

Notes on James

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The writer of this epistle was evidently the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:19) and the brother of Jude, the writer of the epistle that bears his name (cf. Matt. 13:55). This was the opinion of many of the early church fathers and writers.¹ This James was not the brother of the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, who suffered martyrdom early in the history of the church (Mark 1:19; Acts 12:2). Neither was he the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:18) or the father of Judas (Luke 6:16). He was the leading man in the Jerusalem church who spoke at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13-21; cf. 12:17; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7). Some commentators believed that the similarities in the Greek of this epistle and James' speech in Acts 15 support his identification as the writer.² The fact that the writer wrote this epistle in very good Greek should not rule this James out. He would have been fluent in both Aramaic and Greek as a gifted Galilean.

The recipients of this letter were the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora, Jews who had scattered from Palestine and had come to faith in Christ (1:1). Several Jewish references in the book support the claim that a Jew wrote it to other Jews (e.g., 1:18; 2:2, 21; 3:6; 5:4, 7).

Josephus said that James died in A.D. 62.³ Josephus did not name the date, but he identified James' death with that of Portius Festus who died in A.D. 62. So James wrote the letter before that date. Many commentators believed that James' lack of reference to the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 49) suggests that he wrote before that meeting. This is a very tenuous argument, however, since the issues James dealt with in this epistle are different from those the Jerusalem Council discussed. Reference to the Jerusalem Council in this letter would have been unnecessary. Traditionally James wrote early, however. It seems that his epistle was probably the first divinely inspired one and that James composed it in the middle or late 40s, perhaps A.D. 45-48.⁴ Many scholars have taken James' lack of references or allusions to other inspired New Testament epistles as

¹E.g., *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 2.23. Eusebius lived about A.D. 265-340. For fuller discussion, see Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, pp. 7-9; Ralph P. Martin, *James*, pp. xxxiii-lxi; and Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St James*, pp. i-lxv.

²E.g., D. Edmond Hiebert, *James*, pp. 17-18.

³Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20:9:1.

⁴See Donald W. Burdick, "James," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, p. 162.

additional support for this position. I believe there is no substantial reason to doubt the traditional early date.⁵

Since James lived in Jerusalem most if not all of his Christian life, that city seems to be the most likely place of writing.

SPECIAL FEATURES

There are several unique features of this epistle. It contains no references to specific individuals who were the original recipients. There is no concluding benediction. There is a large number of imperatives in the letter, about one for every two verses. There are many figures of speech and analogies, probably more than in all of Paul's epistles.⁶ James also alluded to over 20 Old Testament books. He referred to many Old Testament characters including Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah as well as the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses. One commentator observed that this book "has a more Jewish cast than any other writing of the New Testament."⁷ There are many references to nature. This was characteristic of the Jewish rabbis' teaching in James' day and the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are also many allusions to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.⁸ Yet there are only two references to Jesus (1:1; 2:1), which led Martin Luther to question whether this book was worthy of being in the New Testament.⁹ The margin of the Nestle Greek Testament version of James identifies 38 references to statements in Matthew. Both books seem to have been written about the same time, namely, in the late 40s.

"Both writers [Matthew and James] seem to have to do with a similar type of community . . ." ¹⁰

Leading themes in James include perfection, wisdom, and the piety of the poor.¹¹

"As soon as we read through the letter of James we say to ourselves, 'This man was a preacher before he was a writer.'" ¹²

"In style it reminds one now of the Proverbs, now of the stern denunciations of the prophets, now of the parables in the Gospels."¹³

⁵For a thorough discussion of the date, see Mayor, pp. cxliv-clxxvii; or Davids, p. 4, who catalogued the opinions of 64 modern commentators regarding the date of composition.

⁶J. Ronald Blue, "James," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 816.

⁷Mayor, p. ii.

⁸See Virgil V. Porter Jr., "The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647 (July-September 2005):344-60; idem, "The Sermon on the Mount in the Book of James, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:648 (October-December 2005):470-82. See the charts in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, pp. 817 and 818, for James' references to nature and the Sermon on the Mount.

⁹William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, p. 28.

¹⁰E. M. Sidebottom, *James, Jude, 2 Peter*, p. 14). See also Davids, pp. 47-48, for a chart of similarities between verses in James and those in the Synoptic Gospels, and Martin, pp. lxxv-lxxvi, for common links between Matthew and James.

¹¹Martin, pp. lxxix-lxxxvi.

¹²J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James*, p. 11.

¹³Mayor, p. i.

"The Epistle of James is without doubt the least theological of all NT books, with the exception of Philemon. . . .

"Three doctrines come to the surface more often than any others, and of these the most prominent is the doctrine of God. In keeping with the ethical nature of the epistle is the repeated stress on the doctrine of sin. And, surprisingly, the third most prominent theological theme is eschatology."¹⁴

"The epistle of James is no more anti-Pauline than is the Sermon on the Mount."¹⁵

PURPOSE

"The design of the Epistle is on the one hand to encourage those to whom it is addressed to bear their trials patiently, and on the other hand to warn them against certain errors of doctrine and practice."¹⁶

"The purpose of this potent letter is to exhort the early believers to Christian maturity and holiness of life. This letter deals more with the practice of the Christian faith than with its precepts. James told his readers how to achieve spiritual maturity through a confident stand, compassionate service, careful speech, contrite submission, and concerned sharing. He dealt with every area of a Christian's life: what he is, what he does, what he says, what he feels, and what he has."¹⁷

"The chief aim of the Epistle is to strengthen the faith and loyalty of the Jewish Christians in the face of persecution from rich and overbearing Jews who were defrauding and oppressing them."¹⁸

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction 1:1
- II. Trials and true religion 1:2-27
 - A. The value of trials 1:2-11
 - 1. The proper attitude toward trials 1:2
 - 2. The end product of trials 1:3-4
 - 3. Help in adopting this attitude 1:5-8
 - 4. The larger view of circumstances 1:9-11
 - B. The options in trials 1:12-18
 - 1. The ultimate end of trials 1:12
 - 2. The source of temptation 1:13-14

¹⁴Burdick, pp. 164-65.

¹⁵George M. Stulac, *James*, p. 16.

¹⁶Mayor, p. cxxviii.

¹⁷Blue, p. 818.

¹⁸A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:6.

3. The progress of temptation 1:15
 4. The goodness of God 1:16-18
 - C. The proper response to trials 1:19-27
 1. The improper response 1:19-20
 2. The essential response 1:21
 3. The complete response 1:22-25
 4. The external behavior 1:26-27
- III. Partiality and vital faith ch. 2
- A. The problem of favoritism 2:1-13
 1. The negative command 2:1
 2. The present improper practice 2:2-4
 3. The inconsistency of favoritism 2:5-7
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 6. The implication of our own judgment 2:12-13
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 1. James' assertion 2:14
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- IV. Speech and divine wisdom ch. 3
- A. Controlling the tongue 3:1-12
 1. The negative warning 3:1
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 - B. Controlling the mind 3:13-18
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- V. Conflicts and humble submission ch. 4
- A. Interpersonal and inner personal tensions 4:1-10
 1. The source of conflict 4:1
 2. The explanation of the conflict 4:2-3
 3. The nature of the choice 4:4-5
 4. The resources to choose right 4:6-10

- B. Self-exaltation 4:11-12
- C. Self-reliance 4:13-17
 - 1. The self-centered person 4:13-16
 - 2. The concluding exhortation 4:17
- VI. Money and patient endurance 5:1-18
 - A. Warnings for the rich 5:1-6
 - 1. The introduction of the problem 5:1
 - 2. The corrosive effect of wealth 5:2-3
 - 3. The misuse of wealth 5:4-6
 - B. The proper attitude 5:7-12
 - 1. The exhortation to be patient 5:7-9
 - 2. Examples of endurance 5:10-11
 - 3. The evidence of patience 5:12
 - C. The proper action 5:13-18
 - 1. The way of release 5:13
 - 2. The prescription for help 5:14-16
 - 3. The power of prayer 5:17-18
- VII. The way back to living by faith 5:19-20

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION 1:1

The writer identified himself for the original recipients of this epistle and greeted them to introduce himself to his readers.

James (lit. Jacob) was probably the half-brother of the Lord Jesus Christ who evidently became a believer late in Jesus' earthly ministry (cf. John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7). He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem early in its history (Gal. 2:9; Acts 15:13-21).

"Apart from Paul and Peter, no figure in the church of the first days plays a more substantial part upon the historic and legendary stage than James, first Bishop of Jerusalem."¹⁹

James described himself simply as a bond-servant (Gr. *doulos*) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only he and Jude, another half-brother of the Lord, described themselves simply as bond-servants in their epistles. This probably indicates that they were so well known in the early church that they did not need to describe themselves in more detail.²⁰ James did not refer to himself as Jesus' brother or the church's leader. He evidently purposed not to know Jesus "after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16) but only as his Lord and God. Being a bond-servant of God was his most important relationship (cf. Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1; Rev. 1:1). He placed Jesus equal with God by saying he was the bond-servant of both God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The term bond-servant did not carry the degrading connotation in the first century that it does today. In the Septuagint *doulos* described Israel's great leaders who occupied positions of privilege and honor (e.g., Moses [Deut. 34:5; et al.]; David [2 Sam. 7:5; et al.]; and the prophets [Jer. 7:25; 44:4; Amos 3:7]). By using this word James was proudly asserting that he belonged to God and to Jesus Christ body and soul.²¹

"It is only his servanthood to the Lord Jesus Christ that matters to him here, for this is the theme of his letter: How shall we live as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ?"²²

The 12 tribes (cf. Matt. 19:28; Acts 26:7) scattered abroad most naturally refer to Jewish Christians of the Diaspora, those who were living outside Palestine.²³ James knew nothing of the ten so-called "lost tribes;" he regarded Israel in its unity and completeness as consisting of 12 tribes. These Jews were very likely members of the Jerusalem church who had left Jerusalem shortly after Stephen's martyrdom (cf. Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19-20).

¹⁹G. H. Rendall, *The Epistle of James and Judaic Christianity*, pp. 11-12.

²⁰Mayor, p. 29.

²¹Burdick, p. 167.

²²Stulac, p. 30.

²³Hiebert, pp. 32-34. Cf. Martin, pp. 8-11.

Some scholars believed they lived within Palestine.²⁴ However the location of the recipients does not affect the interpretation of the epistle significantly. What James wrote to them as a fellow Jewish Christian is normative for both Jewish and Gentile Christians since both are one in Christ. It is unnatural to take the 12 tribes as descriptive of the so-called "new Israel," the church, as some interpreters do.²⁵ "Israel" can and does always refer to the physical descendants of Jacob whenever it occurs in the New Testament, just as it does in the Old Testament. Furthermore there is no other revelation that the church consists of 12 parts as the nation of Israel did.

James wrote in very good Greek; his grammar, syntax, and word choice were excellent. "Greetings" was a common Greek salutation familiar to his readers.

II. TRIALS AND TRUE RELIGION 1:2-27

James began his letter, which is in many ways a lecture, by dealing with the problem of trials that all believers encounter. Jews who became Christians in the early history of the church experienced much antagonism and persecution from their unbelieving fellow Jews, as is clear in the Book of Acts. All Christians who take a stand for the Lord continue to have to deal with such trials. Thus James' inspired advice is perennially relevant.

A. THE VALUE OF TRIALS 1:2-11

The writer pointed out the value of trials to encourage his readers to adopt a positive attitude toward these experiences, to endure them, and to view them as God's tools. God uses trials to shape believers into people that will glorify Himself.

1. The proper attitude toward trials 1:2

What kinds of trials was James talking about? Did he mean troubles such as running out of money, or failing a test in school, or having to stay up all night with a sick child: everyday troubles? Yes. The Greek word translated "trials" (*peirasmois*) means a "proving," specifically, "the trial of a man's fidelity, integrity, virtue, constancy . . . also an enticement to sin, temptation."²⁶ Various temptations to depart from the will of God are in view. The context supports this conclusion. Verse 3 restates these trials as "the testing of your faith." James was speaking of the different kinds of trials in which we experience temptation to accompany sinners rather than remaining faithful to the Savior. He was not distinguishing between internal and external temptations.²⁷ Trials come from both sources (cf. v. 14). Any trial can constitute a test of our faith, namely, a temptation to cease trusting and obeying God.

"Trials rightly faced are harmless, but wrongly met become temptations to evil."²⁸

²⁴E.g., Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James*, p. 12.

²⁵E.g., R. V. G. Tasker, *The General Epistle of James*, pp. 39-40; Motyer, p. 24; and Sidebottom, p. 26.

²⁶A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "peirasmos."

²⁷James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, p. 53; Sidebottom, p. 30.

²⁸Robertson, 6:11.

Note that James was speaking to Christians: "my brethren." This title for the readers occurs 15 times in this epistle (cf. 1:16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19).

"Even a superficial reading of James 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 we do not observe this simple and obvious fact, we may fall into a quagmire of skewed interpretations, just as so many expositors of James have actually done."²⁹

What follows is instruction concerning how Christians should respond when we experience temptation to sin.

James counseled his readers to view the various kinds of trials and tribulations they were encountering in their lives as opportunities for growth. He did not urge them to rejoice that they were undergoing trials. He did not advocate a masochistic attitude that unnaturally rejoices in painful experiences. Rather he commanded them to view their trials as profitable even though unpleasant. Another translation of "all joy" can be "pure joy." The opposite would be "some joy" along with much grief. The attitude James advocated can take all the bitterness out of even very uncomfortable trials. Regardless of the source of our difficulties—the world, our flesh, or the devil—we can and should be glad as we go through them. The reason follows.

2. The end product of trials 1:3-4

Trials are the means God uses to make believers the kind of people that bring honor to His name, namely, mature Christians. "Testing" (Gr. *dokimion*) implies demonstrating the true quality of something when it undergoes a trial. The true nature of gold becomes evident when the refiner heats gold ore over a fire. Similarly the character of God within a Christian that is there because of the Holy Spirit's presence becomes apparent through trials, if responded to properly.

These are trials of our "faith" in the sense that our trust in God and obedience to God are being stretched to the limit. Trials can result in endurance, steadfastness, and perseverance (rather than "patience" [AV]). The Greek word translated "endurance" (*hypomonen*) describes the quality that enables a person to stay on his or her feet when facing a storm.³⁰ If we submit to them, they will eventually make us mature (fully developed, "perfect," cf. Matt. 5:48; 19:21) and complete (developed in every essential area of our lives). Consequently we should not try to escape from trials but submit to the maturing process with patient endurance and joy. We must learn patience or we will not learn much else.

²⁹Hodges, p. 18. See also Hiebert, p. 56; and Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, p. 32.

³⁰William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, pp. 144-45. Cf. Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, pp. 318-19.

God will bring every believer who endures trials, rather than running from them, to maturity as we persevere in them. James taught that in view of this fact we should rejoice in our trials rather than rebelling against them. They are God's instruments for perfecting us.

"After over a quarter century of ministry, I am convinced that spiritual immaturity is the number one problem in our churches."³¹

The concept of living by faith that James introduced here for the first time seems to be the theme that unites all the parts of this epistle. Another writer suggested a variation of this theme, namely, "tests of a living faith."³² The Christian who not only experienced justification by faith in the past but is presently living by faith (trusting in God and obeying Him) has what James calls a living faith. This use of live faith is very important to remember when we come to James' discussion of faith and works in 2:14-26.

