



The Epistle of James

A SHORTER COMMENTARY

ZANE C. HODGES

The Epistle of James: A Shorter Commentary is taken
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Design: Shawn Lazar

Hodges, Zane C., 1932–2008

ISBN 978-1-943399-33-8

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Grace Evangelical Society
P.O. Box 1308
Denton, TX 76202
www.faithalone.org
ges@faithalone.org

Printed in the United States of America

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INTRODUCTION

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES is a beautifully constructed Christian letter written by a skilled communicator with a pastor's heart. His style is both terse and graphic, employing a wide range of effective illustrations, making it easy to believe that he also taught God's truth orally with considerable power.

An indispensable element of the NT canon, the letter's profound substance renders invalid Luther's initial evaluation of the work as a "right strawy epistle." The Book of James is the voice of a great Christian leader whose grasp of the spiritual life and of human nature is equal to any in the NT. The modern Church ignores James's immensely practical admonitions at its own peril.

Authorship

The author calls himself *James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1). But which James is this?

The "James" most frequently connected with this letter is the half-brother of Jesus. If the epistle was written after the death of the Apostle James (see the discussion on the date), then James the Lord's brother was the only well-known James left in the Christian church of Palestine. He might then have easily referred to himself simply and modestly as "a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). It is also likely that the bearer of the epistle knew its author and would so inform the recipients wherever it was read. In addition, the

tone of authority in the epistle presupposes a fairly commanding and respected figure, rather than an unknown James.

Thus there are no compelling grounds for setting aside the traditional view of authorship by James the Lord's brother. On the contrary, the epistle dovetails in important details with this identification of its writer.

Audience, Date, and Destination

James designates his intended audience as *the twelve tribes* (1:1). This naturally identifies the recipients as Jewish, and the tone. The contents of the epistle agree with this. The notion that the Epistle of James is a non-Christian Jewish document, into which some Christian additions have been inserted, is now properly regarded as fiction. Nevertheless, James makes no reference to the Gentiles, nor does he show any awareness of the kind of evangelism typical of the Pauline mission. This suggests the possibility that James was written before the Gentile outreach recorded in Acts.

If the traditional date of James's death (AD 62) is correct, the epistle cannot have been written later than that. Instead, the absence of any concern with the issues raised by the conversion of Gentiles suggests the possibility that the letter might be dated as early as the middle or late 30s. Taking April 3, AD 33 as the date of the crucifixion, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Paul) could have taken place in AD 34, leaving about a year or a little more for the events of Acts 1–9. In that case James could plausibly be dated as early as AD 34.

If James is regarded as quite early, before the spread of the Gospel to the Gentile world, one can understand the phrase *the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad* accordingly. The words *scattered abroad* translate the Greek words *en tē diaspora* ("in the dispersion").

From their unified, communal situation in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 4:32-35), the early Christians were "dispersed" throughout Judea and Samaria. In fact in Acts 8:1 the English words *they were...scattered* translate *diesparēsan*, which is from the same Greek root as *diaspora*. If James was written to this dispersed audience not long after they had undergone this very troubling experience, the writer's pastoral stress on the spiritual value of trials is highly appropriate.

Possibly the letter was written even before the evangelization of Samaria. But since the Samaritans had a racial relationship to the Jews, the early Christians could have viewed the Samaritan converts as returning to the spiritual community of *the twelve tribes*

who constituted the true Israel of that day (cf. Rom 2:28-29). A close study of the early chapters of Acts shows that the Christians did not yet regard the Church as an entity distinct from Israel in purpose and character. That enlightenment was to come later through Paul and through the other *holy apostles and prophets* of the early Church (Eph 3:5).

In conclusion, therefore, the Epistle of James was a pastoral letter written to the dispersed Jewish believers of Palestine, probably at a time *before* Paul's initial mission to the Gentile world, that is, *to Arabia* (Gal 1:17). This would suggest a date of AD 34 or 35. On this view James is by far the earliest NT document. (Galatians, the next book written, can be dated about AD 49).

Purpose

James is writing to Christians who had been scattered (1:1) by the persecution that arose after Stephen's death. This persecution had probably now subsided (see Acts 9:31). No doubt the memory of their recent trouble was still fresh in the readers' minds. But enough time had passed for new difficulties to appear, and the stress these caused was manifested in various kinds of intra-church problems, such as quarrels and disputes (4:1). James's letter is an effort to encourage these believers to face trials with faith and perseverance (5:7-8, 10), and to renew a spirit of peace within the churches (5:9).

The structure of James's letter helps us define his purpose even more closely. The threefold admonition of 1:19, "let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath," in fact, is the key to the letter's development. James adopts for his letter a structure known and approved for speeches by ancient writers of rhetoric. Of course, as contemporary rhetorical criticism has pointed out, the NT documents were almost certainly intended for public reading in the churches. Thus James's letter is basically a speech or sermon, cast in written form. Its basic elements are as follows: a preface, or prologue (1:2-18), followed by a thematic statement (1:19-20); a body, called by the Greek rhetoricians the *kephalaia*, or "headings" (1:21-5:6); and an epilogue (5:7-20). The outline below shows this structure.

With this ground plan in mind, the thematic material in 1:19-20 reveals the purpose of James as set forth in the following outline.

OUTLINE

- I. Salutation (1:1)
- II. Prologue: Respond to Trials Properly (1:2-18)
 - A. Welcome Trials (1:2-11)
 - B. Do Not Accuse God (1:12-18)
- III. Theme: Behave Well in Trials (1:19-20)
- IV. Body: Cultivate the Necessary Behavior (1:21–5:6)
 - A. Be Swift to Hear (1:21–2:26)
 - B. Be Slow to Speak (3:1-18)
 - C. Be Slow to Wrath (4:1–5:6)
- V. Epilogue: Persevere in Trials to the End (5:7-20)
 - A. Perseverance Will Be Properly Rewarded (5:7-11)
 - B. Perseverance Can Be Undergirded by Prayer (5:12-20)

COMMENTARY

I. Salutation (1:1)

1:1. The author of the epistle was evidently James, one of Jesus' half-brothers (see *Introduction*). He was also a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. Yet he does not lay claim to any prestigious title, but simply calls himself **a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. This humility might well be expected of a man who grew up in the same household with the sinless Son of God.

James addresses an audience whom he calls **the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad**. If this epistle was written to Jewish Christians not long after the first persecution of the church in Jerusalem (c.

AD 35; see *Introduction*), the addressees are the true *believing* Israel within the larger Jewish nation (cf. Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-8).

II. Prologue: Respond to Trials Properly (1:2-18)

A. Welcome Trials (1:2-11)

1:2-4. James refers to his readers as his **brethren**, not because they are fellow Jews, but because they have been born from above, *brought...forth by the word of truth* (1:18; cf. Acts 9:30; 10:23, etc.). This form of address, (*my*) *brethren*, is frequent in this epistle (1:16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). Even a superficial reading of 1:2-18 shows that the author regards his readers as Christians. It may be said that nowhere in the letter—not even in 2:14-26—does he betray the slightest doubt that those in his audience are truly his brothers or sisters in the Lord. If this simple and obvious fact is not observed, one may fall into a quagmire of skewed interpretations, just as many expositors of James have actually done.

The words **count it all joy** are actually the opening words of v 2 (in Greek). They strike precisely the note of triumph that James wishes to sound for his Christian brothers. They should be joyful in trials because trials have a positive and highly beneficial purpose in the plan of God. And that purpose is stated here as something known to the readers. God's intention in allowing faith to be tested is to produce **patience**, more accurately, "endurance" or "perseverance." God is in the business of building up strong Christian men and women who can persevere in hard times without fainting.

But believers must not be impatient. This is the thrust of v 4. When James urges his readers to allow "endurance" (**patience**) to **have its perfect work**, he means that they should allow the Lord to accomplish a complete work of endurance within them. Of course, by *perfect* James does not mean sinless perfection. Both Greek words, **perfect and complete**, mean much the same thing, but they might be rendered this way: "that you may be complete and intact, with no deficiency."

1:5. One of the deficiencies that trouble often exposes is lack of wisdom. Thus, if "endurance" is to accomplish its "complete work", the deficiency in believers' **wisdom** needs to be supplied. Of course, James is not speaking here of any and all *wisdom*, since believers will always be deficient in many such areas while still in the body. Rather, in this context, James is speaking of that particular wisdom needed to cope with the *various trials* they experience.

So if a particular trial exposes a particular lack of wisdom in some area, what should a believer do? James's answer is that he should pray for this wisdom. God loves to bestow wisdom and He bestows it bountifully. **Ask**, James reiterates, **and it will be given** (cf. Matt 7:7; Luke 11:9).

1:6. There is one stipulation, however. The request for wisdom must be made **in faith** (v 6). This also means the request must be made **with no doubting**. Faith and doubting are opposites, of course. When one doubts, he is not believing. When one believes, he is not doubting. (See Matt 14:31; 21:21; 28:17; Mark 11:23; Rom 14:23). The Christian who comes to God for wisdom must come with calm confidence in the Lord. If his heart is buffeted by doubts about God's willingness or ability to grant the request, then this Christian **is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind**. That is, he is in the grip of uncertainty and perplexity.

1:7. His failure to trust the One to whom he comes in prayer is serious. Indeed, it is an insult to God Himself. Such a man should not expect to **receive anything from the Lord**. Just as the Christian life begins with the confidence that eternal life is by faith in Christ, so the believer's ongoing need for wisdom must be sought from God with a similar confidence.

On the other hand, it must not be assumed that the answer to a prayer for wisdom will come like a bolt of lightning the moment it is requested. Such a conclusion would ignore the context of James's thought here. James has just said that God's goal in trials is to furnish those spiritual assets that are lacking (vv 3-4). Thus one can expect God to answer his prayer for wisdom through the very trial itself, as he *endures* it until God's *perfect work* in him is done. An appropriate prayer may be, "Father, help me to gain from this trial the wisdom You want me to have."

1:8. The Christian who cannot make up his mind to leave his need for wisdom confidently in God's hands is spiritually unstable. He is, in fact, **double-minded** (*dipsychos*, "two-souled"), a kind of "split personality." One part of him knows that he must leave this need for discernment with God, while the other part still feels that he can, and must, solve the puzzle by himself. The result of such an inward division in perspective is likely to be a zigzag course of action filled with mistakes and false starts. The Christian who combines a lack of wisdom with the spirit of a "doubting Thomas" is a prime candidate

to make a mess of things. Or, as James puts it, he is **unstable in all his ways**.

1:9. How then should **the lowly brother** accept trials? (By a *lowly brother* James probably means a “poor brother,” since he is contrasted with *the rich* [brother] in v 10.) Does not a Christian of low estate in life have enough problems just by virtue of his status? How can such a *brother* calmly, indeed joyfully, accept the additional trials which often befall him, especially those arising from the very fact of his being a Christian? James’s solution is simple. That brother should consider his trials a form of **exaltation**.

Two reasons for doing this are suggested in the immediate context. First, God is paying attention to *the lowly brother* by using trials to make him a better person (vv 3-4). There is no higher honor than to be the object of God’s gracious and loving concern. Also God is preparing to bestow on this brother *the crown of life*, which comes to those who endure testing (v 12 and discussion). That too is an *exaltation*. Thus the lowly brother’s *exaltation* is both present (in the trial itself) and prospective (in the trial’s outcome). This, then, should be the poor person’s perspective on trouble.

1:10. The situation is different for **the rich** brother. The wealthy Christian brother should **glory** (also implied from v 9) in his personal trials as a form of **humiliation**. Like all people with abundant material wealth, the wealthy Christian can easily forget that **as a flower of the field he will pass away**.

Trials, however, can be used by God to remind him of the transience of his own earthly life and of how quickly all his material belongings can be lost (cf. Luke 12:18-21). He should rejoice in his sufferings because they humble him and because, after all, he is a mere human being whose life is a “vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away” (Jas 4:14).

1:11. To underline his point, James compares the wealthy man to mere *grass* of the field whose **grass withers under burning heat**. His **pursuits** will abruptly cease when he dies. The rich Christian can take occasion from his troubles to be reminded of all this.

B. Do Not Accuse God (1:12-18)

1:12. James here begins the second unit of his introduction. The one who takes the attitude prescribed for him by James in vv 2-11, **endures temptation** (*peirasmos*; the same word translated *trials* in v 2) and may anticipate reward. Enduring temptation (and trials) will

cause believers to be **proved**. In using the word *proved* (*dokimos*), James is alluding to the character development he has referred to in vv 2-4 (cf. Rom 5:3-4a). The Christian whose endurance through trials has cooperated to produce approved character (*dokimēn*) is indeed *blessed* of God.

The reason he should be considered **blessed** is that (since he has become approved) **he will receive the crown of life**. The question arises here as to whether **the crown of life**, to which James refers, is a present benefit or a future one. Either view is possible, but the *life* in question must not be confused with the free gift of life that James mentions shortly (vv 17-18; cf. Rom 6:23; Rev 22:17, etc.). Clearly, v 12 refers to a *reward* for enduring trials.

