons. It grows out of a sin which James seemingly knew to be prevalent among the Jewish churches and is related to his previous discussion by furnishing a further example of inconsistency on the part of those whose practice of pure and undefiled religion was defective. Just as those who were hearers and not doers lacked self-control over their tongues and did not exhibit the love that led to visiting the fatherless and widows, so also they showed they did not possess the right attitude toward poor people. James rebukes them sharply and calls them “evil” and “sinners.” The thought of James 1:26f. that religion must reflect the great importance of conduct is now enlarged in a specific illustration of something of which many of his readers were guilty.

Avoid Favoritism/Inconsistency

2:1-4

> *"My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here please,', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts."*

James enjoys not a little of its reputation for vividness and power from this part of his composition. At one level, one can see this as effective rhetoric; the techniques of the diatribe (e.g., addressing an imaginary opponent) are here put to good effect. At another level, however, it is impossible to miss the tone of prophetic outrage, as James lashes members of the community of faith whose behavior in the assembly "with the noble name invoked over them" so contradicts their professed identity.

The word translated partiality or favoritism literally means "taking face" (προσολαμπσια*, prosolampsia)*. Its origins lie in the custom of kings allowing accepted persons to "lift up their face" in the ruler's presence, hence to be received. The term came to have negative connotations associated with a judge giving unfair, favored treatment.

What James says is that partiality is incompatible with faith in Jesus. All men are created equal. We have brought nothing into this world and we cannot take anything out of it. Before God we cannot boast of our possessions or achievements, for all that we have has been given to us by God. And God does not show partiality (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; 1 Peter 1:17). If Jesus sets the example, we should follow in his footsteps.

> *"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."*

The appeal is personal: "*my brothers."* James uses this address rather frequently in his letter, but here he is more specific. He calls the brothers "*believers in our*

glorious Lord Jesus Christ." The word *believers* is reminiscent of the beginning of the epistle, where James encourages the "*brothers*" to persevere in their faith (1:3). Now he tells them they are believers in Jesus Christ; their personal subjective faith is in Jesus.

James' word picture, church history, and our own experiences chronicle the inconsistent tendency of vibrant Christianity to become discriminatory and given to favoritism. Money – economics – is the principal medium for discrimination. Christians tend to listen more intently to the prosperous man, to defer to his wishes, to place him in positions of leadership. "If he can run the bank," we think, "he can lead the church."

But money is not the only factor of favoritism. We also make too much of education. A man or a woman may not be rich, but if they are academically pedigreed they are told, "Welcome to the church board."

No "social register" mentality ought to be found in the church. The problem in James' time was God's Word did not triumph over culture. That was also the problem in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century church. Likewise in today's church, when the poor/uneducated and the rich are not welcomed with equal enthusiasm it is precisely because the Bible has not triumphed over culture.

In verse 4: "*... have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts."* James pulls the rug hard and subverts everything the messianic community has been doing. Not only has the messianic community denied Jesus Messiah, the glorious one who was poor, but its actions have become divisive and sinful. In fact, as James will say in 4:11-12, they have usurped the prerogative of God.

James' question in 2:4 is not simply a question: it comes loaded with an answer and the answer is "Yes, indeed." The two-edged question is simultaneously a two-edged accusation: you have made distinctions among yourselves and you have become judges with evil thoughts.

These two accusations must be tied back to 2:1: What James has in mind with "acts of favoritism," spelled out in 2:2-3, is an act of judgment that cuts the messianic community in two and is also an act of sin. We must not lose contact with the inconsistency of three things then: the inconsistency of their actions with faith in

Jesus Christ; the act itself being favoritism toward the rich and prejudice against the poor; and it being captured by James as an act of judgment. Furthermore, it is wise to keep in mind the rest of James as we read 2:4.

First, the messianic community is divided by the public act of judgment against the poor and in favor of the rich (2:4a). The operative word is "made distinctions" (διεκριτηετε*, diekrithete*), a word with either the sense of doubt (cf. 1:6-7) or the sense of rendering a decision about something or someone. What James has in mind is at least the sundering of the community into the haves and have-nots by this one symbolic act. And surely we can extend this also to include using a standard for judgment that is at odds not only with the great prophetic traditions (e.g., Isaiah 58) but also with Jesus' own teachings and practice (e.g., Luke 6:20-26; see also Luke 1:46-55). And, if we keep 2:1 in mind, James intends for his readers to know that Jesus himself was poor and was raised to glory and that faith in that Jesus as Messiah involves commitment to those like him – the poor.

James addresses other issues surrounding unity and division, including the need to watch how one speaks (1:19-21; 3:1-12; 4:11-12), how one treats the marginalized (1:26-27), how one treats the poor (2:14-17), and how one thinks about and relates to others in the messianic community (3:14-16, 18; 4:1-3; 5:8-9). 3:9 opens up another possible explanation for the seriousness of his words: "*With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God."* Here James is appealing to Genesis 1:26-27 and the creation of all humans in God's image (εικονσ*, eikons*). Recognizing the poor (and the rich) as made in God's image ought to prohibit slanderous communications between brothers and sisters in the messianic community. To anticipate what comes at 2:8-10, the partiality James denounces in 2:1-4 contradicts the second half of the Jesus Creed (Mark 12:28-32), the command to love neighbor as self, which comes from Leviticus 19:18, which also prohibits prejudice against the poor: "*You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor"* (Leviticus 19:15). In this emphasis, then, on unity in the community James is continuing the teachings of Jesus (John 15:12; 17:11, 21-23) and is in harmony with Paul's great vision of a church formed into a unity by the Spirit's indwelling (1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:1-5).

Second, they have "*become judges with evil thoughts"* (2:4b). Again, the operative word is "judges" (κριται, *kritai*). The expression "evil thoughts" (διαλογισμον πονερον, *dialogismon poneron*) is abstract but is found in one or more forms in the New Testament.

> Matthew 15:19: "out of the heart come *evil intentions*" (cf. Mark 7:21)
>
> Luke 2:35: "the *inner thoughts* of many will be revealed"
>
> Luke 5:22: "when Jesus perceived their *questioning"*
>
> Luke 9:47: "Jesus, aware of their *inner thought"*
>
> Luke 24:38: "why do *doubts* arise in your hearts?"
>
> Romans 1:21: "they become futile in their *thinking"*
>
> Romans 14:1: "not for the purpose of quarreling over *opinions"*
>
> 1 Corinthians 3:20: "the Lord knows the *thoughts* of the wise, that they are futile"
>
> Philippians 2:14: "do all things without murmuring and *arguing*"
>
> 1 Timothy 2:8: "lifting up holy hands without anger or *argument"*

What James has in mind with "evil thoughts," then, is corrupt mental processes. Besides severing the unity of the messianic community, such processes include at least (1) usurping the place of God (4:11-12), (2) using a worldly standard that roots honor in wealth and status (2:2-3), and (3) corrupting the mind of Christians to render judgment on God's will for the community.

The judge in James is God (4:11-12), and Jesus is the judge's agent (5:7-9). James' strong denunciation of favoritism is rooted in faith in Jesus Christ, the glorious one, who was poor and was glorified after his death and resurrection. Faith in this kind of Messiah implicates the messianic community in a life of advocacy for the poor, commits its members to live with one another in love, and summons the rich to generosity and justice. Sadly, the messianic community has become infected with favoritism. James will now appeal to a simple, pragmatic argument: experience.

Be Rich in Faith

2:5-7

> *"Listen my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?"*

The inconsistency of the messianic community's living out of its faith in Jesus Christ, the glorious one, seen in its overt favoritism toward the wealthy and casual dismissal of the *eikonic* status of the poor, now leads James to nothing less than a public interrogation. *"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters!"* he exclaims. With little comment and with heavy assumptions, he asks four questions, each of which assumes an affirmative answer:

1. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?
2. Is it not the rich who oppress you?
3. Is it not they who drag you into court?
4. Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

Between the first and second questions, James utters a description that is simultaneously a denunciation clothed with kindness: "*But you have dishonored the poor."* There is no time for answers; there is simply a barrage of questions. The "Yes" to each points out the reader's inconsistency and instructs them to reconsider behaviors. The first question stands as the head and contrasts with the rest of the questions. God's choice of the poor flies in the face of the rich, who despise the poor. Furthermore, God's choice of the poor contrasts with the messianic community's choice to favor the rich and disparage the poor. The second, third, and fourth questions form a crescendo: oppression leads to court injustice and to overt blasphemy of Jesus Christ, the glorious one.

As James drives home the poor/rich paradox, he is powerfully asserting the *ground is level at the foot of the cross.* This being so, it is absurd to be partial toward anyone. All should be treated equally – as beings created in the image of God. Rich

and poor should be accorded equal honor and cordiality. Discrimination or favoritism is spiritually irrational.

In regard to our situation today, materialism perverts the human soul. How else do we explain how a man who steals a ham goes to jail and a man who steals an airline goes to the Senate? How else do we account for the adulation we give to selfish celebrities who spend their lives exploiting us? The answer can only be that a materialistic focus fosters spiritual derangement.

Jesus saw everyone as they really are. Gold fingers and flowing garments meant nothing to him. Neither did the shabby attire of the poor. He noted the heart, not the wardrobe. To be like Jesus, to stand on the level plain at the floor of the cross and to live out our varied relationships to God's glory – that is our call and our privilege.

Keep the Royal Law

2:8-13

> *"You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy, mercy triumphs over judgment."*

This passage extends the teachings of 2:1-7 by exploring the significance of love as the central virtue through which all behaviors, including those involving the oppressing rich and the needy poor, are judged. The first two verses of this paragraph (2:8-9) form a double set of conditions, with the second in control of the first. The first condition sets out what James wants – a community shaped by the Jesus Creed (Lev. 19:18) and already made visible in 1:25-27 – and the second

spells out the contrasting consequences of the messianic community's recent glaring behaviors.

> If you *love*, you are doing what is right.
>
> But if you are *partial*, you become a "transgressor."

With this *condition* set up, James then *explains* why he can label such a person "transgressor" in 2:10-11. James's statement that a person who fails in one commandment is liable for the whole law must be seen in this context. He is not speaking theoretically but practically. The person who claims to live by the law of love, yet practices the sort of discrimination that the law of love itself forbids has broken the law of love entirely. The reason, as James then goes on to show, is that transgression is not against a "commandment" but against the lawgiver. The unity of the law is found in the will of the legislator. To make this point, James quotes from the Decalogue according to the order of commandments in the LXX (2:11). The same God forbade both murder and adultery; if one avoids adultery but commits murder, one is still a "transgressor of the law." This example is meant to confirm James's judgment concerning partiality in the assembly. If they have discriminated among themselves on the basis of appearance, then they have entirely missed the meaning of the law of love. His explanation is twofold: first, the one who commits to the Torah becomes accountable to the whole Torah; second, the one who gave one law also gave the others. Which means, if you keep one law but break another, you are a "transgressor" in the eyes of the divine lawgiver. 2:11 then leads us back to the conclusion of 2:9.

James follows this strong language about becoming a "transgressor" by *exhorting* the messianic community to love (2:12), and thus he returns back to 2:8 and to 1:25-27. But, instead of using the word "love," in 2:12 James speaks of the "law of liberty," drawing us back to 1:25. His final lines in this section (2:13), though, turn the exhortation of 2:12 into a threat of judgment if one does not live by mercy. Thus, we are prepared to see a variety of ways of looking at the proper way for the messianic community to shape its behaviors: love, the law of liberty, and mercy. These are distinguishable terms but inseparable in substance.

A good translation of 2:8 can open with "if you *really* do fulfill the royal law…" James both assumes that the messianic community really is following the royal law

and also knows that it does not follow it consistently and that he is about to speak once again to their failures (in 2:9). We recognize that "really" in 2:8 belongs with the messianic community's salutary practices in 1:25-27 in order to get them to move beyond what he has just described in 2:2-4. Thus, if they *really* do live as described in 1:25-27, they will be fine. But James knows better. This verse then sets up the messianic community for one more strong critique about their favoritism. 2:9 will begin that critique.

The use of the present tenses in "you do well" and "if you really fulfill" paints a picture of an event occurring before our eyes, and that picture is found in the community's benevolence toward orphans and widows (1:26-27). To "fulfill" means (1) to bring to completion (Matthew 7:28; 11:1; Luke 2:39), (2) to "pay" (Matthew 17:24), or (3) to "observe" or "to do" or "keep" (Romans 2:27; James 2:8). Here, "fulfill" is synonymous with "keeps" in 2:10. Even more it has the sense of doing the Torah completely, which helps set up the emphasis in 2:10-11 on doing all of the Torah. In fact, one might detect a tone of arrogance, not uncommon in descriptions of the community's actions or claims to do the Torah.

What they were "fulfilling" was the "royal law." We might be tempted to forget that James is referring here to the Torah, the law or laws of Moses. But even that is not without its own history and development, and the fulfillment of the Torah in Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17-20) feeds into what James is saying here. In what sense is it "royal"? Three components come into play and need not exclude one another. First, it could refer to the "capital" or "preeminent" of all the laws, which would suggest that the connection of "royal law" to Leviticus 19:18 in this verse (James 2:8) and the law of loving others is preeminent law. James would then be agreeing with Jesus (Mark 12:28-32), Paul (Romans 12:19; 13:9; Galatians 5:14; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:17), and Peter (1 Peter 4:8). But there may be residual traces of Christology here. Inasmuch as Jesus is the Messiah and the Messiah is the royal king and the Messiah's rule is the kingdom, then, secondly, the Messiah's law is royal and designed for his kingdom (2:1). We can extend this slightly to a third consideration: if the law is the Messiah's (royal) law, then the law itself is the royal law for the king's subjects as they live in the kingdom. It is unwise to dwell heavily on the second and third aspects of "royal law" for one primary reason: in James the focus of the evidence is not the "royal" - kingly law but on the "preeminent" nature of this singular law found in Leviticus 19:18 raised to

prominence by Jesus Messiah (Mark 12:28-32). The only other passage of significance in James is 1:25, where we have "perfect" (τελειον, *teleion*) as in 2:8 ("fulfill" comes from (τελεο, *teleo*) and where the Torah is connected to "implanted word" in 1:18, 21 and perhaps to the Spirit of the new covenant. Furthermore, in 2:12 we find that 1:25's sense of freedom has been brought into our passage: "*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.*"

I suggest then that "royal law" refers to:

(1) Jesus' highlighting of Leviticus 19:18 as the preeminent command of all commands, alongside loving God,

(2) this interpretation of the Torah, bringing the Torah to its destined completion (1:25),

(3) this law of love actually creating freedom for the messianic community, and

(4) the empowering implanted presence of word and Spirit in the messianic community.

James is Torah-observant. What we find in James does not lead us to think he believes the messianic community has been set free from the works of the Torah as we see in Pauline theology in Galatians and Romans. What James implies might not be clear, but the significance of the Torah coming to a new expression in Jesus surely sets the groundwork for buildings to be constructed later by (Gentile) Christians.

Negative Behaviors Described

2:9

James turns now to the second half of the condition, which describes the messianic community's negative behaviors. Again, James's use of the present tense is notable: "*if you show partiality*" and "*you commit sin*" and "*are convicted*." It is not that James is describing something currently going on in the church but, as aspectual theory is now teaching us, the actions are *depicted* as incomplete and

depicted as going on before our eyes. When this event occurs is not important to James; he wants to see it going on. If the messianic community shows partiality, then consequences follow. The act of partiality effects sin. James uses the word "sin" (ηαμαριτια*, hamaritia*) six times. Sin is the perverse desire and choice not to do what one knows is good (1:14-15; 2:9; 4:17) and is an act against God's will (2:11) and against relational love and mercy (2:8-13); upon confession and prayer, sin can be forgiven by God (5:15); sins are to be confessed to one another (5:16); sin leads to death (1:15), but the messianic community's restoration of sinners leads to their sins being covered over (5:20). By using εργαζομαι (*ergazomai,* (NRSV: "commit"), James draws us back to 1:14-15 and the mysterious, desirous forces of sin to lead humans from their eikonic design to the inevitability of destruction and death. The singular act of partiality unleashes the powers of sin in the messianic community.

Not only are sin's power turned loose, but the act of partiality leads to a status: "transgressors." The term is plural. James's concern is the community and not just an individual: the messianic community becomes complicit in the act of partiality and renders the entire community "transgressors." Some translations mask the Greek construction as in the NRSV *(2)*

Vv. 10-11

> *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery, also said, 'You shall not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."*

James's point here is perhaps more difficult to comprehend than a Protestant reader might suppose, and so his context needs to be sketched. Following the Reformation, which filtered Augustine's anthropology into a bold set of categories, Protestants tend to read James 2:10-11 like this: God gave the Law to reveal his will and to reveal sin; humans listen to the Law but, instead of confessing their sins, use it to establish their own righteousness. James steps into this anthropological blindness and contents that, since God gave not only individual

laws but the whole Law, anyone who transgresses any specific commandment is guilty of it all. Why? Because, whether one transgresses all of it or only one aspect of it, one is proven to be a transgressor. Since God demands either utter perfection or the alien righteousness that comes from Christ's own obedience to the Law, any transgression puts one outside the bounds of redemption until one accepts alien righteousness. Something close to this is the common assumption by which many Protestants tend to read James 2:10-11. It is considered the way Paul dealt with the legalism of Judaism. So, a brief digression into these themes will set up our comments on 2:10-11.

Many appeal to texts like Galatians 5:3 to support the demand of perfection and the need for an alien righteousness as the very heart of the gospel. The distinct *problem with this view* is that, while the Jewish world clearly expected all Jews to follow all the Law, the Torah itself wrote into its very fabric a mechanism that released Israelites from the demand of total perfection: that mechanism was *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. In other words, while the Torah demands obedience it also provides forgiveness through confession and sacrifice.
The scholar who argued this doggedly for more than a decade was E.P. Sanders. *(8)* Sanders lays bare what many have taken to be the view of "normative" Judaism, and it is my view this is at work in how many try to read James 2:10-11: "one must keep it [the Law] all; one cannot do so; there is no forgiveness of transgression; therefore accepting the law necessarily leads to being cursed." But Sanders observes that "the middle terms of this thought-sequence are never stated by Paul, and this sequence of views cannot be found in contemporary Jewish literature." "All the rabbis … took the position that all the law must be accepted," but "No rabbi took the position that obedience must be perfect." "It is equally un-Jewish to think that the law is too difficult to be fulfilled." Thus, "It would, in short, be extraordinary un-Pharisaic and even un-Jewish of Paul to insist that obedience of the law, once undertaken, must be perfect." "

[T]he law is not too difficult to be satisfactorily fulfilled; nevertheless more or less everybody sins at some time or other …; but God has appointed means of atonement which are available to all." "Paul may very well simply have been reminding his converts [Gentiles] that, if they accepted circumcision, the consequences would be that they would have to begin living their lives according to a new set of rules

for daily living." Such a conclusion for Galatians 5:3 is similar to what needs to be seen in James 2:10-11.

Judaism did not tolerate a "pick and choose" mentality when it came to Torah observance. A commitment to observance meant (for some anyway) commitment to observe the whole Torah. Prior to the writing of James the Qumran community famously expected each member to live completely according to its interpretation of the Torah. If their views are anywhere near the world in which James wrote, namely a situation where obedience was expected and forgiveness granted but also where a firm commitment to doing *all* of the Torah was the expectation, it leads to some modifications of what some think is said in James 2:10-11. Once, again, we need to remind ourselves that these verses are a digression that define the meaning of "transgressor" in 2:9. James has accused his community of being transgressors because it, a community convinced it is committed to the (whole) Torah, has broken the law of Leviticus 19:15, 18 – the command to love others as oneself. The person who does not love others, as the community has failed to love the poor (2:2-4), has broken the law of love from Leviticus. This infraction of the Law makes them not observant but *transgressors*. If one keeps the whole Law (2:10a) but breaks just one commandment (2:10b), one is assigned to the category of a transgressor who has in effect, broken the whole (2:10c). Why? Because there are only two options: one is either observant or a transgressor. *(9)*

Show Mercy

Vv. 12-13

> *"So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy: mercy triumphs over judgment."*

The logical flow of 2:1-13 now comes to its telos (τελοσ, *telos)* in an exhortation to change (2:12) and an eschatological warrant (2:13). The moral point of these two verses was made in negative form in 2:1, where James prohibits favoritism. What he meant by favoritism was then fleshed out in 2:2-4 in the graphic behaviors of the community: they were favoring the rich and abusing the poor. James then

asked a series of questions that were designed to get the messianic community to see that mistreatment of the poor is inconsistent with faith in Jesus Christ. Following this James offered wisdom on how the messianic community was to live: by the "royal law" of loving one's neighbor as oneself (2:8), which was blatantly at odds with prejudiced behaviors. But he must now back up to explain how he can call a supposedly observant group of messianists "transgressors," because they do see themselves as observant. So, James pulls out a standard definition of observance in Judaism: to observe Torah is to observe all of Torah. Anyone who avoids adultery but murders is a transgressor (2:10-11). Now James is ready to state again, this time a little more directly, what he has already indicated in this passage: the messianic community should live by the law of love (2:12-13). As such 2:12-13 both makes a summary exhortation for the whole passage and draws a conclusion to the passage.

In a brief summary, James eloquently defines what he already has written at the end of the preceding chapter (1:26-27): words without accompanying action are worthless. He exhorts the readers to speak and to act within the freedom that the law of love provides.

Throughout his letter James uses direct speech in the form of commands. At times these are softened somewhat by a word of endearment, for instance, "*dear brothers."* This is not the case here.

"*Speak and act."* A more literal translation is "so speak and so act." James is not interested in the content of the spoken word but rather in the act of speaking. He tells the readers to put the word and deed together. As Christians they ought to look at their lives from the perspective of being judged. God's eyes are constantly upon them. "*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account"* (Hebrews 4:13).

If you keep the royal law, says James, you are doing right (v. 8). Moreover, Scripture teaches that every person will have to stand before the Judge of all the earth. All the words man speaks and all the deeds he performs are going to be judged by the law of God. Judgment is going to come and is inescapable.

James repeats an earlier statement (see 1:25) when he says, "*the law that gives freedom*." He implies the law should not be understood as a legislative list of rules and regulations.

The law is perfect and complete. It comes to expression in the "*perfect love*" that flows from God to man and from man to God and fellow man. In the freedom of the law of love the child of God flourishes.

Therefore, the Christian lives not in fear of the law but in the joy of God's precepts. As long as he stays within the boundaries of the law of God he enjoys complete freedom. But the moment he crosses one of these boundaries, he becomes a slave to sin and loses his freedom. The Christian, then, assesses every word he speaks and every deed he performs by the measure of God's law. His entire life is governed by the law of love.

"*Because judgment without mercy will be shown."* In these verses James develops the sequence of law, transgression, judgment, and mercy. No one is able to keep the law perfectly, for everyone transgresses that law and falls into sin. The inevitable consequence for the sinner is that he will have to appear before God's judgment seat. And the one who stands guilty before the Judge pleads for mercy.

God's judgment will be "without mercy" to those in the messianic community who persist in prejudice against the poor and marginalized. The Torah gave rise to a strong Jewish tradition of showing mercy, and when mercy was not shown the prophets spoke on behalf of the poor and implored Israel to show mercy. Hence, even if Jesus is the one who brought into fresh light Leviticus 19:18, the essential behavior of mercy toward the marginalized is written into the fabric of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition.

An unmerciful spirit reveals a heart that has not received mercy, but the heart which has been the object of divine mercy will be merciful. This is why the fifth beatitude proclaims, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy"* (Matthew 5:7). If we are not merciful we have much to fear, for the beatitude becomes a curse parallel to James' words. The unmerciful will not receive mercy. A terrifying thought!

A deeper terror in James' words is this: *favoritism is evidence of an unmerciful spirit.* The merciful do not ignore the poor in favor of the privileged, but reach out

to them. James is saying a life characterized by discrimination and favoritism indicates a damned soul! This is frightening moral theology from the brother of Jesus.

Of course, there is an up-side in his final sentence: "*Mercy triumphs over judgment!"* (v. 13b). A heart full of mercy through faith in the mercy of God "triumphs over (literally *boasts against*) judgment." A truly merciful Christian heart looks forward to judgment.

The beauty of James' practical, moral approach to faith is that it cuts through all the religious words and rhetoric. We can fool each other so easily, simply by learning to quote a few Bible verses and slip in some evangelical clichés. We can learn to give a proper Christian testimony and deliver it with apparent conviction, but that does not mean our faith is real.

James is saying that real faith is not indicated only by avoiding the big no-no's like murder and adultery, but by how we treat people, especially the needy.

We must by all means apply James' tests to ourselves, but *never* apply them to others, for no one can know another's heart. The personal question James demands we ask ourselves is, how is *my* heart in this matter of favoritism? Is it in peril of judgment because I am transgressing the royal law? Or does it wait triumphantly? Each of us must answer for himself or herself.

There is a particular corporate application for any church which is made up of educated, upwardly mobile people. It is so easy for today's affluent church to practice an urbane, omni-smiling favoritism which offers a brighter fraternal smile to well-dressed professionals and a cordial but less enthusiastic greeting to the less-favored or troubled. Such subtle discrimination may defy human detection, but God always sees it. And if it is practiced enough it can eviscerate a church even while its walls stand and its spires point symbolically to Heaven.

God freely grants us mercy when we ask him, but he expects us to imitate him. When we refuse or neglect to extend mercy to our fellow man, God withholds it from us and instead gives us judgment without mercy.

If a church is strong in worship, missions, evangelism or youth ministry, it is because it has worked at strengthening those areas. By God's grace, a church can also become strong in caring for the poor, the refugees, the disabled, the

disenfranchised and the broken as believers intentionally submit to God's Word. This is a choice God wants us to make individually and corporately as we follow Christ in his love for all.

ENDNOTES

1. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 52.
2. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, *Volume 8, James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 61 says:
   But the wearing of fine garments and rings was generally a mark of opulence and ostentation (Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.22.18; cf. Seneca, *Non Quest* 7.31-32: *exornamus anulis digitos in omni articulo gemma disponitur,* "we adorn our fingers with rings; a gem is fitted to every joint").
3. Hiebert, *The Epistle of James,* p. 154 says,
   The man's "fine clothing" was further evidence of his wealth. "Fine" (*lampra*) means "bright" or "shining" and refers either to the glittering color of his clothes or his sparkling ornaments, probably the former. Luke used the adjective of the "gorgeous apparel" in which Herod Antipas and his soldiers mockingly arrayed Jesus (Luke 23:11), and also of the "bright apparel" of the angel who appeared to Cornelius the centurion (Acts 10:30). The reference probably is to the shining white garments often worn by wealthy Jews.
4. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James,* pp. 60-61.
5. Richard Collier, *The General Next to God* (New York/Grand Rapids, MI: William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987), p. 307.
6. Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (New York/Grand Rapids, MI: William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987), p. 307.
7. Harold L. Fickett, Jr. *James* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1973), p. 52.
8. The bibliography continues to grow as the opinions increasingly polarize. I would recommend beginning with Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle,* 334-89; N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said, 95-133; S.* Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); ; C. Van Landingham, *Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism in and the Apostle Paul (*Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006); B. L. McCormack, ed. *Justification in Perspective (*Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006); Eerdmans, 2004); *J.* Piper *The Future of Justification* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); N.T. Wright, *Justification* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009).
9. Greek construction in NRSV: "you commit sin *and* are convicted," which translates a verb and a participle. The participle *elenchomenoi* could indicate, as in NRSV and TNIV, simply an attendant circumstance, translated virtually as an equivalent to the main verb "commit" by using "and convicted," or it could extend the thought by defining what James means by "commit sin." In such a case, a more accurate translation could be "commit sin, leading to your conviction as 'transgressor'" or "commit sin, that is, be convicted as a transgressor."

CHAPTER 5

James 2:14-26

FAITH AND WORKS

The first thing people do when they get *The New Yorker* is read the cartoons, because a good cartoon not only entertains, but often humors the truth home in a powerful way. Recently I came across a cartoon in another publication that did just that for me. It pictured a conventional-looking church with a large billboard in the foreground advertising its ministry. The sign read:

THE LITE CHURCH

24% FEWER COMMITMENTS,

HOME OF THE 7.5% TITHE,

15-MINUTE SERMONS,

45 MINUTE WORSHIP SERVICES.

WE HAVE ONLY 8 COMMANDMENTS – YOUR CHOICE.

WE USE JUST 3 SPIRITUAL LAWS.

EVERYTHING YOU'VE WANTED IN A CHURCH … AND LESS! *(1)*

This is the stained-glass experience of so many in the modern church today – no quickening of the conscience, no feeding of the mind, no opening of the heart, no commitment – *no real faith.*

This was James's concern millennia ago, because it was just as likely then as today for church attenders to slide along with a bogus faith that made no difference in the way they lived. James wants to make crystal-clear what makes faith real faith, and

in so doing he sheds eternal wisdom on the relationship of faith and action. James' teaching, taken to heart, will steel the church against a "lite" faith.

James's passionate insistence in this section that faith must be translated into practice seems like the most obvious good sense. We might wonder why it needs saying. Yet the evidence is overwhelming that precisely this reminder above all needs to be made repeatedly and urgently. There is something deep inside humans that leads them to presume that knowing the right truth or holding the right position is enough to make them righteous. The ancient Greco-Roman philosophers knew this. The *Discourses* of Epictetus are filled with remonstrance against students of philosophy who can quote their textbooks concerning self-control and reasonableness, yet whose lives exemplify neither. *(2)* Indeed, even among philosophers, the gap between profession and performance was often so prominent as to encourage the popular stereotype of the daytime philosopher, dignified and sober, who was also the nighttime carouser, lewd and drunk. The earliest Christian movement was not free from this same tendency, as the moral exhortations in Paul's letters make plain. Among James's readers, as well, there were clearly some who considered believing "*that God is one*" (2:19) qualified them to be considered among God's people, or that believing in "*our glorious Lord Jesus Christ*" (2:1) was itself sufficient to find refuge in religion and a resting place within a community of faith remains constant and keeps James's exhortation perennially relevant.

Connections to the first part of chapter 2 are also obvious. The rhetorical question in 2:14 poses the same sort of opposition as in 2:1. James then provides a similar vivid hypothetical case (2:15-16 see 2:2-3) that ends in a rhetorical question (2:16, see 2:4). In 2:5-7, readers were shown the logical inconsistency of their behavior. Now in 2:18-19 the claim that faith and deeds are separable is refuted by a *reduction ad absurdum*. In 2:20-25, he argues from Scripture for the unitary character of faith and faith's deeds. Finally, just as 2:12 provided an aphoristic conclusion to the first section, so also does 2:26 conclude the entire essay with an aphorism. The main literary difference between the two parts of the chapter is the introduction of an imaginary interlocutor in 2:18, whom James – in typical diatribal style – uses to advance the argument.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

2:14-26

James does not know it, but he is about to record a set of thoughts that would torment Luther and many in the Protestant movement that flowed from him. The relation of this section to the earlier parts of the letter should not be lost sight of. James has insisted that true religion must show itself in proper response. It is not merely the hearer who is saved by the word but the doer. However difficult they might be to square with some ways Protestants frame faith and works, James's words flow naturally from 2:1-13 and fit snugly in both a Jewish and messianic Jewish world. If 2:1 asserted that faith in Jesus Christ was inconsistent with prejudice against the poor, 2:14-17 (and 18-26) will expound the meaning of "faith" as something that involves "works" of mercy. Professor Thorwald Lorenzen says what needs to be said: "It is very seldom that this text is taken seriously." In fact, he observes "Luther for example took this text seriously." That is, Luther "let his [James's] message stand, although he criticized it from his "Pauline" perspective." *(3)* Augustine said it well: "I do not understand why the Lord said, 'If you want to enter into eternal life, keep the commandments,' and then mentioned the commandments relating to good behavior, if one is able to enter into eternal life without them." And as everyone quotes his famous line, we will too: "Paul said that man is justified through faith without works of the law, but not without those works of which James speaks." *(4)*

The word "*mercy*" in 2:13, expressing as it does the "law of liberty" in 2:12 (cf. 1:25) and the law of loving one's neighbor as oneself in 2:8, both contrasts with the partiality of the messianic community's behaviors (2:2-4, 9) and leads James to a robust defense of works. In brief, "mercy" is expounded in 2:14-26 in the term "works" and, because James connects faith and works one can also say "mercy" is expounded in what James means by a proper faith. 2:1 established that "faith" in the Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious one, is inconsistent with prejudicial behaviors against the poor. What James meant by "faith" there was not entirely clear, but he now clarifies it: faith involves works of mercy! All of this to say that the prejudicial, partiality behavior of the messianic community (2:1-4) is inconsistent both with Judaism and the gospel of Jesus.

James drives his conclusion home repeatedly in 2:14-26, beginning with an interrogation (2:14-17) in which the questions imply sharp rebuttal and proceeding

to a set of challenges (2:18-26). He begins with two questions about the saving adequacy of a faith that is not simultaneously at work in deeds of mercy (2:14):

> *"What good is it, my brothers, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"*

The implied answers to these questions – "no good" and "no" – are then elaborated with a graphic, almost comic, example (2:15-16):

> "*Go in peace be warmed and full!"*

The example is couched in a conditional sentence, the concluding apodosis bring a question that repeats what was asked in v. 14: "*What good is it?"* James then draws his conclusion (2:17) which becomes the focus of yet more questions and repeated conclusions in 2:18-26.

An issue of form and style arises in 2:18-19. The letters of the New Testament, especially those of Paul, occasionally reflect a response to a question, leading readers today to think we are hearing one end of a conversation. James 2:18-19 evidently is a response of James to a question. Even if James gives us his version of the query in 2:18 (18a or 18ab?), scholars remain unsure just what James understands the question to be, despite many efforts to resolve the issues. If we are unclear about the questions his opponents are asking, we are nonetheless on firmer ground in discerning his response, even if there is some debate where it begins (2:18b or 2:19?). The impact of 2:18-19, though, is clear: faith and works are an inseparable couple. What James implied in 2:14 remains the single conclusion throughout 2:20-26.

Once again, James furthers his argument with a question in 2:20:

> "*Do you want evidence that faith without works is useless?"*

James answers this question by appealing to two figures – a most likely candidate, Abraham, and a most unlikely candidate, Rahab. Following his sketch of how each of these two illustrates the necessity of works, James concludes yet again:

> "*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead"* (2:26).

He is making one point in this passage, and we will do well to stick to his point, which he makes with four words. Faith without works:

is *useless (οπηελοσ, ophelos),* 2:14, 16),

cannot *save* (2:14),

is *dead (νεκρα, nekra,* 2:17, 26).

It fascinates theologians, preachers, and lay persons to tease out the relationship of faith and works: is the former the foundation of the latter? If so, why does James not say it quite that way? Are works a dimension of faith? Is faith nearly the same or identical with works? Is faith a work? Are works faith itself or a demonstration of the presence of faith? Why, then, do non-followers of Jesus have as many works as faith-focused Christians? These are important questions, but they do not drive what James is arguing here. *(5)* He is arguing that faith without works is useless, unable to save, ineffective, and dead. Whatever relationship there is between faith and works or works and faith, there is a relationship – but what concerns James is not analysis of the relationship but the *ineradicable necessity of works in faith*.