"The root difficulty of the readers lies in a distorted conception of the nature of salvation by faith and its relation to daily life as the proving ground for the development of Christian character."³³

3. Help in adopting this attitude 1:5-8

James' reference to "lacking" nothing (v. 4) led him to digress briefly from his discussion of trials to explain (through v. 8) the wisdom necessary to deal with trials appropriately.

1:5 What James just explained is divine wisdom, God's view of life. However the world, which does not have or accept this revealed wisdom, generally fails to appreciate the value of enduring trials. The Christian is apt to take the world's view toward his or her trials rather than God's and try to escape them at any cost. An evidence of this is that the divorce rate among Christians is about the same as the divorce rate among non-Christians, at least in the United States. Most people count it all joy when they escape trials, and they count it all grief when they have to endure them.

James used the word "wisdom" (Gr. *sophia*) in the sense in which the Old Testament wisdom literature used it. There it refers to what God has revealed about His will for human life. Wisdom denotes "a fixed, righteous order to which the wise man submits his life."³⁴ The New Testament writers often regarded wisdom as the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit and sometimes identified it with the Holy Spirit.³⁵ Consequently the

³¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature*, p. 13.

³²D. Edmond Hiebert, "The Unifying Theme of the Epistle of James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 135:529 (July-September 1978):224. See also the subtitle of the 1979 edition of his commentary on James.

³³Idem, *James*, p. 37.

³⁴Bruce K. Waltke, "The Book of Proverbs and Ancient Wisdom Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 136:543 (July-September 1979):238.

³⁵J. A. Kirk, "The Meaning of Wisdom in James: Examination of a Hypothesis," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1960):24-38.

wise Christian is the one who views life in the light of God's revelation (i.e., His written Word).

If we do not understand God's view of life, James urged that we keep on asking (Gr. present active imperative) God to enable us to understand it. This is a first class condition in Greek that assumes a condition is true to reality for the sake of the argument. Every Christian lacks this wisdom to some extent. Wisdom is seeing life realistically from God's perspective. The unwise Christian who repeatedly asks God to open his or her eyes and heart can count on God granting his or her request repeatedly. He will give this wisdom freely and graciously, as often as we need it (cf. Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20). This description contrasts God with the double-minded man in verse 8.

We must read this verse in context to understand it correctly. This is not a promise that God will give everyone who asks Him for wisdom a higher IQ. What God promises in this context is the ability to see the importance of enduring trials and persevering in them faithfully.

1:6 In Scripture asking in faith always means one of two things. It means either believing God *will* do what He has promised or, if He has not promised, believing that He *can* do what the person requesting asks (cf. Matt. 8:1-4; Mark 4:35-41).

"James teaches that faith is the essential condition of prayer."³⁶

The NASB translation "without any doubting, for the one who doubts" is unfortunate. The Greek word *diakrinomenos*, used twice in this verse, is better translated, "let him ask in faith, free from divided motives and divisive attitudes, for such a person is like an ocean wave . . ."³⁷

Lack of confidence in God's faithfulness or power manifests a lack of consistency in the believer's life. James compared the instability that this inconsistency produces to the surf of the sea. Something other than itself drives it. The surf corresponds to the Christian who by not submitting consistently to the will of God is driven by forces outside himself or herself rather than by the Holy Spirit within. The surf (Gr. *kludon*) may refer to the tops of the waves that the wind blows off (cf. Luke 8:24). The low and high-pressure conditions of life tend to blow us around in a similar fashion.

1:7 Such a person's problems are not only subjective, feeling circumstances are directing him or her rather than God, but they will also be objective. He or she really is at the mercy of circumstances and events beyond our

³⁶Adamson, p. 57.

³⁷See David DeGraaf, "Some Doubts about Doubt: The New Testament Use of *Diakrino*," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48:8 (December 2005):741-43. Cf. 2:4.

control. This type of inconsistent person resists God's work in his or her life. Rather than simply perfecting maturity in the person through his trials, God now also has to discipline (educate) him regarding his attitude toward his trials.

In the context "anything" (v. 7) refers primarily to wisdom (v. 5). If a person is not going to trust God ("ask in faith," v. 6) he or she will fail to enjoy the confidence that comes from knowing that God is in control of his or her trials. In a larger sense, of course, our failure to trust God can rob us of the confidence that comes when we know that all of what God has revealed is true.

1:8 In this context the "double-minded" (*dipsychos*, lit. two-sided; cf. 4:8) man is one who trusts and obeys God part of the time but not consistently. A double-minded person is one who has a divided opinion or allegiance (e.g., Lot; cf. 1 Clem. 11:2). He is unsteady, fickle, staggering, and reeling like a drunken man.³⁸

". . . the man is a walking civil war in which trust and distrust of God wage a continual battle against each other."³⁹

In summary, God will help us take His view of trials, which James explained in verses 3 and 4, if we ask Him to do so in prayer. We can and should be joyful while experiencing trials that constitute temptations to depart from God's will. We can do so because we know that, if we remain faithful to God, He will use these trials to produce what is glorifying for Him and what is good for us, namely, our spiritual maturity.

4. The larger view of circumstances 1:9-11

James had been urging his readers to adopt God's view of their trials (vv. 2-4). Now he returned to this subject, broadened their perspective, and encouraged them to adopt His viewpoint on all their present circumstances.

1:9 Materially poor believers should derive joy from focusing their thinking on their spiritual riches.

1:10 Likewise the materially wealthy should remember that riches are temporary and that one's real condition before God is a very humble one.

"The Cross of Christ lifts up the poor and brings down the high. It is the great leveller [*sic*] of men."⁴⁰

³⁸Robertson, 6:15.

³⁹William Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 54.

⁴⁰Robertson, 6:15.

Grass in many places is not very hardy, but in some parts of Palestine it only stays green a few weeks. The term "flowering grass" evidently goes back to Isaiah 40:6-8. It is a combination of two thoughts, namely, that the grass withers and the flower fades. In Hebrew, mixing metaphors was a way of enriching the thought.⁴¹

The commentators differ in their understanding of who the rich people were to whom James referred. Many concluded they were believers in view of James' parallel statement in verse 9. They take the verb *kauchaomai* ("glory" or "take pride in") in verse 9 as the verb for verse 10 also. Likewise the subject "brother" in verse 9 seems to be the subject of verse 10.⁴² Other interpreters believe the context points to the rich being unsaved.⁴³ I think the evidence favors the view that they were Christians, probably Jewish Christians (cf. 5:1-6). But the fact that James did not make this clear suggests that he intended to state a general truth that applies to both kinds of people: riches are worthless in the face of death and judgment (cf. 1 Tim. 6:9-10, 17-19).

"There is no higher honor than to be the object of God's gracious and loving concern."⁴⁴

1:11 The flower of the grass refers to its stage of green, lush growth when it is at the peak of its vitality. Soon it withers and turns brown in the Middle East (cf. Matt. 6:30). Likewise the rich man may fade quickly (cf. 4:13).

"Speaking of his friend, a poor Christian, a wealthy unbeliever remarked, 'When I die, I shall leave my riches. When he dies he will go to his.'"⁴⁵

Our trials as well as our triumphs on the earth are only temporary. This fact should help us endure our trials and not become self-confident in our triumphs.

"James seems to be indicating that trials erase any superficial distinctions that may be thought to separate the rich brother from the poor one."⁴⁶

This introduction to the book (vv. 2-11) is in balance with the conclusion (5:7-20). Both sections talk about the need for patience (1:2-4; 5:7-12) and prayer (1:5-8; 5:13-18), and both end with an emphasis on all the contrasting circumstances of life (1:9-11; 5:19-20).⁴⁷

⁴¹Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1—72*, p. 151.

⁴²E.g., Mayor, pp. 45-46; Adamson, p. 62; Hiebert, *James*, p. 78; C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James*, p. 33; and Blue, p. 82.

⁴³E.g., Davids, pp. 76-77; Stulac, pp. 195, 199; and Martin, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁴Hodges, p. 23.

⁴⁵Adamson, p. 66.

⁴⁶Burdick, p. 169.

⁴⁷Motyer, p. 12.

B. THE OPTIONS IN TRIALS 1:12-18

Thus far James revealed the value of trials, how God uses them to perfect the Christian, and how to obtain God's perspective on one's trials when this is difficult to see. Next he proceeded to explain the consequences of obedience and disobedience and the source of temptations so his readers could manage their trials effectively.

1. The ultimate end of trials 1:12

In view of how God uses trials in our lives we should persevere in the will of God joyfully. The Christian who perseveres under trials, who does not yield to temptations to depart from the will of God, demonstrates his or her love for God. James used the same Greek word for trials here as in verse 2, but here the negative sense of the word is in view.⁴⁸ It is those who persevere under trials out of love for God that He will reward with the crown of life (cf. Rev. 2:10). Only the person who endures will receive the blessing.⁴⁹

" . . . James has begun the sentence with 'blessed' *makarios*, like a new beatitude recalling Matthew 5:3-10 and especially 5:11-12, where Jesus encouraged perseverance in trials 'because great is your reward in heaven.' . . . the crown of life would be the ultimate reward, the fulfillment of eternal life and the exaltation with Christ which will be enjoyed by those who, because of faith in Christ, have loved God enough to live faithfully, obeying him even through trials."⁵⁰

"It is evident that this 'life that God has promised' is more than the eternal life given to every believer at the time of his salvation (John 5:24). Since it is a reward for an accomplishment subsequent to initial faith, it must refer to a still higher quality of life."⁵¹

"Many Christians are presently following the same path which Esau took (considering the birthright to be of little value), and such Christians will one day come to the end of the matter in the same position as Esau. They, although presently in line to be blessed as the firstborn (every Christian is a firstborn child of God), will have forfeited this right; and they will be rejected for the blessing."⁵²

"The idea that all Christians *do* love God is a fiction. Even our Lord felt it necessary to exhort His inner circle of eleven disciples on this point (cf. John 14:21-24). . . . In no circumstances more than in trials does the presence or absence of love for God in a Christian become more apparent."⁵³

⁴⁸See Buist M. Fanning, "A Theology of James," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 419.

⁴⁹See Mayor, p. 194.

⁵⁰Stulac, p. 49.

⁵¹Burdick, p. 171. Cf. Curtis Vaughan, *James*, p. 28.

⁵²Arlen L. Chitwood, *Judgment Seat of Christ*, p. 157.

⁵³Hodges, pp. 26-27. See also Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, pp. 128-29, 140-51.

For other promises to those who love God, see Exodus 20:6; Deuteronomy 7:9; 30:16, 20; Judges 5:31; Psalm 5:11; Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9; and 2 Timothy 4:8. The other "crowns" to which the New Testament writers referred are probably also references to the fullness of the qualities mentioned in their contexts. They are probably not material crowns (cf. 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10). In other words, we should probably interpret them as metaphors rather than as literal crowns. Those who demonstrate their love for the Lord by persevering under trials will receive life to its fullest potential in the present and in the future.

BELIEVERS' CROWNS		
Title	Reason	Reference
An Imperishable Crown	For leading a disciplined life	1 Cor. 9:25
A Crown of Rejoicing	For evangelism and discipleship	1 Thess. 2:19
A Crown of Righteousness	For loving the Lord's appearing	2 Tim. 4:8
A Crown of Life	For enduring trials	James 1:12; Rev. 2:10
A Crown of Glory	For shepherding God's flock faithfully	1 Pet. 5:4

2. The source of temptation 1:13-14

James did not want us to conclude that because God permits us to experience trials He is the source of temptation. That deduction might encourage us to give in to sin.

1:13 God is never the source of temptation. He does not try to get us to sin, even though some people blame God for their sins. He Himself is not even subject to temptation because He is totally separate from sin and not susceptible to evil.⁵⁴ The only sense in which God is responsible for sin is that He permits other things to tempt us, namely, the world, the flesh, and the devil (cf. Job 1—2). James did not mention this here.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13; Luke 11:4). Jesus used a figure of speech (i.e., litotes) in which He expressed a positive idea by negating the contrary. Other examples of litotes are "not a few" meaning many, and "no rare occurrence" meaning a frequent occurrence. James did not imply that God does lead us into temptation. His point was that He can help us stay away from it. Essentially Jesus meant we should ask God to allow us to experience as little temptation as possible (cf. Mark 14:38). James was not contradicting Jesus' teaching.

⁵⁴Mayor, p. 53. See also his extended discussion of this subject on pp. 195-97.

"We all know only too many people who have ceased to walk with God under the pressure of trouble or tragedy . . ." ⁵⁵

1:14 Rather than blaming God we need to recognize that *we* are responsible when we yield to temptation, not God. There is nothing in God that responds positively to sin, but there is much in us that does.

"Desire (*epithymia*) does not always have a negative meaning (cf. Lk. 22:15; Phil. 1:23), but here, as most often in the New Testament, it refers to fleshly, selfish, illicit desire. While the word often describes specifically sexual passions, the use of the singular here suggests a broader conception." ⁵⁶

What practical difference does it make if God tempts us or if He allows us to experience temptation from other sources? Perhaps we can better appreciate the difference if we think of God as our Father. No good earthly father would deliberately seduce his child into sin by trying to make him or her fall. However every good father will deliberately allow his child to enter situations in life in which the child must make moral choices. We realize that sending a child to school or into the community, at the proper age, is good for a child because it matures him or her. Likewise God grows us up by allowing certain experiences to assail us, though He Himself only gives good gifts to His children (v. 18; Luke 11:13). Similarly a schoolteacher will test his students to help them grow, but he should never tempt them to do evil.

3. The progress of temptation 1:15

Lust in this context is the desire to do, have, or be something apart from the will of God. Lust is covert, but sometimes it manifests itself overtly. If we do not check lust, it will lead to sin, and if we do not confess and forsake sin, it will lead to death (Rom. 6:21-23; 8:6). One commentator helpfully identified seven successive stages of temptation.⁵⁷

"Sin is the result of the surrender of the will to the soliciting of *epithymia* [lust] instead of the guidance of reason." ⁵⁸

Lust can lead to physical death in a believer (1 John 5:16), and it can lead to physical and spiritual death in a non-believer. James' vivid illustration of the childbearing process graphically describes the cause and effect relationship of lust, sin, and death. God desires to lead us into the fullness of life (v. 12), but if we respond improperly and give in to temptations we will not obtain the crown of life but death. "Death" in verse 15 is the opposite of "life" in verse 12. The ultimate outcome of capitulating to temptation is death

⁵⁵Motyer, p. 50.

⁵⁶Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, p. 73.

⁵⁷Mayor, p. 198.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 55.

(cf. Prov. 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; and 19:16), but the ultimate outcome of resisting it is the fullness of life (cf. John 10:10).

"This attention-getting imagery is designed to stop sinners in their tracks, seeing that death is the natural and terrible end of a life of sin, not just an occasional result for some sinners."⁵⁹

4. The goodness of God 1:16-18

James now defended God before those who doubted His goodness or reliability or who had given up hope in a time of testing and had concluded that this was their "fate."⁶⁰ The theological term for a vindication of God's character is "theodicy."

1:16 James wanted his readers to have no doubt about God's purposes and methods in dealing with them, His children. The same "Do not be deceived" expression occurs in 1 Corinthians 6:9; 15:33; Galatians 6:7; and 1 John 3:7. God definitely is not the author of temptation.

When God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice (Gen. 22:2), it only appeared to Abraham that God was tempting him to commit murder. God prevented him from slaying his son (Gen. 22:12). This was a test of Abraham's obedience, not a solicitation to sin.