If a *future* reward is in view, a parallel verse might be Gal 6:8, where the future “harvest” of a believer’s deeds is presented as the reaping of *everlasting life*. Although eternal life must be received initially as a gift, the possibility of having it “more abundantly” (John 10:10) is held out to obedient Christians.

More likely James has in mind the way God enriches one’s *present* experience of life, when testing has been successfully endured. This interpretation takes on a high probability in light of James’s later statement in 5:11. Obviously this statement picks up the themes of 1:3-12, including the reference to being “blessed” (1:12) in the words “count...blessed” (5:11). Every Jewish-Christian reader of James would know how God had crowned Job’s life with blessings after his trials were over. Therefore it seems quite likely that it is the enrichment of *temporal* experience of *life* (spiritually always, materially sometimes) that James has in mind in the expression *the crown of life*.

Finally, this experience is for **those who love Him**. Only to these has God *promised* this *crown of life*. In fact, it may be stated that each of the believers’ *various trials* in some way or other is a test of their love for God. With each test there comes the temptation to resist God’s will in sending the trial at all or, at least, the temptation to resent it and thus refuse to allow God to do the character-building work He desires to perform. Only when they submit lovingly to God’s mighty hand do they find *the crown of life*.

1:13. At this point in his prologue James makes a subtle shift in his use of the word *peirasmos* from its broader meaning of “trial” or “testing” (vv 2-12) to its more narrow meaning of “temptation” or “solicitation to evil.” In every “trial” (broad sense), there is also a “temptation” to evil (narrow sense).

The person who claims, “**I am tempted by God,**” has forgotten that **God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He...tempt anyone.** Instead, the source of temptations is the inward pull exerted by one’s *own* [evil] *desires*. If people were not evil, they would have no such desires and would be free of wrong impulses.

If *God cannot be tempted*, some have wondered how Jesus was. Though Jesus was human, He was perfect and holy, and did not have a sinful nature. Nevertheless, it was in His flesh, not in His divinity, that He was tempted by Satan.

1:14. Clearly in this passage James is thinking of “temptation” in the subjective sense. All Satan’s efforts to lead people into evil and all of the world’s seductions would have no effect on a person at all unless **he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.** There is no temptation except when a person finds evil desirable in some way.

James affirms that God does not tempt anyone. This means that God is not *personally* the agent of temptation, but James’s words leave room for the truth that God *allows others* to engage in temptation. Job is the classic example. God *Himself* did not tempt Job, but He *allowed* Satan to do so.

Thus the readers of James’s letter must not sinfully charge God with responsibility for their temptations. Rather, the responsibility is their own because of their own wicked hearts.

1:15. James now traces the potentially deadly consequences into which man’s evil desires can lead him. The language he employs is the language of childbearing. **Desire** (as if it were a woman) experiences a “conception” and subsequently **gives birth** (*tiktei*) **to sin.**

Desire, James says, is the mother of sin. Such conception occurs when desire, or lust, is united with the human will, so that the birth of sin becomes a determination of the heart. But after the sin is brought to birth through lust, it grows (or, is repeated) and reaches maturity (i.e., **it is full-grown**). Then sin in turn bears a child of its own—namely, **death** (sin...**brings forth** [*apokyeō*, “gives birth to”] *death*).

Death, then, is the grandchild of sinful lust or *desire*. Death is the cul-de-sac into which one’s lusts can lead him. This point is reaffirmed by James in 5:20. The truth that physical death is the ultimate end of sinful conduct is stated repeatedly in the Book of Proverbs (e.g., 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16). Since James is writing to his Christian brothers (see discussion of Jas 1:2), it is plain that even a born-again Christian can flirt with premature physical death by

indulging in his sinful lusts. This is an extremely serious consideration. But immediate repentance from sin, that is, a turning from the error of his way (5:20), can cut the sin off before it is *full-grown* and thus save the sinning one *from death*.

1:16. So James's Christian brothers and sisters should not allow themselves to **be deceived**. Temptation to evil can lead to physical death, and death is the very opposite of the kind of gift that God always bestows. In fact, death is the dreadful consequence earned by sin (Rom 6:23), but God is fundamentally a Giver.

1:17. Indeed, He is a flawless Giver, unlike all earthly givers. **Every good gift and every perfect gift** is from Him and therefore **from above**. One might have expected James to say that God only gives *good and perfect* gifts, but in fact he says more than this. Wherever there is such a thing as a flawless gift, that gift is necessarily *from above*. All human gifts, by contrast, are flawed in some way because the human giver is flawed. Only God can give *perfect* gifts. That is because He is **the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning**. God is immutable in His activity of giving.

1:18. Christians should know this truth (v 17) best of all, and James's readers *are* Christians. Therefore James can say of them and of himself, **Of His own will He brought us forth**, that is, He "gave birth" to us.

This statement is clearly related to the context. James's word for *brought us forth* (*apokyeō*) is the same word used in v 15 for "brings forth." Sin, James is saying, "gives birth" to death, but God "gives birth" to *believers!* Moreover, it is not related to the "will" of man, by which it could be flawed because of the corruption of that "will." Rather, new birth finds its source in *God's will (of His own will)* and is effected **by the word of truth**.

God's role in conversion may be described as revelatory. As an act of *His own will* He commands the light of the gospel to shine into a person's heart so that he can perceive that light in faith, as Jesus said to Peter after his great confession (Matt 16:17). This of course in no way diminishes man's responsibility to seek God and the illumination He alone can give (Acts 17:26-27; Heb 11:6).

Thus the teaching called "Lordship salvation" is flawed. By insisting that saving faith is an act of the will, it demolishes the Biblical concept of faith as a reception of God's truth. Biblical saving faith is a conviction or persuasion about what God says in the gospel (Rom 4:21). There is no place here for man's will—even as influenced by

God's Spirit. God commands the light of His Word to shine into one's heart and, like blind men suddenly able to see, he perceives it as truth (2 Cor 4:6). Once received as truth, that is, believed, there is no room for man's will to act. Faith and regeneration have already occurred.

The result of this amazing act of God's will and Word is that we who are born again become **a kind of firstfruits of His creatures**. The NKJV translation **that we might be** is slightly ambiguous just as is the original Greek behind it (*eis to einai*). The Greek phrase can indicate either *purpose* or *result*. If the idea were one of *purpose*, James could be saying, "God has regenerated us so that we may afterwards be (become)..." If the idea is *result*, then the words suggest, "God has regenerated us so that we are (already) a kind of firstfruits..." The latter idea seems more natural since it gives cohesion to James's statement by making clear what the believer is as a result of God's regenerating activity.

James's point is that God's gift of new life is so *good* and *perfect* that when one possesses that life he is a foreshadowing of what God will do for all *His creatures* (all created things). Just as the first crops from a field (*firstfruits*) suggest the quality of the harvest as a whole, so the miracle of regeneration is so wonderful that what God plans for the entire creation can also be called a *regeneration* (Matt 19:28). Although James recognizes that the analogy is not exact (believers are a *kind of firstfruits*), yet it carries his point effectively. There is no flaw in the gift of new life; otherwise it could serve as no true model of what God wants to do for the entire creation.

III. Theme: Behave Well in Trials (1:19-20)

1:19. James now states his answer to the question of how to behave under stressful circumstances. The word **therefore** shows the connection with what has been previously said. There is a sense in which the statements in vv 19-20 are thematic for the entire epistle. Although the advice they contain is certainly good advice for all times and situations, these exhortations have a special suitability for those who are undergoing trial and testing. His admonitions are three.

First, **Be swift to hear**. A willingness to listen properly is an essential ingredient in successful endurance under testing. Although this trait is needed at all times, yet when a believer experiences stress, he urgently needs to be attentive to the wisdom that God offers through His Word or through the counsel of others based on that Word.

But typically people are more eager to *talk* in times of stress than to *listen*. Hence the second admonition is to be **slow to speak**. Eagerness to pour out one's thoughts and feelings under trial needs to be restrained. As has often been said, one cannot learn anything while talking! It might even be pointed out that Job's triumph under trial was enhanced by his brief but meaningful statements in Job 1 and 2 (1:21; 2:10). It was only when he decided to engage his so-called friends in extended dialogue that the sharpness of his victory over trial was diluted. It is a good practice for everyone who is under stress to cover his mouth, that is, to be *slow to speak*.

The third admonition is to be **slow to wrath**. Everyone knows that *wrath* (*orgē*, "anger") is one of mankind's most common reactions to difficult times. The human heart is easily swayed to anger by undesirable events. Then people begin to blame others or even God for their troubles. Obviously the ability to avoid anger at such times is a supremely admirable trait.

1:20. But such restraint is not merely admirable; it is also functional. **For, James adds, the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.** The ultimate goal for a Christian undergoing trial is the realization of God's *righteousness* in his life. The moral improvement a person can gain through trials (cf. vv 2-4) is in the last analysis a growth in righteousness and Godlikeness.

Verses 19-20 conclude the Prologue and also anticipate the contents of the main unit of the epistle. The subject of the Epistle of James is testing: its theme is the proper behavior under testing. Such behavior consists of eagerness to listen, reluctance to talk, and restraint in the expression of anger.

IV. Body: Cultivate the Necessary Behavior (1:21–5:6)

A. Be Swift to Hear (1:21–2:26)

1. More than mere listening (1:21-27)

1:21. Now that the theme of the epistle has been summarized by James (vv 19-20), he launches into an extended exposition of his theme. The word **therefore** (*dio*) signals the new point of departure. It is not enough for the writer simply to state the demands of v 19. He must also examine their ramifications. How easily a reader might claim, "Of course I am quick to hear God's Word!" But James's exposition puts this claim to the test.

The believer who wishes to **receive...the implanted word** must prepare himself both negatively and positively. Negatively, he should **lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness**. Positively, he should **receive** (or, “welcome” [*dexasthe*]) the Word **with meekness**.

The necessary preparation for “hearing” the Word is divesting oneself of evil. The word translated *lay aside* (*apotithēmi*) was often used of removing clothing. The evil itself is described as *all filthiness* and as an *overflow of wickedness*. James calls “evil” an abnormal outgrowth in the Christian’s life.

Like a seed *implanted* within them, the Word had imparted new life to them. It was thus an “inborn” Word which was natural and innate to them as born-again people. (See Peter’s use of the *seed* imagery for new birth in 1 Pet 1:23-25.) Just as a seed of wheat contains within itself all of the potential from which fully developed wheat may grow, so too does the gospel. Simple though the message of salvation is, the seed of life which is implanted when we believe this message contains enormous potential which only Christian obedience can fully develop.

Furthermore *the implanted word* can produce an enormous benefit, for James tells his readers that it *is able to save your souls*. Many readers and expositors have an automatic reaction to the phrase *save your souls* in English, which leads them to understand it as eternal salvation from hell. But none of James’s readers were at all likely to get such a meaning out of this text. The Greek phrase found here (*sōsai tas psychas hymōn*) was in common use in the sense of “to save the life.” It is used in both the Greek OT as well as in the NT in exactly that sense (see Gen 19:17; 32:30; 1 Sam 19:11; Jer 48:6; Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9). This is its obvious sense also in Jas 5:20, which refers to the physical preservation of a life *from death*. There is not a single place in the entire Greek Bible (i.e., the NT plus the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT) where this phrase signifies deliverance from hell. (For the Lord’s metaphor using this phrase see the discussions on Matt 16:24-28; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-27.)

The meaning which the data supports—“to save your lives”—is precisely the meaning most suited to this context. The readers are already born again (v 18) and are in no need of being saved from hell. Moreover, James has just spoken of the death-dealing consequences of sin (vv 14-15). In this light the meaning of v 21 is transparent: although sin can culminate in physical death, the Word of God,

properly received, can preserve physical life (cf. Prov 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16).

From both a linguistic and contextual point of view, as well as from the perspective of Hebrew wisdom, there can be no legitimate doubt about James's meaning in this verse. To take these words as a reference to eternal salvation is to commit an obvious error of eisegesis (reading one's own ideas into the text). As long as a reader does that in v 21, he will not only misunderstand the verse itself, but he will misunderstand the entire epistle, including 2:14-26!

1:22. As important as it is to *receive the implanted word* with cleansed hearts and a meek spirit, there is one further essential step. They must become **doers of the word**. James's readers must never allow themselves to become mere **hearers**; instead they must obey it. James trades on the fact that the word "hear," in both Hebrew and Greek, can mean either sensory audition or "to hear responsively," that is, "to obey." In his exposition of the command to *be swift to hear* (v 19), James wants his audience to realize that the regular hearing of God's Word in the meetings of the church is not all he has in mind. To *be swift to hear*, at its deepest level of meaning, means also "to be swift to obey." If the readers ever thought that mere attention to the Scriptures was enough, they were mistaken. With such a view they would be **deceiving** themselves. The analogy today would be the Christian who is fascinated by the exposition and study of God's Word but who has assimilated very little of it into his everyday life.