Interrogation

Vv. 14-17

> "*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "God in peace; keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."*

James begins with two questions, each of which assumes its answer: (1) what good is it … if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? (2) Can such faith save them? The first assumes the answer that such faith is no- (saving) good and the second that such (workless) faith cannot save. Then James elaborates the answer he has assumed – the uselessness of faith without works – by offering a graphic, comic example (2:15-16). I say "comic" because we hope (and trust) that no follower of Jesus would behave this way in an overt, conscious manner. Then James, in 2:17, draws his conclusion – ("*in the same way, faith, all by itself and*

without works, is dead) the conclusion he assumed in the answers to his question in 2:14.

The emphasis in the text emerges in the word εχηολεχηειν (*echolechein)*: it is about what one *has* or does not *have*. James knows his universal person *does not have works*, even if he or she *claims* to have faith. James knows this, in this context, because of what happened in the encounter with the poor person (2:2-4). And, no matter how hard we Protestants might try to work this out, the bottom line for James is *having* works. Works may well indicate the presence of faith, but the absence of works proves the absence of a faith that can bring about what James calls the "good."

There are basically two options for what James means by "works": either he means "works of the Torah," as in Paul, which would bring James into material conflict with Paul, or he means generally good "works," which means James and Paul could be harmonized. There can be no dispute that James does not speak of "works" as does Paul, for whom "works" often refers to boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles and represents covenant fidelity. Nor can there be dispute that James's essential angle is good works in general or that these general good works are mapped out in the Torah and expressed in Torah observance. This is what we find in texts like 1:25 and will find in 2:14-26. For some this seems to let James off the hook, but I am unconvinced it is as simple as either-or. James is Jewish, and he writes to a messianic Jewish community. It would be impossible for such a person or such a readership to hear the word "works" and not connect it to the Mosaic Torah. In fact, I propose that James means "works of the Torah" when he says "works," but he understands works through the lens of the Jesus Creed, and that means he generalizes "works" into a life shaped by following Jesus' teaching about doing Torah through loving God and loving others, and loving others means deeds of compassion toward those in need. This rendering of "works" is established by 2:8-13. *(6)*

What does James mean by "save?" God is the Savior because God is also the Judge (4:12), and God saves, at least in part, through the "*implanted word*" (1:21). In light of 1:21, we can say that "save" involves moral transformation, but clearly for James salvation is eschatological since it is connected to the final judgment (4:12). This is spelled out more concretely in 5:20, where it is the "sinner's soul" saved "from death" because salvation will "cover a multitude of sins." Salvation, then, is morally transforming, and eternal – and the tragedy for James is those who

claim to have faith but do not have works will not be saved. Most Protestants do not believe this today.

James now offers a comic example, (you have been waiting, haven't you?) and it would be humorous if it were not so tragic. These two verses (15-16) are one long conditional sentence, and can be diagrammed like this:

> "***If*** *a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs,* ***then*** *what is the good of that?*

The "if" clause contains three elements: the condition of neediness (2:15), the condition of response to the needy (2:16a), and the summary evaluation of the response by James (2:16b).

The neediness of the brother or sister shocks us when we see the contrasting behaviors of the messianists: they say things that sound pious (2:16a) but *do nothing* (2:16b): "*and yet you do not supply their daily needs."* The description here is tragic: the messianic community is connected to the Messiah who became poor in order to make others rich and taught in word and deed to show mercy to those in need; the community is connected to the Scriptures of Israel, which from beginning to end advocate mercy and compassion for those in need; and the community is filled with poor who know the underside of oppression. Yet – and this is what perplexes James into strong words – this group of those who say they have faith in Jesus the Messiah, the glorious one who became poor, does nothing for those who make their needs obvious.

"What is the good of that?" James asks. This question rounds off 2:14-16 by framing the whole with the same question. The "good," again, is the "saving good." The implied answer is "No good, none whatsoever."

James now draws his conclusion in 2:17, and it is the conclusion that has quietly lurked behind everything James has said from the beginning of this paragraph: "*So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."* This conclusion is clearer than the implicit answer of 2:14 and is spoken of in four ways:

(1) faith without works is useless (2:14),

(2) cannot save (2:14),

(3) is dead (2:17),

(4) and is ineffective (2:20).

It is wiser to synthesize the four than to drive wedges between them. Perhaps the weightiest is the second: faith without works cannot save.

"*So faith*." As claims and wishes and prayers that are not met by actions do no good for those in need (2:15-16), so faith that does not have works is dead. What is the meaning of "faith" (πιστισ*, pistis*) here? As in 2:1, the word here is neutral. In 2:5 and 2:22 (and 1:3, 6; 5:15) "faith" does what faith is designed to do: it trusts God and obeys God. But, in 2:1, 14, 17, 18, 20, 24 faith is the right word but is stalled in its design from moving into full-blown works. It is best to understand this kind of stalled faith as a claim of faith that, because it does not manifest good works, cannot save. That faith was in God as one and Jesus as the Messiah. The major point is that faith here stands alone with no works. There would be (and are) precious few who would (do) claim to have faith and have absolutely no works, so it is wiser for us to understand James is describing an absolute condition in order to make his appeal more persuasive. Had he moved into how many works are requisite, the point would die the death of nuances.

Faith, "*if it has no works*," is **dead.** For James, the options are two: either one has the kind of (claimed) faith that does not live out in works or one has the kind of (saving) faith that lives out in works. The former (claimed) faith is dead. As sin is "dead" with the Law to give it life (Romans 7:8), so faith is dead without works. Again, the focus here is not so much that such faith is simply ineffective in this life alone, which it is. It is "vain" [futile] (1:26), "useless" (2:14), and "ineffective" (2:20). But there is more: James stretches the now into the eternal – "dead" means "cannot save" (2:14). As Rob Wall puts it, "those whose confidence rests on routine professions of faith in God but whose lives do not embody the mercy of God are destined for "death" instead of "life" at day's end (cf. 5:19, 20)." *(7)* We must also respect what James is saying: there are those who claim faith, and who

may well be supporters of the faith, but who do not have works – and their faith cannot save.

James now turns to a rhetorical, imaginative debate with an unidentified (and perhaps unidentifiable) interlocutor. His main point is already clear from 2:17, but he must deepen his argument, sharpen his polemic, and lay bare his objections to the kind of faith that does not produce works. Even if it is easy to get lost in the thicket of problems, we cannot lose sight of James's major point: that faith without works cannot save.

> *"But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works," Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one, you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."*

James 2:18-19 interrupts the flow by providing the response of an imagined interlocutor to whom James then responds, and this style is a form of ancient rhetoric. James responds to the claims that faith and works are separable items and that some persons have only faith while others have (faith and) works. James offers two stiff challenges. First, he challenges the interlocutor to show his faith without works; James, for his part, will back up his words by showing his faith by his works. The second challenge concerns creedal faith. Having creedal faith alone, James states, is not enough; even demons have that. The third response concerns biblical proof for his point, which he fines in both Abraham and his unlikely ally, Rahab.

James in 2:19 takes his hearers to the absurdness of creedal faith alone: "*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder."* James goes back to one the most basic points of ancient Judaism, the confession that "God is one." That was, and still is, at the heart of Jewish daily prayer. "*Hear,*

O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One" is called the Shema, spoken on arising each day. The rest of the scripture was not forgotten either "*and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and mind, and soul and strength.*" It was at that point Jesus himself added what James has earlier called "the royal law," "*Love your neighbor as yourself."*

But simply saying "God is One" doesn't get you very far if it doesn't make a difference in your life. After all, there is not a demon in the universe who is an atheist! The demons know all this too, and it doesn't do them any good; it merely scares them out of the wits. There are, no doubt, some who are spirits of atheism, demons who have influenced and danced on the graves of Bertrand Russell. But all are thoroughgoing *monotheists*, for they believe God is one (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4, 5). And they are all *Trinitarian*. They know the Apostles Creed is true: God is the Maker, and Jesus is his virgin-born Son. They know the truth of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, and coming return.

In fact, some demons have better theology than we do! But it does them no good. James says they "shudder" – (πηρισσουσιν, *phrissousin).* Literally they "bristle up" like a frightened cat.

So it becomes clear that what James means by "*faith"* in this passage is now what Paul and others developed as a full, Jesus-shaped meaning; it is the basic *ancient Jewish* meaning, the confession of God as "one." This, he says, needs to translate into action, into Jesus-shaped action, if it is to make any significant difference. At this point, he is actually on the same page as Paul, who in his fierce letter about faith and works defines "what matters" as "*faith working through love" (*Galatians 5:6).

James' point is, there is a belief which is not true faith. Simon the sorcerer is another prime example. Luke records in Acts 8:13 that Simon "*believed and was baptized*." But several verses later, after his attempt to buy spiritual power, Luke records Peter as saying Simon, "*You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin"* (Acts 8:21-23). Simon the sorcerer's faith did not even benefit him as much as it does the demons, because they shudder! Simon foreshadows the multitudes who week after week have said their creedal "I believes," but have neither faith nor fear of God.

Real faith is more than mental assent to truth. It is a belief that involves the heart " *…. That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved"* (Romans 10:9, 10). It is one thing to say, "I believe this airplane will hold me," and it is quite another to fly somewhere in it.

James refuses to accept a division between faith and works. True faith cannot exist separately from works, and works acceptable in the sight of God cannot be performed without true faith. Abraham and Rahab prove his point.

Since Abraham is the "father" of Israel, appeal to Abraham is not only first but also perhaps the weightiest argument James might find. Not only is he the honored, primordial ancestor, James goes one more step to ask: Was not Abraham "*justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar*?" Our understanding of justification has either gone through a revolution since the publication of E.P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977 or has been under attack since that time. How one sees this shift in understanding will impact what one sees in James 2:21-24. *(8)* When I first read Luther and Calvin, particularly the latter, I determined that whether or not I agreed with them in everything they said, their stated and practical method would be mine too: to soak myself in the Bible, both Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, to get it into my bloodstream by every means possible, in the prayer and hope that I would be able to understand the Scripture but especially their courage to discover without intimation by the powers that be. They are to be honored for their diligence and commitment by seeking to understand the Scriptures and especially when you could forfeit your life by differing with church doctrine expounded by the Catholic Church.

But nevertheless when it came to James, Martin Luther's and John Calvin's interpretation and exegesis of Paul was ill-informed and unduly influenced by a medieval framework. Calvin and Luther's struggle with the Roman Catholic Church of the time, the Papacy, indulgences, the role of faith and works in justification, and Luther's own internal struggle to find a "gracious God" led to his conclusion of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Rather than exegete Paul with the first-century context in mind they had their own 16th century issues by way of Augustine-Pelagius debate informing their exegesis. Luther read his own personal struggle into the Epistles of Paul. As a result, Luther misunderstood first-century Judaism to be a religion of "works of righteousness," "legalism" and

"Pelagianism." We now see what a fresh reading of Paul is like with first-century Judaism and liberation from the "Lutheran Paul." Paul was not concerned with Judaism as a "religion of works" contrasted with Christianity as a "religion of grace" as was Luther. Paul's concern was with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God.

Every commentator on James is tempted to write a minor dissertation on the relationship of James 2:20-26 to Paul's theology of justification. Few resist. I shall try, because my focus here is on what James says in his context and not on battles best fought elsewhere. I will begin with this: To be called "righteous" *in the Bible* means that one's behavior and life conform to the Torah, the standard of God (Genesis 38:26). To be called "righteous" *in Judaism* means that one's behavior and life conform to the Torah as interpreted by one's authorities – e.g., the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran or Hillel or Shammai. To be called "righteous" *in the messianic community of James* means that one's behavior and life conform to the Torah as interpreted by Jesus (Luke 18:14) and the leaders of that messianic community, most especially James (1:26-27; 2:8-13, etc.). To be called "righteous" *in the world of Paul* means to be conformed to the standard of God by union with Christ (Galatians 3:11-12; Romans 2:13; 3:23-26; 4:5). Even if Paul uses this term in an innovative way, the sense of judgment by God and moral conformity to God's will are in one way or another always present.

If we keep in mind the thrust of James's argument, namely that faith and works are inseparable and that faith without works is non-saving faith, then we can answer the focus of the word "justified" by returning to James's own words. "Justified" is the opposite of "useless" (as in "what *good* is it?" in 2:14), unsaving (2:14), dead (2:17), shaken in God's presence (2:19), and barren or ineffective (2:20).

To be justified, then, is to have useful, saving, life, delight in God's presence, and fruitfulness – all with an eye to the final courtroom in which the workful believer is declared in the right by God (on the basis of what one has through the new birth 1:18), in which one lives out God's will as taught by Jesus, particularly in showing mercy to those in need. *(9)* Again, Paul and James use the word "justify" in the same sense (though talking about a different occasion of the declaration of righteousness). But a contradiction is avoided by seeing they used the word *works* in a different context of meaning (see Excursus in Appendix).

What shocks the post-Reformation reader of James 2:21 is "*by works*." James says Abraham was justified – brought into a saving relationship with God or declared

justified by God – *on the basis* of his works. And James tells us exactly which work (singular) of Abraham's it was that justified him: "*when he offered his son Isaac on the altar*." We need to understand the "binding" (Hebrew *Aqedah*, from Genesis 22:9) of Isaac in order to understand why James says Abraham was justified "by works." Abraham survived the test by remaining faithful and God provided for him. God the Provider justified Abraham on the basis of that kind of faithfulness (works). And what lies latent in all of this is that James has urged since 1:19-27, but especially in chapter 2, that the messianic community – like Abraham – should be acting with compassion and mercy toward those in need.

But why does James use the plural "works"? Perhaps because the one act of the *Aqedah* (binding of Isaac, Genesis 22:9) sums up all the other works in the testing of Abraham's faith. We need to recall just prior to the *Aqedah* an incident in which *Abraham showed hospitality to strangers* (Genesis 18) and it was this incident that led to the birth of Isaac. *(10)* It is not fanciful to think of Genesis 22, then, as another instance of God *providing* (22:8) for the one who was merciful to others by providing life's necessities. Once we connect Abraham's "works" back to the hospitality theme in Genesis, we realize that James has touched on a moment of brilliance: Abraham, the one who was hospitable to those who had needs, was tested by God the (hospitable) Provider. The Jewish tradition famously saw Abraham as an example of hospitality. Abraham survived the test by remaining faithful and God provided for him. God the Provider justified Abraham on the basis of that kind of faithfulness (works). And what lies latent in all of this is that James has urged since 1:19-27, but especially in chapter 2, that the messianic community – like Abraham – should be acting with compassion and mercy toward those in need.

Justification by works, then, is not "works of the law" so much as it is by "works of mercy" as the way to interpret genuine Torah observance. As James calls the messianic community to such (1:19-27; 2:1-4, 14-17), so he appeals to Abraham as one whose entire life came to expression in acts of hospitality that led to his own act of sacrificing his son to God the Provider. For James, Abraham's faith, his lifelong faithfulness, is found in that word "works." What James will not tolerate is a kind of "faith" that is not like Abraham's faithfulness.

What perhaps surprises Protestants the most is that James does not think the job was complete when Abraham trusted God in Genesis 15:6; it was the *Aqedah* that brought the trust of Abraham to its intended goal. Genesis 15 finds its perfection in

the narrative of Genesis 18-22. Simple trust and believing the right things is not saving faith in the mind of James.

Paul used Genesis 15:6 as potent evidence that justification occurs solely by faith by trusting in the word of God, apart from works. Because Abraham was justified (Genesis 15:6) prior to circumcision, Paul says, the promises to his seed were received by faith alone (Galatians 3:6, 16; Romans 4:9-11, 18, 22). Therefore, since justification occurred prior to circumcision and prior to any works, works do not figure into the act of God in making a person righteous (Galatians 3:10-11; Romans 3:20, 28; 9:31-32). Furthermore, because the proper response is trust in the word of God, Paul knows that justification can occur for Gentiles without them having to enter into Judaism through circumcision (Galatians 3:7-9; Romans 4:11-12). Having had his say in this way, however, Paul still knew the importance of works (Galatians 5:22; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

James comes at this topic from a different angle. *(11)* Paul faces some who think of Jewish status as sufficient or even as an exclusive privilege, but James faces those who think confessional/creedal faith is sufficient. These different issues lead to different uses of both faith versus works language and the example of Abraham, even if both appeal in their own way to Genesis 15:6. For James, Abraham is not the model of faith-*before*-works but of faith-*with*-works. **Paul wants to show justification prior to circumcision, and James wants to show that Abraham's justification was not perfected until the binding of Isaac (*Aqedah*)**. It was perfected there, and here James banks on the potency of the Jewish traditions about Abraham's testing, that Abraham's faith reached the divine intent. It seems to me that James knew of Paul's teaching. *(12)* This is not a matter of who got Abraham right: this is a matter of hermeneutics (interpretation) in a Jewish world.

Hence, James says, it was at the *Aqedah* that Genesis 15:6 was "fulfilled." *(13)* The verb means to fill up (Matt. 13:48; John 12:3) but it could also could mean to "fulfill prophetically" or "confirm" in the sense that this test confirms the point James is making. It seems that another view is more likely: since James is showing Abraham's Genesis 15:6 faith was "perfected" (Jas. 2:22) in the *Aqedah,* it stands to reason that "fulfilled" means nearly the same.

When Abram so trusted God, YHWH "reckoned" his faith as righteousness. *(14)* It could be that Abraham's faith was considered a kind of work and that it was that kind of work that was reckoned in the divine tribunal as righteousness (a life of Torah observance). **But this is not how James is using these terms**: for James,

faith is distinguishable from works. Faith is not a work. Rather saving faith works or moves into acts of mercy. So, it is more likely that Abraham's trusting of YHWH's word was an act that YHWH considered good and so therefore assigned Abraham to the class of those who were "righteous," that is, those who did God's will. What James is emphasizing, though, is that this act of trust by Abram did not come to its perfection or completion until the *Aqudah.*

Not only is Scripture fulfilled, but Abraham was "called the friend of God." *(15)* James sums up God's view of Abraham with the summary word "called." "Friend" (*philos*) brings together three words James has already used that express divine approval "justified" (2:21), "brought to completion" (2:22), and "fulfilled" (2:23a). When James calls Abraham the "friend of God" he could be quoting verses like 2 Chronicles 20:7 or Isaiah 41:8, or more likely, he simply sums up the Jewish view of Abraham. To be God's friend is to be the people of God (cf. Luke 12:4; John 3:29; 11:11; 15:13; 3 John 15), to be in the right, to be saved, and to be a person who in fellowship with God lives out the life God designs for those on earth. Inasmuch as friendship with God (cf. Jas. 4:4) involves love, one can find echoes of the Jesus Creed as the friend of God acts in friendship toward others (2:8-13).

2:24

James now sums up his point one more time and repeats what he said in 2:20. Here we are justified in hearing James responding either to Paul or to someone around Paul. From the perfection and fulfillment of Abraham's Genesis 15:6 faith in the *Aqedah*, James concludes "*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone*." James now universalizes with "a person," which is used in the same way in Galatians 2:16, along with the equivalent "flesh" (see also Matthew 4:4; Acts 4:12; Romans 3:28).

James's conclusion has a positive and a negative element:

A person is justified:

positive: by works

negative: not by faith alone

Justification is forensic: it is to be declared in the right by God in the courtroom of God. Those who are in the right are so by virtue of works (like Abraham in

Genesis 18-22). And, like Abraham, no one can be justified by "faith alone." "Faith alone" is confession of monotheism (2:19) and thinking one is in the right before God even if one does not respond to those in need (2:1-17). It is confessional, creedal, and workless faith. This point should not surprise the reader of the New Testament: Matthew 7:15-21; Galatians 5:6; 6:4; 1 Corinthians 13:2; 2 Corinthians 9:8; Hebrews 11:1; 1 John 2:3-6. Saving faith, then, is a trusting faith that flows into deeds of mercy; non-saving faith is creedal faith without deeds of mercy. In this setting, James may distinguish faith from works, but he leaves no room for saving faith that does not involve works. Faith finds its perfection and fulfillment in acts of mercy.

Faith and Righteousness

Vv. 25-26

> *"Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.*

The actualization and maintenance of authentic faith has been a problem for the church from apostolic times onward. In the last century this problem was a main concern of the Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who addressed it with his considerable arsenal of literary weapons, variously employing logic, paradox, scorn, humor and parable. In one memorable instance he told a parable about Duckland: It was Sunday morning, and all the ducks dutifully came to church, waddling through the doors and down the aisle into their pews where they comfortably squatted. When all were well-settled and the hymns were sung, the duck minister waddled to his pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read: "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Use your wings!" It was a marvelous, elevating duck scripture, and thus all the ducks quacked their assent with a hearty "Amen!" – and then they plopped down from their pews and *waddled* home. *(16)*

In the lives of many churchgoers today, there is a yawning chasm between profession and action, professed faith and works – and that chasm gives a lie to people's loud claims to real faith.

As we have seen James has a passionate desire to close that deadly gap, using his own considerable literary devices to capture his readers' attention. In the second half of his appeal in verses 20-26, he poses an aggressively phrased question: "*You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?"* (v. 20). James was obviously not a student of Dale Carnegie, for "foolish" means literally "empty," suggesting in today's language shallowness. He is short on tact, to be sure, but he has our attention and goes on to answer his own question with two diverse case studies – Abraham and Rahab. We have studied Abraham. Now we move to Rahab.

Second Proof: Rahab

James moves from his first example, Abraham, to a second, Rahab. His intent to demonstrate the inseparability of faith and works and to deconstruct the arguments of those who think one can have faith and not have works (deeds of mercy). The perfection of Abraham's faith in the *Aqudah* now gives way to the active faith of Rahab. This shorter example then is followed by a summary conclusion. (2:26).

"*Likewise"* ties what James has to say about Rahab to what he has said about Abraham as a second proof that faith and works are inseparable. The Canaanite prostitute Rahab, whose story of hospitality is told in Joshua 2 and whose reward is described in Joshua 6:16-25, creates problems for modern interpreters and historians while she resolves a faith-works relationship for James. *(17)* The writer of Hebrews also saw Rahab as an example of faith and hospitality (11:31), while Matthew seems to depict her as a sinful Gentile woman who played a role in the Messiah's genealogy (1:5). Josephus makes her an innkeeper instead of a prostitute, and therefore the spies are only there for dinner (*Ant. 5:7).* In *1 Clement* 12 we discover a prophetic type of atonement in the red cord, and in Judaism Rahab was classified as a proselyte, but none of this is James's point. For James, Rahab was (1) a prostitute, (2) justified by works, who (3) welcomed the spies and sent them off surreptitiously.

What does James mean here by "justified"? *(17)* It means to be judged in the right by God or to be made righteous or to be vindicated before God. And as with Abraham, James boldly claims that God judges Rahab to be in the right *on the basis of works.* Once again, James uses the plural "works." He could be referring to the double act of reception and sending away in safety, but it is more like he is using a typical language, whether he has one thing in mind (hospitality) or more. It

is not without significance that James sees Rahab's works in her hospitality, *(18)* that is, in her treatment of Israelites in need, and sets her behavior before the messianic community as a standard (cf. 2:1-4).

Let us focus first on the contrast. Abraham, the father of believers, serves as a striking example of faith and works. But, we object, all of us are not like Abraham. True, James answers, Abraham demonstrated both faith and works, but so did Rahab – and she was a prostitute. Both were foreigners among other people: Abraham dwelled among the Canaanites and Rahab with the Israelites. And last, both are listed as ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:2, 5).

Conclusion

2:26

"For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead." There is nothing new in James's conclusion because he has made his point implicitly and explicitly since he opened this section at 2:1. Furthermore, the same point was made in 1:19-27, especially vv. 22-27. Implicitly, James has argued that since faith and works are inseparable,

1) the messianic community's prejudice against the poor and favoritism toward the rich are contrary to faith (2:1-4),

2) experience itself should inform the community's members God is with the poor, while the rich are oppressing the community (2:5-7), and

3) the royal law to love one's neighbor as oneself demands care for the poor, while the community's disrespect for the poor proves its members are transgressors (2:8-13).

Following this implicit argument, which is hardly subtle, James turned more aggressive at 2:14. Faith without works is useless (2:14a) and it cannot finally save (2:14b). with the help of an exaggerated example, James now interrupts with a question that assumes faith and works are totally different responses to God and the former without the latter saves (2:18a). Again, James responds with three points:

(1) faith can only be shown to be saving by works (2:18b),

(2) creedal faith is not enough because even the demons have that (2:19),

(3) and the examples of the unquestioned faith of Abraham (2:21-24) and Rahab (2:25) prove they had the kind of faith that worked.

Explicit statements that faith and works are inseparable and that only a working faith saves can be found, then, in 2:14, 17, 20 and now 26. [Davids suggest that some might wonder if James has indulged in "rhetorical overkill" p. 133]

What James means by "works" are clearly the living fruit of a lively faith; he does not mean "the works which mark out Jews from Gentiles (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, etc.)." What James means by "faith" is clearly "the bare Jewish confession of monotheism," not the lively faith of which Paul speaks in e.g. Romans 2:1-16, the future verdict delivered on the basis of the whole life led. Too many people forget that that remains basic for Paul; Paul's "justification by faith" is all about the future verdict being brought forward into the present. That isn't what James is talking about.

The anthropology at work in this analogy assumes that the spirit animates and gives life to the body (Genesis 2:7; 6:17; Ps. 31:5 [LXX 30:61];Ezek. 37:8- 10; Luke 8:55; 23:46;1 Corinthians 7:34). It would stretch the evidence to suggest that we must strictly compare faith (alone?) to the body and works (as the perfection of faith?) to the spirit, with in this instance works being what gives life to faith or what brings faith to its completion, since James is comparing one whole situation with another and not dissecting. From beginning to end this chapter has had one central theme: the inseparability of faith and works if the faith is to be saving and the works justifying. One can clearly discern a difference: faith is confessional and works behavioral, but for James a saving faith is one in which the confession is manifest in works of mercy toward those in need. Faith alone, by which he means a minimal creedal faith, cannot save. It is useless, ineffective, and dead. Christian theologians might synthesize James and Paul with this line: "as faith without works is dead, so works without faith is dead." *(19)* True enough, but neither James nor Paul was in situations where the niceties of such theological syntheses were needed.

Those poor ducks waddled in and out of church and never flew as they were created to do, because their "faith" was nothing more than mental assent. Few things are as inglorious as a waddle, and few things are more glorious than a duck on the wing! All God's people have wings! The first wing is faith. The second is

works, a faith that works. And beating together they lift us from our inglorious waddles to the glory of lives on the wing – soaring in God's service.

There is no such thing as a "lite" church, for a "church" which waters down its call for commitment is an imitation. Likewise, there is no such thing as a "lite" faith. A real faith is committed. It wholeheartedly follows the Master. It reflectively reaches out to those it perceives to be in need. It places its hands on the infections of the ill. It works to meet the spiritual and material needs of all. It is full of mercy!

All the wings of faith and works beat together, one's life will soar with James and Paul – right up to the heart of God.

For a fuller look at faith and works see Excursus of James and Paul at end of book on page 243.

ENDNOTES

1. *Leadership,* Volume 4, Number 3 (Summer 1983), p. 81.
2. See Epictetus *Discourses* II. 1.31; III. 22.9.
3. See T. Lorenzen, "Faith without Works Does Not Count before God! James 2:14-26." *Expository Times* 89 (1978 231-35, quoting here from p. 231.
4. From *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (Ancient Christian Commentary, ed. G. Bray: Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). p.31.
5. See D. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4, trans. B. Green and R. Kraus: ed. G.B. Kelly and J.D. Godsey; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); A.C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 19-42, on the disposition of belief.
6. A good discussion, one that sides with "works" meaning general good works to be distinguished from Paul is Davids, *The Epistle of James,* "James and Paul."
7. Wall, 134-35. Calvin reasons: "We hence conclude that it is indeed no faith, for when dead, it does properly retain the name" (p. 311).
8. See Roy. B. Ward, "The Works of Abraham: James 2:14-26," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968) 283-90.
9. See Ropes, 217-18.
10. It is worth observing that the promises of Gen. 22:18 is connected to the same promise in Gen. 18:18.
11. This is one of the most important issues in understanding biblical theology: it is always *occasional* or *contingent*. I appeal here to M. Fishbane's *Sacred Attunement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 208), who draws this out of several occasions (e.g., pp. 160-

62): here he extracts a hermeneutical spirituality from the theoretical foundation laid in *Biblical Interpretation.*

12. See the discussions in Davids, 130-3; Laws, 131-32; J.T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1986), 115-28.
13. W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other English Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), defines this usage as "to bring to a designed end, fulfill" and "of the fulfillment of divine predictions or promises." Martin 93, disagrees and defines it as confirming James's point.
14. The image is one of ledger and a mental act of assigning a *quid pro quo*, "a tit for tat."
15. By whom? By Scripture (2 Chron.20:7; Isa. 41:8) and tradition (e.g., Philo, *Abraham 273)*. The aorist passive is not a divine passive do much as impersonal. Scripture (or tradition) calls Abraham the friend of God. The aorist is not used to speak to the moment at which he became God's friend but to sum up the action globally.
16. Gary Vanderet, *Discovery Papers.* Number 3989 (May 25, 1986), "The Skill of a Genuine Faith."
17. The aorist is chosen, not because the act of God declaring her just is over and done, but because James chooses to depict the act in summary form. The passive is divine ("God declared her just").
18. An exceptional study of hospitality can be found in A. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2005); see also C.D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eeerdmans, 1999); A.G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). At a more popular and focusing on house churches, see R. and J. Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006).

CHAPTER 6

James 3:1-12

EXHORTATIONS FOR TEACHERS

By the 1950's Churches of Christ began to emphasize having full time directors of education for larger congregations. For that reason I completed all the specialized course-work while attending Lipscomb and seminary in order to be prepared for this task. I spent several fruitful years as an associate minister with this wonderful ministry. During that time I learned of Henrietta Mears. Henrietta Mears was undoubtedly one of the greatest Christian education geniuses of our time. As Christian Educational Director of Hollywood Presbyterian Church during the 1940s and 1950s she built the Sunday school to the then unheard of proportions of 4,000. At the end of her life Teacher, as she was affectionately called, could count no less than 400 young people who went into Christian service under her direct influence. Thumbing through her biography I noted photographs of seminarians who came through her college department, including such later notables as Richard Halverson, chaplain of the U.S. Senate, and several prominent pastors and theologians. She took young Billy Graham under her wing, and also Bill Bright, who would go on to found Campus Crusade for Christ. *(1)* She was a woman of immense personal influence.

Henrietta Mears vast influence extended far beyond the walls of her church. She was a prime mover in the founding of the National Sunday School Association. Gospel Light Publications, today a major publishing house, was formed by her to provide quality Sunday school materials. She was also the visionary and tireless force behind the founding of Forest Home, the great conference center where thousands upon thousands of people have come to Christ. When Teacher died in the early sixties, officials at Forest Lawn Memorial Park said it was the largest graveside crowd in twenty years – an astounding fact, considering that many of Hollywood's most famous celebrities are buried there. Henrietta Mears life is an

eloquent testimony to the positive influence of a gifted teacher who was totally committed to Christ. *(2)*

Thumbing through her biography, I mentally contrasted it with the chilling experience reported in *Time* magazine in 1978 chronicling the life and death of another teacher, Jim Jones. The photographer similarly chronicled Jones's life, his coterie of disciples, his triumphs, and his end – the rotting bodies of hundreds of people in the infamous Jonestown massacre – an unforgettable testimony of the influence of a teacher for evil.

Teachers wield incredible power! Young or untaught minds in the hands of a skilled teacher are like clay in a potter's hands. Such a teacher is closely watched by his or her students, and often the teacher's attitudes and personal morals have as much influence as the information conveyed – perhaps more. Casual advice from a teacher can direct the course of one's whole life. Phrases such as "Have you considered full-time church ministry?" or "I think you would make an excellent doctor" often propel young lives into one career or another. We must realize what power teachers have at crucial times in tender lives – to crush the bloom or make it eternally flower!

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

Teachers and Tongue

3: 1-12

> *"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.*
>
> *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the*

> *whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but on one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs.? No more can salt water yield fresh."*

Chapter 3 treats two subjects directly related to each other. The bridling of the tongue (a metonym for "speech," compare "what he says" in verse 2) and the analysis of true wisdom. These subjects both refer to the teacher, the first part relates to his responsibility and control of his speech (3:12) and the second to the teacher's wisdom (3:13-18). That verses 1-12 are to be interpreted in this manner is quite plain. But the second point must be deduced from the context. It appears that "the one wise and understanding" of verse 13 also describes the teacher. Wisdom and speech are connected in Proverbs 31:26, "*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue*."

3:1-12 sets out the first of four themes that are connected to speech in the messianic community. I say are because it is clear that 3:13-18 and 4:1-10 is centrally focused on speech patterns. The four themes, taken at face value for what they say in and of themselves, can be ordered like this:

1. Teachers and the tongue (3:1-12)
2. Wisdom 3:13-18
3. Dissensions (4:1-10
4. Community and the tongue (4:11-12)

In chapter 3 James pinpoints one issue that seems to underlie several of his concerns: the use of the tongue. His opening sentence seems to set the whole discussion in the context of the responsibilities of teachers, but in truth teachers simply serve as a prime example of how the tongue can be misused. Those charged to instruct others carry great liability in what they say, but control of speech is the

charge of every Christian. In fact, harnessing speech is seen as the key to keeping the whole body in line.

What effect have our words on those who hear us? Are we speaking the truth in love? Do we control our anger and especially our tongues? David knew that alone he could not restrain his tongue. Therefore, he asked God to help him as he earnestly prayed, *"Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips"* (Psalm 141:3).

Turning now to 3:1-12, which clearly connects back to 1:19, 26 and 2:12, we observe the following structural flow. James begins with a negative warning in 3:1a and immediately gives a reason for the warning (3:1b). He then gives the same warning, this time with a subtle concession about the inevitability of everyone stumbling (3:2a) but a special status for those who manage not to stumble in speech patterns (3:2b).

> *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check"* (3:1-2).

At this point James simply begins to expound on the magnitude of the impact of the tongue (3:1-12), and he does not properly bring what he has said in 3:1-2 to a close, or if he does, not explicitly. He begins addressing the problem of the tongue's magnitude by giving three clever, concrete examples: a bit and a horse (3:3), a rudder and a ship (3:4), and a spark and a fire (3:5b-6). In the middle of this, he makes his analogy clear by saying the tongue is a small member of a big body (3:5a). Then he turns from observation of the magnitude of the tongue's impact to say that it is hard to tame the tongue (3:7-8), and he makes his point once again with analogy, now from domestication of animals. Fatigued either by the teachers or the flow of his examples, James gasps about the tragedy of how the tongue is used. Thus, he challenges his readers/teachers simply to stop using the tongue for destruction (3:9-12).

Talk is cheap, we say. But we express ourselves in words that reflect our thoughts, intentions, and personalities. The words we speak influence those who listen to us, and with these words we teach others. Therefore, we who teach must know what to

say, for Jesus said that "*men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken"* (Matthew 12:36).

The Warning

Vv. 1-2

> *"Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle."*

James begins with a simple prohibition:

> "*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters…"*

James admonishes his readers. The New International Version (NIV) provides a somewhat interpretive translation ("*Not many….should presume")* to avoid the impression that James is discouraging people from becoming teachers. *(3)* The New Testament encourages believers to become teachers of the good news. For example, Jesus commands us to make disciples of all nations [disciples = to teach them] (Matthew 28:19-20, as my friend Bob rightly notes disciple translates to teacher). And the writer of Hebrews rebukes his readers for not being teachers after a period of training (5:12).