James clarified God's purposes and methods in the following two verses (cf. Gal. 4:7). Verse 15 warns against yielding to temptation by reminding us of the judgment of God, and verse 17 warns us by reminding us of the goodness of God.

1:17 Every act of giving (better than "good thing bestowed," Gr. *dosis*) and every gift given (Gr. *dorema*) has its source in God. This does not include temptations to sin. God created the sun and moon by which we see variation in light. However there is no variation in God's dealings with His creatures (cf. 1 John 1:5). He always does everything for His own glory and His creatures' good.

"From above" is the translation of the same Greek word (*anothen*) Jesus used in John 3:7 when He told Nicodemus that he must be born "again." There the new birth is the good gift from God that is in view.

1:18 The greatest of God's gifts for believers is the gift of new life in Christ. God's deliberate initiative provided this gift for us, and His special revelation communicated it to us (i.e., the message marked by truth). This verse along with the preceding one shows clearly that James believed that eternal life was a gift of God's grace. We need to keep this in mind when

⁵⁹Stulac, p. 56.

⁶⁰Martin, p. 39.

we read James' discussion of faith and works that follows in chapter 2. James also agreed with Paul that our salvation springs from the sovereign volition of God (cf. Rom. 4:21-22; 2 Cor. 4:6). He initiated it.

The "first fruits" probably refer to all Christians who persevere in spite of trials. All believers will bring glory to God's name, but believers who remain faithful to Christ will please Him greatly, as the first fruits in Israel were a special offering to God. The Greek word translated "first fruits" (*aparche*) refers to what is first in honor as well as to what is first in order. The biblical writers used it "of persons superior in excellence to others of the same class."⁶¹

The point of these verses (17-18) seems to be that God's intention for all people, and believers in particular, is invariably their blessing. Rather than viewing temptations to depart from the will of God as heaven-sent, we must see them as the potential enemies of spiritual growth. Instead of caving in under their weight we must brace ourselves against them. We can do so knowing that the effort will make us better this side of the grave, and it will yield a wonderful reward the other side of the grave.

"James outlined the source of temptation, the steps in temptation, and the solution for temptation."⁶²

C. THE PROPER RESPONSE TO TRIALS 1:19-27

Having explained the value of trials and our options in trials, James next exhorted his readers to respond properly to their trials. In this section he stressed the Word of God because it is the key to resisting temptations and responding to trials correctly (cf. Matt. 4:1-11).

"Receptivity to the Word, responsiveness to the Word, and resignation to the Word are essential to spiritual growth. One must accept God's Word, act on it, and abide by it."⁶³

1. The improper response 1:19-20

1:19 James' readers already knew what he had just reminded them of in the preceding verses (vv. 17-18; cf. Prov. 10:19; 13:3; 14:29; 15:1; 17:27-28; 29:11, 20; Eccles. 7:9). Nevertheless they needed to act in harmony with this knowledge.

"He [James] drives home the teaching about our death-bound, sinful nature with the cry *Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren* (16); he drives home the teaching about

⁶¹A *Greek-English . . .*, s.v. "*aparche*." Cf. Rev. 14:4.

⁶²Blue, p. 822.

⁶³Ibid.

the new birth with the cry *Know this, my beloved brethren* (19a)."⁶⁴

We may respond to trials by complaining about them and becoming angry over them. James advised his readers to remain silent and calm and to listen submissively to the Word of God (v. 23).

"It is possible to be unfailingly regular in Bible reading, but to achieve no more than to have moved the book-mark forward: this is reading unrelated to an attentive spirit."⁶⁵

Many people have observed that we have two ears and one mouth, which ought to remind us to listen twice as much as we speak (cf. Prov. 10:19; 17:27). Apparently Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, is the oldest known source of this observation.⁶⁶

"Ceaseless talkers may easily degenerate into fierce controversialists."⁶⁷

"The great talker is rarely a great listener, and never is the ear more firmly closed than when anger takes over."⁶⁸

"The tribute was once paid to a great linguist that he could be silent in seven different languages."⁶⁹

1:20 An angry response to temptations does not advance the righteousness in character and conduct that God is seeking to produce in the believer.

"The policy James condemns is one of seeking to promote the cause of freedom by politically motivated and engineered violence (an endeavor to be brought into the discussion at 4:1-3)."⁷⁰

2. The essential response 1:21

The filthiness in view seems to be all kinds of unclean behavior that lies outside the will of God, including anger and wrath. The "remains of wickedness" are those evil habits of life we carry over from the unredeemed world (cf. Ps. 17:4; Luke 6:45). The believer should accept submissively what God has revealed and should respond cooperatively to what He commands. The Word of God will then have good soil in which to grow, and it will yield an abundant harvest of righteous conduct in the believer.

⁶⁴Motyer, p. 61.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁶Martin, p. 54.

⁶⁷Alexander Ross, *The Epistles of James and John*, p. 38.

⁶⁸Motyer, p. 65.

⁶⁹Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 65.

⁷⁰Martin, p. 48.

"We pray for safety instead of purity because we do not see impurity as dangerous."⁷¹

Some interpreters have understood the phrase "which is able to save your souls" to imply that the souls of James' readers still needed to experience salvation from eternal damnation. However, since his readers were Christians (vv. 1-2), some interpreters believe that when a believer sins he loses his salvation and needs saving again. Yet the words James used and the context make clear that this is not what he meant. "Save your lives" or "save your selves" (Gr. *psychas*) is a better translation used elsewhere (cf. Matt. 16:24-27; Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9; 9:56; James 5:20; 1 Pet. 1:9). I counted 40 instances in the New Testament where the translators of the AV rendered the Greek word *psyche* "life" rather than "soul."⁷² "Soul" does not describe a part of the individual that is different from some other part of him or her such as the body; it describes the whole person.

". . . the expression ["save your souls"] is never found in any New Testament text which describes the conversion experience!"⁷³

By obeying God's Word the believer can save his life, himself, from the consequences of sin. The ultimate consequence for a believer is premature physical (not eternal) death (cf. 1:15; 5:19-20; Prov. 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16; Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16).⁷⁴ James was still talking about the consequences of obeying and disobeying God: the crown of life (v. 12) and death (v. 15).

"It has often been observed that the Epistle of James is, of all the New Testament writings, the one which most clearly reflects the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The theme of death as the consequence of sin is an extremely frequent one in the book of Proverbs. . . . It should be evident that this is the Old Testament concept which furnishes the background for James' thought. A recognition of this fact clarifies a great deal."⁷⁵

3. The complete response 1:22-25

Whereas verses 19-21 stress the importance of listening to the Word, verses 22-25 emphasize the necessity of putting the Word into practice, applying it.

1:22 Doing the Word of God in this context means persevering in God's will when we experience temptation to depart from it. Hearing God's will is good as far as it goes, and it is indispensable, but obedience should follow. Some Christian disciples delude themselves by thinking that knowing God's will is enough, but it is only foundational to doing God's will.

⁷¹Stulac, p. 71.

⁷²See also Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, pp. 118-19; and Hodges, p. 41.

⁷³Idem, *The Gospel Under Siege*, p. 24.

⁷⁴See Arlen L. Chitwood, *Salvation of the Soul*, pp. 25-34.

⁷⁵Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, pp. 24-25.

"The blessing does not come in *studying* the Word, but in *doing* the Word."⁷⁶

"The call to 'do what it says' lies at the center of all that James teaches. It sums up the message of the whole book: Put into practice what you profess to believe. Indeed, 1:22 may well be the key verse of James's epistle."⁷⁷

1:23-24 This illustration is so clear and so common that it needs little comment. The Greek verb *katanoeo* refers to careful observation. It does not mean to cast a hasty superficial glance, as some have suggested.

1:25 The law to which James referred is the revelation of God's will contained in Scripture (cf. Matt. 5:17). It is perfect because it is the perfect will of a perfect God.

"Unlike the imperfect metal mirror in the previous illustration, this law is able to give the beholder a true and undistorted revelation of himself."⁷⁸

"The law of God is perfect, first, because it perfectly expresses his nature and, secondly, because it perfectly matches ours."⁷⁹

It is a law of liberty because by obeying it we find true liberty from sin and its consequences (i.e., real life).

"True freedom is the opportunity and the ability to give expression to what we truly are."⁸⁰

Note James' agreement with Paul that Christians live in comparative liberty under the "law of Christ" (Gal. 5:1; 6:2; cf. Matt. 11:30). Obedient adherence to the Word of God is the key to experiencing God's blessing in life now as well as in the eschatological future.

". . . the letter . . . is a 'law book' in a deeper and more pervasive sense than any other single writing in the New Testament."⁸¹

⁷⁶Wiersbe, p. 16.

⁷⁷Burdick, p. 175.

⁷⁸Hiebert, *James*, p. 122.

⁷⁹Motyer, p. 70.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

"Thus the passage falls into three sections, each with a distinct response to the word God speaks: hearing (19b-20), receiving (21) and obeying (22-25)."⁸²

4. The external behavior 1:26-27

James proceeded to explain in 1:26—2:13 what a doer of works (1:25) does.

1:26 "Religious" (Gr. *threskos*, used only here in the New Testament) describes someone who fears or worships God. In particular, it refers to the outward consequences of what one believes (i.e., piety, good works) rather than to what he believes or the fact that he believes deeply. The Jews, who were James' original readers, typically regarded alms-giving, prayer, fasting, regular attendance at worship services, and the observance of holy days and feasts as signs of true spirituality (cf. Matt. 6:1-18). However, James said a better test of spirituality was God's control of one's tongue (cf. 3:1-12).

1:27 Taking care of orphans and widows (conduct) is a duty that lies close to the heart of God (cf. Exod. 22:22-24; Deut. 10:18; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 5:28; Ezek. 22:7; Zech. 7:10). Yet many who professed to love Him neglected it (Ps. 68:5; Eccles. 4:1; Mark 12:40).⁸³ Likewise personal moral purity (character) is an excellent external indicator of godliness (cf. Acts 15:20; 1 Tim. 5:22). James argued for reality. He did not want us to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are spiritual if our obedience to God is only superficial.

"Like Jesus, James sees worship not in terms of external law but as an expression of inner active goodness."⁸⁴

"To summarize, vv. 22-27 insist that a person's religion must consist of more than superficial acts. It is not enough to listen to the statement of spiritual truth (vv. 22-25), nor is it sufficient to engage in formal religious activity (v. 26). The person whose religious experience is genuine will put spiritual truth into practice, and his life will be marked by love for others and holiness before God."⁸⁵

In this chapter James dealt with the practical problem of trials and temptations. He used this subject to remind his readers of some very basic truths that have implications in many other areas of practical Christian living. Some of these areas are consistent commitment to God and obedience to His Word. We will demonstrate behavior that is as

⁸²Ibid., p. 63.

⁸³See Richard D. Patterson, "The Widow, the Orphan, and the Poor in the Old Testament and the Extra-Biblical Literature," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130:519 (July-September 1973):223-34.

⁸⁴Adamson, p. 85.

⁸⁵Burdick, pp. 176-77.

genuinely religious as anything anyone can do when we respond to temptations to depart from God's will appropriately. The appropriate response involves rejecting them and rejoicing in them because we believe God is using them to mature us for His glory.

III. PARTIALITY AND VITAL FAITH CH. 2

"In the epistle of James, the Holy Spirit has given the church a commentary on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and Sermon on the Plain, a commentary that is rich in applications for daily life."⁸⁶

The similarities appear both in subject matter and in structure. Note the parallels between Matthew 7:1-27 and James 2:1-26 below.⁸⁷

MATTHEW 7			JAMES 2	
1-2	Prohibition against judging		1	Prohibition against judgmental favoritism
3-5	Illustration of removing one's own faults so that one can help remove others' faults		2-4	Illustration of removing one's own partiality so that one can judge or instruct others
6	Warning not to despise what is sacred in favor of dogs or pigs that will harm you		5-7	Warning not to despise brothers who are rich in faith in favor of others who harm you
7-11	Encouragement to ask and to believe			
12	Summary of the law as doing to others what you would want for yourself		8-11	Summary of the law as loving others as yourself
13-14	Summary admonition to follow the narrow way that leads to life		12-13	Summary admonition to follow the law that gives freedom
15-23	Warning against false prophets, with the true test presented: deeds		14-19	Warning against dead faith, with the true test presented: deeds
24-27	Parable to illustrate putting Christ's words into practice		20-26	Examples to illustrate putting faith into practice

⁸⁶Stulac, p. 34. Cf. Davids, pp. 47-50.

⁸⁷Stulac, p. 92.

A. THE PROBLEM OF FAVORITISM 2:1-13

James' previous reference to hypocritical religiosity (1:26-27) seems to have led him to deal with one form of this problem that existed among Christian Jews of his day. It is still with us today. It is the problem of inconsistent love for other people that manifests itself in how we treat them. James wrote this chapter to exhort his readers to deal with this very basic inconsistency in their lives and so progress toward spiritual maturity.

"The connection of this warning against social discrimination with the previous ch. 1 seems fairly obvious. Truckling to the rich and apathy or worse toward the poor are two sides of the same base coin rejected by the touchstone of 1:27 and of 2:8."⁸⁸

"He [the believer] must show courtesy to all, compassion for all, and consistency to all. Equity, love, and fidelity are the vital ingredients."⁸⁹

1. The negative command 2:1

James came right to the point; we know exactly what his concern was. Personal favoritism is hardly a glorious characteristic, and it is inconsistent for a Christian who worships the glorious Lord Jesus Christ to practice it (cf. Matt. 22:16 Acts 10:34). All earthly distinctions disappear in the presence of our glorious Lord. It was especially appropriate for James to address his readers as "my brethren" here since he proceeded to encourage them to practice brotherly kindness. Such behavior would be glorious, in harmony with their "glorious Lord Jesus Christ."

". . . a Christian is (or should be) the last person to be impressed by the sham glory of social status."⁹⁰

It may be helpful to distinguish partiality or favoritism (Gr. *prosopolepsia*; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; cf. Acts 10:34) from some of its synonyms. One definition of *prosopolepsia* is as follows.

It is "the fault of one who when called on to requite or to give judgment has respect to the outward circumstances of men and not to their intrinsic merits, and so prefers, as the more worthy, one who is rich, high-born, or powerful, to another who is destitute of such gifts."⁹¹

Partiality implies an inclination to favor a person or thing because of strong fondness or attachment. We say that an orchestra conductor, for example, has a partiality for the works of a particular composer. Treating people with partiality may spring from predilection, or from prejudice, or from bias. *Predilection* implies a preconceived liking

⁸⁸Adamson, p. 102.

⁸⁹Blue, p. 824.

⁹⁰Adamson, p. 104.

⁹¹A *Greek-English . . .*, s.v. "*prosopolepsia*," p. 551.

formed as a result of one's background, temperament, etc., that inclines one to a particular preference. We might say a certain person has a predilection for murder mysteries. *Prejudice* implies a preconceived and unreasonable judgment or opinion, usually an unfavorable one, marked by suspicion, fear, intolerance, or hatred. We might say racial prejudice incited a certain lynch mob. *Bias* implies a mental leaning in favor of or against someone or something without passing judgment on the correctness or incorrectness of the preference. One might say someone has a bias toward the color blue. James was dealing primarily with partiality.