1:23. James then points out in fact that hearing the Word without doing it is like looking into a mirror and then forgetting what one has seen.

What is seen in this mirror is described by James as **his natural face** (*to prosōpon tēs geneseōs autou*). A more precise rendering of the phrase would be "the face of his birth." In the word "birth" (*geneseōs*) one can hear, as in the word "inborn" (v 21), a further echo of the readers' experience of regeneration (v 18). "The implanted [inborn] word" (God's mirror; 2 Cor 3:18) reveals to its Christian hearers the true "face" of their new birth into God's family. It shows them what they truly are *in Christ* and therefore how they *ought to behave* in keeping with that image of themselves.

1:24. This approach to Christian morality is a fundamental feature of the NT epistles. We begin by recognizing what we are by God's grace, and we are then commanded to behave *accordingly* (cf. Rom 6:5-14; 1 Cor 6:15, 19-20; Gal 2:20; Eph 4:1; Col 3:1-4; 2 Pet 1:3-7).

Thus the believer who hears the Word but goes out and ignores what it has shown him is truly like a person who **immediately forgets what kind of man** he is. To be a mere hearer of God's truth is to forget one's true identity as a born-again and justified child of God, and to behave as though he is not.

1:25. By contrast with such a person is the Christian who is **not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work**. *Doer of the work* (*poiētēs ergou*) is in the general sense of a "work-doer." This is James's first reference to good works in a series of sections leading up to 2:14-26.

The **perfect law of liberty** is the spiritual "mirror" into which a believer looks when he hears "the implanted word." Since the commands of this Christian *law* are in accord with his innermost nature as a born-again person, they are not in any way a form of bondage but rather they are a "*law of liberty* [freedom]." What the Christian really learns from the Word (as seen in vv 23-24) is to *become* (in conduct) what he already *is* by virtue of his regenerate nature. When a person is doing something as a natural expression of his true nature, he is obviously enjoying the *liberty* of just being himself.

The Christian man who **looks into...and continues** in God's Word is one who submits to divine authority (law), yet in so doing he finds himself truly free. One can easily imagine that James had personally heard Jesus say, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). Such truly free obedience to God is the secret of "saving our lives" (Jas 1:21) and of enjoying every other benefit God chooses to bestow on believers. The *doer of...work* (or, "work-doer") of this verse, not the mere hearer of the Word, is the person who **will be blessed in what he does**.

1:26. The church or churches to which James is writing (see *Introduction*) are much less than perfect (see chap 4). They probably contain many individuals who consider themselves punctilious in their **religious** observances and thus worthy of the blessing James had just spoken about (v 25). But it is commonplace for people to reduce obedience to God to the performance of various religious routines. In James's day these might include regular attendance at Christian worship, as well as prayers and fasting. The words for *religious* here and "religion" (v 27) were terms used to describe just such activities as these. But James is not concerned with the practice of religious exercises, however valuable they are in their place. Instead

he is concerned with down-to-earth conduct in relation to other people.

James totally dismisses the *religion* of any Christian person who placed no restraint on the use of his own **tongue**. Sanctimonious prayers in public or private are worth little if the person who offers them has lips filled with slander, deceit, and cursing when he talks to other people (see 3:9-10).

1:27. Equally, any claim to being *religious* is dashed to the ground by a failure to help the needy, or by any sinful practice derived from the unbelieving world around them. **Pure and undefiled religion** is far more than a few basic liturgical routines. The **God and the Father** of James's readers—the Father of lights who had regenerated them (vv 17-18)—looked for more than such routines. What best expresses His nature and character is mercy and personal moral purity. This means James's readers needed **to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep themselves unspotted from the world.**

Any Christian who fails to mingle with and assist those who have greater material needs than his own is in serious danger of being infected by the world's selfishness, greed, and indifference. No amount of prayer and church attendance can compensate for the loss of compassion and involvement with the poor. Charity to the poor channeled in an impersonal way through the government or other institutions is not at all the same thing.

2. More than mere morality (2:1-13)

2:1. In developing the theme of being “swift to hear” (see 1:19), James points out that *to hear* is more than merely listening to the Word. It also involves *doing* it (1:21-25), yet not simply in the sense of the observance of ceremonial routines but with acts of mercy to those in need (1:26-27). Such acts guard one against worldly “spots” (1:27). It is this last point that forms a bridge to the next unit (2:1-13).

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**.

2:2. With the vividness of a preacher, James describes the sharply different treatments which an impressively attired rich man might receive, when he visits a Christian **assembly**, as over against a

dirty-looking poor man. The former would be offered a comfortable seat, the latter an insignificant seat or no seat at all. Perhaps James had actually witnessed such cases of blatant *partiality* (v 1).

Although the Greek word for *assembly* is the one used for a synagogue, “meeting” seems most natural here. In the circle of churches to which James writes (see *Introduction*), it is not likely that there were many who met in the local synagogue since that would imply the conversion of most of the synagogue’s members. Most probably the Jewish–Christian churches of Palestine met in private homes where rooms might be set aside to accommodate these gatherings.

2:3. The statement, “**Sit here at my footstool,**” is literally, “sit here under (or, below) my footstool.” There may be a touch of ironic exaggeration in these words for James suggests that the position given the poor visitor is so demeaning as to be *underneath* the footstool on which the speaker rested his own feet!

The scene James has in mind may be one in which the Christians were reclining at a table to observe the Lord’s Supper. If so, the rich visitor is allowed to sit down on a seat in the room to observe the proceedings. The poor visitor, on the other hand, is told simply either to stand (against the wall?) or to sit on the floor “below” the pillow or object on which the speaker placed his feet. For the concept of visitors at a Christian gathering see 1 Cor 14:23-25.

2:4. Those who behave with such outrageous favoritism are to be firmly censured. “If you do this,” James is saying, **have you not shown partiality among yourselves?** This may indeed be the meaning of the text, but it seems too obvious a conclusion to be drawn from the glaring example presented in vv 2-3. The original words (*ou diekrithēte en heautois*) can also be understood in the sense “have you not discriminated among yourselves.” In that case the *partiality* is condemned because it draws an unchristian distinction between the rich and the poor man. It implies that those who behave this way have judged the rich man to be better and more worthy as a person than the poor man. But such judgments are morally wrong and make those who exercise them **judges with evil thoughts.**

2:5. The type of behavior just criticized represented a serious miscalculation. James wants to call the attention of his fellow Christians to this miscalculation in no uncertain terms: **Listen, my beloved brethren,** that is, “Pay attention to this!” The fundamental principle James now states amounts to telling his readers that partiality toward the rich flies directly into the face of reality. The despised poor man

may actually be rich in God's sight. **Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith?**

More than once Scripture commends faith which is either abundant or exceptional in character (Matt 8:10; 15:28; Acts 6:5; 11:24; Hebrews 11). It is clear that not everyone who has faith can be described as *rich in faith*. Yet even little faith can have significant results (Matt 17:20; Luke 17:6) because it is in an infinite God. The issue here is not that of eternal salvation. Simple faith in Christ is sufficient to save (Acts 16:31). The issue rather is: How *much* is a Christian trusting God in his daily life? How high can one's trust rise when outward appearances are deeply discouraging? Ironically a rich Christian may have less opportunity to trust God for his needs than a poor man who must trust Him day by day, and sometimes meal by meal. Thus by the providential arrangement of God a poor Christian may become very rich in the area of personal faith in God, while the rich Christian may be poverty-stricken in this aspect of spiritual experience. James's readers needed to remember this whenever a scruffy, poor brother came to their assembly. Despite outward appearances, he might be a spiritual millionaire!

Indeed, if so, he was also one of the **heirs of the kingdom**. By this phrase James indicates that the poor man who is *rich in faith* will be a co-ruler with Christ over the kingdom of God. Just as Christ inherits the kingdom (Ps 2:8-9) because of His loyalty to God the Father (Heb 1:8-9, quoting Ps 45:6-7), so will the co-heirs of His kingdom. Thus *the kingdom* has been **promised to those who love God**. Although salvation is freely bestowed at the moment a person exercises simple faith in Christ for eternal life, the kingdom is not *inherited* that way. Heirship in the kingdom requires loving God, which can be expressed only through obedience to Him (John 14:21-24), while obedience itself is the product of living by faith (see Gal 2:20). Anyone who does not live this kind of life cannot rightly be called *rich in faith*, even though he or she has believed in Christ for eternal salvation.

2:6-7. Poor believers, then, tended to live such lives and to be people of importance in the light of God's coming kingdom, and disdainful treatment of a poor person who attended a meeting was a failure to take that fact into account. "You should have honored him," James is saying, **but [instead] you have dishonored the poor man**. As a class, rich people were more likely to be enemies of Christianity and to be oppressors rather than helpers of the Christian community.

In the Jewish context of this book many unbelieving, wealthy Jews were a source of oppression to Christians and might **drag** [them] **into the courts** on any pretext. Moreover, many did not hesitate to **blaspheme that noble name** “the Lord Jesus Christ,” v 1, **by which you are called**. By putting the statements about rich men in question form, James is simply making them face what they already know. It made no sense for any reader of James to obsequiously extend himself in welcoming a rich person into the Christian assembly, while at the same time slighting a potential heir of the kingdom!

2:8. The failure to avoid partiality in dealing with the rich and the poor was more than a failure to face reality in regard to these two classes of men. More fundamentally, it was a breakdown in Christian morality. It was a violation of Scripture’s **royal law** commanding love for one’s neighbor based on how a person would wish to be treated. Certainly no one desired to be slighted in the way described by James (v 3).

In calling the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” a *royal law*, James creates a memorable expression with more than one significant facet. The command to love is *royal* because it is issued by the King—the Lord Jesus Himself, in fact, first as the divine Revealer (Lev 19:1, 18) and then in His incarnation among men (Matt 22:37-40). But it is also *royal* because it is conduct of a high order worthy of a king. James is alluding to the theme of heirship in the kingdom which he had just mentioned (Jas 2:5). The heirs were the future kings of God’s kingdom and they should conduct themselves according to the *royal* (kingly) *law* of love for one’s neighbor. Thus with considerable skill James pulls together in this passage the two great commands of OT revelation, uniting them under the theme of kingship. (These two commands are also a part of the New Covenant “law of liberty.” See discussion on 1:25 and 2:9.) The aspiring future kings will possess (reign over) the kingdom if they “love God” (v 5), but this requires also love for men (cf. 1 John 4:20-21).

2:9. But *do* they indeed fulfill it? Not if they **show partiality** to the rich over the poor, for in that case they **commit sin**, and the Biblical command to love exposes them as **transgressors** of God’s *law*. No doubt, as Jewish converts to Christianity, James’s readers still held the moral standards of God’s OT law in high esteem. After all, every one of the Ten Commandments, except the one about the Sabbath day, is repeated in the NT. Thus the repeated commands are binding on those who live under the New Covenant rather than under the

Old, which has been set aside (see Hebrews 8). Therefore the failure to love a brother as oneself (which is a failure reflected in *partiality*) constitutes a genuine infraction of God's will for believers.

2:10. Furthermore such failure exposes inadequacy in the light of God's holy standards. An infraction of the Law of the sort James is discussing is to break the Law as a **whole**. No matter how well one might keep the rest of it, a sin against love constitutes a person as a lawbreaker, that is, a criminal before the bar of justice!

2:11. This disturbing point is driven home by James with the observation that the commands against **adultery** and **murder** are part of the same Law. Since both sins were punishable by death under the Old Covenant, James's argument has great force. Obviously he is saying, **if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder**, innocence in one area does not excuse a person in the other. As James's readers would know, murderers suffered the ultimate penalty for Law-breaking whether or not they had ever committed adultery.

Naturally James is addressing himself to Jewish Christian readers (see *Introduction*) who still retained a high opinion of Law-keeping. Their culture and heritage strongly inclined them to this, even after they had been justified by faith in Christ. James writes with considerable perception to such readers. Even though justification is not the issue here, his readership (like their unsaved but self-righteous fellow countrymen) put a high premium on avoiding such sins as adultery and murder. But they needed to be reminded that a failure to love a poor brother who came to their assembly nullified any pride they might have in obeying God's Law in other respects. One either obeyed it *all*, or he did *not* obey it—whatever the specific infraction might be.

Even James's converted readers, however, needed to be reminded of this truth about the Law, lest they ignore their own unloving *partiality* and carelessly regard themselves as Law-keepers in God's sight. "Don't think that way at all," James is saying, "for your loveless behavior sets you under the Law's condemnation, not the Law's approval!" Thus the kind of "hearing" James wants of his readers (see 1:19-25) is not mere moral separation from sins like adultery and murder. No indeed. To "be swift to hear" is also to be swift to love, and that excludes partiality.