When James urges individuals in the messianic community not to become teachers, he may be concerned not so much with the number of teachers in the community or even with candidates for the teaching office as he is with the impact of too many talking and teaching in irresponsible, unloving ways. We say this because of how 3:1-12 develops and, if there is a strong connection to the next section, how 3:1-4:12 develops. Not once does James bring up again how many teachers there are; instead, he is concerned with the impact of speech patterns in the community, and here particularly with the crucial role play in such a community. His concern shifts from the number of teachers to the impact of teachers. This verse fits with Matthew 23:6-8: "*They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people*

call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students." If Jesus perceived the desire for power and prestige to be a vice for teachers, James augments those two desires with the desire to dominate verbally.

Teaching has always been necessary and to one degree or another, prestigious because knowledge and power go hand in hand, especially in that world, where only about 10% could read. *(4)* Not only the Jews' of Jesus day, but also the early church gave great prominence to the office of teacher. Teaching carries with it the capacity to know, guide, and offer wisdom, not to mention criticism and rebuke. A teacher had authority and influence and many people sought to gain this position. *(5)* James warns his readers not to fill the role of a teacher unless they are fully qualified. He includes himself in the discussion and calls attention to the eventual outcome: "*we who teach will be judged more strictly."* Says Jesus, "*Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:19; and see 18:6). The fundamental problem is that these teachers, who explained God's Word and God's ways for the messianic community and who brought "a new insight into an old word from God" *(6)* could also abuse that vulnerable charismatic authority by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong persons or about another person and so lead to the destruction of the delicate relationships that characterize the Christian community. Teaching then, is a great responsibility with lasting consequences, for on the Day of Judgment God will pronounce the verdict (Romans 14:10-12).

James speaks sympathetically as a thoughtful pastor. He does not elevate himself because of his teaching position. He identifies with his readers when he writes, "*We all stumble in many ways."* That is, we all make mistakes, err, and come to grief. In a sense, we are like a one-year-old stumbling, although not immediately fatal, it is serious. All of us fall into sin and cannot escape its power. Sin robs us of our maturity, and the sin we most often commit is that of speaking carelessly.

"*If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check."* Does James mean that man is able to achieve perfection by controlling his tongue? If that were true a deaf and mute person would achieve this

status. No, in the first part of this epistle James indicates what he means by "*a perfect man*." He writes that faith during testing leads to perseverance, "*Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything"* (1:4). A perfect man, then, is not a sinless man but one who has reached spiritual maturity, speaks the truth in love, is filled with wisdom and understanding, and is able to keep his body in check.

Power of the Tongue – The Problem: Three Analogies

Vv. 3-8

> *"If we put bits into the mouths of horses, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.*
>
> *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison."*

Teachers, James tells them, need to be aware their tongues are like a bit that can direct and misdirect the entire messianic community. We are invited to a deeper reflection on the role of language in human double-mindedness by James's fascinating connection between speech and creation. The clearest indication that the reader should be thinking in terms of the Genesis account is James's reminder that humans are created according to the likeness of God (3:9), which recalls the first creation story (Gen. 1:26). The mention in 3:7 of "*beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature*" (NRSV) that are tamed by humans also echoes Genesis 1:27-28. In the second creation account, the human person is given the power of speech to name all of the living creatures (Gen. 2:19). The first and most important gift

distinctive to humans is this power to name, to create language, and by creating language also to continue God's own creative activity in the world.

When we realize that language is a world-creating capacity, then we begin to appreciate James's cosmic imagery in describing its power and its peril. Even the world as it emerges moment by moment from God's creative energy – the "given" world of natural forces and juices – is reshaped and given its meaning by human language, whose symbols enable us both to apprehend the world as meaningful and to interpret it. The power, then, is awesome, for it gives humans the freedom to structure human life according to "*the word of truth*" so that humans are "*a kind of first fruits of his creatures*" (1:18 NRSV), or to create a universe of meaning in which God is omitted or ignored. The real peril of the tongue is not found in the passing angry word or the incidental oath or the petty bit of slander. It is found in the creation of distorted worlds of meaning written within which the word of truth is suppressed.

Let no one ever say that words are insignificant. Martin Luther's hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" mentions the prince of darkness, whose

> Rage we can endure,
>
> For lo! his doom is pure,
>
> One little Word shall fell him.

One word can alter the course of human history. For example, Jesus spoke the words *"It is finished,"* which in the Greek is only one word.

James compares man's tongue to bits in the mouths of horses, to a very small rudder of a ship, and to a small spark that devastates a great forest. *(7)* James's three analogies were commonplace in the ancient world, showing James to be at home in the Hellenistic world.

Analogy One

The horse is awesomely powerful animal. Take 550 pounds (as much as a puffing Olympic heavyweight lifter can hoist overhead), set it on a horse's back, and it will barely snort as it stands breathing easily under the burden. The same horse, unburdened, can sprint a quarter-mile in about twenty-five seconds. A horse is half

a ton of raw power! Yet, place a bridle and bit in its mouth and a 100-pound woman on its back who knows what she is doing and the animal can literally be made to dance.

Analogy Two

James observed the same phenomenon in ancient ships, as ships small and large (as big as the 276 passenger ship that carried Paul to Rome – (cf. Acts 27:37-44) - were steered by an amazingly small rudder. Today it is still the same, whether it be an acrobatic ski boat or the *USS Enterprise*. He who controls the rudder controls the ship. Note that not the strong wind but the pilot determines the direction of the ship.

James's point is that the bit enables the rider to "*make them [the horses] obey us*." The bit is placed into the mouth so we can "*guide their whole bodies*." That he uses "guide" both here and in v. 4 suggests that he is thinking of the teacher's tongue as the guide of the church. So it is with the mighty tongue, that "movable muscular structure attached to the floor of the mouth" (*Webster's Unabridged*). Says James, "*the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts"* (v. 5a). Or as Phillips translation has helpfully paraphrased it, "*the human tongue is physically small, but what tremendous effects it can boast of."* The comparison should not be taken too strictly because the smallness of the tongue is compared with "great boasts" and not with the largeness of the body. This mere "two ounce slab of mucous membrane," as Charles Swindoll has called it, can legitimately boast of its disproportionate power to determine human destiny. The tongues of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill bear eloquent testimony to the dark and bright sides of the tongue's power. The Fuhrer on one side of the channel harangued a vast multitude with his hypnotic cadences. On the other side, the prime minister's brilliant measured utterances pulled a faltering nation together for its "finest hour." But we need not look to the drama of nations to see the truth of James's words. Our own lives are evidence enough. Never doubt the power of the tiny tongue, and never underestimate it. Curtis Vaughan eloquently sums this up:

> "It can sway men to violence, or it can move them to the noblest actions. It can instruct the ignorant, encourage the dejected, comfort the sorrowing, and sooth the dying. Or, it can crush the human spirit, destroy reputations, spread distrust and hate, and bring nations to the brink of war." *(8)*

The tongue of a teacher, James adds, can be compared to the rudder of a ship: as the small rudder guides a big ship, so the tongue can direct and misdirect the messianic community. James describes ships as "*so large that it takes strong winds to drive them.*" A question arises as to whether James is speaking of the size of the wind that large ships require in order to sail effectively or how a violent wind that buffets a boat can be mastered by even a small rudder. His emphasis is the contrast of small with large. The use of "strong winds," even if not neatly parallel, evokes the violence done by the tongue. The oddity here is that the rudder is used to control a violently blown ship, but James's own logic is the rudderlessness of the teachers' tongues. This shows that his emphasis is on the contrast of a small object influencing a much larger object.

James indirectly throws the responsibility back on the will of the teachers in his extension of this analogy to include the sovereign control of the helmsman: "*whatever the will of the pilot directs."*(9) The pilot, even if the winds are more than he can control, controls the impact of the winds on the sails by operating the rudder with expertise. By moving into the will of the pilot, James now prepares the messianic community to hear more explicitly the point he is making. As Luke Timothy Johnson states, James has his audience now prepared: "James makes all three components [of his rhetorical point] explicit: the guiding desire (the steersman), the means of control (the rudder), and that which is controlled (the ship), corresponding in turn to human desire, the tongue, and the body. *(8)*

Analogy Three

James then moves briefly to a third analogy, to fire, and this analogy will lead to a more complete exposition in vv. 6-12. James wants teachers to realize that their tongues are like a spark setting on fire a forest. "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!" (9) Anyone familiar with the American West these days knows that even a spark at the wrong time can threaten the lives and homes of thousands. It might also be observed that forests are uncommon in the Land of Israel, and this

leads some to suggest that ηψλε (*hyle,* "forest") might have its more common meaning "wood," suggesting brush fires instead of the conflagration of a forest (cf. Isa. 10:17). The best commentary is perhaps Philo, with whom James shares so many similarities in this passage. In speaking of desire, (επιτηψμια*, epithymia)*, Philo says from desire "flow the most iniquitous actions, public and private, small and great, dealing with things sacred or things profane, affecting bodies and souls and what are called external things. For nothing escapes desire, and as I have said before, like a flame in the forest it spreads abroad and consumes and destroys everything." *(10)*

> *"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell"* (v. 6).

James says the tongue is a raging fire. In a poetically structured sentence James portrays the tiny tongue as a cosmos of iniquity in itself, standing among the other members of the body and staining them all, then moving on to infect the whole cycle of life. One spark is sufficient to set a whole forest ablaze: stately oaks, majestic cedars, and tall pine trees are reduced to unsightly stumps of blackened wood. And that one spark usually can be attributed to human carelessness and neglect.

When we calculate the annual damage done to our forests by devastating fires, the amount runs into the millions in addition to the untold suffering and death inflicted on the wildlife of the stricken areas.

The emphases of James's three analogies varies: the bit and horse emphasized small size and great impact, the rudder and the ship emphasized not only small and great but also guidance, while the spark and forest now emphasizes small and great along with destructiveness.

Verse 6 is one of the most difficult passages in the epistle of James. Some scholars have attempted to explain the text by deleting a few words, for example, the phrase *a world of evil. (11)* Others wish to add a word to ease the reading of the text. For instance, in the Syriac translation of this verse, the sentence shows a balance in harmony with the preceding verse: "The tongue is fire, the sinful world like a forest." *(12)* Although the text presents numerous problems, we believe that one of

Luther's sayings is applicable: "Let the word stand as is." That is, before we delete from or add to the wording of the text, let us see whether we can understand the message itself. For this reason we wish to stay with the wording of the text.

James writes, "*The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body."* James compares the tongue with a fire that, by implication, is out of control and destroys everything that is combustible in its path (compare Psalm 120:3-4; Proverbs 16:27). He clarifies this comparison with the remark that the tongue is a world of evil. At 9:00 one Sunday evening, October 8, 1871 poor Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over the lantern as she was being milked, starting the great Chicago Fire, which blackened three and one half miles of the city, destroying over 17,000 buildings before it was checked by gunpowder explosions on the south line of the fire. The fire lasted two days and cost over 250 lives.

But, ironically, that was not the greatest inferno in the Midwest that year. Historians tell us that on the *same* day that dry autumn a spark ignited a raging fire in the North Woods of Wisconsin which burned for an entire month, taking more lives than the Chicago Fire. A veritable firestorm destroyed billions of yards of precious timber – all from one spark!

The tongue has that scope of inflammatory capability. James is saying that those who misuse the tongue are guilty of spiritual arson. A mere spark of an ill-spoken word can produce a firestorm that annihilates everything it touches.

The tongue corrupts. The word *corrupts* actually means "stains" but must be taken symbolically. An evil tongue blemishes one's personality. "*What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'"* (Mark 7:20-23).

The tongue is set on fire. From verse 3 James has been analogizing about the tongue and its impact on a community when teachers use it unwisely. Now he sees the teacher's impact as analogous to a spark loose in a forest, and this means that his focus is on the destructive impact of loose words. James explains the tongue's disastrous impacts by converting his active voice participle into a passive voice: "*and is itself set on fire by hell*." The tongue is a world of injustice in that it is

stoked by hell. James employs the word *hell* with a Hebrew connotation: Gehenna, (from "valley of Hinnom," 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31), outside Jerusalem where rubbish and refuse was burned. The term became an idiom, not for the dwelling place of Satan or demons, but for a place of condemnation because it was an everlasting fire (Matt. 5:22; 18:9). Hell inspires the abusive tongue, and James personifies hell as something "on the march" because he wants to drive home to the teachers they will be held accountable to God for what they say. The punishment then fits the crime: if it sets things on fire, it, too, will be set on fire (e.g., James 2:13; 1 Cor. 3:17; cf. Prov. 16:27). *(13)* "Far easier," Doug Moo wisely reminds us, "to heal are the wounds caused by sticks and stones than the damage caused by words."

The Difficulty: Taming the Tongue

Vv. 7-8

I have seen whales playing jump rope and so have you, at Sea World or some other great aquarium, as their trainers hoisted the rope high and the whales sailed over it. I have seen African lions cowed and submissive to the wizardry of Gunther Gebal Williams. I have seen eagles kill their prey and humbly lay it at their master's feet. I have seen a woman obediently kissed on the lips by a deadly cobra. But I have never seen a man or woman who in their own power could tame the tongue.

I say this, of course, on good biblical authority:

It is the *success* of humans with animals that both impresses James and his readers (and us), and that success will form the foil for the human ability to control the tongue. In fact, James flourishes in his praise of success: he says any animal species "*can be tamed and has been tamed*" by the human species.

In hyperbole, James now makes his case for the problem the teachers are facing: "*but no man can tame the tongue*." 3:2 claimed the one who does, in fact, control the tongue is "perfect" and now James forces the urgency of the situation in the hyperbolic claim that no one can do so. If humans can tame wild animals of all sorts, they still cannot tame the little tongue inside the human.

This is true of all of us every day. People who have been delivered from alcohol or gambling or hard drugs find their most difficult opponent to be the tongue.

Moreover, the uncontrolled tongue is deadly – "*It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison"* – verbal cyanide. Like the deadliest poisons, those which are most effective are tasteless and odorless; subtle criticism and slander, verbal venom which has done its work before the victim can react. By exposing the untamable tongue James is driving us to grace, as we shall see.

One of the most distinctive and disturbing features of contemporary culture is the way in which language serves distorting functions. We dwell in a virtual Babel of linguistic confusion and misdirection. One need think only of the advertising industry to appreciate how pervasive is the use of language to at once deceive and seduce, to consciously create by means of words and images multiple illusions in pursuit of which other humans can spend their fortunes and their energies. Such language weaves its deceptive web with a cunning awareness of how desire, avarice, and envy can "seduce the heart" (see 1:26).

We are aware as well how the slippery half-truths of advertising have become the common language of politics, where messages to the public are crafted precisely according to their ability to "sell" a candidate, where lying about and slandering opponents have become recognized as appeals to the electorate's most primitive fears and most unworthy cravings.

The Challenge: Tragedy and the Tongue

Vv. 9-12

> *"With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this out not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh."*

Now James deepens the problem of the misuse of the tongue by unmasking the tragedy and the incomprehensibility of unkind words. First, in 3:9-10a James restates the problem as a contradiction in its use for both blessing and cursing. To curse a fellow human being is to break out of the frame of God's creation and God's wisdom. It is to place oneself in the frame of competition and envy and violence and murder, which for James means to betray the purpose of creation: "*from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (3*:10). These last words convey almost a sense of despair at the human drive to distort God's creative will. In the core of this restatement, he brings in a profound anthropological argument: humans are made in God's image. Then he illustrates the problem at the misuse of the tongue with, once again, metaphors, now of a spring (3:11), a fig tree (3:12), a grapevine (3:12a), and salt water (3:12c). Each of these explores the inappropriateness of teachers using words to destroy those who are made in God's image.

The problem is that the same source, a teacher, uses words that both bless and curse someone who is God-like. To exhort the teachers to change, James uses four images. Each image leads the reader to think of a source producing something inappropriate: a spring producing both fresh and brackish water, a fig tree producing olives, a grapevine producing figs, and salt water producing fresh water. The fourth image comes back to the first, though with slight variations.

v. 11.

The first question, "*Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water?*" begins with μετι (*meti)*, a word that invites a negative response. In fact, the term is a little more emphatic than *me* (2:14, 3:12), and the question could be rendered, "Surely, no spring produces both fresh and brackish water, does it?" James assumes the teachers will answer his questions accurately, and if they do they will connect the images to the incongruity of being a God-blesser and a human-curser. Here the focus is on the source or perhaps on the connection of the source and what is produced. Again, the analogy is to the tongue of a teacher whose responsibility is to love others and speak in a way that emerges from that love. That sort of source should produce God-blessing language but not human-cursing language.

v. 12.

As geological observations create images for the congruity of nature, so do plants: "*Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives?"* (12a) Anyone who has traveled the Mediterranean knows of the ubiquity of olives, grapes, and figs. A good example is Jotham's fable in Judges 9:7-15. James, whose style is to absorb rather than quote his sources, could be rooted in a saying of Jesus (Matt. 7:16). Again, though using now *me* instead of *meti,* a negative answer is expected by James. Inasmuch as fig trees do not produce both figs *and* olives, so a teacher should not be a God-blesser *and* a human-curser. To be both is incongruous.

"[*Can*] *a grapevine [produce] figs?"* (12b) This question is tied to the second since the *me* carries over and the verbal construction, "is able to produce," is implied. Again, inasmuch as grapevines do not produce both grapes *and* figs, so the teachers ought not to be both God-blessers *and* human-cursers.

James's fourth image moves from a question to "neither does" observation. Since this marks the end of the paragraph, we are led also to think this image brings closure to James's point. But he closes abruptly with a final analogy that makes the same point about the incongruity of a source bringing forth wildly different produce. Thus: "*No more can salt water yield fresh."* This image trades back on the first image in v. 11, but in this instance the source ("the same opening") is not the focus. Instead, the concern is solely with the congruity (or incongruity) of a source and its produce; salt water does not produce fresh, or sweet, water. And, in contrast to the first image, this fourth image uses "salt" instead of "brackish" (or "bitter"). Perhaps more significantly, it is reasonable to think "spring" is implied instead of "water": thus, "no more can a salty *spring* produce fresh water." With this analogy about the rightful congruity of source and produce, James finishes our section. To return now to the supposed incongruity of how James ends this paragraph: perhaps it is our own form of writing and Bible translation with paragraph formatting that creates the problem we discover here in the lack of closure. 3:13 continues to address the teachers, even if there is a subtle sideways skip to a slightly different subject.

We need to keep the context in mind: James is concerned about the teachers in the messianic community, and his concern is with their tongue – he advises them not to pursue teaching and to guard their tongues. Why? Because the tongue's impact

is disproportionate to its size. In fact, the tongue demands attention to tame. As if crying out to his teachers, James pleads with them to realize the incongruity of being one who blesses God and at the same time one who curses humans who are made in God's likeness. By appealing to an assortment of analogies, James claims this incongruity makes no sense; it is at odds with what everyone sees in nature. A better way is the way of wisdom, and the proper goal of the teacher is neither control nor curse but wisdom.

After such a lengthy exposition about the nature of the tongue, we can expect members of the church to object. They believe that those whom the grace of God has touched are able to control their tongues. Jewish Christians were perpetuating the beautiful old Hebrew custom of saying, "Blessed be he" after each utterance of God's name, so that their worship times were continually punctuated by choruses of praise. Yet these same people, with the blessings on their lips would sometimes, after leaving worship, actually curse someone who had angered them. This was a shameful sin, and James would not tolerate it. The Law is fulfilled by loving God with one's heart and loving one's neighbor as oneself (cf. Mark 12:28). But to affirm devotion for God and then hate a fellow man made in God's image scandalizes one's profession of loving God (1 John 4:20, 21).

In my childhood I learned some stanzas of a song that expresses a longing for perfection but recognizes man's inability to achieve it.

"I would be like Jesus,

So humble and so kind.

His words were always tender,

His voice was e'er divine.

But no, I'm not like Jesus,

As everyone can see!

O Savior, come and help me,

And make me just like Thee.

-Anonymous

James reflects on the Christian's inconsistency of praising the name of the Lord and cursing his fellow man.

The prophet Isaiah teaches the believer to praise God the Father: "*But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O Lord, you are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name"* (Isaiah 63:16).

We would expect the believer who praises God in prayer, confession, and song to be consistent. This is not the case, however. With the same tongue the believer curses his fellow men, "*who have made in God's likeness*." Therefore, if we curse men, we indirectly curse God. *(15)* Moreover, if we curse men, we act contrary to the explicit command of Jesus, "*Bless those who curse you"* (Luke 6:28; also see Romans 12:14). The God-like are not to be cursed.

ENDNOTES

1. Ethel May Baldwin and David V. Benson, *Henrietta Mears and How She Did It!* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Light, 1970), pp. 176, 177.
2. *Ibid*., pp. 279, 280.
3. A literal translation (with variations) is, "let not many of you become teachers" (NKJV, NASB, NEB, MLB, RSV, GNB). JB has, "Only a few of you, my brothers, should be teachers."
4. See W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); A. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).
5. The title *rabbi* actually means "my great [teacher]" and in the New Testament it commands honor and respect. For the role of the teacher in the early church, see Acts 13:1; Romans 12:7; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9, and *Didache* 11:1-2.
6. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 237.
7. The SIV follows Nestle-Aland's 26th edition of the Greek New Testament in starting a paragraph division at verse 3. The paragraph, with examples and a conclusion, continues through verse 6.
8. Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p. 69.
9. James uses a single Greek term with opposite meanings: *νλικοξ nlikox* here means both "how great" and "small."
10. *Decalogue,* 173.
11. The substantival participle throws a weight on the action: "the steerer" or "the one piloting." Again, James's use of the present tenses is vivid: "wherever the will of the one piloting is choosing." There are good resources for the images here: the classic study of James Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul* (4th) ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978, a reprint of the 1880 edition); B.M. Rapske, "Acts, Travel and Shipwreck,"

in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 2; ed. D.W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eeerdmans, 1994), 1-47; see also L. Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 149-62.

12. Johnson, 258.
13. See Bauckham, "Tongue," 123-4.
14. James Hardy Ropes suggests the possibility of omitting the phrase *a world of fire*, but then candidly concludes, "Exegesis by leaving out hard phrases is an intoxicating experience." See *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary of the Epistle of James,* International Critical Commentary series (1916); reprint ed., Edinburg: Clark, 1961), p. 234. Martin Dibelius regards as a gloss the clause "a world of evil among the parts of the body." *James: A Commentary on the Epistle of James,* rev. Heinrich Greeven, trans. Michael A. Williams, ed.
15. Refer to James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James,* New International Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 143, 138.
16. C. Leslie Mitton is of the opinion that cursing "probably refers primarily to angry words of abuse spoken to those whom we regard as subordinate to us." *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p. 131. However, if James had wanted to tell his readers not to slander or engage in backbiting, he had words to that effect at his disposal

CHAPTER 7

James 3:13-18

TEACHERS AND WISDOM

J. I. Packer, a gifted and personable theologian, has shown how many go wrong in their thinking about wisdom via the illustration of a British railway station, the kind with which all visitors to England quickly become very familiar. He says if you stand at the end of a platform you will readily observe the constant movement of trains in and out, but you will only be able to form a general idea of the overall plan of what is going on, catching only glimmers of the subtle minute-by-minute alterations that are part and parcel of a smooth-running station.

However, if you are privileged to be taken into the signal box room, you will see on a long wall a detailed diagram of all the tracks for five miles around the station, with little "glowworm lights" indicating the positions of every engine on the track – some moving slowly or swiftly, some stationary. In a glance you will be able to survey the entire situation through the eyes of those in control. You will see why one engine is signaled to a halt, and why another has been diverted, and why another sits unmoving on a siding. The reasoning for all the movements will become perfectly plain once you see the great diagram and its glowing dots. Says Dr. Packer:

> "Now the mistake that is commonly made is to suppose that this is an illustration of what God does when He bestows wisdom: to suppose, in other words, that the gift of wisdom consists in a deepened insight into the meaning and purpose of events going on around you, an ability to see why God has done what He has done in a particular case, and what He is going to do next. "*(1)*

People who think this is what wisdom is imagine if they walk close enough to God, they will be in God's signal box and will understand everything that happens. Such people are always analyzing the events of life: why this or that happened, whether

specific happenings are signs to stop, park on a sliding, or go ahead. When they are confused, they suppose themselves to have a spiritual problem. It is true God sometimes uses unusual signs to confirm the way we should go by, but this is very different from getting a message from every unusual thing that comes our way.

On the contrary, explains Dr. Packer, the experience of God's wisdom is like learning to drive a car. When driving it is important to make appropriate responses to the constantly changing scene, to exercise soundness of judgment regarding speed, distance and braking. If you are going to drive well, you must not fret over the highway engineer's reasoning for an S curve, the philosophy which produced red, green, and yellow traffic lights, or why the lady in front of you is accelerating while her foot is on the brake. Rather, "You simply try to see and do the right thing in the actual situation that presents itself. The effect of divine wisdom is to enable you and me to do just that in the actual situations of life." *(2)* In order to drive well, you need to keep your eyes wide open to what is before you and use your head. To live wisely, you must be clear-eyed about people and life, seeing life as it is, and then responding with a mind dependent on the wisdom of God.

Being wise does not mean we understand everything that is going on because of our superior knowledge, but that we do the right thing as life comes along. Some drivers may have immense knowledge about everything, but they cannot drive well at all. Others who are less knowledgeable consistently do the right thing as they wisely drive through life.

The Christian lives not in isolation but in fellowship with the community in which God has placed him. That community is first of all the church of Jesus Christ. True to her calling, the church stands in the midst of the world to let the light of the gospel shine forth.

To function properly in their respective places, the Christian and the church need wisdom and understanding. James is concerned about practical, moral wisdom, the kind that is expressed in righteous behavior. In the introductory part of his epistle James tells the reader how to obtain wisdom: "*Ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault"* (1:5).

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

The Truly Wise Teacher

Vv. 13-18

> *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

This portion of the third chapter of James is best interpreted as a continuation of the subject begun in verse 1 on the influence and use of the tongue. After mentioning teachers in the first verse, James digresses in a sense to the more specific subject of the tongue's influence and evil. In verse 13 he reverts to the subject of verse 1 (the teacher). Under the contrast of heavenly and earthly wisdom he sets forth the deadliness of the sins of the tongue of the unwise teacher and the beauty of righteousness as the fruit of the truly wise teacher. There is abundant evidence that the term "wise man" is to be taken in the sense of "teacher." The truly wise teacher will have his fruit in peace and understanding leading to righteousness, and not in faction, jealousy, and vile deeds. This is an admonition which every individual who teaches or preaches God's word needs to study and take to heart. He should ask whether the fruit of his ministry indicates his wisdom is from above or below. He may be sure if faction, strife, and division follow his work, the source is not the "wisdom from above."

No one can live without wisdom, for no one wishes to be called stupid. Therefore, wisdom is treasured by those who have it and sought by those who lack it. James, then, asks a rather direct question:

> *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom"* (v. 13).

The question "who is wise and understanding among you?" is more than a quest for information. James's rhetorical intent is not so much to identify *who* such persons are as to *describe* such persons, as both the answer in 3:13b and the exposition in 3:14-18 will reveal. James's description will not permit the teacher to think his or her mastery of theology or exegesis sufficient to pass muster. What passes muster for James is behavior shaped by humble wisdom. He is asking more than simply "who are the good people among you?" It is about finding some solid footing in the midst of an economic and power divide. It is about rooting oneself in the kind of wisdom that bears the likeness of God rather than the brokenness of humanity. It is also, it seems, about leadership in the midst of communal disorder and bitterness.

James addresses the members of the church. "*Who is wise and understanding among you?"* Both "wise" and "understanding" are words that described skilled and expert people. They were persons invested with knowledge; they were scientifically versed. They were, as these terms were used among Greek philosophers, the scholars. They were the people in-the-know and with the know-how. James's question might be something like this, who should be the teachers of this community? Who is worth following and imitating? Who should mentor us?

But James immediately twists the language away from any kind of ancient educated scholarship (those lovers of wisdom, the philosophers) toward a lifestyle characterized by the fruits of God's Spirit.

His concern is with the leaders in the messianic community, and they were identified as teachers. He assumes they pray to God for wisdom, that they possess this virtue, and that the world looks to them for leadership. True wisdom engenders peace and enables the pursuit of righteousness. Knowing, however, these things are not always true of Christians, James wants his readers to examine themselves.

I repeat: Being wise does not mean we understand everything that is going on because of our superior knowledge, but that we do the right thing as life comes along. Wisdom shows up in a changed life; it shows up in transformation. What characterizes this life? It is those who show their good works out of a good

lifestyle (conduct, way of life) that is characterized by wisdom' meekness or humility. James prefers a person with life-shaping wisdom rather than an academician. Wisdom is not what you know but how you live.

"*Knowledge is proud that she knows so much;*

Wisdom is humble that she knows no more."

William Cowper

A wise and understanding person demonstrates in what he says and by what he does that he possesses wisdom. Whether James wants to designate the teachers of his day wise men is not quite clear. If this is the case, we see a direct connection between the beginning of the chapter ("*Not many of you should presume to be teachers,"* v. 1) and the rhetorical question here in v. 13.

James qualifies the term *wise* with the word *understanding*. This means that a wise person also have experience, knowledge, and ability. Wisdom consists of having insight and experience to draw conclusions that are correct. An old proverb sums this up: "Foresight is better than hindsight, but insight is best." Countless instances prove that knowledgeable people are not necessarily wise. But when a knowledge-able person has insight, he indeed is wise. If there is a wise and understanding person among you, says James, let him demonstrate this in his life.

What does James mean by the expression *good life*? He refers to noble praiseworthy behavior. True, James stresses "*deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."* But a wise man affirms his noble conduct in words and deeds.

"Actions speak louder than words." This proverbial truth underscores the necessity of looking at a person's deeds to see whether his actions match his words. What are his deeds? They are performed in a humble, gentle spirit that is controlled by a spirit of heavenly wisdom.

The emphasis in this verse falls on that characteristic of wisdom described as humility. This quality can also be described as meekness or gentleness. Gentleness comes to expression in the person who is endowed with wisdom and who affirms this in all deeds.

> *But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth"* (v. 14).

There is another kind of wisdom. Its roots, deeply planted in the heart, are envy and selfish ambition. "Selfish ambition" is the word used for political partisanship. It describes people who hold or seek positions of power for their own ends or interests. This bitter and selfish ambition are the two character traits that lead to the negative consequences below: disorder and vile (useless) practices. These two traits wreak havoc in a community, a marriage, a partnership, a leadership. They destroy us from the inside – insidious heart problems that lie hidden beneath the outward boast and lie. Something is broken deep inside.

The contrast in this verse and the preceding one has a direct parallel in Paul's epistle to the Galatians, where he mentions among the fruits of the Spirit "*gentleness and self-control"* (5:23). Among the acts of the sinful nature are "*selfish ambition ... and envy*" (5:20-21).

> *"Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice"* (vv. 15-16).

The opposite of wisdom from above is earthly wisdom manifested in arrogant ambition and contentiousness. James is suspicious of anything that smacks of friendship with the world. The NIV correctly puts the word *wisdom* in quotation marks to indicate that this wisdom is not genuine. Its peculiarities are unspiritual and devilish.

In this verse James lists a series of three adjectives that have descending order: earthly, unspiritual, devilish. This pseudo-wisdom is "earthly," and thus stands in contrast to what God originates in heaven. If God's spirit is absent from earthly matters, sin is present. Further, this wisdom from below is "unspiritual" (πσευχηικε*, pseuchike*), natural as opposed to spiritual. Paul's use of the same word in 1 Corinthians 2:14 clarifies this idea: "*But a natural (pseuchikos) man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised"* (NASB). Thus we see that "unspiritual" or "natural" describes a wisdom that comes from the mind of depraved fallen humanity and is hopelessly flawed. Last, and lowest, this

wisdom is "of the devil." The wisdom which produces "bitter envy," selfish ambition," and proud boasting is radically evil, for it is authored by the Devil. *(3)*

Persons who are consumed by envy and selfishness usually talk about this to anyone who lends a listening ear. They ought to realize, however, that everything they say is contradicted by the truth. Every time they open their mouths to give vent to their feelings, they deceive themselves. When Paul admonishes the Ephesians not to grieve the Holy Spirit, he tells them to *"get rid of all bitterness"* (4:31). A heart that nurtures "*bitter envy and selfish ambition"* is devoid of heavenly wisdom.

"The truth is clear – proud, ambitious, fighting 'wisdom' comes from the world, the flesh, and the Devil. We must never let anyone convince us that such conduct is "common sense," or that if we don't learn "to give as good as we get" we will never succeed in life, or that meekness is "unmanly" (or "unwomanly"), or that the wise man must always have the last word. Such wisdom is from below and can only take us down, down, down, down!

The Potential of True Wisdom

Vv. 17-18

In 1845 Royal Navy Rear Admiral Sir John Franklin and 138 specially chosen officers and men left England to find the Northwest Passage. They sailed in two three-masted ships with the daunting names the *Erebus* (the dark place, according to Greek mythology, through which souls pass on their way to Hades) and the *Terror*. Each ship was equipped with an auxiliary steam engine and a twelve-day supply of coal, should steam power be needed sometime during the anticipated two-to-three-year voyage. But instead of loading additional coal, each ship made room for a 1, 200-volume library, an organ, and full, elegant place settings for all – china, cut-glass goblets, and sterling flatware. The officers' sterling was of especially grand Victorian design, with the individual officers' family crests and initials engraved on the heavy handles. "The technology of the Franklin expedition," says Annie Dillard, "… was adapted only to the conditions in the Royal Navy officers clubs in England. The Franklin expedition stood on its

dignity." *(4)* The only clothing which these proud Englishmen took on the expedition were the uniforms and greatcoats of Her Majesty's Navy.

The ships sailed off amidst imperial pomp and glory. Two months later a British whaler met the two ships in the Lancaster Sound, and reports were carried back to England of the expedition's high spirits. He was the last European to see them alive.

Search parties funded by Lady Jane Franklin began to piece together a tragic history from information gathered from Eskimos. Some had seen men pushing a wooden boat across the ice. Others had found a boat, perhaps the same boat, and the remains of thirty-five men at a place now named Salvation Cove. Another thirty bodies were found in a tent at Terror Bay. Simpson Strait had yielded an eerie sight – three wooden masts of a ship protruding through the ice.

For the next twenty years search parties recovered skeletons from the frozen waste. Twelve years later it was learned that Admiral Franklin had died aboard ship. The remaining officers and crew had decided to walk for help. Accompanying one clump of bodies were place settings of sterling silver flatware bearing the officers' initials and family crests. The officers' remains were still dressed in their fine, buttoned blue uniforms, some with silk scarves in place.

The Franklin Expedition was a monumental failure by all estimations. It was foolishly conceived, planned, equipped, and carried out. The expedition itself accomplished absolutely nothing. Yet it is universally agreed that it was the turning point in Artic exploration. The mystery of the expedition's disappearance and its fate attracted so much attention in Europe and the United States that no less than thirty ships made extended journeys in search of the answer. In doing so, they mapped the Artic for the first time, discovered the Northwest Passage and developed a technology suitable to Arctic rigor. It was upon the shipwreck of Rear Admiral Franklin's "wisdom" that Amundsen would one day stand victorious at the South Pole and Perry and Henson at the North. *(5)* Similarly, the shipwreck of worldly wisdom ought to motivate us to seek wisdom from above, so we can wisely navigate through life.