2. The present improper practice 2:2-4

The situation James described in verses 2 and 3 presents what some have called "the case of the nearsighted usher." Some interpreters believe this was a hypothetical situation that James constructed.⁹² Others believe it was a real situation that he knew about.⁹³ There is no way of knowing now, and whether the situation was hypothetical or real is insignificant.

2:2-3 "Assembly" is literally "synagogue." In the early history of the church Jewish believers met in Jewish synagogues until their unbelieving Jewish brethren forced them out. This reference suggests that James probably wrote this epistle early in the history of the church.

There is some debate among the commentators about whether a public worship service or a congregational meeting for the purpose of hearing a judicial case is in view.⁹⁴ The term "synagogue" meant a public worship service in early Christian literature, but the following verses may suggest a judicial setting. This issue does not affect the meaning of the passage significantly.

". . . in its early days the Church was predominantly poor and humble; and therefore if a rich man was converted, and did come to the Christian fellowship, there must have been a very real temptation to make a fuss of him, and to treat him as a special trophy for Christ."⁹⁵

2:4 The form of James' question in the Greek text expects a positive answer: "You have, haven't you?" The usher made two errors. First, he showed favoritism because of what the rich man might do for the church if he received preferential treatment. He should have treated everyone graciously, as God does. This reflects a double-minded attitude in the usher, thinking like the world in this case while thinking as God thinks in other respects (1:8).

⁹²E.g., Davids, p. 107.

⁹³E.g., Martin, pp. 60, 63.

⁹⁴Adamson, p. 105, argued for the first option and Martin, pp. 59, 61, for the second.

⁹⁵Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 76.

Second, the usher, who represents all the believers, manifested evil motives in judging where to seat the two visitors. His motive was what the church could obtain from them rather than what it could impart to them. The Christian and the church should seek primarily to serve others rather than getting others to serve them (cf. Mark 10:45).

"Prejudice is an evil that exhibits the character of the one who practices it."⁹⁶

3. The inconsistency of favoritism 2:5-7

James' three questions in these verses all expect positive answers, as is clear in the construction of the Greek text.

- 2:5 Since God has chosen the poor of this world to be the recipients of His blessings it is inconsistent for Christians to withhold blessings from them (cf. Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20). Really God has chosen more poor people than rich (Luke 1:52; 1 Cor. 1:26). The "kingdom" is probably the messianic millennial kingdom in which Christians will participate with Christ whom they love.⁹⁷ This seems clear from the context. The heirs of this kingdom, those who will receive it, are believers (cf. 1:12; Matt. 5:3, 5; Mark 10:17-22; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5).
- 2:6 When a Christian dishonors the poor, he or she treats them exactly opposite to the way God treats them (cf. 1 Cor. 11:22; 1 Pet. 2:17). Instead of favoring Christians, James reminded his readers that the characteristic response of the rich to them had been to oppress them (cf. Mark 13:9; Acts 4:1-3; 13:50; 16:19; 19:23-41). How inconsistent it is to despise one's friends and honor one's foes! The oppression in view could have been physical and or legal.
- 2:7 The rich not only typically oppose Christians, they also typically speak against Christ. This was true in James' world as it is in ours. It is inconsistent to give special honor to those who despise the Lord whom believers love and serve. To blaspheme or slander (Gr. *blasphemeo*) means to mock deliberately or to speak contemptuously of God. Perhaps those who were blaspheming Christ's name were unbelieving Jews (cf. Acts 13:45).⁹⁸

4. The Christian's duty 2:8-9

- 2:8 James did not mean Christians should avoid honoring the rich but that we should love everyone and treat every individual as we would treat ourselves (Matt. 7:12; cf. Lev. 19:18). The "royal" (Gr. *basilikos*) law is

⁹⁶Hiebert, *James*, p. 139.

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 141.

⁹⁸Mayor, p. 88.

royal in that it is the law of the King who heads the kingdom (Gr. *basilikon*) that believers will inherit (v. 5).⁹⁹ It is also royal in that it is primary; it governs all other laws dealing with human relationships (Matt. 22:39; cf. Lev. 19:18). Moreover it is "conduct of a high order that is worthy of a king."¹⁰⁰ The phrase "royal law" reflects the Latin *lex regia*, which was known throughout the Roman Empire.¹⁰¹

2:9 In this verse James used the verb form of the same Greek word he used in verse 1, namely, *prosopolepteo*. The type of preferential treatment James dealt with in this pericope (2:1-13) violates the royal law because it treats some as inferior and others as sources of special favor (cf. Acts 10:34). It also violates specific commands found in God's Word that reveal God's will in interpersonal dealings (Matt. 7:12; cf. Lev. 19:15).

"The passage calls us to consistent love, not just polite ushering. People of low income are to be fully welcomed into the life of the church. The passage calls us to be blind to economic differences in how we offer our ministries. The poor person is as worthy of our discipling and pastoral care and love as the person who has the means to rescue our church from its budget crisis."¹⁰²

"Anyone who shows favoritism breaks the supreme law of love for his neighbor, the law that comprehends all laws governing one's relationships to one's fellowmen."¹⁰³

5. The importance of partiality 2:10-11

2:10 James anticipated that some of his readers might feel that preferential treatment was not very important. Consequently he pointed out that the practice of preferring certain individuals makes one a violator of God's law. We become guilty of all in the sense that we have violated God's law, not that we have violated every commandment in that law. One can never claim to behave righteously because he or she keeps only part of God's laws.

"The Jew was very apt to regard the law as a series of detached injunctions. To keep one of these injunctions was to gain credit; to break one was to incur debt. Therefore, a man could add up the ones he kept and subtract the ones he broke, and, as it were emerge with a credit or a debit balance."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹Motyer, pp. 96-97.

¹⁰⁰Hodges, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 53.

¹⁰¹Blue, p. 825.

¹⁰²Stulac, p. 93.

¹⁰³Burdick, p. 180.

¹⁰⁴Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 81.

"Our obedience to God's will cannot be on a selective basis; we cannot choose that part that is to our liking and disregard the rest. God's will is not fragmentary; the entire law is the expression of His will for His people; it constitutes a grand unity. To break out one corner of a window pane is to become guilty of breaking the whole pane. He who crosses a forbidden boundary at one point or another is guilty of having crossed the boundary."¹⁰⁵

- 2:11 James illustrated this point with a hypothetical case involving two very severe violations of the law. All sins are not equally serious in that the consequences of some sins are greater than others, but all sins are equally serious in that any sin is a violation of God's will.

6. The implication of our own judgment 2:12-13

- 2:12 The law of liberty (1:25) is the law of God that liberates us now. It is the same as the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2) in contrast to the Mosaic Law. As free as we are under the law of Christ, we need to remember that God will judge us (Rom. 14:10-13; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). We need to speak and act accordingly, namely, without prejudice toward others.

"Since he is speaking to believers, the judgment to which he refers must be the judgment of believers at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10)."¹⁰⁶

- 2:13 God will not judge us with partiality. He will punish the unmerciful unmercifully. We need to understand this statement in the light of other revelations concerning how God will judge believers. We are in no danger of losing our salvation or even experiencing God's wrath. However, we will suffer a loss of reward if we sin by practicing unmerciful favoritism (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Matt. 5:7; 6:15; 7:1; 18:23-25).

On the other hand, if we are merciful in dealing with our fellowmen God will be merciful in dealing with us when we stand before Him (cf. Matt. 25:34-40). Mercy triumphs over judgment just as love triumphs over partiality. We should accept one another with courtesy, compassion, and consistency.¹⁰⁷

In modern life, partiality sometimes arises because of differences in economic levels, race, religious preferences, political views, educational backgrounds, and personal opinions, to name a few causes.¹⁰⁸ For Christians it is sometimes harder to be impartial

¹⁰⁵Hiebert, *James*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁶Burdick, p. 180.

¹⁰⁷Blue, p. 825.

¹⁰⁸See Larry A. Mercer, "A Biblical and Cultural Study of the Problem of Racism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:609 (January-March 1996):87-103.

toward sinners who flaunt their sin than it is those who acknowledge that they have sinned. However because Christ died for all we should reach out to all as He did rather than being unfriendly and cliquish. This is true whether the sinners are homosexuals, AIDS patients, the murderers of unborn children, liars, adulterers, thieves, gossips, or gluttons, for example. This reaching out will be an accurate indicator of the extent to which Christ's love controls us (cf. 1:27).

This section of verses may raise a question in some minds concerning how James viewed the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law. Was he implying that we are responsible to keep the whole Mosaic Code? His own words at the Jerusalem Council show that this was not his view (cf. Acts 15:13-21). God gave the Mosaic Law both to regulate the life of the Israelites and to reveal the character and purposes of God to the Israelites and all other people. Its regulatory function ceased when Jesus died on the cross (Rom. 10:4; Heb. 7:12). Its revelatory value remains forever; it is part of Scripture that is still profitable (2 Tim. 3:16). The moral revelation James referred to here is as applicable now as it was before the Cross. God still expects people to live in its light. Whereas God has terminated the Mosaic Law as a codified body of law, some individual commands within this covenant continue in force under the new "law of liberty." These are the laws affecting all human conduct presently in contrast to those affecting only the life of the Israelites under the Mosaic Law. Christians live under a new set of rules, the law of liberty. Israelites lived under a different set of rules, the Law of Moses. The fact that the "golden rule" was part of the Mosaic Law as well as the law of Christ does not mean that we are still under the Mosaic Law.¹⁰⁹

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF VITAL FAITH 2:14-26

Some have seen this section as dealing with a new subject, the relationship of faith and works, whereas the previous one dealt with partiality (vv. 1-13). It seems to me and to others, however, that this section relates to the preceding one in the same way 1:19-27 relates to 1:2-18. It deals with a larger, more basic issue that connects with and underlies the practical problem just discussed.

"In this section St. James proceeds to enlarge on the meaning and nature of that faith in Jesus Christ which was spoken of in ver. 1 as inconsistent with *prosopolempsia* [respect of persons]."¹¹⁰

In his discussion of favoritism James argued for genuineness and warned of superficial self-deception. The larger issue is the whole matter of faith in God. James wrote this section to challenge his readers to examine the vitality of their faith in God. Were they really putting their faith into practice, applying their beliefs to their behavior? Their preferential treatment of some people raised this question in James' mind.

¹⁰⁹For further discussion of the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law, see Charles C. Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:495 (July-September 1967):239-47; and J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Purpose of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:511 (July-September 1971):227-33.

¹¹⁰Mayor, p. 95.

"Not only is the mature Christian patient in testing (James 1), but he also practices the truth. This is the theme of James 2. Immature people talk about their beliefs, but the mature person lives his faith. Hearing God's Word (James 1:22-25) and talking about God's Word can never substitute for doing God's Word."¹¹¹

There have been three primary interpretations of this passage of Scripture. The first view is that it refers to a person who was a believer but has lost his salvation. He used to have saving faith but does not have it any longer. This is the view of most Arminians. The second view is that it refers to an unbeliever who professes to be a Christian but has never really exercised saving faith in Christ. His faith is only intellectual assent to gospel truth, not saving faith.¹¹² One advocate of this interpretation wrote, "His [James'] contrast is between two kinds of faith: one that saves and one that doesn't."¹¹³ The third view is that it refers to a believer who is not living by faith. He is not behaving consistently with what he believes.¹¹⁴ The first two views say this passage describes unbelievers whereas the third view says it describes believers. By examining the passage we should be able to decide which view is correct.

1. James' assertion 2:14

The Arminian interpretation of this verse (view one above) is as follows. If a person claims to be a Christian but gives no evidence of true faith by the way he lives, he may never have been saved or he may no longer be saved. One Reformed view (view two above) is that if a person claims to be a Christian but gives no evidence of true faith by the way he lives, he was never saved.¹¹⁵ The third interpretation (view three above) is that if a person claims to be a Christian but gives no evidence of true faith by the way he lives there are two possibilities. He may not be saved, or he may be saved, but he is not living by faith, practicing his faith.

James just dealt with the Christian who professed to love others but by practicing personal favoritism demonstrated that he did not. Now he raised the larger issue of the believer who gives no evidence of his faith in the way he lives. He began by questioning the vitality of that faith. The form of this question in the Greek expects a negative response. If we translate it, "Can that *kind of* faith save him," or, "Can *such* faith save him," we may mislead the reader. The same construction exists in 1:2-4; 2:17, 18, 20, 22, 26; and 1 Corinthians 13:4 where the addition of "kind of" or "such" gives a more obviously improper translation. The presence of the definite article "the" with the abstract noun "faith" emphasizes the noun. James was saying that faith without works cannot save a person. Works *are* a condition for some kind of salvation.

¹¹¹Wiersbe, p. 63.

¹¹²E.g., Burdick; Tasker; Motyer; Fanning, pp. 424-27; and John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works*, pp. 139-55.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹¹⁴E.g., Hodges; Wiersbe; Dillow; and R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*.

¹¹⁵For a response to advocates of lordship salvation that hold this position, see Robert N. Wilkin, "Can Faith Without Works Save? James 2:14," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 9:5 (September-October 1994):2-3.

This statement seems to contradict Paul's affirmation that works are *not* a condition for salvation (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 11:6; et al.). However, Paul and James were talking about different aspects of salvation. This is clear from James' earlier assertion that his Christian readers (1:18) would be able to save their "souls" (better "lives") if they obeyed God's Word (1:21). Jesus also gave similar warnings that if His disciples did not continue to follow Him they could lose their "souls" (i.e., lives; cf. Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 3:4; 8:34-37; Luke 9:23-25). He used the same Greek word that James did to describe the life (i.e., *psyche*). The translation "life" for "soul" may mislead us, however, into concluding that only the physical life is in view whenever we read this word (*psyche*). Rather it is the total person that *psyche* describes, not just our physical life or our eternal life (cf. 1 Pet. 1:9). Any aspect of our life may be in view, and the context will help us determine what it is.

"We are not saved *by* deeds; we are saved *for* deeds; these are the twin truths of the Christian life. And Paul's whole emphasis is on the first truth, and James's whole emphasis is on the second truth."¹¹⁶

In verse 14 James returned to his thought in 1:21-22 about saving one's life from death. His point here was that faith is no substitute for obedience. Orthodox faith without good works cannot protect the Christian from sin's deadly consequences in this life (i.e., a deadening of fellowship with God at least, and at most physical death; cf. 5:20; 1 John 5:16). That faith cannot save him from God's discipline of him as a believer. Good works in addition to faith are necessary for that kind of deliverance (salvation). Many commentators believe that James was referring to eschatological salvation (i.e., salvation from eternal damnation). This interpretation obviously involves bringing works in as some type of condition for that aspect of salvation, which contradicts the clear revelation that salvation from hell is by grace alone.

"It would be difficult to find a concept which is richer and more varied in meaning than the biblical concept of salvation. The breadth of salvation is so sweeping and its intended aim so magnificent that in many contexts the words used defy precise definition. Yet these difficulties have not thwarted numerous interpreters from assuming, often without any contextual justification, that the words used invariably mean 'deliverance from hell' or 'go to heaven when you die.' It may come as a surprise to many that this usage of 'salvation' (Gk. *soteria*) would have been the least likely meaning to come to the mind of a reader of the Bible in the first century. Indeed, in 812 usages of the various Hebrew words translated 'to save' or 'salvation' in the Old Testament, only 58 (7.1 percent) refer to eternal salvation."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 87.