2:12. But it is not the OT Law by which Christians will be judged, but rather **by the law of liberty** to which he has already referred (see discussion of 1:25). The qualifying phrase *of liberty* clearly suggests

a differentiation from the mere term *law* when not so qualified. James certainly concurred with Peter's description of the OT law as "a yoke of bondage" (Acts 15:10). He joined in the final solution of the Law problem which was hammered out at the Jerusalem Council (vv 13-29). James knows that Christians are "not under law but under grace" (Rom 6:14). That is to say, he knows that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law of the Old Covenant. But James also knows that God's will was extensively revealed for New Covenant people through the NT apostles and prophets and—above all—through "our Lord Jesus Christ from Glory." It is precisely this revelation which was made for born-again people and which appeals to the fundamental instincts of their regenerate nature. As such it is not a burden at all (1 John 5:3-5), but rather allows them to express what they really are as children of God. Thus it is a law of freedom.

Yet at the same time it is the code of conduct by which Christian life will be judged. Thus believers should **so speak and so do** with that fact in mind. Christians' lives will be assessed in the light of the high and holy standards of the *law of liberty*.

In speaking of judgment, James can mean only what is referred to as the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-11). In reference to eternal life the believer "shall not come into judgment" (John 5:24). There is no such thing as a judgment for the believer to determine whether he goes to heaven or hell. The believer has *already* passed from death to life and no charge can be brought against him because he is *already* justified (John 5:24; Rom 8:32-33). Those who say this judgment in James 2:12 pertains to eternal life for believers can only do so by first reading it in!

2:13. Such is the solemnity of the Judgment Seat of Christ, however, that no one can view it without sensing how awesome and exacting it must be. Paul also sensed this feature of it (2 Cor 5:11). Any reasonable person must know that a **judgment** of his Christian life "by the book" (i.e., with full strictness) is likely to leave him with much censure from his Savior and with much loss of potential reward. What is needed in that day is **mercy**—a willingness on the part of the Lord and Judge to assess the believers' words and deeds with the fullest possible measure of compassion. But how can they store up the mercy that will be so urgently needed in that day?

James's answer is simple and thrilling: he commends mercy. For if **the one who has shown no mercy** will experience none in that day, the converse must certainly be true: the one who has shown much

mercy will experience much. Indeed, the mercy shown to others can actually “win the day” at that future experience of judgment, for **mercy triumphs over judgment**. The word *triumphs* (*katakauchao-mai*) could be rendered “exults over,” as if mercy could celebrate with words its victory over judgment. Hence, if a Christian constantly tempers his words and deeds with mercy, he can emerge a victor in the day of divine assessment.

In this light, then, the cold indifference toward the poor man of Jas 2:2-3 was a dangerous procedure to follow. Instead, that poor man should have been welcomed with the warmth and sensitivity that the merciful person is careful to express. Only in that way would their treatment of him be a positive rather than a negative factor at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

3. More Than Passive Faith (2:14-26)

2:14. James opens this section of admonition by confronting the fundamental issue. Suppose someone lays claim to faith but cannot point to acts of obedience of the kind James has been discussing (1:26–2:13). What then? Can he expect his faith in God’s Word to “save his life” (1:21) if he is not a work-doer (v 25)? In other words **Can faith save him?**

Actually the question (in Greek) implies its own answer and might better be translated, “Faith can’t save him, can it?” The expected response is, “No, it can’t!” But, of course, faith *can* and *does* save when one is speaking of *eternal* salvation (e.g., Eph 2:8-9). But here—as James makes plain—faith *cannot* save under the conditions he has in mind (see discussion at Jas 1:21).

Thus in James 2, the writer plainly makes works a condition for salvation. The failure to admit this is the chief source of the problems supposedly arising from this passage for most evangelicals. Readers need to recognize *that James cannot be discussing salvation by grace*. But instead of admitting these points, many interpreters dodge them.

This is frequently done by trying to translate the question, “Can faith save him?” (2:14), by “Can *that* [or, *such*] faith save him?” But the introduction of words like “that” or “such” as qualifiers for “faith” is really an evasion of the text. The Greek does not support this sort of translation.

Nevertheless, support for the renderings “such faith” or “that faith” is usually said to be found in the presence of the Greek definite article with the word “faith.” But in this very passage, the definite

article also occurs with “faith” in vv 17, 18, 20, 22, and 26. (In v 22, the reference is to Abraham’s faith!) In none of these places are the words “such” or “that” proposed as natural translations. As is well known, the Greek language often employed the definite article with abstract nouns (like faith, love, hope, etc.) where English cannot do so. In such cases the Greek article is left untranslated. The attempt to single out 2:14 for specialized treatment carries its own refutation on its face. It must be classed as a *truly desperate* effort to support an insupportable interpretation.

These statements by James cannot be willed away. As clearly as language can express it, faith by itself does not “save,” according to James. But “save” in what sense? Or better, “save” from what? From eternal hell? Or from something else? The only appropriate answer, in the light of the whole epistle, is to say that James is picking up the theme of 1:21 (expressed again in 5:19-20). This theme is the truth that obedience to God’s Word can “save” the life from the deadly outcome of sin (see 1:15 and discussion). Faith alone cannot do this. Works of obedience are completely indispensable.

2:15-17. If one keeps in mind the concept of “saving the life by obedience,” then the words of 2:15-17 can be heard in a fresh light. Can the fact that a person holds correct beliefs and is orthodox “save” him from the deadly consequences of sin? Of course not! The very thought is absurd. That is like giving one’s best wishes to a destitute brother or sister when what they *really* need is food and clothing (2:15-16). It is utterly fruitless. As a matter of fact, this kind of callous conduct on the part of one Christian toward another is precisely what James has been warning against (see 1:27; 2:2-6). It superbly illustrates his point.

Such idle words are as “dead” (ineffectual) as a nonworking faith. So James says, **Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.** It needs to be carefully considered why James chose the term *dead* to describe a faith that is not working. Yet the moment this term is related to the plainly expressed concept of “saving the life” (1:21), everything becomes clear. The issue that concerns James is an issue of *life* or *death*. Can a faith that is dead save the Christian from *death*? The question answers itself. The choice of the adjective *dead* is perfectly suited to James’s argument. Just as the idle words of some ungenerous believer cannot save his brother from death in the absence of life’s necessities, a nonworking faith cannot save a *believer’s* life from the *death-dealing* consequences of sin. For that purpose

faith is sterile and ineffective *by itself*, because it cannot accomplish the needed result.

Commentators often deal with the word *dead* simplistically. As a metaphor *dead* is often treated as though it could refer to nothing other than the death/life terminology employed to describe salvation from hell. But every linguist knows that “death” and “deadness” are concepts that have given rise to numerous and diverse metaphors in nearly every language. English itself has many (“this law’s a dead letter,” “you’re dead wrong,” “he’s dead drunk,” “he’s a dead duck,” “that idea is dead,” “they navigated by dead reckoning,” etc.). So also the Greek language (and the NT itself) abounds in such metaphors. In Romans alone, Paul says Abraham’s body was “dead” while it was still alive, and attributes “deadness” to Sarah’s barren womb (Rom 4:19). Paul says that “apart from the law sin was [or is] dead” (Rom 7:8) (although sin can be quite active apart from the Law [Rom 5:13]), and then declares that “sin revived and I died” (Rom 7:9). So too the Christian’s body, in which the Spirit dwells, can be described as “dead” (Rom 8:10), although the Christian himself is regenerated. The complexity in Paul’s use of the term “dead” is clearly evident from these texts. A concordance study yields examples in other parts of the NT as well (e.g., Luke 15:24, 32; Heb 6:1; 9:14; Rev 3:1). It is simply wrong to think that James’s metaphor about “dead faith” can have only one meaning, namely, a soteriological one. To claim this is to beg the question.

So when faith is described as “dead” in James 2, this can easily be understood in context as meaning that (for the purpose being considered) faith is *sterile, ineffectual, or unproductive*.

2:18-19. James does not expect such words to go unchallenged. Even in Christians, the impulse to excuse or cover our failures is strong. So James anticipates his readers’ excuse by introducing the words of an imaginary objector. Such alleged objectors were a common stock-in-trade for writers on morals in James’s day, and here he employs this well-known literary foil. The entirety of vv 18-19 belong to this hypothetical speaker.

The exact extent and meaning of the objector’s words have long been a problem to commentators. The NKJV follows a common understanding in its punctuation of vv 18-19. The words, “**You have faith and I have works,**” are enclosed in quotation marks by the NKJV and this signals that these words alone are taken as the words of an objector. (What they are an objection to has puzzled many

commentators.) The remaining words of v 18 and those of v 19 are taken by the NKJV as the reply of James, though it is by no means clear how they answer the words attributed to the objector. But *all* punctuation in our English Bibles is the work of editors, since the original manuscript of James would probably have had little or none. But the text is only correctly understood when the entirety of vv 18-19 (starting with, *You have faith...*) is assigned to the objector and *none of it* assigned to James.

In vv 18-19 the specific literary format James uses was familiar from the Greek diatribe, which was a learned and argumentative form of discourse. The form employed in vv 18-20 might be called the “objection/reply format.” Words such as James’s “but someone will say” (v 18) are used to introduce the objection and, when the objection has been stated, a sharp rejoinder is begun with words like James’s “but do you want to know, O foolish man” (v 20). This same format used by James also occurs in Rom 9:19-20 and 1 Cor 15:35-36. The view of many writers that James’s reply has to begin at v 18b ignores the manifest structural signals of James’s text. These writers have failed to produce any comparable text in the relevant literature. This writer regards it as certain that the objector’s words extend to the end of v 19.

But what does the objection mean? Since most Greek manuscripts read the word “by” (*ek*) in place of the familiar word “without” (*chōris*) in v 18, the reading “by” is preferred here. The objector’s statement may then be given as follows, retaining the Greek word order more exactly than does the NKJV:

But someone will say: “You have faith and I have works. Show me your faith from [*ek*] your works, and I will show you, from [*ek*] my works, my faith. You believe that there is one God; you do well. The demons also believe, and tremble” (vv 18-19, author’s translation).

The argument which these words express appears to be a *reductio ad absurdum* (reducing someone’s claims to absurdity). It is heavy with irony. “It is absurd,” says the objector, “to see a close connection between faith and works. For the sake of argument, let’s say *you* have faith and *I* have works. Let’s start there. *You* can no more start with what you believe and show it to me in your works, than *I* can start with my works and demonstrate what it is that I believe.” The objector is confident that both tasks are impossible. The impossibility of

showing one's faith from one's works is now demonstrated (so the objector thinks) by this illustration: "Men and demons both believe the same truth (that there is one God), but their faith does not produce the same response. Although this article of faith may move a *human being* to 'do well,' it never moves the *demons* to 'do well.' All *they* can do is tremble. Faith and works, therefore, have no built-in connection at all. The same creed may produce entirely different kinds of conduct. Faith cannot be made visible in works!" With this supposedly unanswerable claim, the objector rests his case.

No doubt James and his readers had heard this argument before. It was precisely the kind of defensive approach people might take when their orthodoxy was not supported by good deeds. They might say, "Faith and works are not really related to each other in the way you say they are, James. So don't criticize the vitality of my faith because I don't do such and such a thing."

2:20. James's reply to the objector's words may be paraphrased this way: "What a senseless argument! How foolish you are to make it! I still say that without works your faith is dead. Would you like to know why?" Verses 21-23 are James's direct rebuttal of the objection. This is made clear in the Greek text by the singular form of "do you see" (*blepeis*) in v 22. This shows he is addressing the objector. Only with the "you see" (*horate*) of v 24 does James return to the plural and to his readers as a whole.

2:21. In refuting the objection he has cited, James selects the most prestigious name in Jewish history, the patriarch Abraham. He selects also his most honored act of obedience to God, the offering of his own son Isaac. Since in Christian circles it was well known that Abraham was justified *by faith*, James now adds a highly original touch. He was also justified by works! If James's subject matter is kept clearly in mind, one will not fall into the trap of pitting James against the Apostle Paul. In no way does James wish to deny that Abraham, or anyone else, could be justified by faith alone. He merely wishes to insist that there is also *another* justification, and it is **by works**.

Of course, there is no such thing as a single justification by faith *plus* works. Nothing James says here suggests that idea. Rather, there are *two kinds* of justification (see v 24). Somewhat surprisingly to most people, the Apostle Paul agrees with this. Writing at what was no doubt a later time than James, Paul states in Rom 4:2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast, but not before God." The form of this statement in Greek does

not deny the truth of the point under consideration. The phrase, “but not before God,” strongly suggests that Paul can conceive of a sense in which people *are* justified by works. But, he insists, that is not the way people are justified *before God*. That is, it does not establish their legal standing before Him.

Therefore, in responding to the kind of person who tried to divorce faith from works in Christian experience, James takes a skillful approach. His thought paraphrased this way: “Wait a minute, you foolish man! You make much of justification by faith, but can’t you see how Abraham was *also* justified by works when he offered his son Isaac to God? [v 21]. Isn’t it obvious how his faith was cooperating with his works and, in fact, by works his faith was made mature? [v 22]. In this way, too, the full significance of the Scripture about his justification by faith was brought to light, for now he could be “called the friend of God” (v 23).