This is what James had in mind when he contrasted two kinds of wisdom in 3:13-18. In verses 13-16 he demonstrated the follies of the "wisdom" from below by

parading its skeletons before us. "*Such 'wisdom'* he says in verses 15, 16, "*does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice*." A closer look at those rotting bones, hopes James, will cause us to swear off the vanity of earthly pride and wisdom.

By contrast there is the lure of the meek/gentle wisdom (v. 13) from above and James skillfully describes its seven beautiful characteristics in verses 17 and 18. In respect to wisdom, believers are "*in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God"* (1 Cor.1:30). Since all God's wisdom resides in Christ, when we came to be "*in him*," we become rooted in wisdom. Thus we personally experience the infinite wisdom of God. Our relationship with Christ assures a transfer of this wisdom to us and opens us to further wisdom. "Jesus…has become for us wisdom from God." Hallelujah!

James had apparently given much thought to the arrangement of the remaining six characteristics of wisdom because he has artfully ordered them so in the Greek the first four began with the *e* sound and the last two with a pleasant *a* sound. Also, the last two have an almost metrical rhyming. *(6)* He wanted his hearers to remember this wisdom.

Peace-loving. It is literally "peaceful." This does not suggest, as some may hear it, an attitude of peace by abdication – like the couple who had just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Someone asked the gentleman the secret of their marital bliss. "Well" the old man drawled, "the wife and I had this agreement when we first got married. It went like this: When she was bothered about somethin' she'd just tell me and git it off her chest. And if I was mad at her about somethin', I was able to take a long walk. I s'ppose you attribute our happy marriage to the fact that I have largely led an outdoor life."

There are indeed proper times to "take a walk," but James is not recommending a peace that depends on walking away from conflict. Rather, he is commending a peaceful spirit. The hearts of those with such peace have met Christ, who is himself their peace (Ephesian 2:14). They have the peace he gives, which is totally unlike the peace the world gives (John 14:27). Their spiritual war is over, they are at peace with God, and they have a deep sense of well-being – *shalom*. The person walking in heavenly wisdom longs for peace. At times he or she make some

"waves" because a biblical principle is at stake, but ordinarily they refrain from turbulence and rejoice in making peace. They "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (*Ephesians 4:3) and "*make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification"* (Romans 14:19). They live out Paul's injunction, "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone"* (Romans 12:18). St. Francis understood this, as his prayer beautifully recalls:

"*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;*

Where there is hate, may I bring love;

Where offense, may I bring pardon;

May I bring unison in place of discord."

You and I have met many people more capable than us with far greater knowledge and gifts, some far more accomplished and esteemed. But if they are pugnacious and trouble-making, they are, despite their great abilities, unwise. The wise are peace-loving, says God's Word.

Considerate. The wisdom from above also makes one "considerate." The great linguist Archbishop Trench said there is no word in English or Latin to adequately translate this word. *(7)* Nevertheless, the idea is fairly clear. It describes the kind of person who though wronged and possessing the "right" not to bend nevertheless forgoes his rights. *(8)*

Heavenly wisdom is "considerate," or as the *Jerusalem Bible* has it, "kindly." The honest personal application of this is humbling, to say the least. But if we are to be wise we must take this to heart.

Submissive. The NIV's rendering of the fourth characteristic as "submissive" ("willing to yield") is fine if one understands it as willing to submit to persuasion, *((9)* or open to reason. *(10)* I prefer "compliant," "persuadable," conciliatory," or even "obedient" and "willingly conforming." James still has the teachers in mind, they must be teachable and persuadable and capable of letting the evidence and argument carry the day: they must know when to hold firm and when to adjust. A moving example of such submissive wisdom is seen in the case of David and Abigail. David's generous and friendly overtures to Abigail's foolish husband

Nabal has been outrageously rejected. So David and his men armed themselves and set out for redress. Fortunately they were met by Abigail, who eloquently argued against violence. David responded by saying, "*Praise to the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands"* (1 Samuel 25:32, 33). Those who are filled with Heaven's wisdom will submit to reason.

On one occasion Abraham Lincoln, to please a certain politician issued a command to transfer certain regiments. When Secretary of War Edwin Stanton received the order, he refused to carry it out, saying the President was a fool. When Lincoln was told of this, he replied, "If Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right. I'll see for myself." As the two men talked, the President quickly realized his decision was a serious mistake, and without hesitation he withdrew it. A teachable, open spirit is often a major key in defusing conflict.

A man or a woman is in a bad way when he or she is no longer persuadable. "Foolish" is the biblical designation for such a state. Are some of us playing this part of our marriages – or at work – in our theology? The wise are open to reason – they are "submissive."

The wise teacher, because he or she knows mental and moral limitations, nurtures a willingness to listen and to change. For this reason, pastors and teachers do well to have someone to whom they are accountable, whether it be another teacher, or a spiritual leader.

Mercy. Next, the wise are characterized as "*full of mercy and good fruit."* James combines two attributes to form one idea. As Jesus said the Pharisees were "*full of hypocrisy and lawlessness*" (Matt. 23:28), as Paul can say idolaters were "*filled with every kind of wickedness*" (Rom. 1:29), and as James can say the tongue is "*full of poison*" (3:8), so James urges the teacher to be "*full of mercy and good fruits*" (3:17) and Paul wants the Roman Christians to be "*full of goodness*" (Rom. 15:14). It is likely that "*mercy*" and "*good fruits*" are pointing to the same thing: the good works James speaks of are shown to those in need (1:26-27; 2:2-4, 14-17; 5:1-6). Both "mercy" and "good fruits" are shaped by the Jesus Creed's "*love your neighbor as yourself*" (2:8-13).

James, the unrelenting moral theologian, ties wisdom (seemingly so cerebral and esoteric) to action. Thus we may teach the Bible and be viewed by everyone as fountains of wisdom, refreshing those around with pithy sayings and sage advice. But if we are not full of mercy and good works we are not wise! How radical and countercultural this is. It condemns many twenty-first century dispensers of so-called "wisdom."

Impartial. The sixth characteristic true wisdom is "without partiality," which is a fulsome translation of a single Greek word: αδιακριτοσ (*adiakritos,* "impartial") or non-judgmental." In 3:1-4:12 partisanship appears as that which the zeal and ambition of loose-tongued teachers have generated. Furthermore, partiality toward the rich and against the poor and marginalized has evidently given some shape to the messianic community (1:19-21, 26-27; 2:13, 14-17; 5:1-6). "Impartiality" also needs to be connected to 2:12-13 and 4:11-12, where a rampant verbal partisanship and judgementalism seem to have been set loose. It does not vacillate, taking one position in one circumstance and another in a different situation. *(18)* It operates on consistent principle. I remember once viewing a conversion between Groucho Marx and William Buckley in which Groucho excused a contradiction by quoting Thoreau: "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." At which Buckley rolled his eyes and faced the camera with a winning grin as he corrected Groucho with the exact quotation: "A *foolish* consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." Consistency – being "impartial" – is a hallmark of wisdom from Heaven.

Sincere. Finally wisdom from above is "sincere," or literally *without hypocrisy*. In the New Testament this term ανψποκριτοσ *(anypokritos)* characterizes love (Rom, 12:9; 2 Cor. 6:6; 1 Pet. 1:22) and faith (1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:5). Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, used to tell how he sent a telegram to each of twelve friends, all men of great virtue and considerable position in society. The message was worded: "Fly at once, all is discovered." Within twenty-four hours, the story goes, all twelve had left the country! No doubt there was some playful exaggeration here, but the point is generally true that so many people, including Christians, are not what they seem to be.

But those full of wisdom from above never play-act. What you see is what you get. No masks – no feigned sincerity – no pretense. How refreshing this is in a world full of off-stage actors who believe a little hypocrisy is part of the essential wisdom

of life. Christian wisdom demands and demonstrates the sincerity of Christ. "*Now this is our boast*," says Paul, "*Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace"* (2 Corinthians 1:12).

v. 18

In contrast to the negative side of the attributes of true wisdom, James now turns to his desired end for teachers who are characterized by true wisdom: they pursue peace in peaceful ways. James could have quoted Jesus and the effect would have been the same: "*Blessed are the peacemakers"* (Matt. 5:9). Even if James does not use "peace" often, a careful reading of his letter shows that peace in the community is a primary aim the whole letter. This verse, because its opening words ("a harvest of righteousness") are the least clear in the sentence, might best be interpreted by proceeding from its end back to its beginning.

True wisdom comes down from heaven as a gift of God to the believer who asks for it (James 1:5, 17). This wisdom becomes evident when man makes decisions that are dependent on and in harmony with the will of God. Heavenly wisdom has its own characteristic: it is "*pure."*

In this text purity is the first of seven words or phrases James uses to describe wisdom. It represents wisdom as immaculate, undefiled, innocent, as Christ himself is pure (I John 3:3). Pure is a synonym of "holy." We compare purity with light that dispels the darkness, illumines everything, but it is not influenced by anything. *(20)*

James is concerned with those who characteristically (so the present tense) "make peace." He has his doubts about whether the teachers and leaders of the messianic community really do seek peace, but his rhetoric assumes this is the goal of one who is committed to true wisdom. In fact, the language James uses suggests the teachers are *not* seeking peace they are creating "*conflicts and disputes*" (4:1). As noted "peace" (Hebrew *shalom*) is God's design for humans and this world as humans relate to God, self, others, and the world around them. In this instance, James's primary focus is on relationships among members of the messianic

community, relationships now in jeopardy because of the zeal and ambition of its teachers and the unjust practices of the community (2:2-4; 5:1-6).

The emphasis of James is found in the heart of this verse and in the words "*is sown in peace*." Those who "*make peace*" "*sow in peace*"; they do everything in a way that is peaceable (3:17) and that creates peace in the community. They know "*anger does not produce God's righteousness*" (1:20). What they sow is a "*harvest of righteousness*." "Harvest" translates Greek καρποσ (*karpos),* which is normally translated "fruit," as in 3:17. While "harvest" and "fruit" are both the "yield" of a seed's maturation, the latter term is our preference. Proverbs uses "fruit" for words and speech (Prov. 13:2, 18:20). Closer to James, however, is Isaiah 27:9:

> *Therefore by this the guilt of Jacob will be expiated,*
>
> *and this will be* ***the full fruit of*** the removal of his sin:
>
> *when he makes all the stones of the altars*
>
> *like chalkstones crushed to pieces,*
>
> *no sacred poles or incense altars will remain standing*

and Amos 6:12:

> *Do horses run on rocks?*
>
> *Does one plow the sea with oxen?*
>
> *But you have turned justice into poison*
>
> *and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood.*

In Amos "fruit of *righteousness"* is parallel to "justice." finally, Hebrews 12:11 informs us that discipline "yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

It is far too easy to think of "righteousness" in Pauline terms or to make it a matter of personal morality and holiness. For James and his Jewish world of thought, "righteous" described the person whose behaviors and life were in conformity with Torah. What James has in mind in this metaphorical expression is the yield of acting rightly, namely, concrete acts of justice. Also, even the need for leaders to render judgment in the community must be done peacefully and peaceably by those who pursue peace. James has turned his attention on the teachers' words,

verbal judgments, and behaviors. His point is such acts must be done, as 2:13 clearly stated, with mercy and gentleness and with a view to creating peace in the messianic community.

This is a call to reject the decaying skeletons of earthly wisdom: "*Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice"* (vv. 15, 16). The bones and grinning skulls of such false "wisdom" are clumped everywhere along the shores of modern culture, and among them are the remains of many believers and their churches.

We need to be like ships that followed Franklin's Expedition, learning from the folly of the past and embracing new wisdom for the journey. We must consciously take hold of the wisdom from Heaven.

This is a good point at which to consider again the promise given earlier in James' letter: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him"* (1:5).

Summary

James warns his readers against the danger of the unruly tongue that leads them to sin and shame. Teachers, he says, "*will be judged more strictly*" in relation to their teaching. He himself, however, is not judgmental. He realizes at one time or other every person is at fault in what he says, and therefore no one is perfect. The person who keeps his tongue in check controls his entire body.

We rein in horses with relatively small bits that are placed in their mouths. We steer a large ship with "*a very small rudder*." On the other hand, a tongue that is not kept in check is a fire that affects the whole course of life. We have much greater difficulty restraining our tongue than taming any creature in the animal world. And last, we experience the restlessness of the tongue as it praises God and curses men, for this is contradictory.

After a discussion about the tongue, James describes the wise man who demonstrates wisdom by the deeds he performs. A person filled with envy and selfishness denies the truth; he possesses earthly wisdom that is unspiritual and of

the devil. Heavenly wisdom, however, is pure, promotes peace, and produces a harvest of righteousness.

James urges heavenly wisdom and its characteristics as the lifestyle we wear on our journey.

ENDNOTES

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing* God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 92. Note: the book contains two helpful chapters on wisdom – Chapter 9 ("God Only Wise," pp. 8-88) and Chapter 10 ("God's Wisdom and Ours," pp. 89-97).
2. *Ibid.* 93.
3. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, *Vol. 8, James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 134.
4. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Chapter 1, "An Expedition to the Pole" (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 24.
5. *Ibid.,* pp. 24-27. See also Day Otis Kellogg, ed., *The Encyclopedia Britannica,* Volume 9, Ninth Edition (New York: The Werner Company, 1898), pp. 719-722 for a detailed account.
6. Consult E. M. Sidebottom, *James, Jude, and 2 Peter,* Century Bible series (London, Nelson: Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1967), p. 51.
7. Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 135.
8. Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1901), pp. 144, 147 says, "'Gentle' and 'gentleness,' on the whole, commend themselves as the best; but the fact remains, which also in a great measure excuses so much vacillation here, namely, that we have no words in English which are full equivalents of the Greek.
9. Adamson, *The Epistle of James,* p. 155.
10. Moo, *The Letter of James,* p. 136.
11. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 21895), p. 236.

CHAPTER 8

James 4:1-6

SUBMISSION IN LIFE AND SPIRIT

Many churches contain a pleasing segment in their worship service called "passing the peace." It requires one shake hands with those around him and say, "Peace be with you." The other then responds, "Peace be with *you*." This new "tradition" is a nice touch, but it can have problems. The people of one small New York congregation found it beyond their limits. They could not dare shaking hands with people to whom they bore lifelong grudges. So they fired the minister and found a new one sympathetic to their needs! *(1)* The story is humorous, but its tragic note is firmly rooted in all denominations.

James Robert Johnstone, the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian and preacher, remarked:

> "Men and women who on the Sabbath have sat side by side at the Lord's table and drunk of the common cup of love, will scowl at and calumniate and thwart each other all the week. And the feeling between congregations and denominations, which are but different companies or brigades in the army of the Captain of salvation, is not infrequently such as to remind one of the host of Midian in the night of Gideon's victory, when "every man's sword was turned against his fellow, throughout the host." *(2)*

Our individualistic American tradition has been particularly receptive to church strife. Recently I read of a congregational business meeting that turned into a brawl which was finally stopped by the local police! Stories like this are such a part of our American folklore that the caricature of a feuding church is found everywhere, as a young father learned from his children. Hearing a commotion in his back yard, he looked out and saw his daughter and several playmates in a heated quarrel. When he intervened, his daughter called back, "Dad, we're just playing church!" *(3)*

Here's the point by James: Christians should reject strife and humbly submit to God in order to be his rather than the world's friends. A key test case for demonstrating this transformation involves how one speaks to and about other people.

James has not changed the focus of his attention since 3:1; he is concerned with teachers, their tongues, and the communal destructiveness they are generating.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

4:1-6

> *"Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it: so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.*
>
> *Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, 'God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us'? But he gives all the more grace; therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'"*

Chapter 4 begins with a warning against strife and contention. A connection may be seen between this and the last section in the third chapter. Divine wisdom leads to peace and righteousness. But since there is strife and fighting among the readers, what is the source of such? James answers by identifying the source as lusts and desires which crave worldly satisfaction. Prayers are unanswered or avoided. But friendship with the world means enmity against God, whose Spirit longs for the undivided loyalty of his children and who gives grace to achieve the purpose. A call to repentance and humility is needed to bring the readers back into the favor of God.

This section, while it may not be pleasant to read and contemplate, is one which out to be studied and taught. Worldliness is one of the continual problems in the church. Christians are in the world, but they are not of the world (John 17:14). God has accepted them as his children or sons. He justifies them and accepts them as though they were as spotless as angels, but he leaves them here in the world. The final transformation into the image of God himself will come when Jesus is seen in the resurrection and his followers become like him. But God expects them to grow gradually into that image by continually purifying themselves while here on earth as they await the hope of the resurrection (read 1 John 3:1-3, where these ideas are set forth). This divine Sonship in the heavenly family calls upon the Christian to break the ties which he had as a sinner and alien.

The Origin of Trouble

4:1-3

James opens chapter 4 as he did 3:13, with a question loaded with rhetorical force: "*Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from?"* He will answer that question with another question. "*Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"* The question assumes the answer of yes. The connection between the last part of the preceding chapter and the first three verses of this chapter is clear. If bitter envy and selfish ambition have filled man's heart (3:14, 16), if his guiding principle is earthly wisdom that is unspiritual and devilish (3:15), if he has alienated himself from God, then he promotes "*disorder and every evil practice"* (3:16). When that happens, fights and quarrels are the order of the day.

> *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"(*NIV).

Some say today the modern church needs to return to the purity and simplicity of the early church. I'm not so sure, especially in light of what Paul later reveals about the early church (cf. Acts 6:1ff; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Philippians 4:2).

We have the impression that the early Christian church was marked by peace and harmony. Think of the time after Pentecost when "*all the believers were one in*

heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). This picture of the church, however, fades within the span of a decade or more. The hounded Jewish congregations of the Dispersion were shot through with strife. They were experiencing class conflicts between the gold-fingered rich and their many poor (cf. 2:1-11). Rival would-be teachers grasped at the imagined good life of being Christian rabbis (literally "great ones") (cf. 1:19:26; 3:1). They boiled with "*bitter envy*" and "*selfish ambition"* and fell to "*disorder and every evil practice"* (3:14, 16). They praised God in church at every mention of his name, saying, "Blessed is he! Blessed be he!" and then verbally cursed their fellow parishioners on the street (3:9, 10). Some of the new believers in these congregations were former Zealots, violent political activists. Because of this, many prominent scholars believe some may have actually become violent in the churches!

The literal root meaning of the phrase "fights and quarrels" is "war and fights" which I think better conveys the raw realities of the situation in James's churches. Moreover, James' use of compressed language – deleting the verbs, so that his question is "*From where wars and where fights among you?"* – suggests his immense passion in asking this question. *(4)*

James has posed a passionate rhetorical question, and he answers with a second rhetorical question which takes us to the heart of the subject: "*Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"* (v.1b). The obvious answer is, "Yes!" In fact, this is the answer to all questions about conflict in the church. A pressing question, and one not asked enough in the Western world, is whether James's terms "conflicts and disputes" refer to physical or verbal fights. A more graphic, if less elegant, translation brings out word connections: "warring and swording." The word translated "conflicts" (πολεμοι*, polemoi)* could refer to a state of hostility or to an outright war or battle, which is the common meaning in early Christian literature (Matt. 24:6; Luke 4:31; 1 Cor. 4:8; Heb. 11:34; Rev. 9:7, 9). James's analysis of envy and the way it leads to murder is the most explicit and powerful in the New Testament, providing dramatic evidence for the earlier proposition desire gives birth to sin; and when sin comes in full term, it brings forth death (1:15). No analysis is more pertinent to contemporary North American culture, which is virtually based on the logic of envy.

On the other hand, it is not impossible that James could be using the language of Jesus, in which murder became a metaphor for hatred and abusive treatment of others (Matt. 5:21-22). One can appeal to other texts, like 1 John 3:15: "*All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murders do not have eternal life abiding in them." So polemoi* can also be metaphorical. Furthermore, the second word, "disputes" (μαχηαι*, machai)* can have the same flexible meaning: either physical or metaphorical battles. The New Testament evidence supports a metaphorical meaning (2 Cor. 7:5; 2 Tim. 2:23; Tit. 3:9). At a minimum, the expressions refer to rivalrous factions gathering around the teachers, even if we cannot be sure what they are fighting about or how they were fighting. It is not at all impossible that "among you" could refer to the wider Jewish world. *(5)*

One word here bares the heart of this verse – the word "desires" or "cravings." In the Greek this is ηεδονε (*hedone)*, from which we derive the English word *hedonism*, the belief that pleasure is the chief good in life. Its primary sense here is *pleasures*. *(6)* James is saying, "Don't your fights come from your *desire (cravings) for pleasures* that battle within you?" *(7)* The strife and trouble in the church for the last 2,000 years has been rooted in the overreaching personal desires of her people for personal pleasure and enjoyment.

Pleasure is not sinful per se, but what *is* wrong is driving desire for pleasures. The only other uses of this word in the New Testament suggests this idea: Luke 8:14, where Jesus describes those who fall among thorns as "*choked by life's … pleasures,*" or Titus 3:3, which refers to people "*enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures,"* and 2 Peter 2:13, where Peter describes lost false teachers as "*blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures."* James' emphasis is on a feverish search for one's own pleasures and gratifications.

James' insights come down hard on us Christians who live in a profoundly pleasure-seeking culture. Years ago two famous men produced two opposite but equally chilling visions for the twentieth century, George Orwell wrote *1984* in which he warned that our culture would be overcome by externally imposed opposition. In *The Animal Farm* he explicitly identified it as communism. On the other hand, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* portrayed the danger not as some collectivistic oppressors, but as pleasure-giving technologies. Orwell feared those who would ban books. Huxley feared there would be no reason to ban books

because no one would read them. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivialized culture, preoccupied with pleasures. In *1984* Orwell envisioned a people controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World* Huxley saw us as controlled by inflicting pleasure. *(8)*

Huxley was right! Marxism is crumbling, and pleasure is the ruler, especially in our land. We spend billions on this counterfeit "chief end of man." And, ironic tragedy of tragedies, even the church has become a purveyor of pleasure-centered theology. Christianity is often presented as the unfailing source of the affluent, successful life. For many, Christianity has become the spiritual equivalent of designer clothes and Chivas Regal – something to make life more enjoyable. The significance of this, in terms of our text, is that pleasure-seeking Christians are walking civil wars whose lust for pleasure brings fighting to the church and even to the world.

Are our lives filled with personal conflicts, especially with believers? If so, it is probably because we have been profoundly infected by our Brave New World and, however subtly and piously, are putting our personal pleasure above everything else.

The second leg of this tandem, and absent of debate, reads "*And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts"* (4:2b). The word "covet" in the NRSV masks what is probably a stronger term: ζελουτε (*zeloute)* is connected to "zeal" and the ambition of 3:14, 16. A preferred translation might be "You are zealous and you cannot obtain it." "Zeal," as discussed already at 3:14, connotes not simply personal envy (desire for what others have) or jealousy (seeking to maintain what is one's own) but also the zeal connected to obedience of the God of the Torah, for whom nothing can be too extreme. You might be reminded of C.S. Lewis's capacity to enter into the heart of humans in *The Screwtape Letters:*

> *"And now, my children, pay heed to me. Beware of the spirit of deceit and envy. For envy dominates the whole of man's mind and does not permit him to eat or drink or to do anything good. Rather it keeps prodding him to destroy the one whom he envies. Whenever the one who is envied flourishes, the envious one languishes … And I came to know that liberation from envy occurs through fear of the Lord … From then on he has compassion on the*

> *one whom he envied and has sympathetic feelings with those who love him; thus his envy ceases."* (9)

So what do teachers do? As James says to them, "you engage in disputes and conflicts." Here James repeats the very words he used in 4:1 in reverse order, thus bringing closure to his point. The problem the teachers have is "conflicts and disputes" or "warring and swording." James pushes them to consider the origins of their behaviors and in their own craving desires for power and control. He pushes further and says, evidently, that their craving desires lead to murder and to the disputes and conflicts in the messianic community.

The Prayerlessness of Trouble

Vv. 2-3

If James has not turned from treating internal tensions to external ones already in v. 1, he clearly does so now. Having established that the root of fighting is the pursuit of pleasure, James proceeds to introduce its miserable pathology in verse 2a. "*You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight."* This is a jarring indictment to say the least. Their desire for possessions remains unfulfilled – they "*don't get*" what they want.

Interpreting the words *you kill* is problematic. Is James implying that the readers are actually guilty of murder? Is the original text incorrect? Is James speaking figuratively? Or does the sentence need proper punctuation? These are some of the questions interpreters face. I hold that the general context provides ample evidence that the verb *to kill* should be understood figuratively, not literally (just as, in the preceding verse 14, for instance, the expression *fights* is a less literal, symbolic translation of the noun *wars*). (8)

"*You do not have, because you do not ask God."* The Bible is repeatedly clear that a driving desire for pleasure is ruinous to the prayer life. The way this works is that, first the pleasure-mad Christian, who has some spiritual sensitivity, realizes his prayers may not be a spiritual essential. So he asks for nothing. In fact, he doesn't pray much at all because few of the things he wants are high on the divine priority list.

Secondly, some pleasure-seeking believers do express their wrongly motivated desires in prayer, but do not receive. James gives another reason for unanswered prayer – evil motives – asking "wrongly" for their own wants and desires. When John Ward, a member of the British Parliament died, a prayer was found among his papers:

> "O Lord, thou knowest that I have nine estates in the City of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in the county of Essex. I beseech thee to preserve the two counties of Middlesex and Essex from fire and earthquake; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg of thee to have an eye of compassion on that county. As for the rest of the counties, thou mayest deal with them as thou are pleased." *(9)*

This is hardly the way to win friends and influence God. A pleasure-driven prayer life finds heaven made of brass. The petty circumference of its requests simply do not interest the Father. God refuses to listen to persons who eagerly pursue selfish pleasures. Greed is idolatry and that is an abomination in the sight of God. God does not listen to prayers that come from a heart filled with selfish motives. Covetousness and selfishness are insults to God. God is manipulated as a kind of vending machine precisely for the purpose of self-gratification."

Being Friends with the World

Vv. 4-6

Straddling the line is dangerous, as every driver knows, for he has been taught to stay on his own side of the road. That is a fundamental traffic rule for safe driving.

Nor can a Christian straddle the line. He cannot be a friend of God and a friend of the world, because "*no one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other"* (Matthew 6:24). A Christian cannot pursue his selfish ambitions and still remain loyal to God. In fact, when he looks toward the pleasures of this world, he turns his back to God.

> *"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God"* (v. 4).

At this point the issue comes to a head. James brands those in his churches who are behaving so selfishly with the intentionally insulting term "adulteresses," invoking language from Old Testament prophetic literature in which Israel and Judah were likened to adulteresses flaunting themselves in relationship with idols while claiming to worship God. In keeping with biblical tradition James personifies the entire church as the "bride" of Yahweh or Christ. At best she has become distracted from and at worst unfaithful to her groom. As for example, God told the prophet Hosea, "*Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord"* (Hosea 1:2).

What do you think is God's reaction when a believer becomes enamored with the world? God is a jealous God. He tolerates no friendship with the world. What does the word *world* mean? It represents "the whole system of humanity (its institutions, structures, values, and mores) as organized without God." *(10)* It is the meaning Paul conveyed when he wrote his second letter addressed to Timothy: "*For Demas, because he loved this present world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica"* (2 Timothy 4:10).

James is forceful in saying that a person cannot be friendly with the world and with God at the same time. Friendship in antiquity was usually taken far more seriously than in today's Western world, as a lifelong pact between people with shared values and loyalties. The world does not tolerate friends of God, for they are considered enemies. The reverse is also true. God regards "a friend of the world" an enemy.

We can take comfort in the words of sixteenth-century reformer John Knox, who said, "A man with God on his side is always in the majority." But the person who meets God as his enemy stands alone, for the world cannot help him. The author of Hebrews concludes, "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Hebrews 10:31).

Who is an enemy of God? The Christian has been placed in the world even though he is not of the world (John 17:16, 18). The apostle John warns, "*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him"* (1 John 2:15). When a person purposely turns to the world to become part of it, he has made a conscious choice of rejecting God and the teaching of his Word. *(11)*

"*Anyone,"* says James, "*who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God"* (v. 4b). It must be said that those who persist in living as friends of the world are very likely without grace, not Christians, despite their claims to faith. Paul says of such, "*For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things"* (Philippians 3:18, 19). They are friends of the world! They establish themselves as God's enemies.

James is certainly direct and hard-hitting with his moral theology. James gets in our face that he might get in our hearts. James' teaching suggests several penetrating questions. Are we today better friends with the world than we were a year ago? With God? From which do we derive our primary pleasure? Are we God's adversaries or his friends? How would you answer these questions?

The Grace of God

Vv. 5-6

> *"Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us tends toward envy, but he gives us more grace? That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

James turns to the Scripture to prove his point. He lets God speak to establish the truth of the matter. The difficulty, however, is of the two references James quotes, we are able to identify only the second one (Proverbs 3:34). We have no clear biblical reference for the quotation in the fifth verse. Indeed this particular text is one of the most puzzling in the entire epistle and takes a place among the most

difficult passages in the New Testament. The passage puzzles the reader because it refers to a Scripture passage we cannot locate in the Old Testament. It also lends itself to numerous translations of the text. And last, but certainly not least, we are interested in the exact meaning of the quotation.

The fact that we are not able to locate the origin of this quotation need not surprise us at all. In other passages of the New Testament we encounter similar quotations that have no precise provenance in Scripture. To mention only one text, Matthew writes about the return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Nazareth and says, "*So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: 'He will be called a Nazarene'" (2:23).* The Old Testament, however, provides no leads for finding the origin of this prophecy. *(11)* No matter where we look for an answer to the question of source, the result remains the same: we do not know.

Because the ancient manuscripts lack punctuation marks, translators have to determine whether a sentence is a statement or a question. Here is one translation that phrases the passage as a question: "*Or do you suppose the Scripture speaks to no purpose? The Spirit, who took up His abode in us, yearns jealously over us. But he affords the more grace, for He says, 'God opposes the haughty, but He grants grace to the humble-minded.'"* However, this translation raises more questions than it answers. First, to which scriptural passage does James refer when he says "Scripture speaks"? Second, how does the affirmative statement *the Spirit ... yearns jealously over us* relate to the preceding question? And third, what are the reasons for not adopting the standard formula *Scripture says* that is normally used for introducing quotations?

Another problem is the translation of the word *spirit*. Does the word refer to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit? If it is the human spirit, as the *New International Version* has it, the verse refers to the universal tendency we all have toward envy and jealousy of one another. Or it could mean that God yearns over the plight of our human spirits which were given to us in creation, as the *Revised Standard* Version has it. It could, however, by referring to the Holy Spirit, mean the indwelling Holy Spirit is jealous we not fall to the error of friendship with the world. The *New International Version* footnotes' second alternative reads this way: "the Spirit he caused to live in us longs jealously." Other translations render it similarly: the *New King James Version* – "the Spirit who dwells in us yearns

jealously"; *Jerusalem Bible* – "the spirit which he sent to live in us wants us for himself alone"; and *The Living Bible* – "the Holy Spirit, whom God has placed within us, watches over us with tender jealousy."

I am convinced that the text refers to the Holy Spirit's jealousy over us because it best fits the argument of the context and because it touches on that grand truth so indispensable to the New Testament theology – the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Understanding the Holy Spirit's jealousy for us is what is meant here opens a heart-changing truth to us: even when we sin by seeking our pleasures in friendship with the world, we are greatly loved, for jealousy is an essential element of true love. As I used to tell couples I was counseling, "The jealousy you are experiencing toward your spouse is saying, 'This person is important to me.'" We are brides of Christ, and the Holy Spirit does not want us to go somewhere else to "have our needs met." The Holy Spirit's true love for us evokes a proper intolerance of straying affection. The personness of this ought to steel us against wandering.

The jealous Spirit is *inside* us. When we sin, he is pained! Furthermore, his jealousy is passionate, for the idea in the Greek is that he longs or yearns for us with an intense jealousy. *(12)*

To realize the awesomely holy God who transcends the universe and is wholly Other and self-contained is at the same time personally and passionately and lovingly jealous for our affection – this realization ought to stop any of our "affairs" with the world and cause us to prostrate our souls adoringly before him. How we are loved! And how we ought to love! For a as John informs us, "*We love because he first loved us"* (1 John 4:19).

Though God is the author of all true pleasures, and desires us to enjoy life, the illicit tugging strings of self-centered hedonism constantly pull at us. And many of us have become friends of the fallen world order and are thus God's enemies. What are we to do?

Proud people tend to be friends of the world, for they know not God but the world satisfies their pride. By contrast humble people realize they are completely dependent upon God. They are thankful to him for the rich grace he provides to fill their lives to overflowing.

Pride shuts out grace. If a patient refuses to take the medicine prescribed by the physician, he will never recover. If a son rejects the wise counsel of his parents, he can expect trouble. Pride enters the human heart because man measures himself by human standards, not God's standards.

The believer who lives in constant fellowship with God, who desires to do God's will in all things, and who demonstrates the love of the Lord Jesus is the recipient of God's abundant grace.

"He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater;

He sendeth more grace when the labours increase;

To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,

To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,

When our strength has failed ere the day is half done:

When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,

Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,

His power has no boundary known unto men;

For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,

He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

(Annie Johnson Flint)

ENDNOTES

1. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Chapter 1, "An Expedition to the Pole" (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 23.
2. Robert K. Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 296.
3. Leslie B. Flynn, *Great Church Fights* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1976), p. 7.
4. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 144 writes:

"Since James and his community were situated in a Zealot-infested society and since it is quite conceivable that (at least) some of the Jewish Christians were former Zealots (cf. Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13), the taking of another's life is not out of the realm of possibility for the church members as a response to disagreement (in fact such action may have already taken place….).

5. Thus, "among you" in the sense of "in the world"; see on this Laws, 172. But the second person is harder to explain in this interpretation.
6. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 242; cf. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James*, p. 144.
7. BAG, p. 344. See also Sophie Laws, *A Commentary on the Epistle of James* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 168, who supports the English rendering of the desire or pursuit of pleasures, saying, "It is necessary to take pleasure, *hedone*, here as equivalent to "desire," *epithumia*, as Dibelius does, comparing 1, 13; it is obviously desire for an object that leads to striving for it, but it is the object desired that is the focus of the striving, and James in v. 3 considers the nature of this object in relation to the satisfaction of frustration of desire. Desire and its object each presumes the other, and the object here is *hedone*, a word used often, though not always, of sensual pleasure, and frequently with overtones of unworthy or evil enjoyment, as here and in Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3.
8. The term "murder" is unusual, so some scholars argue that "murder" is a corruption is the text for "envy" (*phoneuele* instead of *phthoneite),* based upon other passages where this has happened (e.g., one manuscript of 1 Pet. 2:1) and the fact that envy and jealousy fit together (e.g. Gal. 5:21). See further J.B. Adamson, *James*, pp. 167-68. But many passages use "murder" in a metaphoric way for the sins of the tongue: "The blow of a whip raises a welt, but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not so many as have fallen because of the tongue" (Sirach 28:17-18; cf. 28:21). Likewise early Christians connected anger, jealousy, and murder (Didache 3:2; 1 Clement 3:4-6:3. So it is not necessary to assume a corrupt text. The term "you covet" is the verb form of the noun used in 1:14. This is further proof that both passages speak of the same desire or evil impulse.
9. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), from the Foreword.
10. John Blanchard, *Truth for Life* (West Sussex, England: H.E. Walter Ltd., 1982), p. 222, 223.
11. Joseph B. Mayor writes that the person who is an enemy of God "makes it his aim" to be a friend of the world. *The Epistle of James* (reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1916), p140. Quotations from unknown sources, even those introduced as Scripture, occur in other texts (John 7:38; 1 Corinthians 2:9; Ephesians 5:14).
12. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 150 argues:
"But there is another argument that speaks against construing "the human spirit" as the subject … To take 4:5b as a scriptural confirmation of human jealousy would require that the author has returned to his description of human nature in vv. 1-3, but in v. 4 James

has issued a call to repentance, warning his readers that friendship with the world means enmity with God.