¹¹⁷Dillow, p. 112. Cf. pp. 187-94. See also Alfred Plummer, *The General Epistles of St. James and St. Jude*, p. 137; Martin Dibelius, *James*, p. 178; and W. Nicol, "Faith and Works in the Letter of James," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975):7-24. For a short, popular discussion, see Robert N. Wilkin, "Repentance and Salvation, Part 2: The Doctrine of Repentance in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2 (Spring 1989):14.

2. James' illustration 2:15-16

As he did before (vv. 2-4), James provided a concrete situation to illustrate his point (vv. 15-16). He envisioned a situation that may very well have taken place in his church in Jerusalem where there were many poor saints (Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:3). All the people in the illustration seem to be genuine Christians in view of the terms James used to describe them (cf. "brethren" in 1:2; 2:1, 14; 3:1). The situation he described highlights the absurdity of claiming vital faith (i.e., that one is putting his faith into practice) but at the same time not working (i.e., not obeying the Word of God; cf. 1 John 3:17-18). A benediction cannot save a starving man from death; only bread can do that.

One Greek scholar paraphrased verses 14-17 as follows.

"What good does it do, my Christian brothers, if someone among you says he has faith and yet does not act on that faith? Faith certainly cannot preserve his life, can it? It would be the same thing as if one of you spoke to some Christian brother or sister who was destitute of the necessities of life and you said, 'Go home peacefully and get warmed and filled.' But if you did not give them the very things they needed for bodily life, what good would it do? Would their lives be saved by your confident words? In the same way when faith stands all by itself, because you fail to act on it, your inactive faith is as dead as your useless words to your destitute Christian brother. It has no life-preserving power at all!"¹¹⁸

3. James' restatement of his point 2:17

James was not saying that a person who responds to another Christian's need, as in verses 15-16, shows that he has failed to exercise saving faith and is devoid of eternal life. He was saying that faith, if work (i.e., obedience to the Word of God) does not accompany it, is dead (i.e., inactive).

"We can make statements in all sincerity of mind and emotion: 'I feel sorry for the poor; I don't condone racism.' But James will say, 'What good is that if you aren't doing something to help the poor or to heal the distrust and injustice between races?' Some Christians attempt a stance of personal belief without personal action, saying, for example, 'I personally disagree with abortion, but I won't try to change others' minds.' James persists in asking us: What are you doing to protect the victims—both the victimized baby and the victimized mother?"¹¹⁹

"Dead" does not mean non-existent but inactive, no longer vital, dormant, useless (cf. v. 14). This is a very important point.

¹¹⁸Zane C. Hodges, *Dead Faith: What Is It?* p. 15.

¹¹⁹Stulac, p. 120.

"It has not usually been considered too deeply why James chose the term 'dead' to describe a faith that is not working. But the moment we relate this to the controlling theme of 'saving the life,' everything becomes plain. The issue that concerns James is an issue of life or death. (He is *not* discussing salvation from hell!) The truth which he has in mind is that of Proverbs: 'Righteousness tendeth to life . . . he that pursueth evil pursueth it to his own death.' [Prov. 11:19; cf. Prov. 10:27; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16] Can a *dead* faith save the Christian from *death*? The question answers itself. The choice of the adjective 'dead' is perfectly suited to James' argument."¹²⁰

4. An objection 2:18

James next introduced an objection to his thesis that faith is dead (inoperative) without works. He put it in the mouth of a hypothetical objector. This literary device of objection and response was a common one that Paul also used (e.g., Rom. 9:19-20; 1 Cor. 15:35-36). It is the diatribe.¹²¹ The form of the diatribe helps us identify that what follows is the statement of the objector and what follows that is James' response to the objector.

The NIV, by its use of quotation marks, has the objector saying only the first part of this verse, "You have faith; I have deeds," and James responding in the last part of the verse. The NASB has the objector saying the whole verse. Which is correct? There were no punctuation marks in the Greek text so we have to determine on the basis of what makes the most sense. The objector seems to be making a point by way of argument rather than making a simple statement. This fact seems clear from the context in which James responds with a rebuttal (vv. 19-23). Consequently I prefer the NASB punctuation of this verse.

The objector claims that good works are the necessary sign of saving faith. He says, "You cannot prove you have faith unless you have works, but because I have works you can see that I have faith."¹²² This is the argument that many evangelicals have used: the necessary evidence that a person has been saved (justified) is his good works (sanctification). If he is not doing good works, he is unsaved. Works *always* evidence faith, they say. But if this view is true, why did Jesus teach his disciples that some who are "in Me" bear no fruit (John 15:2, 6)?

The idea that evidence of sanctification must be present before the sinner can have full assurance of his justification is one that certain Reformed preachers after the time of John Calvin popularized. This idea is neither scriptural nor did John Calvin hold it. Theodore Beza in Geneva and William Perkins in England were leading figures in the Calvinists' departure from John Calvin's own teaching concerning faith and assurance.¹²³

¹²⁰Hodges, *The Gospel* . . . , p. 27.

¹²¹See Hiebert, *James*, p. 131; and Sidebottom, p. 1.

¹²²Cf. Adamson, p. 124.

¹²³See R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*; idem., *Once Saved* . . . , pp. 207-17; and M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*.

The basis of our assurance that we are saved is primarily the promise of God in Scripture (John 1:12; 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 10:27-29; 20:31; et al.). It is not the presence of good works (fruit) in our lives. Jesus taught that some branches of the vine do not bear fruit (Matt. 13:22; Mark 4:7; Luke 8:14; John 15:2, 6). Nevertheless they still share in the life of the vine. It seems clear that every true believer experiences a radical transformation in his life when he trusts Jesus Christ as his Savior (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8; Col. 1:13; et al.). However the Scriptures do not say that every true believer's lifestyle will inevitably experience external transformation. That depends on the believer's response to God's will. Carnal Christians (1 Cor. 3:1-4) are those who choose to indulge the flesh rather than submitting to the Spirit's control. Fruit is the *outward* evidence of inner life. Just as some fruit trees bear little or no fruit, it is possible for some genuine Christians to bear little or no external evidence of their eternal life. The Holy Spirit affects inner transformation in every believer. Normally He will produce outer transformation as well unless the believer quenches and grieves Him as He seeks to manifest the life of Christ through us to others.

5. James' rebuttal 2:19-23

2:19 James refuted the argument of the objector stated in verse 18. Genuine faith does not *always* result in good works. The demons believe that what God has revealed about Himself is true. The *Shema* (Deut. 6:4) was and is the pious Jew's daily confession of his faith. Nevertheless the demons continue practicing evil works. They understand what their behavior will bring upon them, but rather than turning from their evil ways they only shudder as they anticipate their inevitable judgment. I think James selected the demons as an illustration because they are the most extreme and clear example of beings whose belief is correct but whose behavior is not. He did not select them because they are lost, which they are. Throughout this book James was speaking to genuine Christians (cf. vv. 14, 15, 21, 23, 25, et al.). Just like the demons Christians can persist in rebelling against God's will even though they know they will stand before the judgment seat of Christ someday (2 Cor. 5:10).

Some people have concluded that James' reason for using the demons as an illustration was to show that intellectual assent to the truth is not enough. To experience regeneration a person must not only accept the gospel message as true but also rely on the Savior to save him. Whereas it is true that intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel is not adequate for regeneration, that does not appear to be the point James was making in this illustration. His point seems to be that good works do not *always* result from correct belief (cf. 1:26-27; 4:17). They did in Abraham's case (vv. 21-22), but not in the case of the demons. Further evidence that this is the correct conclusion is that what James said the demons believe is not the gospel message. James was not talking about what is necessary to become a Christian.

". . . this verse which is often quoted to show that some creatures can believe but not be saved is irrelevant to the issue of salvation, for it says only that demons are monotheists."¹²⁴

Some scholars believe that the objector is speaking in verse 19 as well as in verse 18.¹²⁵ Some of them base this conclusion on the fact that the Greek word *choris* (translated "without") is *ek* (translated "by") in some ancient Greek manuscripts. Most Greek scholars believe *choris* is the proper word and that James is speaking in verse 19.¹²⁶ I agree with them on this point.

2:20 James thought his objector's argument was foolish. He still asserted that without good works a person's faith in God is useless, not non-existent but useless (Gr. *argos*, ineffectual, lit. without work; cf. Matt. 20:3, 6).

A Christian who has stopped living by faith day by day is similar to a person who has a non-functioning organ in his body. As the organ is dead, so the faith of such a Christian is dead, useless. Furthermore, his dead faith will contribute to his physical death, as a dead organ will shorten physical life.

James then proceeded to explain what he meant by "useless" in verses 21-23. Note how often James said that he was writing about the *uselessness* of faith unaccompanied by works, not the *absence* of faith unaccompanied by works (1:26; 2:14, 16, 20).

2:21 This verse at first seems to contradict other verses that say God declared Abraham righteous when Abraham believed God's promise (Gen. 15:1-6; Rom. 4:1-5). The solution to the problem lies in the meaning of "justified." This word always means to *declare* someone righteous in the sight of the law, not to *make* someone righteous in his or her conduct (cf. Exod. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32). The failure to define justification biblically is what has led some Reformed interpreters to conclude that everyone who is truly justified will inevitably behave righteously.

The NIV translation "considered righteous" is a bit misleading (cf. v. 25). Abraham was *declared* righteous more than once. Most interpreters understand the first scriptural statement of his justification as describing his "new birth," to use the New Testament term (Gen. 15:6). This is when *God* declared Abraham righteous. About 20 years later James says Abraham was justified again. Scripture consistently teaches that believers

¹²⁴Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, p. 122.

¹²⁵E.g., Mayor, p. 101; and Zane C. Hodges, "Light on James Two from Textual Criticism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120:480 (October-December 1963):343-47.

¹²⁶See Martin, p. 89.

whom God declares righteous never lose their righteous standing before God (Rom. 5:1; 8:1; et al.). They do not need to be saved again. Abraham's subsequent justification evidently refers to a second *declaration* of his righteousness. James said this second time Abraham's *works* declared him righteous. They gave testimony (bore witness) to his faith.¹²⁷ Works do not *always* evidence faith (v. 19), but sometimes they do. They do whenever a person who has become a believer by faith continues to live by faith. Abraham is a good example of a believer whose good works (obedience to God) bore witness to his righteousness. He continued to live by faith just as he had been declared righteous by faith.

2:22 Abraham's faith was "perfected" by his works in the sense that his works made his faith stronger. This is another way of expressing the same idea that James stated in 1:2-4. Maturity comes as we persevere in the will of God when we encounter trials. When God spared Isaac's life, Abraham's faith doubtless became much stronger than it had been.

"The faith which justifies . . . can have an active and vital role in the life of the obedient believer. As with Abraham, it can be the dynamic for superb acts of obedience. In the process, faith itself can be 'perfected.' The Greek word suggests development and motivation. Faith is thus nourished and strengthened by works."¹²⁸

The singular "you" in this verse in the Greek text indicates that James was still addressing his objector.

2:23 Genesis 15:6 was "fulfilled" when Abraham offered Isaac in the sense that Abraham's faith became abundantly clear on that occasion. What God had said about Abraham became obviously true when the patriarch trusted and obeyed God when tested.

"In the sacrifice of Isaac was shown the full meaning of the word (Gen. 15:6) spoken . . . years before in commendation of Abraham's belief in the promise of a child."¹²⁹

James seems to have included the fact that God called Abraham His friend for the following reason. He wanted to show that continued obedient faith, not just initial saving faith, is what makes a person God's intimate friend (cf. 4:4; 2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; John 14:21; 15:14).

"When a man is justified by faith he finds an unqualified acceptance before God . . . (Rom. 4:6). But only God can see this spiritual transaction. When, however, a man is

¹²⁷See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1—17*, p. 441; and Robertson, 6:37.

¹²⁸Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, pp. 29-30.

¹²⁹Mayor, p. 104.

justified by works he achieves an intimacy with God that is manifest to men. He can then be called 'the friend of God,' even as Jesus said, 'You are my friends if you do whatever I command you' (John 15:14)."¹³⁰

Why did James bring Abraham into his argument? Abraham is a clear example that it is possible to be declared righteous by God but not to be declared righteous by one's works. It was as Abraham continued to live by faith (continued to trust and obey God) that, about 20 years after his justification by faith in God, his works declared that he was righteous. By continuing to trust and obey God, as Abraham did, James' Christian readers could also validate their justification by faith in God by their good works and become true friends of God.

6. James' final argument 2:24-26

2:24 The use of the plural "you" in this verse in the Greek text shows that James had completed his response to the objector. He was now addressing his readers directly again (cf. vv. 14-17).

Works declare us righteous (Gr. present passive indicative of *dikaioo*) in the sense that our works testify to onlookers that we have exercised saving faith. They are the external fruit that bears witness to the eternal life within. "You see . . . by [his] works." However, James previously said that not every believer will bear visible fruit (v. 17; cf. John 15:2). Such a believer's faith is not productive but "dead." Nevertheless he has faith. Some unbelievers appear to bear the fruit of saving faith, but God will one day expose their "wheat" as "tares" (Matt. 13:30).

". . . Paul and James are best understood as addressing quite dissimilar situations . . . Whereas Paul's audience is in danger of relying on 'works' for salvation, James' readers are excusing themselves from good works, thereby showing only a faith that is dead . . ."¹³¹

One writer argued for the view that the vindication in view here is universal and is stated in a salvific context.¹³² My view is that the vindication is only before others and is not in a salvific context.

2:25 James could have ended his argument about the "revered patriarch" Abraham, but he chose to add the illustration of Rahab, the "redeemed prostitute."¹³³

¹³⁰Hodges, *The Gospel* . . . , p. 31. See also Fanning, p. 429.

¹³¹Martin, p. 95.

¹³²C. Ryan Jenkins, "Faith and Works in Paul and James," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:633 (January-March 2002):62-78.

¹³³Blue, p. 826.

"Rahab . . . is superbly suited to tie the strands of his thoughts together. This passage had begun, as we have seen, with an allusion to his theme of 'saving the life' (2:14; 1:21). Not surprisingly, therefore, Rahab is selected as a striking example of a person whose physical life was 'saved' precisely because she had works."¹³⁴

Apparently Rahab trusted in God before the spies ever arrived at her door (cf. Josh. 2:9-13). Rather than being originally part of the Israelite nation she was a proselyte to Judaism. Thus with these two examples James showed the necessity of works for believers regardless of one's background and origins. Abraham and Rahab were poles apart.

"The contrast is neat: Abraham, a major Bible figure; Rahab, a minor participant. Abraham the father of the faithful; Rahab a foreigner. Abraham the respected; Rahab the disreputable. Abraham a man; Rahab a woman. As so often, the contrast is intended to alert us to the fact that a fully comprehensive statement is being made—as it were, covering the situation all the way from Abraham to Rahab and back again. The primary works of faith, then, are the works of Abraham and Rahab and they apply to all without exception.

"What was the work of Abraham? He held nothing back from God. God said, 'I want your son' and Abraham 'rose early in the morning' (Gn. 22:3) in prompt obedience. What was the work of Rahab? She reached out and took into her own care those who were needy and helpless, regardless of the cost to herself."¹³⁵

2:26 Faith without works is as dead as a body without a human spirit. It is of no practical value. This is James' final illustration and affirmation on the subject. Our faith becomes only dead orthodoxy when we stop obeying God. Vital faith then becomes dead faith. Both a dead body and dead faith were alive at one time.