It should be carefully noted that in referring to Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac, James has returned to the theme of trials which is the basic concern of his epistle (see 1:2-18). In Jewish tradition, this story about Abraham represented the supreme trial of the patriarch, over which he had triumphed gloriously. But equally, when James turns to Rahab in v 25, he is likewise dealing with a woman who had triumphed under severe trial. The two stories, standing at the end of a major unit (1:21–2:26), form an implicit *inclusio* (a reference back) carrying the reader’s mind back to the point at which the unit on true hearing had begun. The exhortation of 1:21 had sprung from the preceding discussion on Christian trials.

2:22-23. The content of these verses is rich indeed. It is a pity that they have been so widely misunderstood. The faith that justifies—James never denies that it *does* justify!—can have an active and vital role in the life of the obedient believer. As with Abraham, it can be the dynamic for great acts of obedience. In the process, faith itself can be **made perfect**, that is, “perfected” (*eteleiōthē*). The Greek word suggests development and maturation. Faith is thus nourished and strengthened by works.

It would hardly be possible to find a better illustration of James’s point anywhere in the Bible. The faith by which Abraham was justified was directed toward God’s promise about his seed (Gen 15:6), a promise that reaffirmed the initial promise of Gen 12:1-3, which carried soteriological significance (see Gal 3:6-9). But Abraham’s faith

was also implicitly faith in the God of resurrection (cf. Gen 15:6 with Rom 4:19-21 and Heb 11:17-19).

Abraham had confidence that the God in whom he believed could overcome the deadness of his own body and of Sarah's womb. But it was only through the testing with Isaac that this implicit faith in God's resurrection power becomes a specific conviction that God could literally raise a person physically from the dead to fulfill His oath.

The faith of Abraham was strengthened and matured by works. From a conviction that God could overcome a "deadness" in his own body (inability to beget children), he moved to the assurance that God could actually resurrect his son's body from literal, physical death. In the process of carrying out the divine command to sacrifice his beloved boy, his faith grew and reached new heights of confidence in God.

In this way, too, the Scripture that spoke of his original justification was fulfilled. Abraham's works filled this ancient text full of meaning, so to speak, by showing the extent to which his faith, mentioned in Gen 15:6, could develop and undergird a life of obedience. Simple and uncomplicated though it was at first, Abraham's justifying faith had potential ramifications which only his works, built on it, could disclose.

And now he could be called **the friend of God**, not only by God Himself, but also by men (cf. 2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8). This is in fact the name by which Abraham has been known down through the centuries in many lands and by at least three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Had Abraham not obeyed God in the greatest test of his life, he would still have been justified by the faith he exercised in Gen 15:6. But by allowing that faith to be *alive* in his *works*, he attained an enviable title among countless millions of people. In this way he was also justified by works (before men; cf. Rom 4:2).

When a person is justified by faith, he or she finds an unqualified acceptance before God. As Paul puts it, such an individual is one "to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works" (Rom 4:6). But only God can see this spiritual transaction. When, however, one is justified by works, he or she achieves an intimacy with God that is *manifest to others*. He or she can then be called a "friend of God," even as Jesus said, "you are My friends if you do whatever I command you" (John 15:14; see also the discussion of Jas 4:4).

2:24. Leaving the imagined objector behind, James returns in vv 24-26 to address his readers directly. (See comment on v 20.) His statement here confirms what is noted above (v 21), that there are *two kinds* of justification, not one kind conditioned on faith *plus* works. James's words should be read like this: **You see then that a man is justified by works, and not [only justified] by faith.** The key to this understanding is the Greek adverb "only" (*monon*), which does not qualify (i.e., modify) the word *faith*, since the form would then have been *monōs*. As an adverb, however, it modifies the verb *justified* implied in the second clause. James is saying that a by-faith justification is not the *only* kind of justification there is. There is also a by-works justification. The former type is *before God*, the latter type is *before men*.

2:25. This is precisely what is now illustrated in the additional case of Rahab. James does *not* say, "Was not Rahab the harlot justified by faith and works?" James knows of no such justification. Rather, **Rahab**, like Abraham before her, was **justified by works** in front of other people, that is, before the nation of Israel among whom she came to live.

Rahab, however, is superbly suited to tie James's thoughts together. The passage had begun with a reference to his theme of "saving the life" (v 14; 1:21). Not surprisingly, Rahab is selected as a striking example of a person whose physical life was "saved" precisely because she had works. The author of Hebrews (11:31) points to her faith and lays the stress on the fact that she *received* the spies. James, by contrast, points to the fact that **she...sent them out another way**. Why does James do this? The answer has considerable significance for James's argument.

Although Rahab's *faith* began to operate the moment she *received the messengers*, she could not really be *justified by works* until she had *sent them out another way*. This is obvious when the story in Joshua 2 is carefully considered. Up until the last minute, she could still have betrayed the spies. Had she so desired, she could have sent their pursuers after them. That the spies had lingering doubts about her loyalty is suggested by their words in Josh 2:20, "And if you tell this business of ours, then we will be free from your oath." But the successful escape of the spies demonstrated that Rahab was truly a *friend of God* because she was also *their* friend. In this way, *Rahab* was *justified by works*.

And in the process, she saved her own life and her family's! Her faith, therefore, was very much *alive* because it was an active, working faith. Though she was a prostitute—and both inspired writers remind us that she was—her living faith triumphed over the natural consequences of her sin. While all the rest of the inhabitants of Jericho perished under the divine judgment which Israel executed, she *lived* because her faith *lived*!

2:26. James therefore wishes his readers to know that works are in fact the vitalizing **spirit** which keeps one's faith alive, in the same way that the human spirit keeps the human body alive. Whenever a Christian ceases to act on his faith, that faith atrophies and becomes little more than a creedal corpse. "Dead orthodoxy" is a danger that has always confronted Christian people and we do well to take heed to this danger. But the antidote is a simple one: Faith remains vital and alive as long as it is being translated into real works of living obedience.

B. Be Slow to Speak (3:1-18)

1. The tongue is a dangerous instrument for displaying wisdom (3:1-12)

3:1. In the early Church the gatherings of believers were less formal than the morning worship services familiar to so many today. In Corinth (cf. 1 Corinthians 11-14), if not in all churches, meetings were largely unstructured (except for the Lord's Supper) and were open to any of the men who wished to make an oral contribution (the women, however, were silent; 1 Cor 14:34-35). In such a context any brother might rise to give instruction to the believers, whether he was particularly suited, or gifted, for this task. James begins his discussion of the tongue by addressing this tendency. He believes that **not many of you** [should] **become teachers**. The reason? Very simply, the man who used his tongue to teach would be held to a higher standard, **a stricter judgment**, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, than someone who had not so used his tongue.

3:2. After all, James states, **we all stumble in many things** (as in v 1 the *we* includes James). The Greek word for **perfect** is *teleios*, which does not mean specifically "sinless," but probably here means something like "flawless," that is, "a man without a flaw." But as the rest of the chapter makes plain, no such man exists, since "no man can tame the tongue" (v 8).

3:3-4. James now emphasizes the capabilities of this small member of the human body. It is true that bridling the tongue means one can also control his “whole body” (v 2). In the same way, **we put bits in horses’ mouths** and are able thereby to control the horse’s **whole body**. Moreover, sizable *ships* are controlled even in **fierce winds** by a relatively tiny attachment: **a very small rudder**. Thus a great ship, like a horse, is subject to human control and is **turned...wherever the pilot desires** by a very small instrument. Thus far, James has stressed only the tongue’s potential as a tiny “bit” or “rudder” capable of controlling man’s “whole body” (v 2). That is to say, human beings can control their own actions provided they first can control the “rudder,” the human tongue.

3:5. In view of the tongue’s potential as a “controller” of behavior, this **little member** of the body can boast of great exploits (it **boasts great things**). The Greek word translated by this last phrase is *mega-lauchei* (according to the great majority of manuscripts) and carries negative overtones of proud bragging. No doubt the choice of this word here is deliberate on James’s part. This verse, for him, is actually a transition statement that moves from considering the tongue’s “potential” (vv 3-4) to considering its “potential dangers” (vv 5b-6). It is almost as if, when the tongue “speaks” of its great exploits, it cannot refrain from “boasting” about them. Everyone can recognize this trait in himself, for who indeed can speak of his accomplishments without pride or boasting?

The transition to a negative assessment of the tongue begins therefore with the expression *boasts great things* and moves on swiftly to compare the tongue to **a little fire** (*we* might say: a ‘spark’ or a ‘match’) which results in a raging inferno in a **great...forest**. How often some casual remark has touched off a firestorm of trouble in human experience!

3:6. Therefore it can be truly said that **the tongue is a fire** or, perhaps better, “the tongue is *fire*.” To play loosely with the tongue is to play dangerously with *fire*. Why? Because the tongue is also **a world of iniquity**. The Greek phrase here (*ho kosmos tēs adikias*), which might also be rendered “an iniquitous world,” suggests that a veritable cosmos of evil lies present within the tiny confines of this dangerous member of the human body. There is no kind of evil at all which cannot be ignited in human life by this tiny firetrap!

That is how the tongue functions in the human body. The words **the tongue is so set** probably refers back to the first part of this verse.

The KJV and NKJV, however, take them as a reference *forward* to what follows and introduce the word *that* into the text. But there is nothing in the Greek to correspond to the word *that* and the remaining statements seem clearly to be qualifying statements about *the tongue*. It would be preferable to translate, “That is how, among our members, the tongue is set, which defiles the whole body,” and so forth. The word for *set* is *kathistatai*, which is of flexible character in Greek usage; here it probably means something like “plays its role.” James means that the tongue plays the role of a dangerous fire and of a “world of wickedness” (see the first part of this verse).

No wonder then that the role of the tongue makes it a physical member which **defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature**. By the words a person speaks he may come to feel completely filthy; furthermore, words can lead to physical acts that defile the entire physical self, as is the case with sins like adultery and fornication. Moreover, one’s words can not only lead to overall defilement but they can also inflame the entire course of one’s life by the ongoing consequences they produce.

3:7-8. After the grim portrayal of the tongue’s capacity for harm in v 6, one would think that so dangerous an instrument can be kept fully under control. Unfortunately this is not the case. For although human beings have had success in training virtually **every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea**, no one can claim a similar success with the tongue, since **no man can tame the tongue**.

Precisely, then, because it cannot be finally tamed while people are in their earthly bodies, the tongue remains **an unruly evil, full of deadly poison**. Christians need to remember at all times that they carry in their mouths what could be compared to a poisonous viper, and that serpentine instrument can affect others in a way that even results in their death (for example, ridicule of a suicidal person). Since the Christian can never relax with the assumption that this “viper” is fully under control, he or she must be especially alert against its most disastrous eruptions.

3:9-10. He must be alert as well to its horrifying inconsistencies. The same lips that **bless our God and Father**, in a hymn or prayer of praise, may also **curse** [and vilify] **men** (even our Christian brothers) despite the fact that they bear **the similitude of God** who created them in His image (Gen 1:26-27). (The Bible does not teach that the image of God has been *obliterated* in fallen man, however much it has been *defaced* by sin.) Thus **the same mouth** can become the source

of **blessing and cursing**—sometimes in such a swift transition that mere seconds suffice to move from one of these modes of speech to the other. In a deliberately understated assertion, James informs his Christian **brethren** that **these things ought not to be so**.

3:11-12. Furthermore, such behavior by the tongue is unsuitable, it “ought not to be,” (v 10) because it flies in the face of the consistency and predictability of so much in nature. For example, a **spring** does not inconsistently **send forth fresh water and bitter**. The tongue is not only inconsistent (v 11), but also behaves contrary to natural expectation. On a **fig tree** one does not expect to find **olives**, nor does one look for **figs** on a **grapevine**. Should one expect lips that were designed to bless our God and Father to produce vilification of humans who are “made in the similitude of God” (v 9)? Yet too often this anomaly is true of even Christians.

James now concludes his warnings against the untamable tongue by a renewed reference to a **spring**. But this closing statement is somewhat different from the one just made in v 11. Those who lived in the arid conditions of the Middle East knew the value of a good spring of water. James’s reference to fresh and bitter water was largely a reference to the *taste* of the water. One either enjoyed the spring’s water or he did not, though he might drink it anyway in an emergency. But **salt water and fresh** water were qualitatively distinct, and men and animals could live on the latter kind of water but not on the former. Not only does the tongue (unlike any natural spring) produce both pleasant and unpleasant words (“fresh” and “bitter”), but it produces words that can destroy (*salt water*) and words that can sustain life (*fresh water*). If his readers used their tongues too much, they could readily expect both negative and positive results of a far-reaching character. The writer of Proverbs (18:21) expressed the thought well: “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it [the tongue] will eat its fruit [death and life].”