Thus, more than likely, v. 5 is set down to highlight God's displeasure with the behavior reported in vv. 1-4. To conclude, therefore, that the subject … is the human spirit is fraught with much difficulty."

CHAPTER 9

James 4:7-17

THE GRAVITY OF GRACE

The "gravity of grace" works like the earth's water system, which always flows from the highest to the lowest. Just as the waters of Niagara roll over the fall and plunge down to make a river below, and just as that river flows ever down to the even lower ranges of its course, then glides to still more low-lying areas where it brings life and growth, so it is with God's grace. Grace's gravity carries it to the lowly in heart, where it brings life and blessing. Grace goes to the humble.

This is the spiritual law behind Proverbs 3:34, which James has quoted in verse 6: "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* The unbowed soul standing proudly before God receives no benefit from God's falling grace. It may descend on him, but it does not penetrate, and drips away like rain from a statue. But the soul lying humbly before God is immersed – and even swims – in a sea of grace. So while there is always "more grace," it is reserved for the lowly – the humble.

The problem, of course, is authentic humility has never been in vogue and most certainly is not today. Our rebellious twenty-first century world has embraced "the illusion that human species is the sole loner and designer of destiny," *(1)* to use Carl Henry's words. Our twenty-first-century human icons are not religious figures, but those who have been strong enough to climb to the top of the pile – and it does not matter to us how they got there.

Even the church has not been immune to this disease. Despite recent disgraces, it appears much of the church is under the sway of the proud – those who, to use Woodrow Wilson's phrase, can "strut sitting down." *(2)*

What is to be done? Fortunately God's Word still speaks, just as it did in James' day, for in verses 7-10 we find the antidote. This is a tidy unit consisting of a series of terse commands, beginning with the dominant call to submit to God and then

giving three couplets of matching commands, and finally issuing a summary command. *(3)* In the Greek the language it is even more clipped, so the commands come in a jackhammer burst. James wants to so fire the souls of his people that they will swim triumphantly in the river of grace. May it be so for us as well!

James's opening command grates like fingernails across the chalkboard of contemporary culture: "*Submit yourselves, then, to God"* (v. 7a). James now turns explicitly to the remedy for friendship with the world. There was a day not long ago when people went to classes on assertiveness training and paid big money to learn the techniques of dominance. But can you image anyone attending a class on submissiveness? "Assert yourselves!" –sounds better to the ear. "Assert yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up!" –is the gospel people would like. The truth is, the language of grace may be grating, but submission is the only way to go. None of us came to Christ unbowed. Many of us had the fear we couldn't get low enough.

James is calling us back to this initial submissiveness. It is to be our everyday experience. This is no small task because, though children of grace, we naturally rebel against many of the things God providentially allows in our lives. We want to be accomplished and highly regarded, but we Salieri's' (sorry, but I just watched my video-Christmas gift of *Amadeus* about Mozart's rival, Salieri) just do not have the gifts some of our Mozart friends have, and we resent the ways of God, the bestower of gifts (1:17). Or perhaps our friends' children all excel in school, but ours have trouble, and we seethe toward God. Or we have a love which is not returned, and we are angry at heaven. Or our health fails us, so we rebel. Many Christians have a sort of private feud with God, sit down with Jonah under the withered vine and mutter, "*I do well to be angry, angry enough to die!"* (Jonah 4:9, RSV).

If this is where we are, we must understand this dead-end road is as futile as Jonah's display. Is there hidden rebellion in our lives? Is it so hidden perhaps only those closest to us see it when they hear our morose humor and momentary bitterness? If so, there is only one answer; submit to God, let go and say, "Though I do not understand my situation, I bow before you and submit my whole life to you."

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

Vv. 7-10

> *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."*

James has now discussed the origin of division (4:1) and has accused the teachers/leaders of the messianic community of divisiveness (4:4-6). But, within the accusation James begins now to shift forward to his appeal for the divisive to repent. Road signs along the highway instruct the traveler how to reach his destination safely. Of necessity, the signs are short, descriptive, and pointed. James provides us with a number of signs that aid us we travel along life's highway on our journey home.

There are ten imperatives in this section:

1) *Submit* yourselves to God.
2) *Resist* the devil, and he will flee from you.
3) *Draw near* to God, and he will draw near to you.
4) *Cleanse* your hands, you sinners.
5) and *purify* your hears, you double-minded.
6) *Lament*
7) and *mourn*
8) and *weep*
9) *Let* your laughter *be turned* into mourning and your joy into dejection.
10) *Humble* yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

The first, "submit yourselves," could name an overall topic but that is far from certain. The second, "resist," is a separable command with a promise, and the third, "draw near," has the same form. Clearly, the fourth and fifth, "cleanse" and "purify," are a tidy, balanced pair of commands that belong together. And the next three, "Lament and mourn and weep," are not only a unit but are inseparable from the third person imperative that comes next. Finally, "humble yourselves" is indeed

similar to “submit yourselves,” but different words are used and “humble yourselves” comes with a promise. These units are clearly discernible. *(4)*

“*Submit”* is not simply a call to a general disposition of living under the lordship of God but also a summons to submit to God for the grace of forgiveness granted to those who repent. A question arises whether this text is connected to others like it in the early churches. Thus, consider 1 Peter 5:5-9 for a striking parallel.

James launches into the first of his coupled commands by stating the negative and positive sides of a mutual call. The negative expression is, “*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”* (v. 7b). The positive side is, “*Come near to God and he will come near to you”* (v. 8a).

As we stand firm “*against the devil’s schemes*” (Ephesians 6:11; 1 Peter 5:9), we also pray the petition “*but deliver us from the evil one”* (Matthew 6:13). The biblical assurance we receive is that “*he will flee from*” us (James 4:7). James draws here on military words in reference to the cosmological battle between Satan and his minions and God and his people happening in the world. The opponents of Stephen could not *resist* his wisdom and the Spirit (Acts 6:10), a verse that implies prior resistance. As James already spelled it in v. 4 by calling his audience “adulteresses,” submission to God and allegiance to the devil are mutually exclusive. Moreover, as people align their lives with God, the result becomes a growing resistance to the temptation of the devil and he loses any foothold and must flee. This is a fact, for the Gospels and Acts are filled with examples of Satan and his cohorts fleeing before divine authority. When we obediently do God’s will, Satan cannot lead us astray but must depart. Luther aptly remarked that if we sing psalms and hymns or read Scripture, Satan will flee from us lest he scorch his wings.

Here is the heart of the message which James introduced with the exhortation to be submissive to God and to resist the devil: “*come near to God.”* This command, like the previous one, brings in its wake a promise. This indicates not just a mental or emotional activity for James. Instead it is a practical response to God. In our struggle against sin and Satan we do not stand alone when we come in prayer to God. God surrounds us with his care and grace so that we have no reason to fear the power of Satan.

God wants us to come to him in true repentance, faith, obedience, and prayer. He will fill us with his grace and crown us with his blessings. When God calls us to come to him, he already shows us his love and grace. The initiative, then, belongs to God, not to us. For this reason we can never claim because we first approached God, he had to come to us. God always acts first in the work of salvation.

How do we approach a holy God? James continues unleashing his barrage of commands. "*Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts …"* The first admonition recalls God's instruction about ceremonial washing (see Exodus 30:20-21). *(5)* The second brings to mind David's word:

> "*Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?*
>
> *Who may stand in his holy place?*
>
> *He who has clean hands and a pure heart …* (Psalm 24:3-4).

By linking these concepts, James clearly implies he is speaking not of being ceremonially clean but of being spiritually pure. The more we seek to live according to God's wisdom, the closer we will grow to his purity and holiness.

James calls the readers "sinners" and "double-minded." Every human being is a sinner, but James is using a term that fits the Jewish context of his people. In the Gospels, the name *sinner* was given to someone who disregarded the law of God and flouted standards of morality (see Matthew 9:10; Luke 7:37, 39). The expression *double-minded* (compare James 1:8) connotes instability, fickleness, and vacillation. The terms fit the person who loves God and the world. Such persons, James says, must repent.

James tells his readers to "*grieve, mourn and wail."* He is like an Old Testament prophet who calls the people to repentance by having them grieve over their sins and, so to speak, sit in sackcloth and ashes.

We experience grief when someone who is near and dear to us dies. That is one aspect of the concept *grief*. The other aspect of grief is spiritual. Scripture teaches us repentance and grief go together. Repentance means a death has occurred in our own lives. We grieve because of sins we have committed against God and our fellowman. Paul, describing his struggle with sin, exclaims, "*What a wretched man*

I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" He himself gives the answer: "*Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Romans 7:24-25).

James is not saying a Christian should dress in black clothing, walk around with a somber face, and preach gloom and doom. A Christian ought to be happy in the Lord, thankful for the gift of salvation, and obedient in doing the will of God. When he has fallen into sin and responds to God's call for repentance, a change must occur in his life. Laughter and joy are silenced. When he reflects on his sin, the penitent is filled with mourning and gloom. Peter said that he did not know Jesus, but after he had asserted this three times, Jesus looked straight at him. Peter repented, went outside, and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62). "*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death"* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

James returns to the subject he introduced in the Old Testament quotation: "*God ... gives grace to the humble"* (v. 6). This particular theme is prominent throughout Scripture. It brings into focus the theme of the entire section from 4:7-9: repentance. As in 4:7b and 4:8a, this last commandment entails a promise: "*Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you.*" The language evokes once again the reversal theme of 1:9-11. But instead of talking directly to the poor as James did there, in the word "humble" he summons the teachers to align themselves with those who are needy and dependent on God. Scripture teaches humility has a vertical and a horizontal aspect. The believer who shows humility toward God shows it also toward others (Romans 12:3; Philippians 2:3).

Judging a Brother

4:11-12

> *"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who then, are you to judge your neighbor."*

Walter Wangerin, in his collection of short stories *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*, begins one of his stories with what seems to be a lesson in entomology, the study of insects (specifically spiders). But he surprisingly turns it into an unforgettable metaphor of spiritual truth. He explains a female spider is often a widow for embarrassing reasons – she regularly eats those who come her way. Lonely suitors and visitors alike quickly become corpses so her dining room is a morgue. A visiting fly, having become captive, will be granted the illusion of wholeness, but she will have drunk its insides so he has become his own hollow casket. Not a pleasant thought, especially if you have a touch of arachnophobia, as our daughter, Jocelyn does!

The reason for this macabre procedure is that the spider has no stomach and so is incapable of digesting anything within her. Through tiny punctures she injects her digestive juices into a fly so that his insides are broken down and turned into a warm soup. "This soup she swills," says Wangerin as he makes the point, "even as most of us swill souls of one another after having cooked them in various enzymes: guilt, humiliations, subjectives, cruel love – there a number of fine, acidic mixes. And some among us are so skilled with the hypodermic word that our dear ones continue to sit up and to smile, quite as though they were still alive." *(6)*

This is a gruesome but effective metaphor to describe the destructive power of evilly intended words. Words do not dissolve mere organs but souls! This world is populated by walking caskets because countless lives have been dissolved and sucked empty by another's words.

This is the evil which the Holy Spirit addresses through James in verses 11 and 12, where we find a command against evil speech and the reasoning behind it.

The command is unadorned and to the point: "*Brothers, do not slander one another"* (v. 11a). It is important we understand the precise wording of this command as the Greek has it, because it actually forbids more than slander. Literally the command is, "Do not speak down on one another, brothers," *(7)* or "Do not speak against one another, brethren" (NASB). Slander is malicious speech that is untrue. But the command here forbids *any speech* (whether it is true or false) which runs down another person. *(8)*

Certainly no Christian should ever be a party to slander – making false charges against another's reputation. Yet some do. But even more penetrating is the challenge to refrain from any speech which intends to run down someone else, even if it is totally true.

Is James's command only for another age? I think not. We're all skillful in rationalizing our corrosive speech. We've all done it and do it. We bite and are bitten. So God's Word comes to us with equal force and application: "*Brothers [fellow believers], do not speak against one another."*

James exposes the true nature of the sin of slandering when he instructs the recipients of his epistle in these words, "*When you judge the law [as you are doing], you are not keeping it [because you have placed yourself above the law], but sitting in judgment on it [as a judge]."* Judging is a most difficult task because it involves not only other people but also the law itself.

The slanderer puts aside the law God made and thus places himself on the same level as God. Only God has the authority to abrogate a law. Blinded by sin, the backbiter often is unware of the seriousness of his doings. The fact remains, however, slander is a sin against the person who is accused and against God who forbids this sin by divine law. *(9)*

Normally we would probably agree speaking against our brothers and sisters and judging them is a serious sin. But James has set the record straight – it is one of the *worst* of sins because 1) it is self-exaltation above the Law, and 2) even worse, it is self-exaltation above God. We must agree that judgmentalism/evil- speaking is a terrible sin, for there is one thing even worse than this – namely, denying that it is so. We must agree with God or experience terrible consequences.

Submission to God's Will

4:13-17

> *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go and do such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you*

> *ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin."*

At last James is ready to unpack his third main theme of trials and temptations (4:13-5:18). This closing section of the letter's body also returns to problems caused by the pursuit of wealth, at least in 4:13-5:6. But whereas the main lesson for believers to learn in 2:1-26, when James formally expanded on riches and poverty, was they ought not to discriminate in favor of the rich and neglect the poor whom they could help, here the main focus is on how James's audience should respond when they are on the receiving end of exploitation and oppression.

This section's focus is not then about wealth or poverty but about the temptations of autonomous planning more generally and thus a failure to take God's will into account. James emphasis is that Christians should not plan for the future as if they are in complete control of their own lives but should consistently make a healthy allowance for God's sovereignty. Awareness of this principle makes failure to implement it all the more culpable.

Pride closes man's eyes to reality, so he does not see the ridiculousness of his deeds. Man makes plans and talks as if he were the master of his life and God does not exist. Utter foolishness! James' has overheard this preposterous talk, records it, and shows his readers the senselessness of living a life of practical atheism.

The persons James addresses, however, are the Jewish Christians who are living in dispersion. He writes this letter to them and not to unbelievers. Although his tone changes, James seems to indicate the readers know how to do that which is good (v. 17), which implies they belong to the Christian community. *(10)* For this reason, I take the next few verses as part of the discourse addressed to the members of the church.

James is fond of sudden, strong, attention-grabbing rhetoric: "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy" (1:2) and "Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up …" (1:9). "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" (2:14) or "Not many of you should become teachers" ((3:1). So also in 4:13:*"Now listen, you who say, "Today*

or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Here we have an example of people who do their planning and work without thinking about God. By ignoring God, they show as much arrogance as does the person who slanders his neighbor. The sin of failing to come to God in prayer is one of the most common offenses a Christian commits.

James addresses a segment of the church, namely, the merchants. He gets their attention with the idiomatic "*Now listen."* Other translations have "*Come now*." Then he quotes their own words that speak of going from one place to the next, spending some time there in order to do business and make money. Actually, we cannot fault a traveling salesman for moving on and doing business. This is part of his life. There is somewhat of a parallel in Jesus' discourse on the end of the age in which he refers to the days of Noah: "*For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away"* (Matthew 24:38-39; also compare Luke 17:26-29). Although no one faults a person for eating, drinking, and marrying, the point is in the life of Noah's counterparts God had no place. These people lived as if God did not exist. And this is also true of the merchants James addresses.

Not that James has quarrel with the merchant's occupation. Nor does he write about the ethics of buying and selling: he only states that the merchants "*carry on business and make money."* And that is what we expect when trade flourishes. James takes the businessmen to task for their disregard for God. To them money is much more important than serving the Lord. They make plans for the future without seeking the will of God. They live like the man portrayed in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21). They fail to realize they cannot add even a minute to their life. They are completely dependent on God.

"*Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes"* (v. 14).

From the human perspective life is uncertain. Life is but a vapor that soon passes. The fault is not in planning for the future but in ignoring the God who holds the future. If we have no idea what the immediate future will bring us, then what is the purpose of life? The writer of Ecclesiastes repeatedly mentions life's brevity and characteristically comments on the meaninglessness of man's pursuit of material

possessions. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of his book he states the purpose of life: "*Fear God and keep his commands, for this is the whole duty of man"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Seventeenth century British theologians asked, "What is the chief end of man?" And they answered, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

The merchants James addresses have not asked about the meaning and duration of life. They have neglected the counsel of Solomon: "*"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth"* (Proverbs 27:1). They talk about the future with absolute certainty. Yet they have no control over it. They live their life but fail to inquire into its purpose. They are blind and ignorant.

James compares human life to a mist that quickly appears and then disappears. What is a mist? Nothing but vapor that vanishes before the rising sun. It is frail and lacks durability (compare Psalm 39:6, 11; 102:3; Hosea 13:3). Moses, who lived to be 120 years old, wrote a prayer (Psalm 90:10) in which he said,

> *"The length of our days is seventy years –*
>
> *or eighty, if we have the strength;*
>
> *yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,*
>
> *for they quickly pass, and we fly away."*

James echoes the psalm with this message: *"Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that"* (v. 15).

James teaches that God is sovereign in our lives. In all our planning deeds, and accomplishments we must acknowledge our submission to God. Thus, after a comment on the brevity of life, he returns to the subject he introduced in verse 13. He says instead of ignoring God in our daily activities, we ought to place him first and say, "*If it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that*."

In some circles and cultures, the cliché *the Lord willing* is rather common. It is a pious formula that because of its repeated usage begins to lose its intended significance. But why does James tell the merchants to use this formula? He shows them their lives are in the hands of a sovereign God and they should acknowledge him in all their plans. He does not tell them when and how to use the phrase *if God wills.*

Surprisingly, this phrase does not appear in the Old Testament. In the New Testament era, however, the apostle Paul teaches the Christians its proper use. Here are a few examples:

1. When Paul left Ephesus, he said to the Jews, "*I will come back if it is God's will*" *(Acts 18:21)*.
2. He told the Corinthians, "*I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing"* (1 Corinthians 4:19).
3. He promised the believers in Corinth to spend some time with them "*if the Lord permits"* (1 Corinthians 16:7; also compare Philippians 2:19, 24; Hebrews 6:3).

The New Testament, however, gives no indication that the apostle had coined a formula that was to be used frequently. In fact, Luke fails to relate to its use in the narratives of Paul's journeys recorded in Acts. Even in his epistles, Paul fails to employ this formula in places where we would have expected it. This means that we do not need to use the words *God willing* as a threadbare phrase. Rather, our entire lives ought to be of the child of God who knows he is secure in the protective care of his heavenly Father. Every believer must live in such a way, as Horatius Bonar put it, "no part of day or night from sacredness be free." That is joyous Christian living. *(11)*

"*As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil"* (v. 16).

In contrast with the proper course of action, James shows these traveling merchants the implications of their present behavior. Again, he returns to convicting his hearers, which also leads to the conclusion that his listeners here are (at least primarily) Christians. These believers, however, are not operating their lives and businesses as they should. This verse is a reminder of the stern warning James issued when he quoted from the Old Testament, "*God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble"* (v.6; Proverbs 3:34).

Some of the businessmen had ventured out; they had taken risks and made a profit. As always happens, success breeds success and along with prosperity come pride and self-sufficiency. These merchants relied on their own insights and now boasted about their accomplishments. J.B. Phillips provides this paraphrase, "*As it is, you*

get a certain pride in yourself in planning your future with such confidence. That sort of pride is all wrong."

Human boasting is worthless, for it gives man and not God the glory. Such boasting includes bragging about accomplishments. This is not only unjustified but also totally unacceptable to God. It is evil. Through the personal experience of a thorn in his flesh, Paul is able to teach us we can boast only in weakness; in this weakness the power of Christ becomes evident (2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:5, 9). A Christian, then, may boast of himself "only in so far as his life is lived in dependence on God and in responsibility to him.*"(12)*

"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins" (v. 17).

James ends this particular section of his letter with a proverbial saying that perhaps circulated in the Jewish world of his day. The adverb *then* links the proverb to the preceding discourse; the tone of the address changes, because James no longer speaks directly to the businessmen but to every reader of his epistle. This verse refers most specifically to actions or, rather, to a failure to act in ways that people know they ought. In this context, James has urged his audience to take God's will into account in all of their planning for life, so to fail to stand in humility before God's sovereign will at all times is to fail to do a "good" thing that they now understand.

The proverbial saying conveys a stern warning against the sin of neglect. Not the sin of commission but the sin of omission is mentioned. That particular sin raises its ugly head when man ignores God, makes plans, is successful and brags about his achievement (James 4:13-16). Man repeats the sin of omission when he neglects to do the good he knows he must do. Jesus put this sin into focus when he portrayed the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35); the rich man who disregarded Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31); and the people who during their life on earth neglected to feed the hungry, entertain the stranger, clothe the poor, and visit the sick and the prisoner (Matthew 15:40-46).

James addresses the person who *knows* the good he must do. He is not speaking to people who commit sin in ignorance. Says Paul to the Athenian philosophers on the Areopagus, "*In the past God overlooked ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent"* (Acts 17:30). Sin is lawlessness, says John in one of

his epistles (I John 3:4). Whether this is the sin of commission or omission, it is an affront to God, especially when the sinner knows God's commandments.

Sin ought never to be taken lightly. This is especially true of the sin of omission which is often given the innocuous appearance of oversight. But this is not so. Consider the farewell speech of Samuel. He says to the Israelites, "*As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you"* (1 Samuel 12:23). Samuel shunned the sin of neglect. Neglect is the equivalent of ignoring God and the neighbor and is therefore a sin against the law of God.

Summary

James admonishes his readers to submit to God. He notes the fights and quarrels that rage among them originate in hearts not in harmony with the will of God. The readers pray, but with the wrong motives; their requests are selfish prayers.

The readers are developing a friendship with the world that makes them enemies of God. James proves his point by referring to the Old Testament Scriptures: "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* Because God is gracious, the readers ought to submit to him. They have to resist the devil, cleanse themselves of sin, repent of their deeds, cease their slander, and stop judging others.

James concludes this section by reminding the readers, especially the merchants, to trust in God and not in financial profits. They know how to do the good; therefore they are under obligation to serve God and do his will. If they fail to do this, they sin.

ENDNOTES

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian, An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), p. 388 says:
   "History has reserved for renegade humanity in our century an eager embrace of what ancient, medieval and early modern sages fled like a dread disease – the illusion that the human species is the sole crown of the cosmos, generator of the good, touchstone of truth, fashioner of the future and designed of destiny."
2. Clarence McCartney, *The Making of a Minister* (Great Neck, NY: Channel Press, 1961), p. 123, writes:

"In that same conversion with Wilson at the Friars Club I heard him say of Henry Van Dyke, quoting, I think, what someone else had said, that Van Dyke was the only man he had ever known who could "strut sitting down."

3. Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 165.
4. Moo, 192.
5. The Old and New Testaments have many references to the ritual of washing hands. Among them are Psalm 26:6; 73:13; Isaiah 1:15-16; Matthew 27:24).
6. Walter Wangerin Jr., *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 26.
7. D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979, p. 266, writes, "The compound verb literally means 'to speak down on' (compare the common expression "running each other down')."
8. Gerhard Kittle, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* Volume 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 5 writes that "It violates the early Christian commandment because of its un-charitableness rather than its falsity."
9. Slander is not a transgression or merely one commandment, but a transgression against the authority of the law in general, and therefore against God." Dibelius, *James*, p. 228.
10. Mayor, in *James*, p. 153, writes, "The appeal to knowledge here, as above in 1:19 is proof that the writer is addressing Christians."
11. Dibelius, *James*, pp. 233-34, has collected a number of instances in Greek and Latin literature to prove that the expression *if God wills* or something similar was common in the pagan world. This observation, however, in no way detracts from the purpose of the New Testament writers: to teach the believers to trust in God.
12. Hans-Christoph Hahn, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T.D. Alexander and B.S. Rosner; Downers Grove: Intervsity, 2000),vol. 1, p. 229.

CHAPTER 10

James 5:1-6

RICHES THAT CORRODE

James continues his apostrophe, or direct address, of those not Christians and not his immediate readers, with the "*come now*" as in the section in which the address began (4:13). But he shifts the subject from the arrogant and boastful living of life without God, in the pursuit of wealth, to the unjust and shameful oppression of workers. James foretells the fearful punishment of God for such sin.

James's attack in the opening paragraph of chapter 5 can only be described as seething. It is so fierce that Upton Sinclair, the novelist and social reformer, once read a paraphrase of this section to a group of ministers after attributing it to Emma Goldman, an anarchist agitator. The ministers were so enraged they declared she ought to be deported. *(1)* So we must take heed as we preach and teach this passage lest we be likewise disposed of! But we must also take heed, for this is God's Word and we will all answer to him who will judge our souls for eternity.

Here James moves from addressing the merchant class within his community to castigating the landholding class, "*you rich people*" which is clearly outside the community. The connection is that both classes are led astray by the desire for wealth. While this passage clearly addresses issues of rich and poor, the principles it enunciates apply readily to any trial. Chapter 5, in fact, offers this letter's last word on each of the epistle's key themes. In terms of tying all three of James's main themes together (trials, wisdom, riches and poverty), the temptation to seek wealth without consulting God's will led to wrong speech [wisdom, see 4:15 and 5:10-11] 5:7-12 leads naturally into vv. 13-18, as the call to patience in the former naturally leads to prayer in the latter. Likewise in 5:16, confession of sins to one another, forms part of the proper response to trials of severe physical affliction. But riches and poverty play no role in 5:13-18, and wisdom plays no explicit role here, so it remains best to see this material as unified most prominently by the theme of trials and temptations.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

Impatience toward the Rich

5:1-6

> *"Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.*

James begins with a prophet's attention-grabbing "*Come now*." It is arresting, even if not as jarring as the first usage of the expression in 4:13. There James addressed those who were making claims about their business ventures; here he broadens the audience "*you rich people.*" If one is suspicious that 4:13-17 might not be addressed to the believing messianic community, then 5:1-6 raises the suspicions much higher. *(2)* There is nothing in this passage that indicates the "rich people" are messianists. We recall our observation that the tendency to read letters written by Christians as addressing only Christians is an unnecessary entailment of how Christians have learned to read the Bible canonically and for applications in life. If James picked a model for his letter, it was not Paul, instead, his letter, especially 4:13-5:6, sounds more like a prophetic remonstrance with a variety of groups than like a pastoral letter to pious Christians huddled into a corner waiting for the coming of the Lord. Once we shed this unnecessary burden of thinking the audience must be entirely Christian, we become more open to weighing here and there the audience in a different set of scales. James uses the language of "*rich people*" very much the way Jesus did: it is "code" for the oppressors of the messianic community, and the letter speaks not only to the messianists but also to those who oppress them. *(3)*Whether or not the oppressors were paying attention is of minimal concern, for that is the way Jews of that time wrote. *(4)*

James summons "you rich people" to hear these words: *"weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you."* The language is dramatic, if not overcooked, because he is calling them to something they cannot manufacture apart from an act of God's grace. The wealthy, who are called to humiliate themselves in 1:9-11, are here called to intense misery and violent grief, something they cannot attain until they come to end of their ways – and there is precious little in 5:1-6 to indicate they will "weep and wail."

The judgment about to come upon the people is imminent, and evidence suggests this. First, James uses the verb ερχηομα (*erchoma,*"come") and uses it in the present tense, which makes the scene vivid. Second, 5:7-8 will indicate that "*the coming of the Lord is near.*" That verb was commonly used of judgment "coming upon" sinners from the hand of God, especially where the "Day of the Lord" was mentioned (Luke 21:36; Acts 13:40).

James continues his denunciation of those whom he does not believe are behaving as they ought. Riches are a blessing of the Lord, as Solomon testifies: "*The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it"* (Proverbs 10:22). But when wealth is devoid of the Lord's blessing, trouble accompanies it in the form of envy, injustice, oppression, theft, murder, abuse, and misuse. Love for God and the neighbor becomes love for money that leads to all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10). When this happens, man worships and serves not God but money. Then he is a friend of the world and God is his enemy.

Actually, James's invective is aimed at his wealthy, Christians and nonbelieving countrymen *(5)* who were exploiting the poor, many of whom were in the church. They are the financially wealthy in a world where the rich occupied a miniscule percentage of the population. James does not call all to change their behavior. Instead, he warns them of impending disaster in their lives by commanding them to mourn their coming fate. Specifically, James target were wealthy farmers who owned large tracts of land and were squeezing everyone and everything for profit. But though these persons were the calloused unbelieving rich, the message was also meant to benefit the church. James understood the natural human tendency to envy the rich, if sustained, would lead many Christians astray. Thus, this scathing warning to the ungodly rich is also meant to steel his people against such folly. In addition, James terrifying description of the judgment awaiting these rich

countrymen is meant to ensure the exploited poor justice is coming and they ought to bear their indignities with patience.

Instead of a direct warning, which James rhetorically suspends until the end of v. 3 (and even that states it somewhat indirectly), James simply brings to mind the riches of the rich are impermanent. He lists three kinds of possessions that do not last: riches and clothes and money (gold and silver). Three terms for consumption accompany the possessions: rotted, moth-eaten and rusted. The last term is used to shift from the impermanence of possessions to the use of the rusted remains as evidence against the rich on the Day of the Lord. That James says with sarcasm, is their "treasure."

This is a timely message for us as we all live under the lure of "The Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous" – the seductive delusion that you "are what you buy." May the Holy Spirit help us to step inside James' smoldering human spirit, hear the hammer blows as he pounds the arrogant rich, and allow those blows to shape *our* lives as well.

Opening Warning

James begins, "*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming to you"* (v. 1). The language is dramatic. [The two verbs should both be interpreted as commands, however, because the latter is a participle of attendant circumstances, allowing it to function in the same way as the main verb in the sentence.] Some feel that this command suggests that the rich are intrinsically happy. Consider recently deceased Malcolm Stevenson Forbes, Sr., who owned *Forbes Magazine* which annually lists the 400 wealthiest Americans – devoting over 400 pages to their motivations, spending habits, divorces, and hobbies. Forbes's wealth was estimated from $400 million (*London Daily Mail*) to one billion *(New York Daily News*). He possessed a 400-square mile ranch in Colorado, a South Sea island, a palace in Tangiers, a chateau in France, a mansion in London, twelve hot air balloons, a huge yacht which helped keep his income down. *(6)* Was he happy? Probably not.

I do know that Paul Wachtel in his book *The Poverty of Affluence* lists a survey which reveals a higher percentage of those with grammar school educations and

poverty level incomes report themselves "very satisfied with life" than do college graduates with high incomes. *(7)*

So we must understand James, in commanding the rich to mourn, is not necessarily calling them from a state of happiness to mourning. He is calling the unrighteous rich (be they happy or not) to mourn because of what awaits them in judgment. Their materialistic focus places them in terrifying peril.

Before his appeal to the rich, James clarifies what he is saying: "*You have laid up treasure for the last days."* James extends this subtly: instead of doing what Jesus commanded, the rich are doing what Jesus prohibited. They are storing up treasures, false ones to be sure for the Day of the Lord. The focus here is less on the leisurely, devil-may-care Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) and more on the object of the affections of the rich: riches. James language is ironic if not sarcastic: what is being treasured up is not treasure that will survive scrutiny in the judgment; instead it is a treasure that will, like Satan, be their accusers.

Next we should note James is not making an indiscriminate attack on the rich. Some notable saints have been rich: Abraham, Job, David, Josiah, Philemon, Joseph of Arimathea, and Lydia, for example. Moreover, there is not a word here against riches *per se.* The Bible does not say money is the root of all evil, but that *"the love of money* is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). The focus, again, is on those who gain their wealth in an ungodly manner, make it the center of their lives, and fail to use it to the benefit of others – those who smugly think:

> "*The rich man in his castle*
> *The poor man at his gate*
> *God made them high and lowly*
> *And orders their estate.* (8)

To such comes James' drastic command to "weep and wail" – "wail" being the onomatopoeic word ολουζο (*olouzo)*, so similar in sound to our word *howl*, which one of the classic commentators renders "lament with howls of misery." *(9)* The picture is of sobbing lament punctuated with repeated howlings as they face the final judgment. We ought to let the subjective horror of this seep into our hearts. This is God's Word!

James pronounces divine judgment upon the rich, and they cannot escape from it. They have their reward, so to speak, in the form of a curse. They have their share of "*misery that is coming upon them*." The words are an echo of Jesus' pronouncement: "*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort"* (Luke 6:24).

Material possessions tend to focus one's thoughts and interests on the world only. Wealth gradually enslaves those who are attached to it and perverts their values. The more we have, the easier it is to be possessed by our possessions, comforts, and recreations. Jesus says, "*the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come and choke the word"* (Mark 4:19). Most tragic of all, as with the rich young ruler, wealth can steep one against the objective requirement for entering the kingdom. That is, when your hands are full, it is difficult to say:

"Nothing in my hand

I bring

Simply to the cross

I cling."

Four Blows

Vv. 2–6

> *"Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on this earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you."*

With this withering reality in mind, we turn to James' indicting blows – the force of which we should apply to our needy souls. There are four distinct blows: 1) hoarding, 2) fraud, 3) self-indulgence, 4) and murder.

(1) Hoarding. The first concrete instantiation of the rotting of their riches is that "your clothes are moth-eaten." The statement evokes a similar saying of Jesus in Matthew 6:19: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal,"* and these lines from Job 13:28: "*One wastes away like a rotten thing, like a garment that is moth-eaten.*" Moth-eaten clothing is an image of impermanence and, in this context, of the impermanence of the focused investment of the rich and their attention to their appearance. Extravagant, status-expressing dress marked the rich (Jas. 2:2-3). It is possible the warning of Isaiah 51:8 lurks behind the words of James:

> "*For the moth will eat them up like a garment,*
>
> *and the worm will eat them like wool;*
>
> *but my deliverance will be forever,*
>
> *and my salvation to all generations."*

This news report was in my files: Bertha Adams was seventy-one years old. She died alone in West Palm Beach, Florida on Easter Sunday, 1976. The coroner's report read: "Cause of death … malnutrition." After wasting away to fifty pounds she could no longer stay alive. When the state authorities made their preliminary investigation of her place, they found a veritable "pigpen … the biggest mess you can imagine." One seasoned inspector declared he'd never seen a dwelling in greater disarray. The pitiable woman had begged food from neighbors and gotten what clothes she had from the Salvation Army. From all appearances she was a penniless recluse – a pitiful and forgotten widow. But such was not the case.

Amid the jumble of her unclean, disheveled belongings, two keys were found which led officials to safe-deposit boxes at two different local banks. The discovery was absolutely unbelievable. The first box contained over 700 AT&T stock certificates, plus hundreds of other valuable certificates, bonds and solid financial securities, not to mention a stack of cash amounting to early $200,000. The second box had no certificates, only more currency - $600,000 to be exact. Adding the net worth of both boxes, the woman had well over a million dollars.