"Does James then contradict Paul's doctrine of full grace, or John's insistence on faith as the single condition for eternal life? Far from it. But neither does he offer support to the widespread notion that a 'dead faith' cannot exist in the life of a Christian. Ironically, that is exactly what he is warning against. Thus the misconstruction of his words has not only bred unnecessary confusion about the terms for eternal life, but it has also deprived the church of a much needed and salutary warning.

¹³⁴Hodges, *The Gospel . . .*, p. 32.

¹³⁵Motyer, pp. 115-16.

"The dangers of a dying faith are real. But they do not include hell, and nothing James writes suggests this. Nevertheless, sin remains a deadly nemesis to Christian experience which can end our physical lives themselves. To that, the wisdom of the Old Testament adds its witness to the warnings of James. And if a man is to be saved from *such* a consequence, he *must* have works."¹³⁶

"Never once does James question whether the rich—or poor—have been saved. Neither does he admonish them in such a way that should cause them to question whether they have been saved. He never says, for example, 'The trouble with you people is that you are not saved.' He does not come forward with a plan of salvation; he does not warn them of a false assurance; he does not go over the basis of saving faith."¹³⁷

The key to understanding this passage is a correct understanding of what dead faith is. James used "dead" (vv. 17, 26) as a synonym for "useless" (vv. 14, 16, 20). He was not saying the person with dead faith has no faith, that he is unsaved. He meant that the person with dead faith has saving faith, but he is not living by faith now. His faith has no vital effect on the way he presently lives. He is not trusting and obeying God day by day.

"The faith which is mentioned in this section [2:14-26] can be presupposed in every Christian . . . [James'] intention is not dogmatically oriented, but practically oriented: *he wishes to admonish the Christians to practice their faith, i.e. their Christianity, by works.*"¹³⁸

To summarize, I believe what James wrote in verses 14-26 means this. Good works are not necessary to keep us from going to hell. However they are necessary to keep us from falling under God's disciplinary punishment that may even result in premature physical death. It is possible for a Christian not to use his or her faith, to stop "walking by faith." In such a case his or her faith is of no practical use here and now. Therefore we who are Christians should be careful to continue to keep trusting and obeying God day by day. It is possible for a Christian to exercise "saving faith" and then to stop "walking by faith." That is what James is warning us to avoid. He is dealing with sanctification primarily, not justification, here and throughout this epistle. This is Christian life teaching, not teaching on how to become a Christian.

"James' emphasis on faith alone shows that he affirms the necessity of faith; what he is opposing is a faith that denies the obligation to obey Christ as Lord."¹³⁹

¹³⁶Hodges, *The Gospel* . . . , p. 33.

¹³⁷Kendall, *Once Saved* . . . , p. 208. Cf. Chitwood, *Salvation of* . . . , pp. 45-54.

¹³⁸Dibelius, p. 178. The italics are his.

¹³⁹Stulac, p. 116. See also Robert N. Wilkin, "Another View of Faith and Works in James 2," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 15:29 (Autumn 2002):3-21.

IV. SPEECH AND DIVINE WISDOM CH. 3

One of the most important aspects of our works, which James had been discussing, is our words. We conduct much of our work with words. We also may express partiality with our words. James next gave his readers directions concerning their words to help them understand and apply God's will to this area of their lives.

A. CONTROLLING THE TONGUE 3:1-12

It is particularly the misuse of the tongue in Christian worship that James addressed (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3; 14:27-39). From the subject of idle faith, James proceeded to discuss idle speech.

"... in his usual 'rondo' manner [James] returns to the theme of speech (1:19, 26) and warns his true Christians of the dangers of the tongue ..."¹⁴⁰

"It [this chapter] is also connected with that overvaluation of theory as compared with practice which formed the subject of the last chapter."¹⁴¹

"Those in his line of sight are evidently leaders who are summoned to control and guide the course of the church's life and destiny. Hence the twin imagery of the horse's bit (v 3) and the ship's rudder (v 4)."¹⁴²

1. The negative warning 3:1

As in the previous two chapters, James introduced a new subject with a command (cf. 1:2; 2:1).

Every Christian is responsible to teach others what God has revealed in His Word (Matt. 28:19; Heb. 5:12). However, James was evidently speaking of becoming teachers as the rabbis in his day were, namely, "professional" teachers. He may have been cautioning those who were considering teaching in the church and suggesting that some who were ministering in this capacity unworthily should step down.¹⁴³

"Teachers are necessary, but incompetent and unworthy ones do much harm."¹⁴⁴

The Jews regarded teachers (rabbis) with great awe and gave them much honor in James' day (cf. Matt. 23:8). The synagogue service allowed opportunity for men in the congregation to rise and address the rest of the assembly (cf. Acts 13:15). The Christians carried this opportunity over into the meetings of the early church (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26-33). Consequently there were many in James' audience who, though not qualified with ability,

¹⁴⁰Adamson, p. 138.

¹⁴¹Mayor, p. 107.

¹⁴²Martin, p. 104.

¹⁴³Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁴⁴Robertson, 6:39.

aspired to teach others publicly for the sake of prestige or some other motive. James warned that God will judge a teacher more strictly than a non-teacher because he presumably knows the truth and claims to live by it.

"This is not an attack upon the office of the teacher or the teaching function, for James at once identifies himself as a teacher. Rather, he is seeking to restrain the rush to teach on the part of those not qualified."¹⁴⁵

"Any teacher runs the risk of becoming 'Sir Oracle.' No profession is more liable to beget spiritual and intellectual pride."¹⁴⁶

2. The reason for the warning 3:2

The person who speaks much is going to err in his or her speech much because the tongue is the hardest member of the body to control. No one has been able to master it yet except Jesus Christ. Yet spiritual maturity requires a tamed tongue (cf. Titus 1:11).

"Although not all sins laid to the account of one person are necessarily the same as those shared by others, all persons have at least one sin in common, namely, the sin of the tongue."¹⁴⁷

3. Examples of the danger 3:3-6

3:3 It is the same with horses as it is with humans. If we can control the tongue, we can bring the whole animal under control.

"Nothing seems to trip a believer more than a dangling tongue."¹⁴⁸

3:4 This second illustration adds another element. The controlled tongue can overcome great obstacles. James had observed many ships on the Sea of Galilee, and perhaps on the Mediterranean, driven by strong winds.

3:5 The two previous illustrations share a characteristic that James pointed out next. Though small and comparatively insignificant, the tongue can affect great change out of all proportion to its size. The bit, the rudder, and the tongue, even though they are small, all have *power to direct*. This interpretation seems preferable to the one that takes verse 5a as a statement that the tongue can make pretentious claims. James did not state that idea previously, but this sentence claims a connection with what precedes.

¹⁴⁵Hiebert, *James*, p. 185.

¹⁴⁶Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 94. His allusion is to William Shakespear's *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1, Scene 1, Line 93: "I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips let no dog bark!"

¹⁴⁷Martin, p. 109.

¹⁴⁸Blue, p. 827.

The tongue has as much destructive power as a spark in a forest. It is petite but powerful.

3:6 Fire is a good illustration of the tongue's effect. It is a "world of iniquity," perverse as well as powerful.

". . . all the evil characteristics of a fallen world, its covetousness, its idolatry, its blasphemy, its lust, its rapacious greed, find expression through the tongue."¹⁴⁹

"From the context it seems best to accept that James thinks of the tongue as a vast system of iniquity."¹⁵⁰

The tongue is the gate through which the evil influences of hell can spread like fire to inflame all the areas of life that we touch. This is the only place in the New Testament where "hell" (Gr. *geennes*) occurs outside the Synoptic Gospels. Here the body (Gr. *soma*) represents the whole person. However it may also allude to the church as well.¹⁵¹

4. The uncontrollable nature of the tongue 3:7-8

3:7 Human beings have brought all the major forms of animal life under control. For example, people have taught lions, tigers, and monkeys to jump through hoops. They have taught parrots and canaries to speak and sing. They have charmed snakes. They have trained dolphins and whales to perform various tricks and tasks. The ancients took pride in the ability of humans to tame and control the animal kingdom.¹⁵² "Tamed" is perhaps too strong a word. "Subdued" might be a better translation of the Greek word (*damazo*).

3:8 Apart from the Holy Spirit's help no human being has ever been able to subdue his or her own tongue. It is much more dangerous than any deadly animal because it never rests, and it can destroy simply with words. Fire, animals, and the tongue all have *power to destroy* (cf. v. 5).

5. The inconsistency of the tongue 3:9-12

3:9 We honor God with our words, but then we turn right around and dishonor other people with what we say. This is inconsistent because man is the image of God (Gen. 1:27).

¹⁴⁹Tasker, p. 76.

¹⁵⁰Hiebert, *James*, p. 195.

¹⁵¹Martin, pp. 111, 112, and 123.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 116.

"To bless God is the sublimest function of the human tongue; thrice daily the devout Jew recited 'the Eighteen Benedictions,' with their ending 'Blessed art Thou, O God.'"¹⁵³

"It was the pious practice among the Jews, both in speaking and in writing, to add 'Blessed [be] He' after each utterance of the name of God. No doubt, the readers of this epistle still continued this practice whenever God was mentioned."¹⁵⁴

3:10 Not only is this contradictory phenomenon contrary to the will of God, it is also contrary to the natural order of things.

"Although the believer has in the indwelling Holy Spirit the potential for controlling the tongue, he may not be appropriating this potential."¹⁵⁵

"To the person who speaks praise to God in the worship service and then abuses people verbally at home or at work, James commands, 'Purify your speech through the week.' With the person who says, 'Oh, I know I talk too much,' and laughs it off, James is not amused. He insists, 'Be quick to listen, slow to speak.' By the person who boasts, 'I always speak my mind, no matter who gets hurt,' James is not impressed. He commands, 'Discipline your speaking.' Of the person who says, 'I know I gossip too much, but I just can't help it,' James still requires, 'Control your tongue.' Of the person who is in the habit of speaking with insults, ridicule or sarcasm, James demands, 'Change your speech habits.' He expects discipline to be happening in the life of a Christian. Any Christian can ask for the grace needed, for God gives good gifts (1:17) and gives them generously (1:5). There is, then, no justification for corrupt habits of speech in our churches today."¹⁵⁶

". . . the Bible nowhere places much value on knowledge that remains merely cerebral or credal [*sic*]. Nothing is known until it also reshapes the life."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³Adamson, p. 146.

¹⁵⁴Hiebert, *James*, p. 201. Cf. Mark 14:61.

¹⁵⁵Burdick, p. 188.

¹⁵⁶Stulac, p. 130.

¹⁵⁷Motyer, p. 130.

"The reference is not to the use of profanity in vulgar speech but apparently seems to envision angry disputes and slanderous remarks in inner-church party strife (cf. 4:1-2, 11-12)."¹⁵⁸

3:11-12 Illustrations highlight this natural inconsistency (cf. Matt. 7:16). A water source can yield only one kind of water. A tree can only produce fruit of its own kind. A salt spring cannot produce fresh water any more than a fallen human nature can naturally produce pure words. A fountain, a tree, and the tongue all have *power to delight* (cf. vv. 5, 8).

"Small and influential, the tongue must be controlled; satanic and infectious, the tongue must be corralled; salty and inconsistent, the tongue must be cleansed."¹⁵⁹

James was dealing, as in the preceding chapters, with root causes of human behavior that is out of harmony with God's will. He contrasts strongly with the religious teachers that Jesus rebuked for their superficiality and hypocrisy. He was, of course, picturing human behavior as it is naturally apart from the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit.

B. CONTROLLING THE MIND 3:13-18

As in the previous chapters, James began his discussion of human speech with a practical exhortation and continued to deal with increasingly basic issues. He spoke of the importance of controlling one's mind next to enable his readers to understand how to control their tongues. Wisdom in the mind affects one's use of his or her tongue. Note the key words "wise" and "wisdom" (vv. 13, 17), which bracket the thought of this section, as well of the prominence of "peaceable" and "peace" that conclude it (vv. 17, 18).

1. The importance of humility 3:13

The real qualifications of a teacher (v. 1) are wisdom (the ability to view life from God's perspective) and understanding (mental perception and comprehension). James probably had the Old Testament sage in mind.¹⁶⁰ We can perceive understanding in others quite easily, but wisdom is more difficult to identify. James said to look at a person's behavior if you want to see if he or she is wise. The wisdom James had in mind did not result so much in what one thinks or says but in what one does.¹⁶¹

One of the marks of wisdom is gentleness, meekness, humility. The Greek word *prauteti* ("gentleness") occurs in non-biblical literature to describe a horse that someone had broken and had trained to submit to a bridle.¹⁶² It pictures strength under control,

¹⁵⁸Hiebert, *James*, p. 201.

¹⁵⁹Blue, p. 828.

¹⁶⁰See John E. Johnson, "The Old Testament Offices as Paradigm for Pastoral Identity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:606 (April-June 1995):182-200.

¹⁶¹James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James*, p. 244.

¹⁶²Barclay, *New Testament . . .*, pp. 241-42.

specifically the Holy Spirit's control. The evidence of this attitude is a deliberate placing of oneself under divine authority. The only way to control the tongue is to place one's mind deliberately under the authority of God and to let Him control it (have His way with it; cf. Matt. 11:27; 2 Cor. 10:1). James' concept of wisdom was Hebraic rather than Greek, moral more than intellectual (cf. 1:5).

"The problem seems to be that some self-styled chief people, thinking they were endowed with superior wisdom and understanding, had divided the church because of their teaching, which betrayed a misuse of the tongue."¹⁶³

"It is very difficult to be a teacher or a preacher and to remain humble; but however difficult it is, it is absolutely necessary."¹⁶⁴

2. The importance of graciousness 3:14-16

3:14 "Bitter jealousy" and "selfish ambition" are motives that must not inhabit the heart of a teacher or he will find himself saying things he should not. These are attitudes toward others and self that are the antithesis of graciousness that seeks the welfare of others before self. Jealousy and ambition are manifestations of arrogance, and they result in promoting self rather than the truth the teacher is responsible to communicate. Lying against the truth means teaching untrue things, things that oppose the truth. Those who boast of wisdom are not following God because humility does not mark their lives. This is as true of Christians as it is of non-Christians.

3:15 This type of so-called "wisdom," which springs from jealousy and ambition, does not have its source in the fear of the Lord. It comes from the spirit (philosophy) of this world (cf. 2:1-7). It consists of only what is natural, excluding the supernatural influence of God's Spirit. Furthermore it is demon-like in its deception, hypocrisy, and evil.

"Wisdom is not measured by degrees but by deeds. It is not a matter of acquiring truth in lectures but of applying truth to life."¹⁶⁵

3:16 God is not the God of disorder but of order and peace (Gen. 1; 1 Cor. 14:33). He opposes every evil thing (1 John 1:5). Therefore ungracious jealousy and personal ambition are not part of the wisdom He provides.

"There is a kind of person who is undoubtedly clever; he has an acute brain and a skilful tongue; but his effect in any committee, in any Church, in any group, is to cause trouble,

¹⁶³Martin, p. 128.

¹⁶⁴Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 107.

¹⁶⁵Blue, p. 828.

to drive people apart, to foment strife, to make trouble, to disturb personal relationships. It is a sobering thing to remember that the wisdom that that man possesses is devilish rather than divine, and that such a man is engaged on Satan's work and not on God's work."¹⁶⁶

3. The importance of loving peace 3:17-18

3:17 In contrast, the wisdom God gives has several characteristics. It is pure, meaning free of the defilements mentioned. It is peaceable, namely, peace-loving, peace-practicing, and peace-yielding. It is gentle or considerate of others. It is reasonable, that is, open to reason and willing to yield to reasonable requests. It is full of mercy in that it is actively sympathetic to the needy, and it is full of good fruits (good works). It is unwaveringly single-minded in its devotion to God rather than double-minded. It is, finally, without hypocrisy, namely, true to appearances.