2. Holy conduct is the safe instrument for displaying wisdom (3:13-18)

3:13. James’s suggestion is clear and specific. Was anyone among them **wise and understanding**? The way to demonstrate this fact was **by good conduct**. Naturally such *conduct* would be characterized by **works**, as James has already shown (1:21–2:26). The NKJV, however, slightly distorts the text by introducing an italicized *that* which is unnecessary. It is better to translate it, “Let him show [display] his

works through good conduct with the meekness of [derived from] wisdom.” Instead of boldly (and arrogantly) verbalizing the wisdom they thought they possessed, James’s readers are challenged to demonstrate it by their lifestyle in that gentle spirit (*prautēti*, **meekness**) which is always a mark of true wisdom. As Jesus said, if He teaches believers, they will learn to be *gentle* (*praos*); (Matt 11:29).

3:14. But *meekness* was sorely lacking, it appears, in some of the churches James was addressing (see 4:1-2). James therefore warns them that if they had **bitter envy and self-seeking in [their] hearts**, any effort to display God’s wisdom would be like lying **against the truth**. The word translated *self-seeking* (*eritheia*), though rare before NT times, probably connotes the kind of egotism that is expressed by an ambition to get ahead of others. Christians who wish a higher status in the church than someone else, of whom they are envious, often seek some prominent role that will satisfy this fleshly ambition.

To behave in the way James is describing is to *boast and lie against the truth*. The Greek verb for *boast* (*katakauchasthe*) is the same word used in 2:13 about mercy triumphing over judgment. The probable meaning here is similar. A person who dares to wield the truth of God as an instrument to satisfy his own *envy and self-seeking*, as he professes to teach that truth, is guilty of “triumphing over” the truth. That is, he arrogantly tramples down the truth as if it were a thing subordinate to his own personal ambitions.

3:15. If that is the way the would-be teacher was trying to show his wisdom (see v 13), he was misguided. He was showing a kind of *wisdom* all right, but it was not the kind he thought. **This wisdom**, says James, is not of heavenly origin. Instead it is **earthly, sensual, demonic**.

3:16. Basically, wherever **envy and self-seeking** were at work among believers, there were always two inescapable consequences. One of these was **confusion** (*akatastasia*, “disorder,” “unruliness”) and the other was **every evil thing** (*pragma*, “deed,” “event”). How often this inspired statement has proved true in churches where individuals seek prominence out of a spirit of jealousy or proud ambition! Characteristically the local church where this occurs is thrown into turmoil, and factionalism and evil things are said and done which have no place in the Christian fellowship. Thus the work of Satan becomes unmistakable.

3:17. In sharpest contrast with all this stands true heavenly wisdom: **the wisdom that is from above**. The primary characteristic of such

divinely bestowed wisdom is the fact that it is *pure*. It is free of the moral contamination of *envy and self-seeking* (v 16) and is marked by true devotion to God. As a result, it is also *peaceable* (*eirēnikē*) and is therefore concerned about harmony with and among the brethren. But its peace-loving nature also makes such wisdom both **gentle** (“kind,” *epieikēs*) as well as **willing to yield** (“compliant,” *eupeithēs*). This kindness and compliancy means that such wisdom does not rigidly insist on its own way, but is graciously anxious to go out of its way for other believers. The last three qualities (peaceable, kind, compliant) all begin with the Greek letter epsilon (*e*) and they are alliterative when put together as James arranges them here. They also describe traits that tend to appear together in an individual.

But if purity, peaceableness, kindness, and compliancy have pride of place in James’s list, it is equally true that heaven-wrought wisdom will be **full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy**. The attentive reader will hear echoes in these words of earlier themes in this epistle. “Mercy” recalls 1:27 and 2:13. “Good fruits” echoes 1:22-25 and 2:14-26, while “without partiality” evokes 2:1-13 (although the Greek word here is different from the one in 2:1). “Without hypocrisy” echoes the near context, specifically v 14. In short, along with the first four qualities, these are the aspects of “good conduct” (v 13) that verify a person’s wisdom in a way that words by themselves are powerless to do.

3:18. The person who behaves as v 17 describes is among **those who make peace**. (The translation *by those who make peace* [*tois poiousin eirēnēn*] takes *poiousin* as a dative of agent [by] rather than of advantage [for]. The dative of agent is found earlier in this chapter in the phrase translated “by mankind” in v 7 and it gives the best sense here.) Thus as a peacemaker the one who demonstrates the heavenly wisdom of v 17 is like a sower in a field. His behavior (his seed) has its ultimate *fruit* in *righteousness*, since righteousness among believers grows and flourishes when they dwell together *in peace*. Given James’s concern for congregational peace (cf. 4:1-3), it is probable that the phrase *in peace* goes actually with the phrase, **the fruit of**

righteousness, rather than with *sown*, as in the NKJV (i.e., the clause should read, “the fruit of righteousness in peace, is sown by...”).

C. Be Slow to Wrath (4:1–5:6)

1. Wrath Is Created by Worldliness (4:1-5)

4:1. What then was the cause of the **wars and fights** among his readers? *Where* did they come **from**? The answer is sharp and direct. Such conflicts arise, James states, **from your** desires for **pleasure**. The NKJV surely has the correct idea here even though no Greek word corresponds to the English words *desires for*. But James’s statement virtually personifies the word *pleasures* so that these *pleasures* become like hostile soldiers who wage **war** within his readers, that is, **in your** (physical) **members**.

Why were the Christians at war with *each other*? It was because they experienced *war within themselves*, as good and evil impulses did battle with each other!

4:2. Their tumultuous inner life is now discussed in terms of its utterly frustrating nature. **You lust and do not have**: what they wanted was out of their reach. **You murder and covet and cannot obtain**. It is unlikely that James means that his readers literally committed murder, but, as the Apostle John declares, “whoever hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15).

In their jealous hostility toward some Christian brother or sister, James’s readers were doubtless guilty of “wishing him away” (“I wish he was dead”) and then of coveting what they hoped they might *obtain* if he actually were dead. But since this murderous spirit could not be actualized (too risky, too shameful, too sinful, etc.), it only accentuated the readers’ frustration. Despite their mental murder and intense coveting, they were left where they started. They could not *obtain* what they coveted. All that was left was to continue the brother-versus-brother conflict in all its unpleasant aspects: hence, says James, **you fight and war**. Out of their deep frustration, James is saying, they were turning their church into a battlefield.

But as tragic as was the selfish inward frustration of his readership, equally bad was the fact that they had not turned to God to meet their needs: **you do not have because you do not ask**.

4:3. On the other hand, when they did **ask**, their requests were wrongly conceived. (The words **you ask amiss** are equivalent to “you ask badly,” where “badly” translates the Greek word *kakōs*.) Their

requests were bad precisely because they were selfish. Whatever they were asking God for, they intended to **spend it on their pleasures**. The phrase is a remarkable one. By using the word *spend* (*dapanēsēte*) James clearly implies that the benefits they sought from God would soon be used up. They would have no permanent or lasting worth. Coupled with the word *spend* here, the word *pleasures* suggests transient gratifications of the wrong kind (contrast the more neutral use in v 1). No wonder they *do not receive* answers to requests of this type!

When James writes, *you do not ask*, he has in mind requests which, when answered, will meet the fundamental needs of the readers. Among other obvious requests, they should have been asking for peace and harmony with their brothers and an end to turmoil in the church. But when James also writes, *you ask and do not receive*, he has in mind misguided and undiscerning prayer. Prayer *can* result in needs met, but it *cannot* result in the coddling of our selfish desires.

4:4. Exasperated as James must have been when he considered this state of affairs (vv 1-3), it is not surprising that he breaks forth into an exclamation that charges his readers with being **adulterers and adulteresses**. As in the case of “murder” (v 2), James is probably not speaking literally. What arouses him is the transparent infidelity to God that his readers have exhibited by craving **friendship with the world**. As will become apparent later in the chapter, some of his readers loved to boast about their business ventures (4:13-16). In doing so they exhibited a crassly materialistic and *worldly* spirit.

In fact, James has already warned the readers about the need to “keep oneself unspotted from the world” (1:27). And this warning was immediately followed by a rebuke to conduct in the church in which a rich person was fawned over while a poor man was demeaned (2:1-7). What emerges from the epistle is a portrait of Christian readers many of whom are materialistic in outlook, cultivating connections with the wealthy while pursuing financial success for themselves. But all of this was worldly to the core. Did his readers not realize, James asks, that *friendship with the world is enmity with God*? Did they not know that **whoever...wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God**?

Often in the NT the term *world* (*kosmos*) is used of a system or entity that is hostile to God and is manipulated by Satan (e.g., 1 Cor 1:20-21; 2:12; Gal 6:14; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 John 2:15-17; 3:1; 5:19). Materialism, immorality, and spiritual blindness are all components of this wicked

entity and are in sharp conflict with God's interests and purposes on earth. James is insistent here (as is John in 1 John 2:15-17) that one cannot be on good terms with both God and the world. One must choose the side he is really on, and when one opts for *friendship with the world*, he automatically opts for *enmity with God*. He has chosen the status of an antagonist toward his Maker and Redeemer. This is just like when a married man decides to engage in immorality with a woman to whom he is not married. In that very decision he chooses to reject fidelity to his wife. Thus in their craving for worldly acceptance and standing, James's Christian readers are committing spiritual adultery and renouncing friendship with their Lord. It may have surprised many of them to hear it put this way, but James's aim is to wake them up to the sad depth to which their spirituality and devotion had sunk.

4:5. And James also wants them to realize that God does not accept such infidelity with indifference. Thus he reminds them that it is not **in vain** that **the Scripture says** God's Spirit is jealous over believers. This is surely the meaning of this text although no single Scripture contains exactly the words used here by James. Nevertheless the truth that God is a *jealous* God is well known from Scripture (e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:14). Therefore the quotation marks in the NKJV (NT Greek had no such indicators) could be dispensed with, and James's words here could be treated as a paraphrase of biblical truth couched in terms appropriate to the NT. On the other hand, the absence from the Greek text of a word like *hoti* ("that") after the word *says* leaves the impression that James is indeed quoting. In that case, the source of the quotation is unknown and might possibly be a Christian hymn or prophecy. But it would still be true that the words paraphrase what Scripture teaches and are thus quite correctly designated as something that *Scripture says*.

The OT truth that God is a jealous God is here combined with the NT truth that His "**Spirit...dwells in us.**" But since the Holy Spirit is God, what can be said of God can also be said of the *Spirit*. If God is jealous, His Spirit is jealous. James is affirming that God's indwelling Spirit "**yearns jealously**" over the affections of his readers. He is, therefore, grieved by their pursuit of *friendship with the world*. The readers, James thinks, ought to take this most seriously, for the Scripture does not say such a thing *in vain* (lightly). In fact, the words *in vain*, coupled with the strong assertion about God's Spirit, hint at

the possibility of some kind of retribution if the Spirit's yearning over them is ignored.

2. Wrath is cured by humility (4:6–5:6)

4:6. Although James has hinted at possible retribution for his readers' deplorable conduct (see v 5), he chooses not to dwell on this aspect of things. Instead, he affirms that the God whose jealousy they had aroused by desiring *friendship with the world*, was nevertheless strongly inclined to be gracious. **He gives more grace** affirms this emphatically. God never runs out of grace—He never exhausts His supply—He always has *more grace* to give. This is surely an appropriate conclusion for this author who had lived under the same roof with the Lord (John 1:14).

In view of the inexhaustible availability of divine grace, James urges his readers to position themselves to receive it. In doing this he quotes Prov 3:34 in the form in which that verse appeared in the Greek OT (Septuagint). If his readers remain arrogantly "proud," God will *resist* them. Here again the hint of trouble is present. But the main point is that God "gives grace to the humble." Divine favor (*grace*) will therefore be available to his readers if they recover the necessary attitude of humility. The rivalries and conflicts that were crippling their churches (4:1-3) were manifest expressions of pride. This spirit needed to be decisively laid aside.

4:7. What follows at this point is an unmistakable call to repentance. His readers should begin with submission **to God**, that is, with a determination to do what was right and pleasing to Him. Satan would test such resolve. Thus they should also **resist the devil** (just as Jesus did in His temptation) and they should expect victory over this enemy: **he will flee from you**. As great as are the powers of seduction employed by Satan, he is not invincible. A Christian firmly committed to God and the authority of His Word can rely on the help of the Spirit who dwells in him and expect Satan to end his assaults and *flee* when he meets this kind of resistance.

4:8. But it was not enough simply to reassert one's commitment to obedience and to resisting temptation. Repentance needs to have a personal dimension in which a Christian's fractured fellowship with God is renewed. Therefore James enjoins his readership to **draw near to God**, knowing that such action will be reciprocated: **and He will draw near to you**. Of course, as the Apostle John makes clear (1 John 1:9), confession of sin is the first step in drawing near to God again.