Bertha Adam's hoarding was tragic, and her death was an unusually grim testimony to the shriveled focus of her life. Her great wealth did her no good whatsoever. Its proper use could have meant good health for her and many others.

Such hoarding is obscene, as James makes so clear in verses 2 and 3. When James unambiguously speaks of the future he uses the future tense (as in v. 3b), and the harsh judgment makes more sense if the rich can see they have simply wasted material possessions by putting them to no good use for anyone. While the Bible does not discourage saving and prudential provision for one's needs, it is dead-set against the vast accumulation of self-directed wealth focused solely on perpetuating one's own comforts and pleasures. Jesus was very clear about this, using words which James consciously borrowed: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"* (Matthew 6:19-21). A wise Christian will submit to these convicting words of Jesus.

The second instantiation of the rotting of riches concerns money: "*"Your gold and silver have rusted."* A common Jewish monotheistic critique of idols was they waste away and Baruch 6:11 uses similar language to James 5:2-3 for the idols of Babylon: "They deck their gods out with garments like human beings – these gods of silver and gold and wood that cannot save themselves from rust and corrosion." The word translated to decay of metals, including the partial oxidation of gold and silver (Ezek 24:6, 11, 12), especially as a disclosure of false metals. James has in mind, then, the false claims of the rich, which will be exposed in the judgment. The theme is typical of Jesus as well. (cf. Matt. 6:19-34).

(2)Fraud. The alarm James rings in the ears of the rich opens up with a loud imperative: "Listen!" or possibly "Remember!" The tenses used open a window on the rhetoric of James: *"*The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you have kept back by fraud, cry out *[present*], and the cries of the harvesters have reached [*perfect*] the ears of the Lord of hosts." The present tense, now frequently called the imperfective aspect, is used to depict action that is not complete, while the perfect tense (perfective or stative aspect) is used to depict action that is complete and has led to an existing state of affairs. The state of affairs is God has

heard; the cries of the oppressed, however, are not yet completed – they are going on as the readers listen.

The Old Testament repeatedly warns against defrauding workers. Deuteronomy 24:14, 15 commands, "*Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wage each day before sunset, because he is poor and counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin."* Leviticus 19:13 similarly says, "*Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him. Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight."* And Proverbs 3:27, 28, says, "*Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back later, I'll give it tomorrow' when you now have it with you."*

The oppressed, who may well be the poor of 1:9-11, have labored to earn wages: "the wages of the laborers." The graphic realities of day laborers appear in the parables of Jesus, as do the themes of injustice, generosity, and final vindication (e.g., Matt. 20:1-16). The labor involved is mowing fields, that is, harvesting grain.

But the rich farmers have defrauded the workers of their rightful wages: "which you kept back by fraud." Here we encounter a typical accusation against the rich because, and our society is no different, it is a typical behavior.

It is far better to pay your employees what they are worth and to provide good benefits than to increase your profit and give more to "Christian causes." All who employ others must ask themselves if there are any voices calling out to God because of them.

The concrete instantiations are now complete; James next deconstructs the farmers' obsession with riches: *"their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days."* The very thing they focused on, riches and clothing and gold and silver, will turn against the rich in a final act of cosmic betrayal. The rust on them will become a witness to the idolatrous commitment to mammon on part of the rich. How it will do so is not clear, but perhaps it is because the rich hold these possessions in abundance instead of using instead of using them compassionately for those in need James can say they will become evidence.

The Greek expression εισ μαρτψριον (*eis martyrion)* at face values means "unto a witness," but context often clarifies the witness as either negative or positive. Thus, after healing a leper Jesus told the man to go to the priestly authority, show him his body, and make the appropriate sacrificial offe-ings "as a testimony to them [the priests]" that he was now clean (Mark 1:44). But frequently the context is negative. Thus, the twelve apostles were to shake the local dust off their feet where they were not welcomed "as a testimony *against* them (Mark 6:11). James has this latter sense in mind when he thinks of the rust witnessing on the Day of the Lord.

James now asks rust to do what it does not do except in the world of apocalyptic imagination: "*and it will eat your flesh like fire."* Rust does not eat and it does not eat like fire, since fire consumes quickly, but James's evocative imagery is spoiled by thinking of it with such narrow literalism. If rust can corrode precious metals like gold and silver, which were sometimes considered non-corrodible, it will also corrode the very flesh of the rich. *(10)* And if it can corrode, it can be extended to consuming things the way fire does. The language again is graphic and designed to evoke a response of repentance. Flesh eaten away images death, perhaps even eternal death (cf. 1:14-15). Perhaps by "flesh" James simply means the body (cf. 3:6); it is possible he has in mind something on the order of Paul's use of "flesh" for the unspiritual and unredeemed human in his or her bodily existence. By adding "like fire" James intends an image of total destruction: all to be found after a fire is only charred remains. In 3:5-6 fire was not only destructive but its source was hell. It is a stretch to think that is on James's mind here, though it could be. Instead, the focus here is the fact of destruction: the rich themselves will be destroyed the way fire destroys what it burns. Once again, the language emerges from a strong biblical tradition that connects God's judgment with fire (Isa. 30:27, 30; Jer. 5:14; Ezek. 15:7; Amos 1:12, 14). We find a similar use of "fire" with Jesus (Mark 9:47-48; Matt. 13:42). The Apocalypse, where "fire" is used no fewer than twenty-five times, cannot be forgotten in this context either (e.g., Rev. 8:5; 14:10; 18:8).

(3)Self-indulgence. The sin of greed causes a person to degenerate from theft to living a life of luxury and indulgence. In other words, the money taken from the poverty stricken laborers is spent on extravagances. In scathing tones James denounces the rich. "*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter"* (v. 5).

After they have increased their wealth, the rich turn to luxuries and sinful pleasures. They are able to afford all the bodily comforts they desire and literally squander their resources on wasteful living. This extreme view of life lived only for wanton, personal pleasure shows James does not necessarily condemn the "capitalist" work ethic per se, but the selfishness that can pair with any economic philosophy.

Jesus portrayed the rich man "*who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day"* (Luke 16:19) as a man deserving hellish punishment not for what he did but for what he failed to do. That is, the rich man failed to love God and failed to care for his neighbor Lazarus. That was his sin.

"*You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter" (*verse 5*;* compare Jeremiah 12:3; 25:34). In picturesque language James compares them to domestic animals that are daily gorging themselves without knowing their destined end. As cattle being fattened for the day of slaughter, so the rich are indulging themselves in luxury and licentiousness and are unaware of the impending Day of Judgment. Yet their doom is certain and their destruction swift.

(4)Murder. The last sin is that of murder. In their quest for wealth the rich have not shrunk from taking the lives of others. Their sin of greed gave birth to theft; that sin spawned self-indulgence; and eventually it caused them to commit murder. "*You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you"* (v. 6). James is referring to *judicial* "murder" – primarily referring to taking away the means of making a living, taking smaller, poorer indebted farmers to court, stripping them of their land and thus their source of income, and then hiring them back again to work their former property as sharecroppers. With dirt-poor wages, unpaid debts might then lead their new landlords to throw them into debtors' prison, where they could rot for the rest of their lives. The landed gentry controlled the courts. The poor could not oppose them because they had no way to use the system, and thus were helpless. In the Jewish world, to deprive a person of their support was the same as murdering them.

So it often is today in the cold, hard secular world. Despite attempts to protect the poor, the power still largely resides with the moneyed. This ought to never be true of Christians. We who have advantages of education and wealth and perhaps

position must take great care not to harm others, especially those less fortunate, as we pursue our livings. God sees all!

The key to healthy Christian life is regular submission, to the searchlight of God's Word. We must honestly do so for our soul's sake and the sake of the church. Many of us, in comparison with others, are rich. Our lifestyles, due to modern invention and education, make the lifestyle of the ancients seem very shabby. Depending on our mind-set and soul-dependence, our souls may be in great peril.

A Revelation

By now a reader of James may be forgiven for being as weary as I am in having to explain the logical movements of the book. From the substance of 5:4 one can infer that James now informs the rich, even if they are not listening, their oppressive behaviors against the poor have now entered the ears of the God of hosts. The substance, in other words, provides what we need to know about the logical movement: from the descriptions of the impermanence of riches, to the implication of the sustained affections of those who pursue riches, to a revelation in v. 4. This revelation is designed rhetorically to awaken the rich from their immoral slumbering by appealing to an Old Testament trope – the unjust actions of the powerful rich, the oppression of the poor, the prayers of the poor to God for justice, the ears of God hearing the prayers, and God acting to judge oppressors and liberate the oppressed.

If the cry of the oppressed forms the first part of this revelation, the second is that God hears these cries, as James both repeats what he has said and extends his thought into the heavenly court: "*and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."*

Just why James speaks here of "the Lord of hosts" is not entirely clear. The language evokes the Warrior God tradition of ancient Israel, and one thinks first of a text like David's words to Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:45: "*You come to me with sword and spear and javelin: but I come to you in the name of YHWH of hosts, the God of armies of Israel, whom you have defied."* Here in James the hosts are probably the heavenly retinue (Ps. 103:21). As the covenant formula promises that YHWH will be Israel's God, so YHWH of hosts has chosen Israel as his vineyard

(Isa. 5:5, 7). Even more pertinent to our text, and this language evokes the great and fulfilled prophecies of Isaiah, is that YHWH of hosts brings justice (Isa. 5:16, 24, and see Rom. 9:29), James's use of "Lord of hosts" most likely draws on this theme of the God of justice who, along with the heavenly retinue, enacts justice for the oppressed in judgment. The oppressed cry out (Psalms. 17:1-6; 18:6; 31:2), against defrauding employers. Vv. 7-11, where James will counsel the messianic community on what to do in the face of this oppression, make it clear that James uses "Lord of hosts" because he has in mind an imminent act of judgment against the oppressors.

We have no idea how the rich responded to this series of accusations by James. And, while we also do not know how the messianic community responded, we can assume the poor heard these words as good news. What we do know is James now turns to the messianic community and counsels them on how to deal with the oppressions they are experiencing.

Indicted for self-indulgence

Self-indulgence in the accumulation of wealth is progressively addictive. Lance Morrow tells how, when as a collegian, he visited Pocantico, the great Rockefeller estate:

> "We passed through the Rockefellers' parks and forests. Here, off the public roads, came a sense of kingdom and privacy and magnificent exemption. We pulled up to Kykuit … John D. Rockefeller, Jr. had built it at the beginning of the century. It looked like an ornate and compact and private museum of gray stone. The stone suggested a permanence almost too permanent; an air of the mausoleum clung there. Yet it was summer. The place was gay with bright striped awnings, and trees and flowers. Beside the house lay the profligate garden of art – a reckless millionaire litter of Henry Moores and Calders and Glacomettis and Noguchis, all strewn across the grass, among the boxwood. I felt the casual and overbearing power of that display, the sheer unanswerable force that commanded so much of the world's artistic imagination to come and lie down upon the grass of one man's lawn. And it was all private – family décor – not the work of institutions or governments

> but of an individual's whim and will. Such a display belonged to an earlier civilization, to the feudal. *(11)*

Such self-centered accumulation and indulgence is, and always has been, sub-Christian, even if the perpetrators are Christians.

James excoriates such living: "*You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."* James's reference to luxurious living is very descriptive in its literal rendering: "You have *lived delicately" (12)* – a soft, pampered life. His mention of self-indulgence – literally "taken your pleasure" – evokes the wasteful living of the prodigal, wanton self-indulgence. This is *conspicuous consumption*, a sin which assaults us every hour as we walk through a shopping mall, watch television, or go through the day's mail.

This is a powerful temptation, but the divine statement for those who reject God's grace and pursue an indulgent lifestyle is even more powerful: *You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."* What a terrible thought, especially if you have ever dressed out an animal for the table. "The wealth of the rich becomes a wasting disease." *(13)* Calvin quaintly says:

> "Not for nothing does the Lord by His prophets throw sharp words at those who sleep on ivory couches, who pour on precious unguents, who enhance their palates with sweetness to the notes of the zither, to all intents like fat cattle in rich pastures. All this is said to make us keep a perspective in all our creature comforts: self-indulgence wins no favor with God." *(14)*

James's scathing words to the unregenerate must also find their mark in us. There are times for sumptuous celebration – holidays, birthdays, anniversaries. But a life of conspicuous consumption - delicate, soft luxury – is *not* Christian. Do not be fooled by the evangelistic gigolos who tell eager ears, "You are children of the king – live like it!"

How then should we live? Timothy gives us heaven's wisdom for those who *want* to get rich: "*People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction*. *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have*

wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (1 Timothy 6:17). May God's Word find a place in our hearts!

Christ stands at the bar of the world today,

As He stood in the days of old.

Let each man tax his soul and say, -

"Shall I again my Lord betray

For my greed, or my goods, or my gold?"

John Oxenham *(15)*

ENDNOTES

1. George Arthur Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter's Bible,* Volume 12 (New York: Abingdon, 1957), pp. 62, 63.
2. See the argument in Laws, 195-96; also Nystrom, 267-68.
3. See Moo, Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 210, for sound pastoral wisdom.
4. This enters into a sticky wicket of so-called Jewish apologetic literature, sometimes called propaganda; on this, cf. *A Light Among the Gentiles,* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 57-62, 75, 76, where in the notes one can find other literature. It is doubtful that Jewish apologetic literature was written for Gentiles; it was most likely written for Jews to bolster their faith and arguments. I consider this germane to James's rhetoric and attention to the rich in 1:9-11 and 4:13-5:6. In other words, whether they read or heard this text read, the messianic community did receive the message and were accordingly armed in their faith, their commitments, and their arguments.
5. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 159. Jack Mabley, "Their Riches Grow, but the Veggies Get Smaller," *The Daily Herald,* October 24, 1988, section 1, p. 8.
6. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), p. 283. So most commentators and translations. It is possible, however, to see it as modal, specifying the particularly intense manner in which these people should weep *(*cf. Kristemaker, *James and the Epistles of John*, p. 156.
7. Paul Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence* (New York: Free Press, 1983), p. 5. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), p. 283.

8. Anglican hymn "All things bight and beautiful" by William Henry Monk.
9. James Hardy Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968, p. 283.
10. The imagery gives rise to notable imaginative treatments, not the least of which is Dante's *Inferno* in his *The Divine Comedy*.
11. Lane Morrow, *The Chief, A Memoir of Father and Son* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 275.
12. Ropes, p. 289.
13. Martin, *A Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James,* p. 180.
14. John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke Volume III and The Epistles of James and Jude,* trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 307.
15. John Oxenham, *The King's High Way* (London: Methuen, 1916), p. 16.

CHAPTER 11

James 5:7-11

EXHORTATIONS TO PATIENCE

This section stresses Christians (in spite of the wrong suffered at the hands of the rich) are to bear their injustices patiently until the Lord comes, just as the farmer plants his seed and waits for the harvest. It also touches on the expectancy of the second coming of Jesus.

This exhortation concerning patience is built around three illustrations: the farmer (vv. 7-9), the prophets (v. 10), and Job (v. 11). This brief passage under consideration in this chapter was written to people who ached for the Second Coming of Christ. James, the Lord's brother – had been with the apostolic band on the Mount of Olives at Christ's Ascension. He had seen the *shekinah* glory, the luminous cloud of God's presence, overshadow the mount, and then watched his elder brother/Savior disappear into its shimmering folds (Acts 1:9). The glow of the receding cloud was still on James's rapt face when the angels issued their challenge: "*Men of Galilee,"* they said, "*why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven"*" (Acts 1:11). Jesus will come back in a similar cloud of glory!

They didn't know when he was coming, whether it would be in their lifetime or not, but they believed it would be *soon*. They lived in the exhilarating expectancy of Christ's return. The New Testament contains over 300 references to Christ's return –one of every thirteen verses! The Scriptures ooze with the return of Christ.

But it wasn't just Christ's promise that made those believers ache for the Second Coming – it was *the difficulties of life*. James's scattered Jewish church was being kicked around the Mediterranean like a soccer ball. The verses which immediately precede our text are a seething denunciation of their rich oppressors who had

reduced them to miserable poverty. Life was hard, and this hardness particularly made them long for the return of Christ.

I have noticed when people are hurting, they frequently express their hope for Christ's return – "Oh, I wish the Lord would return today!" But I have never heard anyone say, "Things are going so well …I wish Christ would return right now!" Hard times make us long for Christ's return. It is no surprise almost all the hymns which center on the return of Christ were written when life was more difficult than it is today. It is also revealing that black hymnody especially focused on Christ's return precisely because the slaves had nothing in *this* world. So their hymns rang with longings about "crossing over Jordan" to the "land that is fairer than day."

As for us at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ellen Thompson has written, "Life is too comfortable and things too important for us to want to leave this world, making it hard to sing with integrity, "On Jordan's stormy banks I stand/And cast a wishful eye!/To Canaan's fair and happy land/Where my possessions lie." *(1)* The modern western church simply has too much *here* to sing words like these today.

As we have seen, the early Christians had no such problem. Their implicit belief in Christ's promised return, coupled with the grinding realities of life, made them constantly breathe, "*Even so, come Lord Jesus*!" – an enviable cry we should cultivate, as we shall see.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

5:7-9

> *"Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See the Judge is standing at the door!"*

"Therefore" (ουν*, oun)* indicates that James has a basis for his first exhortation, and five possibilities have been suggested for that reason for patience:

1) the *eschatological* reason (2) :: the Lord God of hosts is about to act against the oppressors, *therefore* be patient;

2) the *judgement* reason narrows the eschatological reason; (3) the Lord is about to condemn the oppressors; or

3) the *intercessory* reason; the Lord has heard the resisting cries of the oppressed (v. 6). The third view could be altered by a view of "one who does not resist you" not supported above (namely, it speaks of the inability to do anything about oppression), to

4) the *piety* reason: the pious/righteous do not resist with violence, *therefore* follow their steps and be patient. Finally,

5) James's rhetoric is more *general* in the word "therefore": his logical inference is drawn from the total picture of God having heard the cries (v. 4) and having decided to act in judgment imminently. Because the point made in 5:7-11 encompass each of these points, it seems preferable to opt for the fifth view and see here a general logical inference.

James commands the messianic community, here designated "*the beloved*" or as the TNIV translates it, "*brothers and sisters*." This word is the first indicator of a change in tone. He shifts from the accusatory "*you who say*" (4:"1) and "*you rich"* (5:1), which were themselves notable shifts from the accusatory but pastorally shaped warnings, commands, and promises in 4:1-12, to the common life of Christian fellowship and unity with "*beloved."* As if to make his change of tone clear, James repeats the term in both 5:9 and 5:10 (see also 5:12, 19).

Exhortation about Patience

Vv. 7-8

He expresses his concern they exercise the virtue of patience; he reminds them they are living in anticipation of the coming of the Lord. The command to "*be patient"* needs to be tied (vocabularically) to the word "*endurance"* in 5:11.

He encourages patience: four times in succession he uses the term *patience* (v. 7 [twice], 8, 10) and twice he employs the concept *persevere* (v. 11). *(4)* And that is where James puts the emphasis.

Patience is a virtue possessed by few and sought by many. We are living in a society which champions the word *instant*. But to be patient, as James uses the word, is much more than passively waiting for the time to pass. Patience is the art of enduring someone whose conduct is incompatible with that of others and sometimes even oppressive. A patient man calms a quarrel, for he controls his anger and does not seek revenge (compare Proverbs 15:18; 16:32). *(5)*

The old English term *long-suffering* does not mean to suffer a while but to tolerate someone for a long time. To say it differently, patience is the opposite of being short-tempered. God displays patience by being "*slow to anger"* when man continues to sin even after numerous admonitions. *(6)* Man ought to reflect that divine virtue in his day-to-day life.

James knows the readers of his epistle are unable to defend themselves against their oppressors. Therefore, he urges them to exercise patience and to leave matters in the hands of God, who is coming to deliver them. Even if they were able to do so, they should not take matters in their own hands. God has said, "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay"* (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:12; Hebrews 10:30).

Throughout this letter the writer reveals his love for God's creation. In this verse he portrays the expectations of the farmer who anticipates a bountiful harvest but must patiently wait for the arrival of "the autumn and spring rains." The farmer has learned everything grows according to the seasons of the year. He knows how many days are needed for a plant to develop from germination to harvest. Moreover, he knows without the proper amount of rainfall at the right moment, his labors are in vain.

Three great words in the New Testament refer to the Lord's Second Coming. Επιπηανια (*Epiphania)* means an appearing or a showing or a manifestation of Christ. Another great word is αποκαλυπσισ (*apokalupsis)*, which means an unveiling, a laying bare, a revelation, and refers to the full display of Christ's power and glory. *(7)* The third word, the one for the Lord's "coming" in verses 7 and 8 of our text, is παρουσια (*parousia)*, which emphasizes Christ's physical

presence, literally meaning "being alongside of." It is used in this way fifteen times in the New Testament in reference to Christ's return, *(9)* denoting "the physical arrival of a ruler." The significance of the word as James uses it here is *his suffering people longed for the presence of Christ their King.* They knew when Jesus came to be *with* them, everything would be all right.

Exhortation about Speech

v. 9

James Spirit-directed wisdom for his afflicted brothers and sisters was given in the form of a command: "*Be patient, therefore until the coming of the Lord."* This is not passive resignation, but rather patient waiting for the Lord. *(8)*

"*Be patient … until the Lord's coming."* Verse 9's concern with words fits into the theme of perseverance, addressing a kind of grumbling connected to the readers' impatience. The readers know the Lord is coming back in the capacity of Judge. They ought to exercise self-control toward their adversaries and demonstrate patience in respect to the coming of the Lord.

They are pilgrims on the journey that will one day be finished. He wants to give them instructions for the interim. James commands that positive waiting for Christ be matched by positive relationships with other waiting believers: "*Don't grumble against each other…"* In the interim they should refrain from grumbling (actually "groaning") against each other, which is the opposite of patience.

It is one thing to get along with other believers when things are going well. It is quite another when we are all under stress. The people James addresses live in oppressive situations that cause them to lose patience with those who deprive them of the basic necessities. In time, they become irritable toward those who share their miseries. They give vent to their repressed feelings and lash out at those who are close to them. Their behavior is understandable. At this point, however, James appears and admonishes them not to grumble against one another. He knows they are grumbling against members of the Christian community.

Grumbling is the opposite of being joyful and thankful. James reminds the grumblers, whom he affectionately calls "*brothers*," they fall into judgment

themselves. God himself will judge them. In fact, James says, "*The Judge is standing at the door!"*

The remark of James is a word of warning for the impatient grumbler and a word of comfort for the person who keeps his eye of faith fixed on Jesus. The church of all ages utters the prayer the apostle John has recorded at the close of the New Testament, "*Amen. Marana tha! Come, Lord Jesus"* (Revelation 22:20).

Examples of Patience/Perseverance

5:10-11

> *"As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."*

James takes the first example of patience from nature – the expectation of the fall and spring rains (5:7) – and the second from Scripture. He knows that the readers are fully acquainted with the history of the Old Testament prophets. Therefore, he writes, "*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."*

The word *example* is most important. In the original it stands first in the sentence and thus receives all the emphasis. The expression has two meanings: in the bad sense, it refers to the ungodly whose conduct we are told to avoid (Hebrews 4:11; 2 Peter 2:6); in the good sense, it describes the righteous whose conduct we are to imitate (John 13:15).

Prominent figures of the Old Testament era are examples of patient endurance as we saw in Hebrews 11 (See Volume 1). Think of the persecution Elijah endured from King Ahab, the hardship Jeremiah suffered at the hands of the kings of Judah, and the perseverance Daniel displayed when he was put in the lions' den during the time of the exile. All of these, and numerous others, suffered because they "spoke in the name of the Lord."

In his prayer of confession, Daniel addresses God and says, "*We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land"* (Daniel 9:6). This is what the prophets did, and James exhorts the readers of his epistle to follow their example. When they imitate the prophets, they will have to endure insult and persecution, and run the risk of losing their lives. Nevertheless, they ought to count themselves among those are called blessed.

"As you know, we consider blessed those who have preserved" (v. 11a). In this verse we hear the echo of one of Jesus' beatitudes, "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (*Matthew 5:11-12). James intimates that the readers are familiar with this word of Jesus.

How is this so? In answer, we must begin with the universal truth that life without struggle and difficulty is bland and tasteless. Malcolm Muggeridge wrote in *Jesus Rediscovered:*

> "Suppose you eliminated suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be. I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the most ghastly place because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered." *(10)*

In other words, our moral development – our character – is largely dependent upon the experience of suffering. Without trials we would be morally dwarfed. In fact, the study of the lives of great people reveals there is a consistent link between the crucible and true greatness. No wise person would seek to be exempt from the healthy discipline of trouble. It is trouble that promotes trust in God, brings us nearer to God and strengthens our communion with God. Paul put it this way: "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"* (Romans 8:18). Those who persevere are *blessed.*

The examples of the prophets ought to be enough, but James adds the greater example of Job, the greatest man of the East: "*You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about"* (v. 11b).

That James mentions Job in particular seems odd in two ways. First, Job is not usually considered to be among the prophets, but we should note that often Old Testament characters of merit could be called prophets. Secondly, a carefully reading of Job reveals he was hardly patient in the usual sense of the word. He complained loudly, and often. Job is not commended here for his patience (μακροτημια*, makrothymia*) but rather for his endurance (ηψπομονε*, hypomone)* evident in his refusal to denounce God despite his hardships.

In his epistle James uses the word *perseverance* rather than "patience" of Job. Patience can be described as passive endurance: by contrast, perseverance is the active determination of a believer whose faith triumphs in the midst of afflictions.

What makes Job unforgettable? He is known for his steadfastness, that is, his persevering faith that triumphed in the end. Because "*Job did not sin in what he said"* (2:10), God eventually blessed him with twice as many possessions as he had before (42:12-13). For this reason, James tells his readers that they "*have seen what the Lord finally brought about."* God blessed Job because of his persevering faith.

James' concluding sentence ties the bow perfectly: "*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy"* (v. 11c). We must not allow ourselves to be persuaded by men or devils to think ill of God. God cannot be unkind to his children. Says our Father, "*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands"* (Isaiah 49:15, 16).

James coined a new word to say the Lord is "*full of compassion." (11)* Other ways of saying this are, "very, very compassionate," or "full of tender compassion." To this compassion James couples "*mercy*." God is full of compassion as he cares for us in our misery, and is full of mercy as he forgives our sins. All of which says to those who are undergoing hardships: God is good. He will sustain you.

Are times hard? Are you feeling alienated from God? If so, consider James' examples – the perseverance of the prophets and the perseverance of Job. If we

persevere we will be "blessed," for we will draw near to him and we will see him as never before, and our end is sure to be good.

The Lord is good!

ENDNOTES

1. Ellen Thompson, retired Wheaton College professor of music, from personal correspondence to R. Kent Hughes. June 3, 1990.
2. The aorist is used to sum up the entire action of patient waiting: the choice of aorist is not to get the community to begin doing something they are not now doing. W. Bauer, Arndt, Ginrich, Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (*BDAG).
3. Peter Davids, 181.
4. Found twice, once as a participle and once as a noun. See BDAG, 1039-40.
5. Ralph Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 8, James* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p. 178.
6. "Patience is the self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong." J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1890), p. 138.
7. Louis Berkhof defines the patience of God as "that aspect of the goodness or love of God in virtue of which He bears with the forward and evil in spite of their long continued disobedience." *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 72.
8. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 188.
9. William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), pp. 143, 144.
10. D. Edmund Hiebert, *The Epistle of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 296. It is found in Matthew 24:3, 27, 37, 39; Mark 14:62; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4; 1 John 2:28).
11. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 158, 159.
12. Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 188.

CHAPTER 12

James 5:12-20

CONCLUDING EXHORTATIONS

Most commentators see the final section of the epistle as a series of admonitions without much, if any connection or general theme. Most see no connection between this section and previous one. It seems to me the theme of illness and the issues growing out of it serve as a central idea in the whole section. James begins in verse 12 about oaths connected to adversity. He begins a new theme in verse 13 with the question about suffering. The cheerfulness and singing of praise are simply in contrast to show one should do naturally what his circumstances lead him to do. From this he turns to a specific kind of suffering – illness – and instructs the ill to call for the elders and let them pray for the sick (v. 14). In connection with this he mentions the possibility the sick may be a sinner or backslider and promises forgiveness upon confession of sins, with bodily healing to follow (vss. 15, 16). Then there is the section promising prayer has power, illustrated by the example of Elijah (vss. 16-18). The last section seems to pick up the thread of the sinner in the previous verses and to encourage the faithful to seek the restitution of the erring one (vss. 19, 20). The whole section is a fitting climax to the previous section on the Christian's attitude in the wrongs he suffers.

EXEGESIS OF TEXT

v. 12

"Above all my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no," do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation." (v. 12).

This verse is probably best interpreted as a continuation of the admonition on how to act in adversity, such as abuse by the rich in withholding wages. James now in a special way urges the disciples of the Lord must not allow themselves to be provoked into swearing.

James here does not have in mind what we call profanity or taking God's name in vain. He is thinking of oaths, that is, confirming a statement or promise by something sacred or holy or (on the other hand) imprecations (the calling down of curses on one's enemies in the name of God or something sacred). The use of the verb "to swear" and the syntax of the Greek (accusative of oaths) make this plain.

Once more James returns to a discussion on the use of the tongue (see 1:19, 26; 3:1-12). The warning not to grumble against one another to avoid falling under judgment (5:9) is somewhat parallel to the prohibition not to use an oath lightly, "*or you will be condemned"* (5:12).

James prohibits oath-taking "*so that you may not fall under condemnation."* This is an interesting variant on Jesus' "*anything more than this comes from the evil one*." Wherever James got his wording, the two come at the same point from different angles: insincere or dishonest words reflect a character that is not in tune with God and is, therefore, liable to condemnation. James is given to what appears to many to be an exaggeration: people can be condemned for not showing mercy (2:13), for grumbling (5:9), and for the inappropriate use of oaths (5:12). Each of these, on closer inspection emerges from the depth of his theology: from a loving life, from a nonviolent approach to resolving one's economic situation, and from a heart that tells true words. These are not the concerns of austere severity but of one who thinks messianists ought to follow Jesus and be transformed in the community.

What is the significance of *above all*? If James means to say the readers ought to pay *special* attention to the warning not to swear, we would have expected a more elaborate admonition. And if James wished to convey the importance of this verse in the light of the preceding verses, we would have expected a definite connection. Perhaps we must conclude James is coming to the end of his epistle and wishes to mention a series of admonitions (compare 1 Peter 4:8).

It seems clear to me James took this teaching directly from the lips of his elder brother Jesus, who had said virtually the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount

when he gave his fourth example of radical kingdom righteousness (Matthew 5:33-37).

The situation was utterly fantastic, so James gave them a piece of Jesus' mind: "*Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else"* (v. 12a). The full portion of Jesus' mind was given by his own words in Matthew 5:34-36. Jesus and James rule out making vows using any references to people or objects as backup.

The reason for this is, *God stands behind everything*. The entire creation is God's, and you and I cannot call up a part of it without ultimately referring to him (Matthew 23:16-22). James concludes his admonition by saying if you fail to speak the truth, "*you will be condemned."* A literal translation of this clause is, "so that you may not fall under judgment" (NASB). That is, God's judgment strikes anyone who carelessly swears an oath and fails to uphold the truth.

We are called to profound truthfulness in a radically deceptive world – a world which is deceptive in its *radix*, its root. We can promote radical truthfulness when our no is truly a no and a yes is truly a yes – in our lives.

Prayer and Healing in the Community

v. 13

"*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise."*

Finally James turns to the matter of pilgrims caring for one another on the way. In the concluding segment of this letter, James gives some specific practical advice related to readers' need to endure. The advice given is good for all times of stress and trial. James's emphasis on prayer in this section is especially noteworthy since few things undergird perseverance more effectively than prayer. In the final analysis, a persevering life is also a praying life.

"Are any among you suffering (in trouble)? They should pray. Calmness and appropriate behavior, even under stress, are what James is really seeking here. The Christian does not always live on a mountaintop of faith. Although Paul instructs the believer to rejoice always (Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:16), the simple

facts of life are from time to time the believer is in trouble or suffering. Just what kind of suffering James has in mind is not immediately clear. The verb *kakopatheo* appears twice in 2 Timothy (2:9; 4:5), where it appears to describe physical persecution. But the word is broader than that meaning and often describes hardship in war as well as ordinary hardships in life. This suffering can be physical, mental, personal, financial, spiritual, or religious – to mention no more. When someone is mentally depressed, even with special effort he finds it difficult to be joyful. Therefore, James counsels anyone who is suffering, has trouble, to pray. The prayer of the suffering, might look like Psalm 30, and a prototypical experience with suffering and prayer is seen in Psalm 77. *Psalms of Solomon* 15:1 expresses the intent of James 5:13a: "*When I was persecuted I called on the Lord's name; I expected the help of Jacob's God and I was saved. For you, O God, are the hope and refuge of the poor.*"

James urges us to seek strength from God in prayer. As Peter puts it, "*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7). Paul exhorts us to pray continually (Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is the vital link that keeps us in touch with "*the author and perfecter of our faith"* (Hebrews 12:2).

The second condition, at the other end of the spectrum, is cheerfulness: *Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise."*

Periods of joy follow times of sadness (Psalm 30:5). We should avoid thinking of "is cheerful"(ευτηψμεο*, euthymeo)* in terms of a happy, smiley face because life is good. This term evokes enthusiasm, courage, and a confident faith and these often in the context of stress. Thus, in a storm at sea and after experiencing hunger, the apostle Paul urges the sailors to "*keep up your courage [eutheymein]"* (Acts 27:22, 25). The contrast here is not between suffering and the good life but within a group where everyone is undergoing persecution or suffering, some of whom are struggling and others who have taken courage.

James exhorts the person to "*sing songs of praise."* This translates one word, πσαλλο *(psallo,* the imperative *psalleto),* a cognate with the word "psalm," which appears twice in 1 Corinthians 14:15. *(1)* Most often it is used of direct praise to the name of God (e.g., Pss. 7:17; 18:49). Those who suffer are to pray to God; those who are encouraged in the conditions of the messianic community are to sing

praise to God, and we are probably to think James intends for the "cheerful" (or "encouraged") to give credit to God for the strength they find to carry on faithfully. If we are accurate in thinking of a single condition – oppression – giving rise to two sorts of response, suffering and cheerfulness, then we should perhaps notice the connection to the "testing" or "tempting" (*peirasmos)* in 1:12-15, where the same condition (*peirasmos*) is perceived as either a "test" or a "temptation," depending in part on how a person responds to "desire" (ευπιτηψμια, *epithymia*). And we could consider how the teachers use the tongue – either to bless God or to denounce those made in God's image (3:9). The letter repeatedly forces on the audience a fork-in-the-road kind of decision, but here the rhetoric is shaped less for decision and more to how different people respond to the same conditions.

The book of Psalms instructs us how to do so. They keep their joy and happiness within proper bounds and give God the glory, honor, and praise that belong to him. In short, we ought to be prayerfully patient in adversity.

Sickness – Summon the Elders *(2)*

Vv. 14-15

"*Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven"* (vv. 14, 15).

James now moves into suffering as sickness with attentive sin and healing, which will occupy his attention through v. 18. If the suffering should pray and the encouraged should praise, the sick, one would think, should also pray for healing. But James lets this third condition open an entire theological and cultural perception unfold it in the following verses of observations and implications for the messianic community.