"Thus 'purity' is not just one quality among others but the key to them all."¹⁶⁷

3:18 People committed to preserving peace must teach the Word of God peacefully to reap a harvest of righteousness (cf. 1:20). That good fruit will not come if teachers sow it in words and ways that inflame and antagonize people (cf. 1 Tim. 5:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:14, 24-26).

"To 'raise a harvest of righteousness' demands a certain kind of climate. A crop of righteousness cannot be produced in the climate of bitterness and self-seeking. Righteousness will grow only in a climate of peace."¹⁶⁸

"Winsome speech comes from a wise spirit. A controlled tongue is possible only with cultured thought. A mouth filled with praise results from a mind filled with purity."¹⁶⁹

To restate James' thought in this chapter, our words are very important as we seek to carry out the ministry God has called us to fulfill. We cannot control our tongues easily. Therefore we should not be too quick to take on a teaching ministry. The only One who can control our tongues is God, who can give us wisdom. The marks of the wisdom He provides are humility, graciousness, and peace.

James warns against anything that does not bear the fruit of good works: unfruitful religion (1:25-26), unfruitful faith (2:26), and unfruitful wisdom (3:17-18).

¹⁶⁶Barclay, *The Letters . . .*, p. 110.

¹⁶⁷Adamson, p. 154.

¹⁶⁸Burdick, pp. 191-92.

¹⁶⁹Blue, p. 829.

V. CONFLICTS AND HUMBLE SUBMISSION CH. 4

In this chapter James gave direction to his readers to encourage and enable them to live at peace with God, others, and themselves. It ties in closely to chapter 1 (cf. 4:6 and 1:5, 21; 4:8b and 1:6-8, 15, 21, 27; 4:9-10 and 1:21).

A. INTERPERSONAL AND INNER PERSONAL TENSIONS 4:1-10

"James 4 continues the same topic of strife, and addresses now not only the teachers of 3:14 but also the rest of the brotherhood who are in similar sin: strife springs from within (vv. 1-3) and is fostered by worldliness; love of the world and love of God cannot coexist (vv. 4-6); Christians must resist the devil and draw near to God (vv. 7-10)."¹⁷⁰

1. The source of conflict 4:1

As in the previous chapters, James began this one with a clear introduction of a practical problem his readers faced. He had just been referring to the importance of avoiding strife (3:14-16) and loving peace (3:13, 17-18). Now he attacked the problem of conflict within and among believers. The absence of the word "my brethren" (cf. 1:2; 2:1; 3:1) indicates the severity of this section and the one to follow (v. 13).

"The sudden transition from the beautiful picture in 3:17-18 of a life governed by heavenly wisdom to the appalling picture in the opening verses of chapter 4 is startling, but it demonstrates effectively the need for this vigorous rebuke now administered to the spirit of worldliness. . . .

"The spirit of worldliness has always been a problem for the church; it manifests itself in varied and often subtle ways. James discusses its manifestation in the lives of believers in four different areas. Worldliness reveals itself in their selfish strife (4:1-12), in an attitude of presumptuous self-sufficiency in business planning (4:13-17), in wrong reactions to experiences of injustice (5:1-11), and in the use of self-serving oaths (5:12)."¹⁷¹

"Quarrels" (Gr. *polemoi*, wars) could refer to disputes between several individuals whereas "conflicts" (Gr. *machoi*, battles) probably describes the tensions within one individual and between a few individuals. Both types of conflict, large and small, are the enemies of peace. James was using diatribe (cf. 2:18), so "among you" has a general reference, aimed at no particular group.¹⁷²

James identified, with a rhetorical question, the source of both kinds of conflict as pleasures. "Pleasures" are satisfied desires (cf. Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3). James did not say they war against each other in the believer but that, as a besieging army, they inevitably

¹⁷⁰Adamson, p. 165.

¹⁷¹Hiebert, *James*, pp. 219, 220.

¹⁷²Sidebottom, p. 51.

assail him or her. The satisfaction of desire, which is what pleasure is, is something people spend vast quantities of time, money, and energy to obtain. Am I spending them to satisfy my personal desires or God's desires primarily? Our personal desires are part of our human nature, and we will never escape their pull as long as we live in our present bodies. Nevertheless they must not dominate our lives. God's desires must do that (Matt. 6:33a). Our culture glorifies the satisfaction of personal desire, and it is the primary pursuit of most people, including Christians.

2. The explanation of the conflict 4:2-3

4:2 The ultimate end of lust, desire that a person may or may not satisfy, is murder. We can see this through human history all the way from Cain down to the present (cf. the case of Naboth; 1 Kings 21). James was probably not accusing his readers of murder, though at least one scholar believed he was.¹⁷³ He was probably reminding them of the serious ultimate consequences of living merely to satisfy personal desires.

"In the context of forceful words such as *polemoi* ('wars') and *machai* ('battles'), it seems better to take *phoneuete* ('you kill') as hyperbole for hatred. This also resolves the problem of seeming anticlimactic word order. To say 'You hate and covet' is a much more natural order than to say 'You murder and covet.' Furthermore, Matthew 5:21-22 and 1 John 3:15 show that hatred is equal to murder."¹⁷⁴

Likewise fights and arguments follow when we do not obtain our desires.

"There are indeed few evils in human life that cannot be traced to covetousness and envy in the sense in which we find these words used in this verse. Covetousness does not always lead to possession, envy does not always attain to the position of its rivals—and the inevitable result is conflict and strife."¹⁷⁵

"This is the condition to which lust consigns its votaries; it disappoints them, and makes them mutual tormentors."¹⁷⁶

"Unsatisfied desire leads to murder . . .; disappointed ambition leads to quarrelling and fighting."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³Martin, p. 146.

¹⁷⁴Burdick, p. 193. Cf. Motyer, pp. 140,164-65.

¹⁷⁵Tasker, p. 87.

¹⁷⁶Edwin T. Winkler, "Commentary on the Epistle of James," in *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 54.

¹⁷⁷Mayor, p. 136.

The only way to obtain satisfaction is to ask God to give it. We do not have what God wants us to have because we do not ask Him for these things.¹⁷⁸ This is one of the most important verses in the Bible concerning prayer. There are some things we can have from God that we will not have unless we ask Him for them.

4:3 However, we often ask God for things to enable us to satisfy our own selfish desires. For example, we request more time, more money, more energy so we can do things that we desire but that God does not desire for us. What we need to ask Him to give us is more desire for what He promises and commands. We also need less desire for what is contrary to His will for us (cf. Matt. 7:7-11).

"If prayer is no more than a formula (saying the right words, believe hard enough, confess; it will happen), then Christians are back to a type of magic: They can manipulate God or impose their will on God, for he *has* to answer. In contrast, New Testament prayer grows out of a trusting relationship with a father whose will is supreme."¹⁷⁹

"In the life of a full-time Christian minister, some may devote themselves to the activist pursuits of endless caring for the sick and house-to-house ministry to the unsaved, and skimp sermon preparation. It may be called 'getting our priorities right', but it may simply be an exercise in self-pleasing. Others lock the study door behind them. When they descend the pulpit steps on one Sunday they are already mentally climbing the same steps next Sunday. They may say that the pulpit is the best place to exercise pastoral care, and that they are putting first things first—but they may in fact just be indulging a passion."¹⁸⁰

3. The nature of the choice 4:4-5

4:4 The real issue is whom will I love, God or the world?

"In the simplest sense of the word, the world is each man's natural environment, that into which he enters at birth, and from which he departs in death. It is the immediate present, the seen and temporal, of which our senses bear witness, in contrast to the unseen and eternal . . ."¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸Cf. Fanning, pp. 432-33.

¹⁷⁹Dauids, pp. 99-100.

¹⁸⁰Motyer, p. 144.

¹⁸¹Mayor, p. 225.

The world urges us to love ourselves, to put our pleasures before God's pleasures. If we agree with that idea, we are unfaithful as the Lord's spiritual brides. We have deliberately chosen to follow the world's philosophy rather than God's will. We cannot be on friendly terms with God if we follow the world's philosophy (Matt. 6:24). The world wants us to exclude God from all aspects of life. God wants us to include Him in all of life because He is in all of life, and without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

". . . no man who makes worldly success his aim can be
also a friend of God"¹⁸²

4:5 In this verse James gave scriptural support for what he just asserted (v. 4). However, he did not quote a particular verse but evidently summarized the scriptural teaching on God's jealousy (cf. Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Ps. 42:1; 84:2; Zech. 8:2) in a new statement.¹⁸³

It is very difficult to translate this statement, but the best rendering seems to be something such as the following. "God jealously longs for the spirit that He made to live in us." Another translations is, "the Spirit which he made to dwell in us jealously yearns for the entire devotion of the heart" (cf. Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 4:30; John 7:39; 16:7).¹⁸⁴ Both translations fit the preceding context well. God's people who love the world have committed spiritual adultery against Him (v. 4), but God (or His Spirit) jealously longs for their love (v. 5). Furthermore these translations accurately represent the Greek text. The phrase *pros phthonon* literally means "to envy," but it is also an adverbial idiom meaning "jealously."¹⁸⁵ The verb *epipothei* means "to long for" or "to yearn for" rather than "to tend toward." Another view is that the human spirit in us lusts enviously.¹⁸⁶

"Thus, in v. 4 James has accused his readers of spiritual unfaithfulness. If they are not willing to accept this indictment, he asks in v. 5 what they think about the OT passages dealing with God's jealous longing for his people. This is the significance of the introductory conjunction 'or.' Do they think Scripture speaks 'without reason' or emptily? Of course they don't think this. Consequently, it is necessary to believe that friendship with the world is

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁸³See Sophie S. Laws, "Does Scripture Speak in Vain? A Reconsideration of James IV. 5," *New Testament Studies* 20 (1973-74):210-15; and Stulac, pp. 146-47.

¹⁸⁴Mayor, p. 141.

¹⁸⁵A *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, s.v. "*phthonon*," p. 718. See also Ropes, p. 262.

¹⁸⁶See Sidebottom, p. 53.

enmity toward God, and thus it is spiritual unfaithfulness."¹⁸⁷

4. The resources to choose right 4:6-10

4:6 God has set a high standard of wholehearted love and devotion for His people, but He gives grace that is greater than His rigorous demand. Proverbs 3:34, quoted here, reminds us that God opposes the proud: those who pursue their own pleasures. However, He gives grace to the humble: those who put God's desires first in their lives. He gives grace (help) to withstand the onslaughts of the flesh within and the world without.

4:7 In view of God's certain supply of this grace we need to adopt a definite stance toward the people involved in this conflict. Ten aorist imperatives in verses 7-10 demand decisive action. They sound like military commands and reflect how seriously James viewed double-mindedness.¹⁸⁸

Toward God we must submit in humility. This means making what is of importance to Him important to us, ordering our priorities in harmony with God's priorities. It means not living to fulfill our personal ambitions but using our lives to fulfill His desires. Submission is not identical to obedience. Submission involves the surrender of the will that results in obedience.

We must resist Satan strongly. When we do, he will flee from us. What is Satan trying to get us to do? The record of his temptations, including those of Eve and Jesus Christ, indicates that he wants to make us doubt, deny, disregard, and disobey God's Word (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4). We resist him by refusing to do these things.

4:8 While resisting Satan on the one hand, we must also draw near to God on the other. When we do, He will draw near to us. To draw near to God we must go through a purification process reminiscent of what the priests in Israel underwent. We must wash our hands, symbolic of our outward actions, as well as our divided hearts, symbolic of our inner attitudes and motives. We clean them by confession and repentance. We must remove sin from our hands and duplicity from our hearts. Single-mindedness involves singleness of purpose, namely, living for the glory of God rather than for both God's glory and our own selfish desires (cf. 1:8).

4:9 James was calling readers who had compromised with the world by following hedonism to get right with God. There is laughter and joy in the pursuit of personal desires, but we must abandon these in the process of repenting. James was not saying Christians must be constantly miserable,

¹⁸⁷Burdick, p. 194. Cf. Martin, p. 151.

¹⁸⁸Hiebert, *James*, p. 236.

mourning, weeping, and gloomy. These are only the evidences of repentance from a formerly sinful attitude and lifestyle (cf. Matt. 5:3-4).

- 4:10 In concluding this section of direct advice (vv. 7-10), James sounded the same note with which he began: submission to God in humility, putting Him before self. This always results in God lifting one up both immediately and eventually. Since this is the condition in which God can use us, He will proceed to do so for His glory (cf. Matt. 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14; 1 Pet. 5:6).

"Ralph Bell, an associate evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, is a godly man who tells of learning grace-reliance in a deeply personal way. Bell is a Canadian-born black man who lives and ministers in the United States. As a young man, he struggled with experiences of racial insults and discrimination. Being so treated by fellow Christians, who were disobeying James's instructions about impartiality, was especially hurtful. Bell shared his struggles with his mother, who counseled him to keep his eyes on Jesus, because Jesus would never disappoint him. As he sought to apply that advice, he began to find the grace to see others' racism as their problem. He further sought grace from God to purify his own life of hatred toward those who mistreated him. In James's terms, Ralph Bell humbled himself before the Lord, and he found himself being lifted up by the grace of God to be able to love his enemies. How does one love hostile and hurtful people? The answer is supernaturally, by relying on the grace that God gives to the humble."¹⁸⁹

B. SELF-EXALTATION 4:11-12

Having dealt with the source of interpersonal and inner personal conflicts that believers in particular and all people generally experience, James dealt next with a different aspect of the same problem. He did so to motivate his readers further to forsake the philosophy of the world that puts self first. Criticizing others is dangerous not only because it is a form of selfishness but also because the critic exalts himself even over God when he or she criticizes.

- 4:11 The speaking in view is speaking disparagingly of, or down on, another Christian. To criticize another one must conclude that he is right and the person he is criticizing is wrong. This is passing judgment. The law in view probably refers to God's law generally in view of the context. We sin against God's law when we criticize a brother because God has revealed that we should not speak against, or pass judgment on, our Christian brethren (cf. Lev. 19:15-18; Matt. 7:1). We should submit to one another (e.g., Gal. 5:13; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3). Rather than taking a position of humility, such a person exalts himself to the role of judge (cf. v. 10).

¹⁸⁹Stulac, p. 151.

"We must be careful to note the far-reaching consequences of James' teaching here: respect for law and order is necessary (as we are often told) for the health of modern society, but James goes on to remind us (v. 12) that, since God is the source of all law, what is ultimately at stake in a 'permissive society' is respect for the authority of God himself."¹⁹⁰

4:12 James was speaking of judging other people without divine authorization to do so. Obviously God has delegated the responsibility of judging some civil acts to human governments, some church conduct to elders, and the behavior of children to their parents. Likewise Christians who are walking by the Spirit who observe other Christians overtaken by some fault should seek to restore them, not ignore them (Gal. 6:1).

Criticizing our equals is a common sport, but it is inappropriate for mere mortals. We all are responsible to God ultimately and must leave the judgment of His servants up to Him (Rom. 14:1-13). We need to remember that we are on the same level with those we may wish to judge. We are brothers and neighbors (cf. Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6-7; 2 Kings 5:7).