But renewed prayer and meditation on Scripture are also appropriate steps. God will respond to such steps, not only with forgiveness, but with other tokens of His nearness. He is always more eager to bridge the gap between believers and Him than they are. Restored closeness, therefore, between God and James's readers is precisely what James is aiming at here. God would meet them more than halfway.

As gracious as the invitation to *draw near to God* is, however, it could not be done apart from candid and painful renunciation of sin. When even dedicated Christians get into the Lord's presence, their wretched condition becomes acutely painful to them (see Isa 6:1-5; Rev 1:17). James's readers could hardly expect to genuinely *draw near* to God without similar feelings. Thus they are now exhorted to **cleanse** [their] **hands** from sin and to **purify** [their] **hearts** from their **double-minded** mentality. They must put away any evil thing their hands were doing. Also, they must renounce the split loyalties they had, which drew them aside to worldly concerns.

4:9. If this was done with discernment and with a depth of commitment, it would be natural for them to **lament and mourn and weep**. Whatever exuberance they feel should be transformed into **mourning**, and whatever delight they are experiencing must be replaced by **gloom**. This does not mean, of course, that **laughter** and **joy** are wrong. On the contrary, both are beneficial to human experience (see, e.g., Ps 126:2; Prov 17:22). However, when an individual is dealing with personal sins in the presence of God, *laughter* and *joy* are inappropriate, and such levity suggests a conspicuous lack of seriousness in the repentance. But when a person's heart is moved by the depths of his wickedness in the sight of God, the responses enjoined here would seem not merely natural but also compellingly spontaneous.

The sins of which the readers needed to repent (4:1-3) fully justified the demands James makes in this verse. As in all Christian repentance, the goal was a definitive renunciation of their grievous faults. A glib and superficial repentance of sins makes the repetition of the same offenses much more likely.

4:10. The objective, therefore, was a genuine humbling of themselves **in the sight of the Lord**. If they did this properly, God would someday **lift** [them] **up**. The Greek verb translated *lift...up* is *hypsōsei* and signifies "exaltation." If the readers would now bring themselves low by repentance, God would someday "exalt" them. Whether this

ever took place in this life or not, God would certainly repay their “humiliation” with an “exaltation” of His own time and choosing.

4:11. Specifically, they are not to **speak evil of one another**. In congregations with the problems James has focused on (4:1-3), there could be no cessation of conflict unless there is a cessation of critical and condemning speech about others. The verb translated *speak evil* (*katalaleite*) is broad enough to cover any kind of negative talk that is harmful to the best interests of a Christian brother or sister, regardless of whether the subject matter was true or false.

Such speech, of course, was also a negative judgment on the character or behavior of that fellow Christian. So James charges that the person **who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother** was at the very same moment a person who **speaks evil of the law, and judges the law**. Here James is probably thinking once again of *the royal law* of Scripture (see 2:8) which, in Lev 19:16-18, is preceded by a warning “not to go about as a talebearer among your people” (v 16). People who tell others about the faults and failings of another Christian are clearly violating the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” But in flouting this command by their criticisms of others, they are in effect criticizing and condemning *the royal law* itself. Since all such speech is forbidden by this law, the one who disobeys it is virtually saying, “This law is unworthy of my obedience and I judge it to be invalid for me in this case.” No doubt James’s readers might be surprised by this concept, but nonetheless this was true of any and all lawbreaking. The lawbreaker was passing his own negative judgment on whatever command he disobeyed.

Such behavior was anything but humble (see v 10). Anyone who took a stance which, by its very nature, passed judgment on God’s law, was placing himself *above* that law. But in that case, James says, **you are not a doer of the law but a judge**. That is, such a person has left his proper role of humble submission to *the law* and has exalted himself to the role of *a judge*. The arrogance of this, however unwittingly done, is obvious.

4:12. But no mere human being could fill such a role, since **there is** [but] **one Lawgiver**. God alone has power **to save and to destroy**, that is, to preserve or take away life. The verbs used here (*sōsai* and *apolesai*) were both used commonly in secular Greek in reference to physical life or physical death. There is no reason to read the doctrine of eternal salvation into them here. God is certainly the only One who determines one’s eternal destiny, but this determination

is already made: believers are already free from final judgment and condemnation (John 3:18; 5:24). But here a reference to this truth is not as natural as a reference to physical life or death (as also in Jas 1:21; 2:14; 5:15, 20). The idea will then be that though a Christian may condemn another believer verbally, God alone determines whether to “save” them from sin’s penalty of death (1:15; 5:20) or whether to destroy their lives as an act of chastening (cf. Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor 11:30).

James’s bottom line, then, is sharp and to the point: **Who are you to judge another?** If the readers’ repentance (Jas 4:7-10) is to be real, they must be humble enough to perceive their unworthiness to pass judgment on a fellow Christian. Anything else was only the fruit of arrogant self-exaltation.

4:13-14. With attention-catching abruptness James denounces those who brag about their business plans with total disregard for the transient nature of their lives. The NKJV phrase “**today or tomorrow**” is read by the majority of the Greek manuscripts of James as *today and tomorrow*, and this is to be preferred. These boasters are full of self-confidence in their long-range planning. They are going to a specific city (“**such and such a city**”) and their journey will take them two days (*today and tomorrow*). Their plans call for “**a year**” of business activity there, from which they expect to “**make a profit.**” Yet, as James points out, these braggarts do not even **know what** will happen **tomorrow** (cf. Prov 27:1). They have plotted out a year’s program without knowing what *tomorrow* itself may bring. Anything could take place tomorrow to frustrate their intentions. They may not even be alive tomorrow, since their lives are nothing more than a **vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.**

4:15. In place of being so proudly confident about their plans, they ought to recognize God’s sovereign control over their business operations and even over their lifespan. What they ought **to say**, if they are truly humble, is that their lives (“**we shall live**”) and their activities (“**do this or that**”) are subject to God’s will. The words “**if the Lord wills**” would have been most suitable on their lips, not as a mere formula, but as a genuine expression of their dependence on God.

4:16. But instead of this humility, the readers actually **boast in** [their] **arrogance.** This expression, however, is not altogether clear as rendered in the NKJV. The Greek phrase *kauchasthe en tais alazoneiais hymōn* is actually better handled by the KJV as “ye rejoice in your boastings.” It could perhaps also read, “You glory in your proud pretensions.” James’s point is that the self-confident words he has just

condemned (vv 13-14) are more than a lapse in their awareness of God's sovereignty. Rather, such pretentious plans are themselves a source of pride to those who announce them. That is, they love putting these "pretensions" (*alazoneiais*) on display in order to attract the admiration of other people. Viewed in that light **such boasting is evil**.

How often it happens in the church that people love to lay their plans (regarding business or anything else) before others to elicit respect, admiration, and deference from them. Even a missionary or a preacher may fall into the trap of setting forth his plans for serving God as a way of obtaining honor from his fellow Christians. James's words here are a timeless reminder that *all such boasting is evil*.

4:17. So if James's readers know the proper way to act and speak, they should do so. For if they do not do so, their failure is itself a sin. If they know that they should acknowledge their dependence on God's will when speaking about their plans, they should start at once to act on that knowledge, since **to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin**. Sin therefore can occur not merely as a wrong act, but also as a right act that remains undone. Accordingly, believers ought not omit from their conversation the recognition that their lives and all their activities are as fragile as a wisp of smoke. They must acknowledge that God alone can enable them to do whatever they hope, or plan, to do.

5:1. In light of the materialism and favoritism James has addressed, he now provides a solid and emphatic reminder of the transience of all human wealth. To remind them of this he virtually dons the mantle of a prophet and speaks in terms reminiscent of OT prophecy. (See Joel 1:5, 13; Isa 13:6; 14:31; 15:3; Jer 4:8, where James's word for **howl** [*ololyzontes*] occurs in the LXX, the Greek translation of these passages.) His pronouncements are obviously no longer addressed to the Christian community alone, even though the epistle was intended to be read by that community. Yet his words are designed to awaken his readers by means of a crisp announcement about the eschatological doom of all human wealth.

Looking outward at the world, then, James in prophet-like fashion announces **miseries** for the rich, which ought to bring them to tears and lamentation.

5:2-3. The sorrow appropriate to the rich is now traced to the ultimate doom of all human wealth. As is often true in prophetic pronouncements, a judgment yet future is presented as a *fait accompli*

(already accomplished), and James sees human **riches** as already **corrupted**, costly **garments** as already **moth-eaten**, and earthly **gold and silver** as already **corroded**. But then, he surprisingly adds, **their corrosion...will eat your flesh like fire**. While James is likely referring to the eschatological judgment on human wealth at the end of the Tribulation (cf. Zech 14:12-15), he wants the rich brethren to recognize that whether they see the last days or not, all their wealth will burn. Therefore they should not be materialistic or greedy, and must refrain from showing favoritism. The accumulation of useless wealth will stand as a *witness against* the rich of the world since they are so foolish as to have **heaped up treasure in the last days**.

5:4. Justice will thus overtake unscrupulous wealthy men of this world. Throughout history, and not only in James's day, men of wealth have often been guilty of holding back **the wages of the laborers who mowed their fields**. This does not mean they did not pay them, but rather that they fraudulently paid them less than was right. These *wages* are here personified by James as accusers of the rich who **cry out** to God for vengeance. Moreover, these cries are heard (and will be avenged) by **the Lord of Sabaoth**, that is, by "the Lord of Hosts" (Armies). Here too the reference to the Second Advent seems plain, since Jesus will return to execute judgment, riding at the head of the heavenly *armies* (Rev 19:14).

5:5-6. In ancient times it was apparently customary for men of wealth to hold a feast when they sheared their sheep and slaughtered some of them to provide meat for their festive table (see 1 Sam 25:4-8; cf. Ps 44:22; Jer 12:3). The behavior of rich men, says James, has been like that. They **have lived...in pleasure and luxury** fattening their own **hearts as in a day of slaughter**. The metaphor is vivid. Rich men are portrayed as enjoying a continual feast day, bloating their own hearts with the delights and enjoyments which are theirs in abundance. (Compare the rich man of Luke 16:19, who "fared sumptuously every day.") Tragically, however, their *day of slaughter* was not confined to the killing of sheep. They also had *other* victims: **you have condemned, you have murdered the just [man]; he does not resist you**.

The hands of the rich, therefore, were stained with fraud (Jas 5:4) and murder (v 6). Righteous men, who did not resist injustice, had perished in persecutions instigated by people of wealth (see 2:6-7). The guilt of the rich is enormous. Strikingly, James's prophetic oracle abruptly halts on this note of condemnation. The rhetorical impact of

this sudden conclusion, however, is effective. It is as though James is pointing to the murder of just men as the final and climactic charge against the rich, which justifies everything he has foreseen for them by way of ultimate catastrophe.

Hopefully, after this dramatic denunciation of human wealth and of the wealthy, James's readers will take a lower view of the value of material things.

V. Epilogue: Persevere In Trials to the End (5:7-20)

A. Perseverance Will Be Properly Rewarded (5:7-11)

5:7. James's prophetic oracle (5:1-6), though a part of the body of the epistle, nevertheless sets the stage for his conclusion. Prophecy can be used not only to wean his readers from worldly wealth, but also to encourage them to hold out to the end, whatever trials they currently may be enduring. They need therefore to **be patient...until the coming of the Lord**. Troubles can often heighten one's anticipation of Christ's return, but if believers view His return only in terms of their own pressing situations, they will be tempted to be impatient instead of *patient*.

In the agricultural society of Palestine in James's day, **the early and latter rain** were well known (i.e., after sowing: late autumn; before harvest: early spring). So **the farmer** who waited patiently for the seasonal rains that were crucial to the production of **the precious fruit of the earth** could be taken by James's Palestinian readers as a model of patience. But since the harvest image is deeply embedded in NT eschatology (e.g., Matt 13:39), there is probably also a reference here to the Lord as the divine Farmer who waits patiently for the consummation of all things.

5:8. In any case, whether one thinks of the human farmer or the divine One, James's readers can find grounds to **also be patient and establish their hearts**, since **the coming of the Lord is at hand**. In affirming this fact, however, James (like other NT writers) has been thought to be mistaken. How, it is asked, can *the coming of the Lord* have been *at hand* in James's day when almost two thousand years have passed without it having taken place? (Of course, this objection is already countered by Peter in 2 Pet 3:3-9.) There are a number of answers to this objection which arises from unbelief, but the one that is most suitable in this context is this: the coming of the Lord is *always at hand* (*ēngike*, "has drawn near") precisely because believers are not separated from it by any known event at all (see next verse).

Throughout the entirety of more than twenty centuries it has always had this character so that a believer could well say, "It may be today." Anything that *must* happen, and *could* happen *today*, is in a very legitimate sense *at hand*. Thus the readers can use this knowledge as a means of settling down and holding out, that is, they can *establish* their *hearts*.