The word translated "sick" is a general term denoting physical, spiritual, or mental *(3)* weakness and can even describe someone on the verge of death (e.g., John 4:46; 11:1-3; Acts 9:37; Phil. 2:26-27). Jesus healed the sick (Matt. 10:8; Luke 4:40),

and exhorted his followers to tend to the sick (Matt. 25:36). John 5:3 shows how general and encompassing this term can be: "In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed." In this text, while invalids might be too strong of a term, we see that "blind, lame, and paralyzed" are specifications of being "sick" (Greek, αστηενεο*, astheneo)*. Furthermore, it can describe those who are frail and needy (Acts 20:35) or aging (Rom. 4:19). *(4)* Furthermore, this term is connected to the strength of one's faith and courage to persevere in the New Testament (1 Cor. 8:11-12; 2 Cor. 11:21, 29). So one is entitled to ask what kind of weaknesses is in view and just how sick James thinks this person might be. These factors deserve consideration: first the situation is serious enough to summon the elders; the sick person will be anointed with oil; and the words "save the sick" and "raise them up" describe the effects of the healing. *(5)* Furthermore, this third condition provokes James to mention not only elders and anointing but also the need for strong faith and righteous people praying for the person. This evidence suggests this person is seriously and physically ill, perhaps near death, though the terms are expansive enough they might include a number of issues. *(6)*

The ill person, who seems to be bedridden, is given this command: "*They should call for the elders of the church,*" James uses only one other term for a leader; in 3:1 he uses the word "teacher." This is not the place to sketch the rise of church offices nor the intricacies of church leadership where we find a variety of terms, including bishop, pastor, deacon, and elder, but we can sketch briefly what it meant to call some an "elder" in the early church. *(7)* To begin with, we are almost certainly dealing with males and with established males who operated in a structured society of respect and honor (Josh.9:11; Judg. 11:5-11; 2 Sam. 2:17; Jer. 29:1; Ezek. 8:1; Ezra 5:5; 6:7). One needs to think of patriarchs (Gen. 12-50), the grey-bearded wisdom of Proverbs, and a patriarchal, hierarchical, and honor-shaped culture where the elders were in the middle of what was most important. But the honor given to the elders in this culture is not so much formal as it is unofficial custom and collective wisdom. There is no evidence that "elder" was an "office." Campbell draws the right conclusion; elders "does not so much denote an office as connote prestige." *(8)*

This leads to an important observation: while it is true that "elder" (πρεσβψτεροσ, *presbyteros*) appears to be a little more of an official designation in the Pastorals (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Tit. 1:5; cf. 1 Peter 5:5), it is a general term for senior wise,

honored, respected males in the community who were household leaders. We find the term used this way in the New Testament. Thus, it refers to the "elders" who were leaders in the community (Luke 7:3), who safe-guarded the oral, sacred tradition (Mat. 15:2) and who seemed to be at the center of power in Jerusalem.

It was also customary in the ancient world to anoint someone with oil. Such an act could be more medicinal, procedural, and connected to the natural healing process, as in Isaiah 1:6: the wounds *"have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil*." The same is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan: "*He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them"* (Luke 10:34).

But anointing with oil was also used for supernatural healing through the power and grace made available in Christ and through the Spirit. Thus, Mark 6:13: "*They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."* In James's words the oil could symbolize consecration of the person to God (e.g., Exod. 28:41; Acts 4:27; 10:18; 2 Cor. 1:21) or could be sacramental, something that mediates God's healing grace. The latter developed through the history of the church and the anointing of the sick.

Anointing (the verb αλελπηο, *alelpho*) was sometimes done as an action of consecrating, dedicating, or purifying – it is not always clear which. The praying and anointing with oil called for here above all emphasize the communal nature of pilgrim life. Sickness is not to be treated as a private affair with the sick confined to their solitude to ponder what they had done to bring on their affliction. The sick are to be embraced by the community of faith, and the leaders of prayer are to share the pain of their afflicted fellow travelers. It was to be done "*in the name of the Lord"* (5:14). To pray and anoint in the name of the Lord Jesus involves invoking Jesus Christ to act in the power of the resurrection.

The pilgrims' perseverance is a general call to endure patiently until the Lord comes. These two verses, although well known, are often misunderstood. Perhaps this is because these verses seem to raise challenging questions rather than provide conclusive answers. However, there is no real problem with this text so long as we allow it to mean what it says – and neither more nor less than it says. There is nothing here at all about a gift of healing possessed by any of the elders. Rather, these church leaders function simply as intercessors on behalf of the one who is sick. Neither does James say that recovery always occurs. It will occur where there

is prayer of faith, but the absence of such a prayer does not mean the elders are spiritually deficient. The more biblically based and perceptive the elders of a church are, the more readily they will be able to evaluate the specific situation in a spiritual way and to pray accordingly. We should be careful not to turn what we read here into an established rite to be followed on all occasions. James instructs the elders on what to do, but we cannot know if this is what he would say always, nor is it clear that he is laying down a law for all Christians of all times. This is what James said at that time to the sick in prayer, and we need to recognize intercessory prayer is the first thing he commands and is the main verb. The anointing accompanies the prayer. Nevertheless, the teachings of this section are clear and to the point.

Amy Carmichael, the turn-of-the century missionary to India, described the attempted healing of one her treasured coworkers, a woman named Ponnammal, who contacted cancer in 1913. Amy was, of course, aware of James's prescription to call for the elders of the church to anoint the ill and offer the prayer of faith, but she and her fellowship were not sure what to do. So they sought a sign asking, if it was God's will, he would send someone to them who was earnest about James' prescription for healing. The person came – an old friend of hers from Madras. As her biographer Elizabeth Elliot describes it:

> "It was a solemn meeting around the sickbed, the women dressed as usual in their handloomed saris, but white ones for this occasion. They laid a palm branch across Ponnammal's bed as a sign of victory and accepted whatever answer God might give, certain that whether it was to be physical healing or not, He would give victory and peace. It sounds like a simple formula. It was an act of faith, but certainly accompanied by the anguish of doubt and desire which had to be brought again and again under the authority of the Master … From that Ponnammal grew … worse. The pain increased, and her eyes grew dull as she lingered for days in misery until she reached her limit and her "warfare was accomplished." *(9)*

Prima facie James' directions did not "work" for Ponnammal, the faithful servant of Christ. Honesty demands we admit such is often the case when Christian's attempt to follow the Scripture. Why is this so? How is it two believers become ill and both call for the elders of the church, both are anointed, both are prayed over,

yet one dies and the other is healed? Are we all to follow James's prescription? How are we to apply this scripture for the church today?

Second, these verses are often misunderstood. Many people have claimed the so-called gifts of healing (1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30) and therefore offer prayers in faith to make sick people well. No one denies that God works healing miracles in the Christian community today in answer to the prayers of the saints. But what happens when God does not heal the sick? Is there a lack of faith? Is there unconfessed sin? Yes, but not always. Consider Paul, who had been given the gift of healing. He seems to have been unable to deliver his friend Epaphroditus from a lingering illness that almost caused his death (Philippians 2:27). Moreover, Paul writes, "*I left Trophimus sick in Miletus"* (2 Timothy 4:20). Why did Paul not pray in faith so his friends were healed instantaneously? Undoubtedly Paul prayed, but he learned from his own experience, when he pleaded for the removal of the thorn in his flesh God does not always heal us as we wish. He heard God say, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

A text close to James quotes: "R. Alexandri said in the name of R. Hihha b. Abba: A sick man does not recover from his sickness until all his sins are forgiven him, as it is written, "*Who forgiveth all thine inquities; who healeth all thy diseases"* (Ps. 103:3). *(10)* The same connection is found in the New Testament. Jesus said as he healed a paralyzed man, "*Son, your sins are forgiven,"* and this implies the paralysis was the result of sin (Mark 2:5; cf. John 15:14). Paul knows some are sick at Corinth because of sin (1 Cor. 11:30). And John 9:2-3 asks the question behind all this and offers an alternative: "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."* Job at some level deconstructs a superficial deuteronomic theology, as does John 9:2-3 from a different angle. The instinct was there, and the principle was in place; sickness correlates with sin, health and faithfulness.

This instinct and principle then prompt James to make the connection between the sick person's illness and possible sin. *(11)* What James says is if the illness is sin induced; it is possible it is not. What James says is if the sickness is from sin, the sin "will be forgiven." James combines the sick person's requesting the elders – a sign in and of itself of need and faith in Christ – the elders' prayer and

anointing, the prayer of faith, and, as the next verse will clarify, confession of sin. This leads to the sick person's forgiveness, itself sometimes a trigger of healing (Mark 2:5; Matt. 8:16-17), and healing, itself an indication of forgiveness. *(12)*

The Need for the Prayer of Faith

v. 15a

Casual, ritual, or routine pastoral prayers for healing are not effective, as most pastors and church leaders know from experience. James speaks of the need for a special kind of prayer in this situation: "*The prayer of faith will save the sick."* What comes to mind immediately is 1:6-8, where James urged the community to ask for wisdom in faith, for, apart from faith, they "*must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."* If faith is needed to acquire wisdom, so also for healing. One also thinks of 4:3 and asking for healing with faith. Faith is particularly connected to healing (Mark 2:5; 5:34, 36, 9:23; 10:52; Acts 14:9), and without faith one does not obtain healing (Mark 6:6). Prayer by "faith" cannot be mustered; instead, it is the Spirit-empowered and trusting vulnerability and loving trust that characterize the genuine I-Thou relationship with God and that, in God's goodness, may or may not lead to healing. Inasmuch as the ones being exhorted to pray are the elders, we are to think the "faith" is theirs.

*The prayer of faith will save the sick. "*The word translated "sick" (a participle of καμνο*, kamno*) covers a variety of symptoms, from weariness and fatigue (Heb. 12:3) to death. In this context the person is ill (5:14a) with the implication of exhaustion (cf. Job10:1). Philo uses the word commonly translated "salvation" (σοτεριᾳ*, soteria)* for healing and so does James – this was a common word for liberation and deliverance from bodily illnesses. Healing is a symptom of the kingdom's presence, and it would be unwise to separate physical salvation from spiritual salvation. Thus, Mark 5:23 "*My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her so that she may be made well (σοτηε, sothe), and live"* (cf. 5:28, 34; 10:52; John 11:12). New Testament authors (Luke 19:10; Rom. 10:13; 1 Cor. 1:21; 1 Pet. 4:18), including James (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20), use the same term for eschatological redemption, but the context here clearly favors the customary use of this term for healing from physical disease.

This salvation (healing) is restated: "*and the Lord will raise them up"* (again, the future tense indicates potentially). Once again the word "raise" (εγιρο*, egiro)* commonly appears in healing scenes. Jesus took Simon Peter's mother-in-law by the hand "*and lifted her up"* (Mark 1:31; cf. 9:27; Matt. 9:5-7; Luke 6:8; John 5:8). Acts describes Peter's healing of the lame beggar in similar terms: "*And he took him by the right hand and raised him up"* (Acts 3:7; cf. 9:41). Though the word could be used of the final resurrection that would make no sense in this context where a sick person has called for the elders for healing. It is tempting for some to connect "save" and "raise" and arrive at the conclusion that James is speaking here of spiritual salvation, but the words are too commonly used for healing and the context is about healing. *(13)* James informs the community it will be the "Lord" who raises the sick person up. Because the elders have been instructed to anoint the sick person "in the name of *the Lord*," that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, it is more than likely that the raising from sickbed is done by Jesus Christ.

As we have indicated above, we should read James 5:13-18 as a pastoral meandering. Perhaps the multivalence of the words provokes James's next idea: that "faith," "save," "sick," and "raise" can also refer to spiritual redemption might have suggested to James that forgiveness might also be needed. But there is a further complexity: in the ancient world sickness was connected to sinfulness.

The Promise of Forgiveness

v. 15b

Sickness in a world far more primitive than ours was a mystery, and one way of resolving that mystery was to connect sickness and illnesses to sin. James seems to make that connection when he says "*and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven."* Why he moves in this direction is not altogether clear, and some think he is preparing for the backslider of 5:19-20, but those verses are marked off by "*my brothers and sisters*," they deal with a person who has wandered from the faith, and they do not mention healing.

What is clear is that James 5:15b reveals a very common connection made in the ancient world: sickness derives from sinfulness. Standing tall to the point of dominating the deuteronomic history are Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26-27, and 2

Kings 17. The correlation of sickness with sin and health with covenant faithfulness shapes the core of the Old Testament and of Israel's identity and consciousness. "Health, fertility, and long life are promised as blessings for covenantal obedience, while disease, plagues, incurable illnesses, infertility, and premature death are threatened as curses for breaches of covenant." *(14)*

The same connection is found in the New Testament. Jesus said as he healed a paralyzed man, "*Son your sins are forgiven,"* and this implies the paralysis was the result of sin (Mark 2:5; cf. John 5:14). Paul knows that some are sick at Corinth because of sin (1 Cor. 11:30). And John 9:2-3 asks the question behind all this and offers an alternative: "*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."* Job at some level deconstructs a superficial deuteronomic theology, as does John 9:2-3 from a different angle. The instinct was there, and the principle was in place: sickness correlates with sin, health and faithfulness. *But not always.* Sometimes there is another explanation, not the least of which in James is oppression (see Matt.25:36; Jas. 2:1-4, 14-17l 5:106). But this does not prevent the instinct nor eliminate the principle.

The instinct and principle then prompt James to make the connection between the sick person's illness and possible sin. James is not certain the sickness is from sin, or he would have used the indicative; (instead, he uses the subjunctive in a periphrastic construction). I would thus translate: "And if he be a person who is in the state of having sinned." James combines the sick person's requesting the elders – a sign in and of itself of need and faith in Christ – the elders' prayer and anointing, the prayer of faith, and, as the next verse will clarify, confession of sin. This leads to the sick person's forgiveness, itself sometimes a trigger of healing (Mark 2:5; Matt. 8:16-17), and healing, itself an indication of forgiveness. *(15)*

The Exhortation to Confession

v. 16a

The person's possible sin-shaped sickness leads James to a related topic: their need for all to confess their sins, presumably to avoid what has happened to the sick person. James thus shifts from a particular case to a more general situation. Or perhaps 5:16 is the conclusion to 5:14-15: the prayer ultimately had to do with sin and the need to routine communal confession and prayer. James shifts to a related topic: the need for all to confess their sins.

"*Therefore confess your sins to each another and pray for each other so that you may be healed."* This command to "confess," so foreign to much of the church today, characterized the life of ancient Israel. Such an act of communal confession is described in Leviticus 5:5-6. The institutionalization of confession led to a community much both more in tune with its sins and peccadilloes and more comfortable, if one can ever do that, with confession. Israelites made peace with God privately as well, as can be seen in some of the Psalms' greatest lines. Confession was commonplace: "*No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy"* (Prov. 28:13).

James's words then are not a new instruction; they speak of an old practice of admitting one's guilt before God and others and now urge the same on the messianic community. The confession of sins to one another was not a substitute for confession to God. What sins James had in mind might be discerned from the letter. Surely it would involve mistreatment of the poor (2:1-17), verbal sins prompted by ambition (3:1-4:12), violence against one another (1:19-21; 4:1-4; 5:7-11), judgmentalism (4:11-12), and sins prompted by greed (4:13-5:6). No doubt one could multiply the sorts of things the messianists did, but at least these were in mind.

The Need for Righteous Persons to Pray

5:16b-18

Almost backing up to the "prayer of faith" in 15a, James now promises healing if the righteous are the ones praying for the sick: "*The prayer of the righteous is*

powerful and effective.“ This translation is in need of some repairs. A more literal rendering would look like this: “The working prayer of a righteous [person] accomplishes much.” This inelegant translation recognizes that “working” (ενεργουμενε*, energoumene*) is an adjective participle modifying the word “prayer.”

Who is this righteous man? We are inclined to look to spiritual giants, to the heroes of the faith, and to men and women of God. In our opinion they are the people who through prayer are able to move mountains. But James mentions no names, except that of Elijah with the qualification that he is “*just like us”* (v. 17). He means to say any believer whose sins have been forgiven and who prays in faith is righteous. When he prays, his prayers are “powerful and effective.”

When the righteous pray for each other, there is power! The emphasis is on practical righteousness. Those with righteous lives are powerful in prayer. This principle was expressed in Isaiah’s ancient words, “*Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear”* (Isaiah 59:1, 2). Similarly the Psalmist said, “*If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened”* (Psalm 34:15). Proverbs states positively, “*The Lord … hears the prayer of the righteous”* (Proverbs 15:29).

Both prayer and the answer to prayer are powerful and effective. The one does not cancel the other. That is, prayer offered in faith by a forgiven believer is a powerful and effective means to approach the throne of God. And God “*rewards those who earnestly seek him”* (Hebrews 11:6), for his answers to prayer are indeed powerful and effective. *(16)*

James has been telling us all of life is to be bathed in prayer: prayers when we are down, prayers of song when we are up, prayers for the sick, and now, in verse 16, prayers for each other. Prayer for each other brings spiritual and physical healing to the church.

James brings his discussion on prayer to a conclusion by turning to Scripture. He refers to the prophet Elijah and presents his prayer life as an example to his readers.

Prayer has power

vv. 17-18

"Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops."

The mention of Elijah especially caught the ear of James's Hebrew audience, who remembered him as fighting a life-and-death battle with idolatrous Ahab and Jezebel, slaying the prophets of Baal, fleeing for his life, exercising more than human power, seeing sights beyond the experience of other men, raising the dead, multiplying the widow's meal and oil, eating from the beaks of ravens, feasting in the wilderness at the hands of angels, foretelling both famine and the coming of rain, out-running Ahab's chariot to Jezreel, learning the secrets of God's presence in the caves of Horeb, and finally vanishing from the earth in a chariot of fire. Whew!

Elijah's name was even connected with paving the way for the coming of the Messiah (Malachi 4:5, 6; Mark 9:12; Luke 1:17). Elijah was so highly regarded that some were tempted to think he was superhuman, *(17)* and some therefore could conceivably wonder how his example of powerful prayer could apply to them. Thus James introduces him by saying, "*Elijah was a man just like us"* (v. 17a). He had the same human nature, the same fallible passions as us. He was an ordinary mortal (cf. Acts 14:15, which uses the same word). The prayer life of Elijah became important in the early Christian tradition, likewise Elijah's experiences has lessons for all of us.

What do we learn from Elijah? We learn passionate prayer: "*He prayed earnestly that it would not rain…* (vv. 17, 18). From what source did Jesus and James receive the information on the duration of the drought? The Old Testament record shows only that "in the third year" of the drought God told Elijah to go to Ahab (1 Kings 18:1). That is not the same as three years and a half. From Jewish sources we learn that the expression *three and a half years* is an idiom which because of frequent usage, came to mean "for quite some time." *(18)* Therefore, we ought to take the expression figuratively, not literally.

Furthermore, the Jewish custom of counting part of a unit of time as a full unit sheds additional light on our understanding of the text. A striking example, of course, is the duration of Jesus' death and burial (from late afternoon on Friday until early Sunday morning). Yet this period is counted as three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). Similarly, the time of the famine during the days of Elijah may not have been exactly three and a half years.

Another example. During the fourth century the city of Antioch in Syria produced one of the greatest preachers of the church, John of Antioch. Because of his careful exegesis, unrelenting moral application, and unmatched eloquence he was given a nickname which became his storied title, Chrysostom, "golden-mouthed." This appellation was well-deserved, as is evidenced by his description of the power of prayer, perhaps the most exciting account ever given:

> The potency of prayer has subdued the strength of fire, it has bridled the rage of lions, hushed anarchy to rest, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, expanded the fates of heaven, assuaged diseases, dispelled frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. There is (*in it*) an all-sufficient panoply, a treasure undiminished, a mine which is never exhausted, a sky unobscured by clouds, a heaven unruffled by the storm. It is the root, the fountain, the mother of a thousand blessings!

In this amazing description Chrysostom stacked *some* of the Scriptural evidences of prayer's power atop each other in neatly sculptured phrases until they formed an overwhelming monument to the power of prayer. None of the phrases are exaggerations or hyperboles. This is truth piled upon truth.

Today's church needs to live out the two grand duties of this passage. *It needs to be a confessing church.* Is the Holy Spirit prodding us to confess our sin to a brother or sister against whom we have sinned? If so, let us do it before we worship again. Are there sins in our lives which need to be confessed to a mature Christian, perhaps an elder or a preacher, so they can pray for us and hold us accountable? If so, may we not put it off.

The second great duty of the church is to engage in powerful prayer, which comes through *purity* and *passion.* The prayer of a pure, righteous man or woman of God is powerful, and when it is prayed with passion from God it is Elijah powerful!

Rescuing the Wayward

Vv. 19-20

The address remains personal and intimate.

"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."

James graphically presents apostasy as a very real possibility in the opening phrase of verse 19. The Greek word for "*wander"* is πλαναο (*planao)*, from which we derive the word "planet," a heavenly wanderer. *(19)* James sees some believers as potentially cut loose from the church and wandering alone across a desolation. But he does not see this wandering as unconscious or absent-minded. Moreover, this is not simply a doctrinal wandering from the truth, but a wandering in lifestyle. The Hebrew mind, and especially that of James, never separated the *intellectual* from the *behavioral*, or the *doctrinal* from the *moral,* as the Greeks did. Truth was something people *did* (John 3:21, NASB).

Restoring lapsed believers was already a concern in Jesus' teaching, where there was a strong emphasis on forgiveness (Matt. 18:21; Luke 17:3-4). But it became a bigger concern in the earliest churches and is accompanied by proper pastoral discipline and care in the New Testament texts (Gal. 6:1-2; Rom. 14:1-15:7; 1 Cor. 5:8:7-13; 10:23-11:1; 1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Heb. 4:1; 1 Pet., 4:8; 1 John 5:16-17; Jude 22-23). James's text belongs with concerns for forgiveness and pastoral sensitivity, but he further emphasizes in 5:20 the results of restoring the wandering.

Thus apostasy could be discerned in two ways: doctrinal aberration or moral deviation. In fact, the Bible teaches that a moral deviation can, and often does, affect one's doctrine. Thousands today change what they believe to accommodate their moral behavior. On the other hand thousands more take up false doctrine,

then apostatize in their actions. In the New Testament we read of Demas forsaking for moral reasons: "*he loved this world"* (2 Timothy 4:10). On the other hand, Alexander the metalworker did Paul great harm because he objected to his doctrine – "*he strongly opposed our message"* (2 Timothy 4:15). Both had distinct reasons for apostasy but would join hands doctrinally and morally as time went on.

The church has not always done well with those who have lapsed, and one thinks of the *Donatist* controversy, but at other times it has done well, and one thinks here of the Confessing Church in Germany and the acts of reconciliation in South Africa. But from the beginning there has been a double duty: to warn with clarity those who lapse and to forgive those who come back.

Restoring (επιστρεπηο*, epistrepho)* involves pastoral attention to a person that enables repentance (Mark 4:12; Luke 1:16-17) even more than once (Luke 17:4), pastoral prayer, and the restoration of that person – sometimes – their previous ministry (Luke 22:32). But James's emphasis is on leading the wandering to repentance: "restore" is frequently connected to repentance (e.g., Acts 9:35; 11:21; 15:19; 26:18; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:9).

As Christians who care for the church, we ought to be sensitive to moral changes in our own behavior and (while avoiding judgmentalism) be sensitive to changes in our brothers and sisters. In our day moral wandering may be as sure an indication of apostasy as mental theological wandering. As Billy Graham has said,

> No man can be said to be truly converted to Christ who has not bent his will to Christ. He may give intellectual assent to the claim of Christ and may have had emotional religious experiences; however, he is not truly converted until he has surrendered his will to Christ as Lord, Savior, and Master. *(20)*

These last two verses of his epistle James stresses the corporate responsibility Christians have toward one another. They not only should confess their sins and pray together; they also should exercise spiritual care that is mutual and beneficial. This care should be administered to the individual believer through private counseling and to the church through the preaching of the Word.

Believers ought to know they are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the wandering brother or sister. In a sense, James proclaims the same message of urgency the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews communicates:

> *"See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness"* (Hebrews 3;12-13).

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews appeals to the readers to exercise their corporate responsibility toward the individual church member who drifts away from the truth. James, however, is even more direct; he addresses the members of the church individually and shows them their responsibility.

Any member of the congregation knows that he or she must care for the spiritual needs of a fellow member. We are our brother's keeper. Wisely and tactfully, therefore, we must point out to our brother the error of his conduct and restore him gently.

The Results of Restoration

v. 20

The NRSV's "*you should know*" masks a subtle grammatical issue. The subject of the verb is third person singular and could be literally rendered "let the person know." The question is "Which person?" Is James addressing the one who has wandered, the one who restores, or the community? The nearest antecedent would be the restorer, and asking the subject of the verb to refer back to the wanderer (as direct address) creates tension with "brings a sinner back," for it should have then been "brings you back." The singular would be able to take this as addressed to the restorer. The almost distant and clinical words of James are shifted by the NRSV into direct address ("you should know") but it seems preferable and more in keeping with James's tone to translate more clinically: "let that person know."

What James wants the restorer to know is he or she has accomplished two things: the sinner is saved from death, and this restoration covers a multitude of sins. The use here of "sinner" and "sin" (ηαμαρτοιοσ, ηαμαριτα; *hamartoios*, *hamartia)* does not mean the focus has shifted to sin in general. The concern is still wandering from the truth. Hence, "*brings back a sinner from wandering."*

First then, the restorer "*will save the sinner's soul from death*." James has used "save" in 1:21 ("the implanted word … has the power to save your souls") and 2:14 (faith without works is not faith that can save). Behind all this is that God is the one who saves (4:12). But in 5:15 James used the term for physical healing, and it is not impossible "*save the sinner's soul from death*" here could refer to the kind of prayer that leads to healing. But, because James uses "soul" in this context and we have a similar expression in 1:21, it is far more likely the salvation here is spiritual, eternal salvation and not simply physical healing, even if one would not want to separate the two too much.

The Greek text does not say "the sinner's soul" but "his life,"(πσψχηε αυτο*, psyche autou*) and one can conceivably think the "his" is the restorer: that is, by his action of caring for the wanderer the restorer saves his own soul. In fact, there is evidence to support this suggestion, even if it goes against Reformation instincts – something we have seen James do already. God tells Ezekiel that if he does not warn the wicked, both they and he will die; if he warns the wicked, they will not repent but he will save himself (3:16:21). Daniel 4:27 can speak of atoning for sins with deeds of righteousness, and 12:3 can say those who lead many to righteousness will be like the stars.

Some suggest James, in "*multitude*," has in mind the abject state of the sinner or the numerical list of things he or she might have done, but others suggest he has in mind rather the extent of grace in God's forgiveness. *(21)* But Psalm 5:10 speaks of "*many transgressions*," and Ezekiel 28:18, which adds an expression like what we find in James 5:20, does the same. Indeed, God's gracious forgiveness abounds but it abounds over the many, many sins that would have been committed had not the restorer taken up the task.

Like 1 John, the letter ends abruptly, and we can only guess why. One can suggest James ends on this note because he wants his readers to repent and be restored, which makes sense for the last few verses. Better yet, it is one of James's purposes to exhort sinners to repent and to encourage elders, teachers, and others to work for the restoration of the wandering. He does not finish up with greetings or benedictions, but this may indicate he has not yet become aware of the Pauline and Petrine patterns.

Summary of Chapter 12

In the first few verses of this chapter, James rebukes the rich who have hoarded wealth in their spiritual blindness and who find their wealth has become useless. They have gained their wealth by neglecting to pay the harvesters who mowed their fields; they squandered it by living in luxury and self-indulgence; and they brutally oppressed the innocent, even to the point of killing them.

Next, James exhorts the readers of his epistle to exercise patience and to stand firm in expectation of the Lord's coming. He resorts to the use of examples (the farmer, the prophets, and Job) to accentuate his exhortation. Knowing the characteristics of his people, he admonishes them not to use oaths but to speak the truth at all times.

In the last section of the chapter, the writer presents a few instructions pertaining to wholesome Christian living in times of adversity, happiness, sickness, and sin. He stresses prayer as a source of power and illustrated this by citing an example from the life of the prophet Elijah.

In his final remark, James reminds the readers of their corporate responsibility toward the person who wanders from the truth. The members of the church must administer spiritual care to the wayward and bring him to repentance, so he may live and his sins be forgiven. William Walsham How gave poetic expression to this truth when he said:

> *The captive to release,*
>
> *To God the lost to bring,*
>
> *To teach the way of life and peace –*
>
> *It is a Christ-like thing.*

A final word: Given the numerous pitfalls James has described in this book, pilgrims can be thankful they are not called to travel alone but in the company of caring fellow travelers.

Soli Deo Gloria!

ENDNOTES

1. In Eph. 5:19 the term is connected to psalm, also suggesting singing in praise to God. See also Rom. 15:9. The term is frequently used in the LXX; it is found 41 times in the Psalms.
2. See D.R. Hayden, "Calling the Elders to Pray," *BibSac* 138 (1981) 258-66.
3. Rom. 4:19 correlates Abraham's faith, which did not "weaken" with his aging.
4. See Davids, 192.
5. Popkes, 341; Warrington, "Healing," 347-51. Wilkinson, "Healing in the Epistle of James," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971) 326-43; M.C. Albl, "'Are Any among You Sick?' The Health Care System in the Letter of James," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002) 123-43, who expounds the symbolic, integrated, communal worldview at work in this passage. It is possible this deathly ill person is healthy or spiritually ill because of sin, explaining why the issue of sin comes up so forcefully, and that Jas. 5:19-20 is a response to that sort of person and situation. The evidence weighs against this, and the least of which are that there no strong indicators that a spiritual sickness is in view and that James exhorts them to confess their sins to one another instead of asking for the near-apostate to confess his or her sins to the faithful community (or its elders). See Moo, 236-37.
6. The switch from present commands to an aorist does not mean this person needs to do something he or she has been resisting until now, but that Jesus wants to conceive of the act of summoning in its totality.
7. See R. A. Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christians* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1994).
8. Campbell, *The Elders,* 65; *pace* Moo, 237.
9. Elisabeth Elliot, *A Chance to Die, The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael* (Old Tappan, NJ: Reveil, 1987), pp. 233-234.
10. See *b. Shabbat 31b-32b,* where the commentary is found.
11. James is not certain that the sickness is from sin, or he would have used the indicative; instead, he uses the subjunctive in a periphrastic construction. I would translate: "And if he be a person who is in the state of having sinned."
12. See Davids, 195, Laws, 232-33.
13. Moo, 243.
14. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer,* 237.
15. See Davids, 195; Laws, 232-33.
16. Translations of James 5:16b vary because the Greek participle *is at work* can be translated either in the passive or in the middle voice. Although the evidence for either position is impressive, on the basis of usage in a number of New Testament passages (see the constructions in Romans 7:5; 2 Corinthians 4:12; Ephesians 3:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:7) translators seem to favor the middle voice.
17. Gerhard Kittle, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 930.
18. For additional information consult Mayor, *James,* pp. 180-81; and Ropes, *James*, p. 311).

19. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 189.
20. Billy Graham, *The Annals of America,* Volume 17, p. 395.
21. Davids, 200.

BRIEF EXCURSUS: JAMES AND PAUL

We perhaps need to remind ourselves that neither James nor Paul defined their terms: they used words that came from various settings with meanings that were assumed, and sometimes they tweaked the assumptions. We are in constant need of reminding ourselves we do our best with our mental lexicons to approximate the lexicons of the earliest Christians, but our destinations are not the same as theirs.

There is nothing distinctly Paul about calling that first generation of beliefs "*faith in Jesus Christ*" (cf. Jas. 2:1), nor is there anything distinctly Pauline about speaking of "*works*." Once we accept that "*faith*" and "*works*" are not exclusively Pauline words, that all Christians expressed themselves with these terms, and that the terms grew rather naturally out of Jewish soil, we can no longer leap to the conclusion that, since both James and Paul are talking about faith and works, they must be talking at one another, with one another, or past one another.

Furthermore, at issue in this passage is not "faith" *or* "works" but "faith without works" over against "faith with works." James fashions a theology in which the Torah remains in force and therefore works remain in force, but he does so in a way that sets faith and works into a tension. And as Don Verseput has recently reminded us, we cannot explain James by simply appealing to a causal relationship of faith and works. (1) For James they are distinguishable realities, connected to be sure, but not simply as cause (faith) and effect (works).

The need to exhort Jews or messianic Jews to a working faith was not a Pauline problem. John the Baptist does it in Matthew 3:7-10, and Jesus did it frequently (7:21-27; 25:31-46). John does the same much later in 1 John. In fact, the entire theme is Jewish to the core.

It is likely Paul and James knew one another (Gal. 1:19; 2:9; Acts 15; 21:17-26). Galatians suggests that their first encounter came very early in Paul's career (Gal. 1:18-19, ca. 37 AD). Paul later encountered some "men from James" who were concerned about his teaching (Gal. 2:12), and Paul also visited Jerusalem in approximately 48 AD. The opportunities for encounter were many and varied, and we can surmise the two men had serious discussions, probable compromises, and firm convictions. This point is often ignored in the discussion of the relationship of James 2:14-26 and Paul's distinctive theology and makes it much more difficult to

argue for the independent interpretation of Abraham faith traditions by both James and Paul.

The concentration on “faith” and “works” and on their relationship is a peculiarly Pauline problem, and James has the same problem. No one else in the New Testament enters into this verbal and theological struggle as do James and Paul. Both also appeal to Abraham and Genesis 15:6, even if they use texts and terms differently (a fact not always given its deserved space). This commonality is there even if we embrace an early date for James (prior to Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem): the Pauline problem (e.g, something like Galatians 2 or Acts 15) surely raised its head in Jerusalem before Paul wrote his letters. Therefore, what we see in James would be another manifestation of the reception of and response to Paul’s message, whether in its earliest oral forms or its later more mature written forms. James could well represent one reaction among others to Paul’s teachings or to an exaggeration of his teachings, not unlike the themes and circumstances we see in Galatians 2:4-5, 7, 10 and Acts 15:1-5. If we assume an early date, we must also assume an oral form of Paul’s teaching, and we cannot be certain what that looked like. We can assume it would have been easier at that date to misrepresent and use strong rhetoric. It is more than probable that Paul’s teaching was often misunderstood and misrepresented (e.g. Rom. 6:1-12).

It is therefore unwise, in our estimation, to see James 2:14-26 as responding to the more mature and fuller and written presentations of these issues in Galatians or Romans. It might be more accurate to see a four-step development at work in the relationship of James and Paul;

1) Paul’s conversion and early articulations of theology (33-48 AD,)
2) James’s response to what he was hearing (ca. 45+AD; cf. Gal. 2:12).
3) A public discussion at which James endorses Paul (Gal. 2:9).
4) Paul’s later more mature articulation, taking into consideration his discussion with James. *(2)*

Once one admits this connection, that James 2:14-26 articulates a fundamentally important theme in James – namely faith and works, and that this theme appears in various locations in the letter, we are driven to conclude that the “response” to Paul that emerges with forcefulness in 2:14-26 actually appears throughout and shapes the entire letter. *(3)*

The following two-line comparison serves to illustrate an important point: James and Paul are using language so close to each other and in such different ways that one must posit some kind of connection:

James 2:24	
A person is justified by *works*	and not by *faith* alone.
Romans 3:28	
A person is justified by *faith*	and not by *works* of the law.

