



GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY

James as Wisdom Literature

SALVATION FROM
LIFE'S TRIALS

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*James as Wisdom Literature:
Salvation from Life's Trial*

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Excerpt from Shawn Lazar, *Beyond Doubt:
How to Be Sure of Your Salvation*

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THE ERROR OF READING JAMES EVANGELISTICALLY

“SURE, SURE, WE both agree we’re saved by faith apart from works,” the pastor assured me. “But obviously, faith without works *is dead*.”

He was quoting James 2:17.

If you teach salvation by faith apart from works, someone will eventually quote from James, which is often interpreted to teach that you only gain eternal salvation by faith that works.

Consequently, I have met countless people who aren’t sure of their salvation because while they say they believe, they aren’t sure if they have the right kind of faith—whether their faith is alive or dead.

Do you, too, wonder about that?

Are you doubting your salvation because you aren’t sure if you have the right kind of faith?

If so, the best solution is to get a better grasp of what James actually meant.

BIBLICAL WISDOM

People often read James as if it were an evangelistic tract concerned with telling you the condition for *eternal salvation*, when it is really Wisdom Literature concerned with telling you the conditions for *earthly salvation*.

In other words, they read James alongside John’s Gospel or Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Romans, when they should be reading it alongside Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or the Sermon on the Mount.

You might say that most people are forcing James to sing in the wrong key—they've got him singing about how to get to heaven, when he's really singing about how to live on earth.

The Epistle of James is Wisdom Literature. I'm hardly the first person to recognize that.¹ Wisdom books are concerned with earthly salvation. They are not meant to tell you how to be born-again, but how to live well *in this life*, after you are born-again.

How can you prosper?

How can you have a good marriage, a good family life, and live well with others?

How can you avoid suffering the bad consequences of sin?

How can you avoid an early death?

How can you avoid wasting your earthly life?

Those are the concerns of Wisdom Literature, and those are James's concerns as well.

As he tells us in the opening verses, James is concerned that his readers know how to deal with *earthly trials*.

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials (James 1:2).

That sets the theme for the rest of the book. James is not writing evangelistically to unbelievers hoping they'll come to faith in Christ for the first time. Rather, he's writing to believers (his "brethren") hoping that earthly trials will help them mature:

Knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.
But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:3-4).

James wants his believing readers to be complete in their Christian character and to lack nothing in their walk with the Lord on this earth.

And what do we need for that?

Wisdom.

But where does wisdom come from? According to Wisdom Literature, God gives it.

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6).

Likewise, according to James, when you face the trials of life, you need to ask God for wisdom:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

When you read James alongside other Wisdom books, you can't help but see the many parallels. Both are concerned with wisdom for practical living.

SIN IS DEADLY

One of the major concerns of Wisdom Literature is with the deadly consequences of sin.

To be clear, by "deadly" I mean *physical death* in the here and now, not *eternal death* in the hereafter.

And according to Wisdom books, it is proverbially true that while a godly life will be long and prosperous, an ungodly life will result in an early death. In other words, sin can literally get you killed.

For example, I remember my wife and I lived in a bad neighborhood in Baton Rouge, where hearing gunfire outside our window was a regular occurrence. When we asked our landlady about it, she said, "That's just the drug dealers killing each other. You've nothing to worry about." We moved to Texas shortly after!

Those dead drug dealers, most of whom were young men, illustrate that sin can have deadly consequences in this life. Just open up any newspaper and you'll read about angry husbands killing their cheating wives, celebrities dying of drug overdoses, thieves getting shot by store clerks, gang violence, abortion, and suicide bombings.

And that isn't counting all the private mental sins that eat us up inside, affecting our mental health, emotional health, and even physical health. "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away," David warned (Psalm 32:3a, NASB).

Who can doubt that sin is deadly?

Hence, Wisdom Literature is meant to lead the wise away from the deadly consequences of sin, so they can enjoy a full and satisfying life here on earth, as God intended.

For example, here is what Proverbs has to say:

My son, don't forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commands; for they will bring you many days, a full life, and well-being (Proverbs 3:1-2, HCSB).

Listen, my son. Accept my words, and you will live many years (Proverbs 4:10, HCSB).

For through wisdom your days will be many, and years will be added to your life (Proverbs 9:11, NIV).

By contrast, if you ignore wisdom and live in sin, you will suffer its deadly consequences:

The fear of the Lord prolongs days, but the years of the wicked will be shortened (Proverbs 10:27).

As righteousness leads to life, so he who pursues evil pursues it to his own death (Proverbs 11:19).

There is life in the path of righteousness, but another path leads to death (Proverbs 12:28, HCSB).

Likewise, James is also concerned about living wisely to avoid an early death:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, *brings forth death* (James 1:14-15, emphasis added).