5:9. If their hearts are indeed established in this expectation, the readers will not **grumble against one another**. The word *grumble* translates a word (*stenazete*) which signifies "to groan" or "to sigh." In view of the *wars and fights* that James had earlier reprovved (4:1-3), this verb sounds relatively mild by comparison. James graciously assumes that his call to repentance (4:7-12) will be heeded, and that the churches will enjoy greater internal harmony and peace. However, realism called for him to caution against even the most subdued complaints of Christians against one another. Even if it was only a "groan" or a "sigh," they should avoid it, since the Lord's coming could take place at any time.

This sense of the imminency of the Savior's return is captured in the striking metaphor, **Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!** The readers are thereby likened to a group of litigants, or defendants, standing within a courtroom. Total silence is required out of respect for the judge who is just outside the courtroom door and about to step inside to take his place on the judgment seat. Like a Roman lictor announcing a judge's impending entry, as it were, James cries "Quiet!" His Christian readers must fully silence their complaints against each other in the realization that their Lord and Judge can at any moment appear and sit down on the Bēma (Judgment Seat) in order to assess their lives (cf. 2:12-13; see also Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10). They must therefore be careful that He does not find them nurturing a complaining spirit against their fellow believers (cf. Rom 14:12-13a).

5:10. Do the readers need any additional reasons for patiently holding out to the end? If so, they can **take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord** as their models. James makes a smooth transition from an admonition based on *prophecy* (the Rapture, vv 7-9) to an admonition based on *the prophets themselves*. Servants of the Lord like Daniel and Jeremiah, knew something about **suffering and patience**.

The word translated *suffering* (*kakopatheias*) carries overtones of endurance under hardship or suffering. Thus it differs somewhat

from *patience* (*makrothymias*), which signifies control of one's temper or emotions, that is, having what is popularly called a "long (*makro-*) fuse." The readers have been told to "be patient (*makrothumēsate*)... until the coming of the Lord" (vv 7-8) and to control their temper toward each other (v 9). The prophets of old exhibited this trait of self-control while they bore up under many serious trials.

5:11. But despite their sufferings, James is saying, believers look back at the prophets with admiration and respect for their endurance. **Indeed**, they take the same attitude toward all who bear up well under testing: **we count them blessed who endure**. The readers could certainly say this about Job, for example, whose **perseverance** (*hypomonē*, "endurance") under trial was justly celebrated among those who honored the OT. The readers had also **seen** (in the well-known biblical story) **the end** intended by **the Lord**. The reference in the word *end* is clearly to the conclusion of the Book of Job, where it is stated that "the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12). Since Job ended his days with much more than he started with, the readers could see for themselves **that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful**.

The implication of this, surely, is that the readers may expect to be "compensated" for whatever they endured (or lost) under the trials God sent their way—provided, of course, that they acquitted themselves well as did Job and the prophets. But the general language James uses simply states that God is truly *compassionate and merciful* toward those who endure well. The readers would have no grounds for saying that their compensation must be made in material terms, as was Job's. Rather, the spiritual benefits of trials are likely to be uppermost in James's mind (cf. 1:1-12). However, in a context that so strongly points toward the coming of the Judge (vv 7-10), it is natural to think that James also has in mind the rewards that will be dispensed at the Judgment Seat of Christ (see 1 Cor 3:14; 2 Cor 5:10). Suffice it to say, James believed strongly that endurance under trial would be amply rewarded by a *compassionate and merciful* Lord.

B. Perseverance Can Be Undergirded by Prayer (5:12-20)

The content of 5:7-11 is tightly knit by James into a broad, general call to endure patiently until the Lord returns. Now in the concluding segment of his epistle James gives some specific practical advice related to the readers' need to endure. As was true with the three admonitions of 1:19, so it is here.

5:12. First, he wants them to avoid oaths. **Above all** (*pro pantōn*) is for emphasis, not to elevate this command above every other. It is precisely when people are under stress (trials) that they are inclined to use language that is inappropriate, like swearing an oath. Oaths taken to establish one's veracity in communication with others implies that one's normal affirmations are inadequate. The readers therefore should abstain from this kind of oath-taking. They should **not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath**, as also the Lord Himself had taught (Matt 5:34). Instead, they should be people of their word, whose simple affirmations and denials, "**Yes**" and "**No**," were sufficient, requiring no further validation such as an oath might appear to give.

The NKJV at this point renders a Greek text that means **lest you fall into** (lit., "under") **judgment** (*hypo krisin*). But it is very likely that the few old manuscripts that contain this text reflect an ancient scribal error in which the tiny Greek word *eis* ("into") has dropped out. This would leave only *hypokrisin* (hypocrisy) which editors now divide into *hypo krisin* ("under judgment"). A sizable majority of the Greek manuscripts of James include *eis* so that the text should read, "lest you fall into hypocrisy" (*eis hypokrisin*).

The oath-taker falls too easily into hypocrisy since it gives him the opportunity to tell lies under cover of a solemn claim to truthfulness. Peter had fallen into precisely this kind of hypocrisy in his denials of the Lord. James's wisdom amounts to this: a believer should never need to use an oath to prove that "this time I really mean it!" Instead he should always "really mean it." In this way he can avoid the trap of oath-taking, which easily allows him to plunge into hypocritical communication.

5:13. Calmness and appropriate behavior, even under stress, are what James is really seeking here. A rash oath is a poor response to any situation. But suppose someone is really **suffering**? In that case prayer is in order. And what if someone is **cheerful**? In that case praise is in order. The word rendered **let him sing psalms** (*psalletō*) probably has the more general sense, "let him sing praise," although it is likely enough that in the early church such songs were often built on the psalms of the OT Scripture.

5:14-15. In a more specific sense what if the suffering person (mentioned in v 13) is experiencing sickness? Prayer is certainly in order (v 13), but in this case a special kind of prayer is accessible to the **sick** person. The *sick* person could **call for the elders of the church**.

These men would then come and, after **anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord**, they would **pray over him**. (The Greek grammar is most naturally understood as implying that the *anointing* precedes the prayer.) Where God granted any, or all, of these men to pray a **prayer of faith**, that prayer would **save the sick** person from dying and **the Lord** would **raise him up**.

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 might be, in any given case, that the elders would not be at all sure whether recovery would be for the best. 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.

Since this anointing was to be done *in the name of the Lord*, at the very least we might take it to signify dependence on God's *sovereignty* over the healing process. It was the sovereign *Lord* who alone could *raise* the sick person *up*. This agrees with the fact that much of the anointing with oil that occurs in the OT points to God's sovereignty in choosing a person for some role (whether as prophet, priest, or king).

There is the possibility, however, that the *anointing* James refers to was a popular medicinal practice of the day (cf. Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34). Anointing with oil was a household remedy for those who were sick or ill. If this is what James is referring to, the elders pray over the one who is sick after administering medicine to him.

James then observes that in cases where sin has occurred, forgiveness as well as healing can take place. But it is precisely the words **if he has committed sins** that serve as a necessary caution. Not all sickness is the result of sin (as some teach), but some of it is (cf. 1 Cor 11:30). The fact that someone calls for the church elders suggests that he or she is prepared to deal with any underlying sin that may have been committed. Obviously, *the elders* should make appropriate inquiries about this, unless the situation is so clear as to render inquiry unnecessary. This makes it even more plain that it may not be prudent for these church leaders to initiate the procedure James describes. If the *sick* person himself has not called them, it may well be because he has sin in his life which he is not ready to confront.

5:16. However, all of James's readers should be prepared for that open and honest confession of sin which was a necessary prelude to

healing (**that you may be healed**). But the command to **confess your trespasses to one another** is still based within James's discussion of sickness and should not be stretched into a general admonition. There is no Biblical command to publicly confess all our known sins. Confession to God is necessary in regard to any sin one is aware of, and should be made in conformity with 1 John 1:9. But only here in Scripture is there a command to make confession **to one another** and this lies fully within the parameters of the need for prayer by the elders and fellow Christians (**pray for one another**) that God will make the sick person well.

It seems apparent that James was not thinking in vv 14-15 of instantaneous healing after the elders have prayed. Rather, he is thinking of collective prayer, both by the elders and the congregation, and he is thinking of ultimate, rather than immediate, recovery. But if the sick person has reason to believe that God's hand of discipline is on him, he should be prepared to acknowledge his failures openly so as to clear the path for effective prayer.

Prayer *can* work wonders! Not, however, if it comes from an unrighteous heart, or if it is shallow, glib, and superficial. Rather, it **avails much** when it is an **effective, fervent prayer** expressed by a **righteous man**. The words *effective, fervent* both translate a single Greek verb form (*energoumenē*) which is difficult to render precisely in English. The familiar English words used by the NKJV are on target, but since the verb "energize" is from the Greek verb in question, James's statement might be paraphrased as "a spiritually energetic prayer" or "a prayer energized by God." The point is that such prayer is more deeply at work than prayers that are verbalized in a casual or perfunctory state of mind. James is speaking of prayer that is Spirit-wrought and that comes from the heart and soul. Such prayer can be offered only by a *righteous man*, so that James implies that if the sick man will indeed turn from any sins he has committed, he could even pray effectively for himself. In fact, this is precisely what righteous King Hezekiah did in a time of near-fatal illness (2 Kgs 20:2-6), though his sickness was not related to sin so far as is known.

5:17. As a classic illustration of "the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man," James now recalls **Elijah**, [who] **was a man with a nature like ours**. If his readers were tempted to think that *Elijah* was a kind of spiritual superman whose prayer life could never be reproduced, they were wrong. *Elijah* was as human as anyone, yet his prayer shut up the heavens **for three years and six months**. In saying

that *Elijah...prayed earnestly*, James uses a phrase that had its roots in a Hebrew idiom. The Greek words (*proseuchē prosēuchato*) mean literally “he prayed with prayer,” but they might be paraphrased “he really prayed.” The reference, as the NKJV suggests, is to the previously mentioned concept of an “effectual, fervent prayer” (v 16). James’s expression here is a way of saying that it was precisely such a prayer that *Elijah* prayed. Its results spoke for themselves.

5:18. Nor was this a totally isolated experience of prayer for this *righteous man*. Rather, **he prayed again** and his prayer affected both **heaven**, which **gave rain**, and **earth**, which **produced its fruit**. So James is suggesting that his Christian readers, likewise, can accomplish much (see *avails much* in v 16) if they are righteous people who pray earnestly.

James has passed beyond the subject of sickness, which had launched his discussion of prayer (v 16). The healing of physical ailments was only one of the possible results of effectual prayer. As everyone who remembered the story of *Elijah* knew, the prayers of this prophet were instruments God used in connection with His call for repentance by His people Israel (1 Kings 18). The prayer that shut up heaven placed Israel under God’s discipline, while the prayer that opened it again brought God’s blessing. But this was only after the nation had repented and turned from the worship of Baal. Thus *Elijah* had turned a whole nation from the error of its way (v 20). Similar opportunities awaited the prayers James’s readers could pray as well.

5:19. This truth is now made clear in the closing statement of the epistle (vv 19-20). This statement definitely must not be read in isolation from the previous discussion about prayer. James has already disclosed the fact that there could be sick people among the churches he is addressing who were guilty of sin, and that their need could be met through prayer. But there could also be others who might go spiritually astray, who might not be physically sick at all. James clearly accepts the fact that this need exists, and that sin, unfortunately, is a fact of Christian life. So, he suggests, **if anyone among you wanders from the truth**, any of his readers could become the person who **turns him back**, as *Elijah* did for Israel. It need hardly be stated by James that this could not be done without prayer. *Elijah* was the obvious model for such restorative endeavors.

5:20. And these endeavors were well worthwhile. In fact, anyone **who turns a sinner from the error of his way** (*hodos*, “road”) is in

reality turning him aside from a sinful path that can lead him to his physical death (see 1:15). Thus a Christian's efforts for the restoration of his brother to the pathway of obedience are life-saving in scope. If successful, he **will save a soul** (*psychē*, "life," "person") **from death**. But he will do more than that, since a restored sinner receives the gracious forgiveness of God. Thus the many sins created and multiplied by a man who turns away from God are all removed from view when that man turns back to God. The word rendered **cover** here (*kalypsei*) means "conceal." The restored sinner's **multitude of sins** are now out of sight through the pardon he has received. And the loving brother who turns him back is credited not only with the preservation of his fellow Christian's life, but also with making him clean, as if his efforts have removed from view all the unsightly moral disfigurements which sin creates, (though, of course, only the Lord actually cleanses anyone). Thanks to such personal involvement, the formerly erring Christian is both physically alive and spiritually clean.

And here the epistle ends. But in no sense is this ending flat or anticlimactic. On the contrary, in his impressive conclusion (5:7-20), James has carried his readers all the way from a state of grumbling against each other (v 9), to a loving mutual concern for one another's physical needs (see v 16), to the highest point of all: concern about a brother's sin (vv 19-20). When believers have reached this plateau, they have indeed surmounted their self-centered concern for their own trials and testings. They now have their eyes focused on the spiritual needs of their brothers and sisters, their hearts are lifted in prayer for them, and their hands are outstretched to draw them back onto the right road.

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