Regardless of how one works to harmonize or compare these two early Christian leaders, the fact remains that James does not cede to the word "faith" the same importance as is found in Paul. Or, from the other angle, Paul does not cede to "works" the same importance as is found in James. These two authors come at things from two different settings with different theological orientations and intents, making their teachings more complementary than identical or contradictory. *(4)* In the words of Sharyn Dowd, "James is using Paul's vocabulary, but not his dictionary." *(5)* And one should not ignore Romans 2:6-16 in this discussion, a text that connects Paul more closely to James and that many have done their best to reinterpret or ignore. *(6)* More reflection needs to take place over the significance of a proto-Augustinian or overtly Augustinian anthropology for framing and defining the debate that occur among Christians and theologians when it comes to comparing James and Paul. I suspect that James did not operate with that sort of anthropology.

Something that deserves more elaboration than can be given here but must be mentioned is James shows more connection in these issues to the rest of the New Testament, say Jesus (or Matthew), Hebrews, and 1 John in their own ways than does Paul. Paul is the outlier here. *(7)* If post-Reformation Christians struggle with James, the earliest Christians would have had the same struggle at times with Paul.

My conclusion is that James is responding either to Paul in the flesh or, which is slightly more likely, to the early Paul or to early followers of Paul who had embraced his message and driven it to some distortions, *(8)* or, which is safer but less likely, to a common Jewish Christian environment where the emphasis on faith provoked conversations and poor theology concerning how faith and works are related. It is not impossible, but less likely, both James and Paul independently developed the Jewish traditions about Abraham and faith.

ENDNOTES

1. See “Reworking the Puzzle.” Also M. Proctor, “Faith, Works and the Christian Religion in James 2:14-26,” *Evangelical Quarterly 69 (*1997) 307-22. For an alternative, see W. Nicol, “Faith and Works in the Letter of James,” *Neotestamentica 9* (1975) 7-24.
2. See H. P. Hamann, “Faith and Works: Paul and James,” *Lutheran Theological Journal 9* (1975) 33-41. See also Popkes, “Two Interpretations, 137-38 who sees more in common than many today because he has reshaped Paul’s theory of justification in more relational terms. K. Haacker finds James more in dialogue with the Gospels’ sense of salvation and in dispute with Peter, but stands alone in this view).
3. Popkes, 36-39; V. Limberis, “The Provenance of the Caliphate Church: James 2:17-26 and Galatians 3 Reconsidered,” in *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and Proposals* (ed. C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplements 148; Sheffield Academic, 1997) 397-420.
4. This is the older view of the relationship and is sustained after generations of examination: see Jeremias, “Paul and James,” 370-71; Longenecker “The Faith of Abraham,” 207; T. Lorenzen, “Faith without Works Does Not Count before God! James 2:14-26, *“Expository Times 89* (1978), 234-35; Fung, “Justification”; D. Ryan Jenkins, “Faith and Works in Paul and James” *BibSac* 159 (2002) 62-78. Bauckham, *Wisdom of James,* 120-27, who offers a strong defense of the different senses but compatible teachings of the terms used by both James and Paul. See also Popkes, 213-14; Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament,* 675-76, ; Dyness, “Mercy Triumphs over Justice,” 15-16.
5. S. Dowd, “Faith and Works: James 2:14-26,” *RevExp 97* (2000) 195-205, here p. 202.
6. See especially the exceptional piece by K.R. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace – To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” NTS 32 (1986) 72-93. Snodgrass’s wry comment hints at deeper issues for interpreters: “I would like to suggest that Romans 2 means exactly what it says.”
7. See Penner, *The Epistle of James and Eschatology,* 67-70.
8. See Moo, 121; Davids, “James and Paul,” *DPI., 458;* Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews,* 100-101.

GLOSSARY

Apodosis

The main clause of a conditional sentence as "If you go, then I will go."

Apostle, disciple, the Twelve

"Apostle" means "one who is sent." It could be used of an ambassador or official delegate. In the NT it is sometimes used specifically of Jesus' inner circle of twelve, but Paul sees not only himself but several others outside the Twelve as "apostles," the criterion being whether the person had personally seen the risen Jesus. Jesus' own choice of twelve close associates symbolized his plan to renew God's people, Israel (who traditionally thought of themselves as having twelve tribes); after the death of Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:5; Acts 1:8), Matthias was chosen by lot to take his place, preserving the symbolic meaning. During Jesus' lifetime they, and many other followers, were seen as his "disciples," which means "pupils" or "apprentices."

Ascension

At the end of Luke's gospel and the start of Acts, Luke describes Jesus' "going up" from earth into heaven. To understand this, we have to remember that "heaven" isn't a "place" within our own world of space, time and matter, but a different *dimension* of reality – God's dimension, which intersects and interacts with our own (which we call "earth," meaning both the planet where we live and the entire space-time universe). For Jesus to "ascend," therefore, doesn't mean that he's a long way away, but rather that he can be, and is, immediately present to all people all the time. What's more, because in the Bible "heaven" is (as it were) the control room for "earth," it means that Jesus is actually in charge of what goes on here and now. The way his sovereign works out is of course very different from the way earthly rulers get their way: as in his own life, he accomplishes his saving purposes through faithful obedience, including suffering. The life and witness of the early church, therefore, resulting in the spread of the gospel around the world, shows what it means to say that Jesus has ascended and that he is the world's faithful Lord.

Baptism

Literally, "plunging" people into water. From within a wider Jewish tradition of ritual washings and bathings, John the Baptist undertook a vocation of baptizing people in the Jordan, not as one ritual among others but as a unique moment of repentance, preparing them for the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself was baptized by John, identifying himself with this renewal movement and developing it in his own way. His followers in turn baptized others. After his resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit, baptism became the normal sign and means of entry in the community of Jesus' people. As early as Paul, it was aligned both with the Exodus from Egypt (1 Cor. 10:2) and with Jesus' death and resurrection (Rom. 6:2-11).

Circumcision, circumcised

The cutting off of the foreskin. Male circumcision was a major mark of identity for Jews, following its initial commandment to Abraham (Gen. 17), reinforced by Joshua (Joshua 5:2-9). Other peoples, e.g. the Egyptians, also circumcised male children. The life of thought from Deuteronomy (e.g. 30:6), through Jeremiah (e.g. 31:33), to the Dead Sea Scrolls and the NT (e.g. Rom. 2:9) speaks of "circumcision of the heart" as God's real desire, by which one may become inwardly what the male Jew is outwardly, that is, marked out as part of God's people. At periods of Jewish assimilation into the surrounding culture, some Jews tried to remove the marks of circumcision (e.g. 1 Maccabees 1:11-15).

Covenant

At the heart of Jewish belief is the conviction that the one God, YHWH, who had made the whole world, had called Abraham and his family to belong to him in a special way. The promises God made to Abraham and his family, and the requirements laid on them as a result, came to be seen in terms either of the agreement a king would make with a subject people, or of the marriage bond between husband and wife. One regular way of describing this relationship was "covenant," which can thus include both promise and law. The covenant was renewed at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah; in Deuteronomy before the entry to the promised land; and, in a more focused way, with David (e.g. Psalm 89). Jeremiah 31 promised that, after the punishment of exile, God would make a

"new covenant" with his people, forgiving them and binding them to him more intimately. Jesus believed that this was coming true through his kingdom-proclamation and his death and resurrection. The early Christians developed these ideas in various ways, believing that in Jesus the promises had at last been fulfilled.

Day of Pentecost

A major Jewish festival, 50 days after Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 2:9-14). By the first century this had become associated with the time, 50 days after the Israelites left Egypt, when Moses went up Mount Sinai and came down with the law. It was on the day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit came powerfully upon the early disciple, 50 days after the Passover at which Jesus had died and been raised (Acts 2). Whether or not we say that this was "the birthday of the church" (some would use that description for the call of Abraham in Gen. 12, or at least the call of the first disciples in Mark 1), it was certainly the time when Jesus' followers discovered the power to tell people about his resurrection and lordship and to order their common life to reflect his saving kingdom.

Dead Sea Scrolls

A collection of texts, some in remarkably good repair, some extremely fragmentary, found in the late 1940s around Qumran (near the north-east corner of the Dead Sea), and virtually all now edited, translated and in the public domain. They formed all or part of the library of a strict monastic group, mostly like Essenes, founded in the mid-second century BC and lasting until the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70. The scrolls include the earliest existing manuscripts of the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures, and several other important documents of community regulations, scriptural exegeses, hymns, wisdom writings and other literature. They shed a flood of light on one small segment within the Judaism of Jesus' day, helping us to understand how some Jews at least were thinking, praying and reading scripture. Despite attempts to prove the contrary, they make no reference to John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, James or early Christianity in general.

Donatist controversy

The primary disagreement between Donatists and the rest of the early Christian Church was over the treatment of those who renounced their faith during the persecution under the Roman emperor Diocletian (303-305), a disagreement of the Sacrament of Penance.

Exegesis

Critical explanation or interpretation of text.

Eikon

Scot McKight says we are made in the image of God (all of us). Since this often no longer has as much of an impactful meaning as it should McKnight suggests we use the term eikon(s) (icons=images). As eikons (images of God), we are called to reflect Christ at all times. Eikons are important for many reasons. An eikon on a computer is a picture that, once clicked on, leads an individual to a program. For example: when I click on the "W" eikon on my computer, the eikon is highlighted and opens up Microsoft Word. Another place we may see eikons are in some Orthodox churches, eikons (pictures) are used to help people remember different events or people from the Bible.

Exile

Deuteronomy (29-30) warned that if Israel disobeyed YHWH, he would send his people into exile, but that if they then repented he would bring them back. When the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the people into exile, prophets such as Jeremiah interpreted this as the fulfilment of this prophecy, an made further promises about how long exile would last (70 years, according to Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10), Sure enough, exiles began to return in the last sixth century BC (Ezra 1:1). However, the post exilic period was largely a disappointment, since the people were still enslaved to foreigners (Neh. 9:36); and, at the height of persecution by the Syrians, Daniel 9:2, 24 spoke of the "real" exile lasting not for 70 years but 70 *weeks* of years, that is, 490 years. Longing for the real "return from exile," when the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. would be fulfilled, and redemption from pagan oppression accomplished, continue to characterize many Jewish movements, and was a major theme in Jesus' proclamation and his summons to repentance.

Exodus

The Exodus from Egypt took place according to the book of that name, under the leadership of Moses, after long years in which the Israelites had been enslaved there. (According to Genesis 15:13ff), this was itself part of God's covenanted promise to Abraham.) It demonstrated, to them and to Pharaoh, King of Egypt, that Israel was God's special child (Exodus 4:22). They then wandered through the Sinai wilderness for 40 years, led by God in a pillar of cloud and fire; early on in this time they were given the Torah on Mount Sinai itself. Finally, after the death of Moses and under the leadership of Joshua, they crossed the Jordan and entered, and eventually conquered, the promised land of Canaan. This even, commemorated annually in the Passover and other Jewish festivals, gave the Israelites not only a powerful memory of what had made them a people, but also a particular shape and content of their faith in YHWH as not only creator but also redeemer, and in subsequent enslavement, particularly the exile, they looked for a further redemption which would be, in effect, a new Exodus. Probably no other past even so dominated the imagination of first-century Jews; among them the early Christians, following the lead of Jesus himself, continually referred back to the Exodus to give meaning and shape to their own critical events, most particularly Jesus' death and resurrection.

Faith

Faith in the NT covers a wide area of human trust and trustworthiness, merging into love at one end of the scale and loyalty at the other. Within Jewish and Christian thinking, faith in God also includes *belief,* accepting certain things as true about God, and what he has done for the world (e.g. bringing Israel out of Egypt; raising Jesus from the dead). For Jesus, "faith" often seems to mean "recognizing that God is decisively at work to bring the kingdom through Jesus." For Paul, "faith" is both the specific belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (Romans 10:9) and the response of grateful human love to sovereign divine love (Galatians 2:20). This faith is, for Paul, the solitary badge of membership in God's people in Christ, marking them out in a way that Torah, and the works it prescribes, can never do.

Fellowship

The word we often translate "fellowship" can mean a business partnership (in the ancient world, businesses were often run by families, so there's a sense of family loyalty as well), or it can mean a sense of mutual belonging and sharing in some other corporate enterprise. Within early Christianity, "fellowship" acquired the sense not just of belonging to one another as Christian, but of a shard belonging to Jesus Christ, and a participation in his life through the spirit, expressed in such actions as the "breaking of bread" and the sharing of property with those in need.

Forgiveness

The Jews divided the world into Jews and non-Jews. The Hebrew world for non-Jews, *goyim*, carries overtones both of family identity (i.e. not of Jewish ancestry) and of worship (i.e. of idols, not the one true God YHWH. Though many Jews, established good relations with Gentiles, not least in the Jewish Diaspora (the dispersion of the Jews away from Palestine), officially there were taboos against contact such as intermarriage. In the NT, the Greek word *ethne,* "nations," carries the same meanings as *goyim*. Part of Paul's overmastering agenda was to insist that Gentiles who believed in Jesus had full rights in the Christian community alongside believing Jews, without having to become circumcised.

Ghenna, hell

Gehenna is, literally, the valley of Hinnom, on the southwest slopes of Jerusalem. From ancient times it was used as a garbage dump smoldering with a continual fire. Already by the time of Jesus some Jews used it as an image for the place of punishment after death. Jesus' own usage blends the two meanings in his warnings both to Jerusalem itself (unless it repents, the whole city will become a smoldering heap of garbage) and to people in general (to beware of God's final judgment).

Good news, gospel, message, word

The idea of "good news," for which an older English word is "gospel," had two principal meanings for first-century Jews. First, with Jewish roots in Isaiah, it meant the news of YHWH's long-awaited victory over evil and rescue of his people. Second, it was used in the Roman world of the accession, or birthday, of

the emperor. Since for Jesus and Paul the announcement of God's in-breaking kingdom was both the fulfillment of prophecy and a challenge to the world's present rulers, "gospel" became an important shorthand for both the message of Jesus himself and the apostolic message about him. Paul saw this message as itself the vehicle of God's saving power (Romans 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Heaven

Heaven is God's dimension of the created order (Genesis 1:1; Psalm115, 16; Matthew 6:3), whereas "earth" is the world of space, time, and matter that we know. "Heaven" thus sometimes stands, reverentially, for "God" (as in Matthew's regular kingdom of heaven). Normally hidden from human sight, heaven is occasionally revealed or unveiled so that people can see God's dimension of ordinary life (e.g. 2 Kings 6:17; Revelation 1:4-5). Heaven in the NT is thus not usually seen as the place where God's people go after death; at the end, the New Jerusalem descends *from* heaven *to* earth, joining the two dimensions for ever. "Entering the kingdom of heaven" does not mean "going to heaven after death," but belonging in the present to the people who steer their earthly course by the standards and purposes of heaven (cf. the Lord's Prayer, "on earth as in heaven," Matthew 6:10, and who are assured of membership in the age to come.

Hillel

Hillel (110 BCE-10CE) was a Jewish leader who was born in Babylon and lived in Jerusalem during the time of King Herod. He was associated with the Mishnah and Talmud. He was believed to have been a teacher to the Apostle Paul.

Holy Spirit

In Gentiles 1:2, the spirit is God's presence and power *within* creation, without God being identified with creation. The same spirit entered people, notably the prophets, enabling them to speak and act for God. At his baptism by John, Jesus was specially equipped with the spirit, resulting in his remarkable public career (Acts 10:38). After his resurrection, his followers were themselves filled (Acts 2) by the same spirit, now identified as Jesus' own spirit; the creator God was acting fresh, remaking the world and them too. The spirit enabled them to live out a

holiness which the Torah could not, producing "fruit" in their lives, giving them "gifts" with which to serve God, the world and the church, and assuring them of future resurrection (Romans 8; Galatians 4-5; 1 Corinthians 12-14). From very early in Christianity (e.g. Galatians 4:1-7), the spirit became part of the new revolutionary definition of God himself: "the one who sends the son and the spirit of the son."

John (the Baptist)

Jesus' cousin on his mother's side, born a few months before Jesus; his father was a priest. He acted as a prophet, baptizing in the Jordan – dramatically re-enacting the Exodus from Egypt – to prepare people, by repentance, for God's coming judgment. He may have had some contact with the Essenes, though his eventual public message was different from theirs. Jesus' own vocation was decisively confirmed at his baptism by John. As part of John's message of the kingdom, he outspokenly criticized Herod Antipas for marrying his brother's wife. Herod had him imprisoned, and then beheaded him at his wife's request (Mark 6:14-29). Groups of John's disciples continued a separate existence, without merging into Christianity, for some time afterwards (e.g. Acts 19:1-7).

Jubilee

The ancient Israelites were commanded to keep a "jubilee" every fiftieth year (i.e. following the sequence of seven "sabbatical" years). Leviticus 25 provides the basic rules, which were expanded by later teachers: land was to be restored to its original owners or their heirs, and any fellow Jews who had been enslaved because of debt were to be set free. It was also to be a year without sowing, reaping or harvesting. The point was that YHWH owned the land and that the Israelites were to see it not as a private possession but as something held in trust. People debate whether the Jubilee principle was ever put into practice as thoroughly as Leviticus demands, but the underlying promise of a great remission of debts was repeated by Isaiah (61:1-2) and then decisively by Jesus (Luke 4:16-21). It is likely that this underlies the action of the first Christians in sharing property and giving to those in need (Acts 4:32-35, etc.).

Justification

God's declaration, from his position as judge of all the world, that someone is in the right, despite universal sin. This declaration will be made on the last day on the basis of an entire life (Romans 2:1-6), but is brought forward into the present on the basis of Jesus' achievement, because sin has been dealt with through his cross (Romans 3:21-4:25); the means of this present justification is simply faith. This means, particularly, that Jews and Gentiles alike are full members of the family promised by God to Abraham (Galatians 3; Romans 4).

Kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven

Best understood as the king*ship,* or sovereign and saving rule, of Israel's God YHWH as celebrated in several psalms (e.g. 99:1) and prophecies (e.g. Daniel 6:26f.). Because YHWH was the creator God, when he finally became king in the way he intended this would involve setting the world to right, and particularly rescuing Israel from its enemies. "Kingdom of God" and various equivalents (e.g. "No king but God!") became a revolutionary slogan around the time of Jesus. Jesus' own announcement of God's announcement of God's kingdom redefined these expectations around his own very different plan and vocation. His invitation to people to "enter" the kingdom was a way of summoning them to allegiance to himself and his program, seen as the start of God's long-awaited saving reign. For Jesus, the kingdom was coming not in a single move, but in stages, of which his own public career was one, his death and resurrection another, and a still future consummation another. Note that "kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's preferred form for the same phrase, following a regular Jewish practice of saying "heaven" rather than "God." It does not refer to a place ("heaven"), but to the fact of God's becoming king in and through Jesus and his achievement. Paul speaks of Jesus as Messiah, already in possession of his kingdom, waiting to hand it over finally to the father (1 Corinthians 15:23-28; cf. Ephesians 5:5).

Last days

Ancient Jews thought of world history as divided into two periods: "the present age" and "the age to come." The present age was a time when evil was still at large in its many forms; the age to come would usher in God's final reign of justice, peace, joy and love. Ancient prophets had spoken of the transition from the one

age to the other in terms of the "last days," meaning either the final moments of the "present age" or the eventual dawning of the "age to come." When Peter quotes Joel in Acts 2:17, he perhaps means both: the two ages have overlapped, so that Christians live in the "last days," the time between God's kingdom being launched in and through Jesus and it being completed at Jesus' return. The NT gives no encouragement to the idea that the period of history immediately before Jesus' return will be significantly different (e.g. more violent) than any other (see Matthew 24:36-39).

Life, soul, spirit

Ancient people held many different views about what made human beings the special creatures they are. Some, including many Jews, believed that to be complete, humans needed bodies as well as inner selves. Others, including many influenced by the philosophy of Plato (fourth century BC), believed that the important part of a human was the "soul" (Gk. *psyche*), which at death would be happily freed from its bodily prison. Confusingly for us, the same word psyche is often used in the NT within a Jewish framework where it clearly means "life" or "true self," without implying a body/soul dualism that devalues the body. Human inwardness of experience and understanding can also be referred to as "spirit."

Messiah, messianic, Christ

The Hebrew word means literally "anointed one," hence in theory either a prophet, priest or king. In Greek this translates as *Christos*; "Christ" in early Christianity was a title, and only gradually became an alternative proper name for Jesus. In practice, "Messiah" is mostly restricted to the notion, which took various forms in ancient Judaism, of the coming king who would be David's true heir, through whom YHWH would bring judgment to the world, and in particular would rescue Israel from pagan enemies. There was no single template of expectations. Scriptural stories and promises contributed to different ideals and movements, often focused on (a) decisive military defeat of Israel's enemies and (b) rebuilding or cleansing the Temple. The Dead Sea Scrolls speak of two Messiahs, one a priest and the other a king. The universal early Christian belief that Jesus was Messiah is only explicable, granted his crucifixion by the Romans (which would have been seen as a clear sign that he was not the Messiah), by their belief that God had raised him from the dead, so vindicating the implicit messianic claims of his earlier ministry.

Mishnah

The main codification of Jewish law (Torah) by the rabbis, produced in about AD200, reducing to writing the "oral Torah" which, in Jesus' day, ran parallel to the "written Torah." The Mishnah is itself the basis of the much larger collection of traditions in the two Talmuds (roughly AD 400).

Non-sequitur

An invalid argument. An argument whose conclusion does not follow from its premises.

Parables

From the OT onwards, prophets and other teachers used various story-telling devices as vehicles for their challenge to Israel (e.g. 2 Samuel 12:1-7). Sometimes they appeared as visions with interpretations (e.g. Daniel 7). Similar techniques were used by the rabbis. Jesus made his own creative adaptation of these traditions, in order to break open the worldview of his contemporaries and to invite them to share his vision of God's kingdom instead. His stories portrayed this as something that was *happening*, not just a timeless truth and enabled his hearers to step inside the story make it their own. As with some OT visions, some of Jesus' parables have their own interpretations (e.g. the sower, Mark 4); others are thinly disguised retellings of the prophetic story of Israel (e.g. the wicked tenants, Mark 12).

Pharisees, rabbis

The Pharisees were an unofficial but powerful Jewish pressure group through most of the first centuries BC and AD. Largely lay-led, though including some priests, their aim was to purify Israel through intensified observance of the Jewish law (Torah), developing their own traditions about the precise meaning and application of scripture, their own patterns of prayer and other devotion, and their own calculations of the national hope. Though not all legal experts were Pharisees, most Pharisees were thus legal experts.

They effected a democratization of Israel's life, since for them the study and practice of Torah was equivalent to worshipping in the Temple – though they were adamant in pressing their own rules for the Temple liturgy on an unwilling (and

often Sadducean) priesthood. This enabled them to survive AD 70 and, merging into the early rabbinic movement, to develop new ways forward. Politically they stood up for ancestral traditions, and were at the forefront of various movements of revolt against both pagan overlordship and compromised Jewish leaders. By Jesus' day, there were two distinct schools, the stricter one of Shammai, more inclined towards armed revolt, and the more ancient one of Hillel, ready to live and let live.

Jesus' debates with the Pharisees are at least as much a matter of agenda and policy (Jesus strongly opposed their separatist nationalism) as about details of theology and piety. Saul of Tarsus was a fervent right-wing Pharisee, presumably a Shammaite, until his conversion.

After the disastrous war of AD 66-70, these schools of Hillel and Shammai continued bitter debate on appropriate policy. Following the further disaster of AD 135 (the failed Bar-Kochba revolt against Rome), their traditions were carried on by the rabbis, who, though looking to the earlier Pharisees for inspiration, developed a Torah-piety in which personal holiness and purity took the place of political agendas.

Present age, age to come, eternal life

By the time of Jesus many Jewish thinkers divided history into two periods: "the present age" and "the age to come" – the latter being the time when YHWH would at last act decisively to judge evil, to rescue Israel, and to create a new world of justice and peace. The early Christians believed that, though the full blessings of the coming age lay still in the future, it had already begun with Jesus, particularly with his death and resurrection, and that by faith and baptism they were able to enter it already. "Eternal life" does not mean simply "existence continuing without end," but "the life of the age to come."

Priests, high priest

Aaron, the older brother of Moses, was appointed Israel's first high priest (Exodus 28-29), and in theory his descendants were Israel's priest thereafter. Other members of his tribe (Levi) were "Levites," performing other liturgical duties but not sacrificing. Priests lived among the people all around the country, having a local teaching role (Leviticus 10:11; Malachi 2:7), and going to Jerusalem by rotation to perform the Temple liturgy (e.g. Luke 2:8).

David appointed Zadok (whose Aaronic ancestry is sometimes questioned) as high priest, and his family remained thereafter the senior priests in Jerusalem, probably the ancestors of the Sadducees. One explanation of the origin of the Qumran Essenes is that they were a dissident group who believed themselves to be the rightful chief priests.

Redemption

Literally, "redemption" means "buying back," and was often used in the ancient world of slaves buying their freedom, or having it bought for them. the great "redemption" in the Bible, which colored the way the word was heard ever afterwards, was when God "bought" his people from slavery in Egypt to give them freedom in the promised land when, later, the Jews were exiled in Babylon (and even after they returned to their land), they described themselves as undergoing a new slavery and hence being in need of a new redemption. Jesus, and the early Christians, interpreted this continuing slavery in its most radical terms, as slavery to sin and death, and understood "redemption" likewise in terms of the rescue from this multiple and tyrannous slavery, which God provided through the death of Jesus (Romans 3:24).

Repentance

Literally, this means "turning back." It is widely used in OT and subsequent Jewish literature to indicate both a personal turning away from sin and Israel's corporate turning away from idolatry and back to YHWH. Through both meanings, it is linked to the idea of "return from exile"; if Israel is to "return" in all senses, it must "return" to YHWH. This is at the heart of the summons of both John the Baptist and Jesus. In Paul's writings it is mostly used for Gentiles turning away from idols to serve the true God; also for sinning Christians who need to return to Jesus.

Resurrection

In most biblical thought, human bodies matter and are not merely disposable prisons for the soul. When ancient Israelites wrestled with the goodness and justice of YHWH, the creator, they ultimately came to insist that he must raise the dead (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2-3) – a suggestion firmly resisted by classical pagan thought. The longed-for return from exile was also spoken of in terms of YHWH raising dry bones to new life (Ezekiel 37:1-14). These ideas were developed in the second-temple period, not least at times of martyrdom (e.g. 2 Maccabees 7). Resurrection was not just "life after death," but a newly embodied life *after* "life after death"; those at present dead were either "asleep" or seen as "soul," "angels" or "spirits," awaiting new embodiment.

Sacrifice

Like all ancient people, the Israelites offered animal and vegetable sacrifices to their God. unlike others, they possessed a highly detailed written code (mostly in Leviticus) for what to offer and how to offer it; this in turn was developed in the Mishnah (c.AD 200). The OT specifies that sacrifices can only be offered in the Jerusalem Temple; after this was destroyed in AD 70, sacrifices ceased, and Judaism developed further the idea, already present in some teachings, of prayer, fasting and almsgiving as alternative forms of sacrifice. The early Christians used the language of sacrifice in connection with such things as holiness, evangelism, and the Lord's Supper.

Sadducees

By Jesus' day, the Sadducees were the aristocracy of Judaism, possibly tracing their origins to the family of Zadok, David's high priest. Based in Jerusalem, and including most of the leading priestly families, they had their own traditions and attempted to resist the pressure of the Pharisees to conform to theirs. They claimed to rely only on the Pentateuch (the first five books of the OT), and denied any doctrine of a future life, particularly of the resurrection and other ideas associated with it, presumably because of the encouragement such beliefs gave to revolutionary movements. No writings from the Sadducees have survived, unless the apocryphal book of Ben-Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) comes from them. The Sadducees themselves did not survive the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in AD 70.

Salvation

Salvation means "rescue," and the meanings of the word have depended on what people thought needed rescuing, and from what. Thus, where people have imagined that the human plight was best seen in terms of an immortal soul being trapped in a mortal and corrupt body, "salvation" was seen in terms of the rescue of this soul from such a prison. But for most Jews, and all early Christians, it was death itself, the ending of God-given bodily life, that was the real enemy, so that "salvation" was bound to mean being rescued from death itself – in other words, the resurrection of the body for those who had died, and the transformation of the body for those still alive at the Lord's return (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:50-57). For Paul and others, this "salvation" was extended to the whole of creation (Romans 8:18-26). But if "salvation" refers to this ultimate rescue of God's creating order, and our created bodies, from all that distorts, defaces and destroys them (i.e. sin, sickness, corruption and death itself), we should expect to find, and do in fact find, that often in the NT "salvation" (and phrases like "being saved") refers not simply to people coming to faith and so being assured of eternal life, but to bodily healing and to rescue from awful plights (e.g. Acts 16:30-31; 27:44). Jesus' resurrection remains the foundation for a biblical view of salvation which, though to be completed in the future, has already begn with the mission and achievement of Jesus.

Satan, the, "the accuser," demons

The Bible is never very precise about the identity of the figure known as "the satan." The Hebrew means "the accuser," and at times the satan seems to be a member of YHWH' heavenly council, with special responsibility as director of prosecutions (1 Chronicles 21:1; Job 1-2; Zechariah 3:1f.). However, it becomes identified variously with the serpent of the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-15) and with the rebellious daystar cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15), and was seen by many Jews as the quasi-personal source of evil standing behind both human wickedness' and large-scale injustice, sometimes operating through semi-independent "demons." By Jesus' time various words were used to denote this figure, including Beelzcbul/b (lit. "Lord of the flies") and simply "the evil one"; Jesus warned his followers against the deceits this figure could perpetrate. His opponents accused him of being in league with the satan, but the early Christians

believed that Jesus in fact defeated it in his own struggles with temptation (Matthew 4; Luke 4), his exorcism of demons, and his death (1 Corinthians 2:8; Colossians 2:15). Final victory over this ultimate enemy is thus assured (Revelation 20, though the struggle can still be fierce for Christians (Ephesians 6:10-20).

Scribes

In a world where many could not write, or not very well, a trained class of writers ("scribes") performed the important function of drawing up contracts for business, marriage, etc. Many scribes would thus be legal experts, and quite possibly Pharisees, though being a scribe was compatible with various political and religious standpoints. The work of Christian scribes was of initial importance in copying early Christian writings, particularly the stories about Jesus.

Shammai

Shammai is linked to Hillel as a leading sage of the Jewish in the last century of BCE and early first century who founded an opposing school of Jewish thought from Hillel. They debated issues on ritual practice, ethics, theology.

Son of David

An alternative, and frequently used, title for Messiah. The messianic promises of the OT often focus specifically on David's son, for example 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:10-37. Joseph, Mary's husband, is called "son of David" by the angel in Matthew 1:20.

Son of God

Originally a title for Israel (Exodus 4:22) and the Davidic king (Psalm 2:7); also used of ancient figures (Genesis 6:2). By the NT period it was already used as a messianic title, for example, in the Dead Sea Scrolls. There, and when used of Jesus in the gospels (e.g. Matthew 16:16), it means, or reinforces, "Messiah," without the later significance of "divine." However, already in Paul the transition to the fuller meaning (one who was already equal with God and was sent by him to become human and to become Messiah) is apparent, without loss of the meaning "Messiah" itself (e.g. Galatians 4:4).

Soteriology

The word is derived from two Greek terms, namely soter, meaning “savior” or “deliverer” and logos meaning “word,” “matter,” or “thing.” In Christian systematic theology it is used to refer to the study of the biblical doctrine of salvation.

Temple

The Temple in Jerusalem was planned by David (c. 1000) and built by his son Solomon as the central sanctuary for all Israel. After reforms under Hezekiah and Josiah in the seventh century BC, it was destroyed by Babylon in 587 BC. Rebuilding by the returned exiles began in 538 BC, and was completed in 516, initiating the “second-Temple period.” Judas Maccabaeus cleansed it in 164 BC, after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes (167). Herod the Great began to rebuild and beautify it in 19 BC; the work was completed in AD 63. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Many Jews believed it should and would be rebuilt; some still do. The Temple was not only the place of sacrifice; it was believed to be the unique dwelling of YHWH on earth, the place where heaven and earth met.

Torah, Jewish law

“Torah,” narrowly conceived, consists of the first five books of the OT, the “five books of Moses” or “Pentateuch.” (Those contain much law, but also much narrative.) It can also be used for the whole OT scriptures, though strictly these are the “law prophets, and writings.” In a broader sense, it refers to the whole developing corpus of Jewish legal tradition, written and oral; the oral Torah was initially codified in the Mishnah around AD 200, with wider developments found in the two Talmuds, of Babylon and Jerusalem, codified around AD 400. Many Jews I the time of Jesus and Paul regarded the Torah as being so strongly God-given as to be almost itself, in some sense, divine; some (e.g. Ben-Sirach 24) identified it with the figure of “Wisdom.” Doing what Torah said was not seen as a means of earning God’s favor, but rather of expressing gratitude, and as a key badge of Jewish identity.

YHWH

The ancient Israelite name for God, from at least the time of the Exodus (Exodus 6:2f.). It may originally have been pronounced "Yahweh," but by the time of Jesus it was considered too holy to speak out loud, except for the high priest once a year in the holy of holies in the Temple. Instead, when reading scripture, pious Jews would say *Adonai*, "Lord," marking the usage by adding the vowels of *Adonai* to the consonants of YHWH, eventually producing the hybrid "Jehovah." The word YHWH is formed from the verb "to be," combining "I am who I am," "I will be who I will be" and perhaps "I am because I am," emphasizing YHWH's sovereign creative power.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Bill McDowell

Bill McDowell was born in Brownwood, Missouri on the edge of the great dark cypress swamps. The oldest of five children he grew to maturity in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, attending the West End Church of Christ and Central High School. In 1956 he left for Nashville, Tennessee to attend David Lipscomb University. There he majored in Speech and Bible graduating *cum laude*, and was selected by Lipscomb Bible professors as one of the two most representative preachers to graduate in 1960. After ten years of full time ministry Bill later earned a Master of Divinity degree from Emory University Chandler School of Theology and United Theological Seminaries. He then entered Kent State University where he completed a Masters of Education, and earned a PhD in counseling psychology in 1971. Bill joined the counseling faculty at Marshall University in Huntington, WV in 1971 and served as professor and later department chair until he retired in 2000. He returned in 2003 as professor and department chair, working until his "final" retirement in 2008, only to return in 2014 to serve one year as Director of the Chancellor's Scholars Program recruiting minority students for doctoral programs. During his ministerial career, Bill has served churches in Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia.

After retirement from university teaching Bill returned to his first love of studying biblical theology. Bill is an active member of the Norway Avenue Church of Christ in Huntington, WV. Among his writings are*, There's Good News in the World (2011), The Story of My Life: From the Edge of the Great Dark Cypress Swamps to the Mountains of Appalachia (2012), Before the Foundations of the World: Connecting Foundations of Faith to Christian Living (2014), Sermon on the Mount: A Pathway to Radical Living (2015), The Journey Ahead: A Spiritual Pathway for Modern Pilgrims, Vol.1, The Epistle of Hebrews (2016),*and *McDowell's Musings, Metaphors, and Messages: Selected Blogs (2012-2017).*