In fact, Proverbs says that a wise man will turn others from their sins so they can avoid an early physical death:

A wise man's instruction is a fountain of life, turning people away from the snares of death (Proverbs 13:14, HCSB).

It should come as no surprise that James has the same concern. Believers should turn others from their sins, so they won't die:

Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:20, NASB).

James is Wisdom Literature. It deals with *earthly salvation*, not with *eternal salvation*. The epistle's focus is on teaching believers to put their faith into practice, and not on explaining to unbelievers the conditions for having eternal life.

SHARED THEMES

There are many shared themes between James and other Wisdom books. Here are just a few more examples to convince you that James should not be read as an evangelistic tract, but as a book concerned with practical living.

For example, both James and Wisdom Literature are concerned about employers paying fair wages to laborers:

“You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning” (Leviticus 19:13).

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty (James 5:4, NIV).

I've read many evangelistic tracts, and none of them have ever mentioned paying workers in a timely manner. But that is exactly the kind of thing that Wisdom Literature is concerned about.

Both James and Wisdom Literature advise thinking before you speak:

The mind of the righteous person thinks before answering, but the mouth of the wicked blurts out evil things (Proverbs 15:28, HCSB).

But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19b, NASB).

In fact, there is a great emphasis on controlling our tongues in general:

Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles (Proverbs 21:23; cf. 10:19; 12:13).

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell (James 3:6).

Both James and Wisdom Literature have an obvious concern for helping the poor:

She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy (Proverbs 31:20).

If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? (James 2:15-16).

And they both warn against speaking evil of our neighbors:

He who is devoid of wisdom despises his neighbor; but a man of understanding holds his peace (Proverbs 11:12).

Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge (James 4:11).

Confessing your sins to one another is also important:

He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy (Proverbs 28:13).

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16).

Do I need to go on? Is it clear to you that James is Wisdom Literature?

None of these themes make sense if James were an evangelistic tract telling unbelievers the condition of eternal salvation. But they make perfect sense if he was instructing believers how to live wisely.

As I mentioned above, I'm not the first person to recognize that James is Christian Wisdom Literature. In fact, I would say that is the near consensus among scholars, across denominational lines. But unlike many, I have tried to take that insight very seriously, by trying to re-read the famous problem passages about faith and works in light of the Wisdom tradition. Typically, those passages have been read as if they were evangelistic statements. But if James is Wisdom Literature, how does that change their meaning?

DEAD FAITH?

Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (James 2:17, NASB).

When some interpreters read James as an evangelistic tract, they think James 2:17 means that if you don't have works, *you don't really believe*, and if you don't really believe, you'll go to hell.

The problem is, that interpretation clearly contradicts Paul's and John's emphasis that the *only* condition of salvation is to *believe in Jesus*—works are excluded as a condition of eternal salvation (e.g., John 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:29; Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20; Ephesians 2:8-9).

But when you approach James as Wisdom Literature—concerned with earthly salvation—this verse makes perfect sense, and doesn't contradict Paul and John at all.

When James talks about "dead faith," he isn't talking about a faith that *doesn't really exist*. He's saying that faith without works is *useless* when confronting the trials of life. "It's as useless as a dead dog," as we say in Texas (cf. 2 Samuel 16:9, CEV). In fact, that's how James 2:20 puts it, "But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"

It is easy to see why this would be of concern for Wisdom Literature.

For example, faith without works is useless for helping people who are “without clothing and in need of daily food” (James 2:15, NASB). If you want to deliver someone from hunger, you need to do more than believe—you must put your faith into action and actually feed him!

Faith alone doesn’t make a sandwich for the hungry.

Faith alone doesn’t change diapers on a crying baby.

Faith alone doesn’t help a friend fill out job applications.

Faith alone doesn’t pay the bills, comfort those in mourning, or lend a helping hand when a friend moves.

If you want to face those practical problems—James’s trials of life—you need more than faith alone, but faith that works. As James says elsewhere,

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves (James 1:22, NASB).

Just do it. You might say that’s what Wisdom Literature is all about.

CAN FAITH SAVE HIM?

The second problem passage builds on the first.

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? (James 2:14).

This is a rhetorical question. James expects the answer to be, “No, it can’t save him.” The big question here is, save him from what? What kind of salvation is in view here?

If you read James as an evangelistic tract, you’ll think, “Save him *from hell*.” Hence, you’ll think that James is teaching that faith without works cannot give you *eternal salvation*. However, that interpretation has absolutely nothing to do with the context of the passage or with the overall message of the epistle.

But when you keep Wisdom Literature in mind, James’s meaning is obvious. The “profit” he is talking about is living well now, as a spiritually mature person. The salvation he is concerned about is with *earthly salvation*. Can faith without works save you from the deadly consequences of sin? Can it save you from the trials of life? Faith without works is useless. If you say you have faith, but don’t act

on it, you won't be saved from earthly trials and the deadly consequences of sin. In fact, if you act *against* your faith, and live foolishly and sinfully, you might die an early death.

DEMONIC FAITH

The third passage mentions that the demons are monotheists. For some reason, people who object to the faith-alone message use this passage to show that mere “intellectual faith” in Jesus is not enough to be saved. You need “heart faith,” they say, something the demons do not have.

It's a neat idea, but those ideas are literally not mentioned in the text. It's not at all what James was discussing. James wrote,

You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! (James 2:19).

This has nothing to do with intellectual faith vs heart faith. James is saying that while the demons are monotheists (i.e., they believe in one God), they haven't put even that limited faith into practice. Instead, they rebel against God. So their faith is useless.

By contrast, as James goes on to explain, Abraham did put his faith into practice when he obeyed God by agreeing to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac. Abraham had not always consistently obeyed God earlier in his life, but by obeying God's command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham proved that his faith was mature; he was vindicated:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only (James 2:21-24).

People who read James as an evangelistic tract immediately think that he is talking about the Pauline sense of justification, i.e., being forensically reckoned as righteous before God. But justification is also an important concept in Wisdom Literature, albeit with a different meaning. We see that in Jesus' own teaching:

“Wisdom is justified by her children” (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:35).

What kind of justification is this? Not the Pauline kind. Wisdom is not justified by her children in the sense of having righteousness imputed to her by faith in Christ. In Wisdom Literature, to be justified simply means *to be proved right*. Wisdom is proved right by the good consequences that follow from acting wisely. That’s the kind of justification that James is talking about in reference to Abraham—not forensic righteousness before God, but vindication before men. As Phil Stringer explained,

We are justified before men by our works (Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11-13). This is our testimony. We are justified by faith before God—this is our salvation (Romans 4:1-8).²

Or as Paul said,

If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, *but not before God* (Romans 4:2, emphasis added).

Paul admitted there was a justification by works, *but not before God*. Then before whom? Obviously, before *other people*.

Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his long-awaited, promised son, showed other people—including you and me—that he knew and believed God. In particular, Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac because he believed God could raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). We can see the good consequences of his faith, and recognize that Abraham’s faith in God was justified.

CONCLUSION

Is faith without works dead? Yes. It will be useless to you when you face the trials of life.

Can faith without works save you from earthly trials and dangers? No. If you want to grow and prosper and mature in your faith, you need to put God’s Word into practice.

Does that mean we are eternally saved by a mixture of faith and works? No, because James is not teaching about eternal salvation, but earthly salvation.

Does that mean we should redefine faith to include works? No again. Faith is one thing and works are another.

Have you been worried about your eternal salvation because you aren't sure if your faith is alive, or dead?

Well, now you know that James was talking about earthly salvation. I think an argument can be made that while you can be sure of your eternal salvation, you can't be sure of your earthly salvation.

Why not?

Because earthly salvation all depends on you. It all depends on how you're putting your faith into practice. And since your behavior isn't always consistent, and you have no idea how you'll act in the future, you'll probably lack assurance of earthly salvation. Not always, but sometimes.

By contrast, assurance of eternal salvation is not based on what you do, but based on simply believing Jesus' promise of eternal life (John 3:16). You can be sure of that salvation because it isn't based on what you've done, but on what Jesus has promised to do for believers.

It would be wise to believe Him.³

ENDNOTES

1. For example, here is a quote from some Catholic Bishops: "From the viewpoint of its literary form, James is a letter only in the most conventional sense; it has none of the characteristic features of a real letter except the address. It belongs rather to the genre of parenthesis or exhortation and is concerned almost exclusively with ethical conduct. It therefore falls within the tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, such as can be found in the Old Testament (Proverbs, Sirach) and in the extracanonical Jewish literature (Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Books of Enoch, the Manual of Discipline found at Qumran)." See <http://www.usccb.org/bible/james/0>. Accessed February 22, 2017. For other examples, see John A. Burns, "James, the Wisdom of Jesus," *Criswell Theological Review* 1.1 (1986) 113-135; Robert F. Chaffin, Jr., "The Theme of Wisdom in the Epistle of James," *Ashland Theological Journal* 29 (1997): 23-49; Gary Holloway, "James as New Testament Wisdom Literature," *Leaven*, Vol. 8 [2000], Iss. 2: 89-95.

2. Jim Scudder and Phil Stringer, *Evangelism Made Simple: How a Clear Presentation of the Gospel Can make Your Witnessing More Effective* (Lake Zurich, IL: Victory In Grace, 2016), 93.

3. Two commentaries that are very helpful for understanding James's concern with earthly salvation are, Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James: Proven Character Through Testing* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2009, 2016); and John F. Hart, "James," in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, eds. Michael A Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2014).

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