C. SELF-RELIANCE 4:13-17

As in the previous chapters, James began with the exposition of a practical problem and moved on to its larger contextual problem, that is, its context in life. He already identified the source of interpersonal and inner personal conflicts as self-centeredness and explained that criticism places the critic in a seat that only God should occupy. Now he pictured a self-centered person living his or her life. He did this to enable his readers to see the root of this problem clearly.

"James gave an example of a boastful statement [v. 13], struck a condemnatory sentence on such boasting [v. 14], and offered a practical solution for boasting [vv. 15-17]."¹⁹¹

1. The self-centered person 4:13-16

4:13 James confronted his audience as the Old Testament prophets did. He began, "Come now" (cf. Isa. 1:18; et al.). The person in James' illustration was probably a travelling Jewish merchant, ". . . the materialist core of the contemporary bourgeois prosperity."¹⁹² Jewish merchants were common in the culture of James' day, and undoubtedly some of them were Christian Jews. The man's plans were not wrong in themselves.

¹⁹⁰Adamson, p. 177.

¹⁹¹Blue, p. 831.

¹⁹²Adamson, p. 178.

4:14 The problem is what the merchant did not consider: his complete dependence on God (cf. Luke 12:18-20; John 15:5).

"To what extent is your life directed by the knowledge that Christ is coming back? Much of our thinking and behavior is shaped by what we can see of present circumstances or past events. Yet Scripture speaks forcefully of Christ's return as a fact that should be directing how we live now. Christians are to be motivated by the certainty of this future event."¹⁹³

4:15 The merchant should have made his planning in conscious dependence on God recognizing His sovereign control over all of life (cf. Acts 18:21; 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7; Phil. 2:19, 24). The Latin phrase, *deo volente* ("God willing," abbreviated D.V.) remains in use even today among some Christians.

"A study of the use of this conditional clause ["If the Lord wills . . ."] in the NT makes it clear that we are not to repeat it mechanically in connection with every statement of future plans. Paul, for example, employs it in Acts 18:21 and 1 Corinthians 4:19, but he does not use it in Acts 19:21; Romans 15:28; or 1 Corinthians 16:5, 8. Yet it is obvious that whether Paul explicitly stated it or not, he always conditioned his plans on the will of God."¹⁹⁴

4:16 James rebuked those of his readers who were living with this God-neglecting attitude. They derived joy from feeling that they controlled their own destiny. Here is the picture of the "self-made man" taking credit for what God has given him. Boasting of this kind is unrealistic. It betrays an attitude that puts man in God's place. For this reason it is evil.

In these verses James presented four arguments that show the foolishness of ignoring God's will: the complexity of life (v. 13), the uncertainty of life (v. 14a), the brevity of life (v. 14b), and the frailty of man (v. 16).¹⁹⁵

2. The concluding exhortation 4:17

The person James just pictured was guilty of a sin of omission. He failed to acknowledge the place God occupies in life (cf. John 9:41). In concluding this discussion of conflicts, James reminded his readers to put into practice what they knew. They should avoid presumption and self-confidence, and they should submit themselves humbly to God. Failure to do this is sin.

¹⁹³Stulac, p. 156.

¹⁹⁴Burdick, p. 197.

¹⁹⁵Wiersbe, pp. 130-33.

"They cannot take refuge in the plea that they have done nothing positively wrong; as Scripture makes abundantly clear, sins of *omission* are as real and serious as sins of *commission*."¹⁹⁶

The verse that concludes each major section of James' epistle, each chapter, is a proverbial statement. It summarizes James' point in the preceding section and states it in a pithy way that is easy to remember. However, the statement in this verse is applicable to all that James wrote in this book.

VI. MONEY AND PATIENT ENDURANCE 5:1-18

The final practical problem James addressed involves money. He wrote these instructions to warn his readers of a danger, to inform them of the ramifications of the problem, and to exhort them to deal with the situation appropriately. This is his third reference to the rich and the poor (cf. 1:9-11; 2:1-12). We might also consider 4:13-17, as well as 5:1-6, as dealing with the rich.¹⁹⁷

A. WARNINGS FOR THE RICH 5:1-6

It is characteristic of James' well-balanced style that he opened and closed his exhortations (in 2:1—5:6) with references to the rich. There is also a return in this chapter to encouragement to persevere in the will of God when tempted to depart from it (cf. ch. 1). Thus the book demonstrates a somewhat chiasmic structure.

". . . wealth brings consternation [v. 1], ends up in corrosion [vv. 2-3], and results in condemnation [vv. 4-6]."¹⁹⁸

1. The introduction of the problem 5:1

Again James confronted his readers as a prophet (cf. 4:13). Rich people are usually happy that they have wealth. However, James challenged his rich readers to weep and howl in anguish, not repentance. The Bible nowhere condemns the rich for being rich. Money is not evil (cf. 1 Tim. 6:10). Nevertheless God's Word consistently warns the rich of the temptations that financial abundance brings with it. These temptations include a false sense of security, a desire to control others, and personal pride. The rich should not rejoice too much. Material misery may be just around the corner (cf. 1:10-11).

"The persons here addressed are not the same as those addressed in iv. 13. It is no longer the careless worldliness of the bustling trader which is condemned, but the more deadly worldliness of the unjust capitalist or landlord."¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶Moo, p. 158.

¹⁹⁷For some helpful insights on the way Christians might speak and act when confronted with wealth, status, and power on the one hand, or poverty, ignorance, and helplessness on the other, see Duane Warden, "The Rich and Poor in James: Implications for Institutionalized Partiality," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:2 (June 2000):253-57.

¹⁹⁸Blue, p. 832.

¹⁹⁹Mayor, p. 153.

Probably James had in mind the rich as a class, not exclusively wealthy believers or wealthy unbelievers.

2. The corrosive effect of wealth 5:2-3

5:2 The riches that rot are presumably perishable commodities such as food and drink. Garments were one of the most popular forms of wealth in the biblical world. People used them to pay for things, and they were also heirlooms and popular presents (cf. Matt. 6:19).

5:3 Gold and silver do not literally rust. They corrode and tarnish. Nevertheless corrosion does the same thing as rust. It destroys the value of the metal. Christians should use money, not hoard it. Therefore the presence of rust or corroded gold in the rich man's treasury will bear witness to his unfaithful stewardship of his wealth. James warned that the process that destroys gold and silver is the same process that destroys the people who collect these precious metals. Hoarding wealth is a particularly serious sin for Christians since we are living in the last days, the days immediately preceding the Lord's return. We should be using our money to get the Lord's work done, not to enable us to live lives of luxury and laziness (cf. Matt. 6:19-24).

"To lay up treasure in heaven means to use all that we have as stewards of God's wealth. You and I may *possess* many things, but we do not *own* them. God is the Owner of everything, and we are His stewards.

"The Bible does not discourage saving, or even investing; but it does condemn hoarding."²⁰⁰

Hoarding, as used here, means accumulating wealth just to have lots of it, for security, prestige, or just selfishness.

3. The misuse of wealth 5:4-6

5:4 Some of James' readers were evidently getting rich by cheating their hired workers out of their fair wages (cf. Deut. 24:15). Cries for justice from these oppressed people had entered God's ears, even though their employers were deaf to them (cf. Gen. 4:5; 18:20-21). The title "Lord of Sabaoth" (lit. Lord of Hosts, i.e., Lord Almighty; cf. Isa. 5:9; Rom. 9:29) emphasizes the sovereign omnipotence of God. Although the oppressed may appear to have no defenders on earth, they have as their helper the Lord God omnipotent in heaven.

²⁰⁰Wiersbe, p. 146.

5:5 The rich are often soft and self-indulgent (cf. Luke 16:19-31; Amos 6:1-6). This is the connotation of luxury, a condition that our culture condones but Scripture condemns. "Wanton pleasure" implies extravagance and waste. In their greedy acquisitiveness the rich fatten themselves figuratively, and sometimes literally, not realizing that they are just preparing themselves for slaughter (judgment) like so many sacrificial animals.

"Like an OT prophet James denounces the wanton luxury of the rich, warning of their coming doom."²⁰¹

This warning should challenge believers to avoid extravagance and self-indulgence when purchasing goods for ourselves.

5:6 The oppression of the rich extends to putting to death those who stand in their way even though these people resist the rich righteously. As in 4:2, James may have been using "put to death" hyperbolically. Many Christians have experienced persecution from people who are trying to guard their own financial security (e.g., Acts 8:18-24; 19:23-28). However if day laborers do not get their wages daily, they can die.

". . . for day laborers it was very serious not to find work or not to be paid. For this reason James personifies the salary, seeing it as the very blood of the exploited workers crying out pitifully. The case was the same for the peasants. The peasants die because they pour out their strength in their work, but the fruit of their work does not come back to them. They cannot regain their strength because the rich withhold their salaries. Therefore James accuses the rich of condemning and killing the just (5:6)."²⁰²

These are strong words of warning. James evidently believed that his readers were erring in this area of their lives and needed a severe shock. The Jews' gift for making money and their interest in this pursuit needed control. We need this warning too since modern culture values money very highly.

As with 1:10, there is a question about whether James was referring to rich Christians or rich unbelievers in this pericope. Here as there I tend to think that James was probably referring to rich Christians. He seems to be addressing his readers rather than "speaking rhetorically, formally addressing non-Christians in 1:10 as well as . . . in 5:1-6, but saying this really for the benefit of his Christian readers, who were suffering at the hands of rich persecutors."²⁰³

²⁰¹Adamson, p. 87.

²⁰²Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead*, p. 20.

²⁰³Stulac, p. 199.

B. THE PROPER ATTITUDE 5:7-12

Essentially the attitude of the rich that James condemned was: Get all you can as fast as you can any way you can. In the following pericope he counseled a different attitude to urge his readers, rich and poor, to practice patience.

1. The exhortation to be patient 5:7-9

5:7 Because of the dangers James just expounded, believers should adopt a patient attitude. The verb *makrothymesate* (be patient) describes "self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong."²⁰⁴ The Lord's return is near (cf. Mark 13:32-37; Phil. 4:5; 1 Pet. 4:7; 1 John 2:18).

"The word *parousias* ('coming') was a common term used to describe the visit of a king to a city or province of his kingdom and thus depicts Christ as a royal personage."²⁰⁵

The early rains came shortly after planting in Palestine in late October and early November. The late rains followed as the crop was maturing in late March and early April. This reference may imply a Palestinian origin for the epistle. James knew agriculture in Palestine. The point of James' illustration of the farmer seems to be that as Christians we are primarily sowing and cultivating in this life, not mainly reaping rewards.

"The picture is that of the small farmer in Palestine . . . The small farmer plants his carefully saved seed and hopes for a harvest, living on short rations and suffering hunger during the last weeks. The whole livelihood, indeed the life itself, of the family depends on a good harvest: the loss of the farm, semistarvation, or death could result from a bad year. So the farmer waits for an expected future event (*ekdechetai*); no one but he could know now precious the grain really is . . ."²⁰⁶

5:8 When the Lord returns we will receive our reward at the judgment seat of Christ. In the meantime we should be patient and encouraged knowing that our reward lies ahead, as God has promised (cf. Matt. 6:20). The rich, who behave as typical rich people, either do not have or have lost sight of this hope. They live only to accumulate as much reward here and now as they can.

". . . the finish line is just ahead: the important point is not to give up now and lose all that for which one has already suffered."²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 138.

²⁰⁵Burdick, p. 201.

²⁰⁶Dauids, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 183.

²⁰⁷Ibid., p. 184.

"Anything that *must* happen, and *could* happen *today*, is in a very legitimate sense *at hand*."²⁰⁸

5:9 It is easy for us to blame one another for our present discomforts.

"What is forbidden is not the loud and bitter denunciation of others but the unexpressed feeling of bitterness or the smothered resentment that may express itself in a groan or a sigh."²⁰⁹

James forbade this because it involves improper judging (cf. 4:11-12). Judgment will take place soon. This verse is a clear indication that the early Christians expected the Lord Jesus to return imminently.²¹⁰ If Jesus could return at any moment, He will return before the seven-year Tribulation, which Scripture says must precede His Second Coming to establish His kingdom on the earth. Thus the Rapture must be distinct from the Second Coming, separated by at least seven years.

"The early Christians' conviction that the *parousia* was 'near', or 'imminent', meant that they fully believed that it *could* transpire within a very short period of time—not that it *had* to."²¹¹

Imminent means something *could* happen very soon, not that it *must*.²¹²

"In light of the concept of the imminent coming of Christ and the fact that the New Testament does teach His imminent coming, we can conclude that the Pretribulation Rapture view is the only view of the Rapture of the church that comfortably fits the New Testament teaching of the imminent coming of Christ. It is the only view that can honestly say that Christ could return at any moment, because it alone teaches that Christ will come to rapture the church before the 70th week of Daniel 9 or the Tribulation period begins and that nothing else must happen before His return."²¹³

²⁰⁸Hodges, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 111.

²⁰⁹Burdick, p. 202.

²¹⁰See Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, ch. 6: "The Imminency of the Coming of Christ for the Church," pp. 108-37.

²¹¹Moo, p. 169.

²¹²See Robert G. Bratcher, *A Translator's Guide to the Letters from James, Peter, and Jude*, p. 55; M. F. Sadler, *The General Epistles of SS. James, Peter, John and Jude*, pp. 68-69; Adamson, pp. 191-92; Frank E. Gaebelien, *The Practical Epistle of James*, p. 112; Vernon D. Doerksen, *James*, p. 123; E. C. Blackman, *The Epistle of James*, p. 146; J. Alec Motyer, *The Tests of Faith*, p. 107; Mitton, p. 186; Spiros Zodhiates, *The Patience of Hope*, p. 90; David P. Scaer, *James the Apostle of Faith*, p. 126; Homer A. Kent Jr., *Faith that Works*, p. 176; Harold T. Bryson, *How Faith Works*, pp. 116-17, 119; Davids, p. 185; and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of James and the Epistles of John*, p. 165.

²¹³Renald E. Showers, *Maranatha: Our Lord, Come! A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church*, p. 149.

James pictured Jesus poised at the door of heaven ready to welcome Christians into His heavenly throne room. The hope of His imminent (any moment) return should strongly motivate us to live patiently and sacrificially now.

2. Examples of endurance 5:10-11

5:10 One could use just about any one of the Hebrew prophets as an example of patient endurance in suffering (cf. 1:4).

5:11 Job was not always patient, but he did determine to endure whatever might befall him as he waited for God to clear up the mystery of his suffering (cf. Job 13:10, 15; 16:19-21; 19:25). In verses 7-10 James pleaded for patience (*makrothymia*) that restrains itself and does not retaliate. Here he advocated perseverance (*hypomone*) through difficult circumstances (cf. 1:3; Heb. 11:25).

Job reaped a great reward at the end of his trial. We see God's compassion and mercy especially at the end of Job's experience, though God manifested these characteristics earlier as well. Job determined to continue to live by faith when he experienced temptation to depart from the will of God (cf. 1:2-4).

"James has been concerned to help believers to overcome the tendency to react like the world to the injustices heaped on them by the world. The world, by its very nature antagonistic to God and His kingdom, will continue to oppose God's people. But if these truths grip the hearts of His people, it will enable them to overcome the spirit of worldliness by refraining from a worldly reaction to the world's injustices."²¹⁴

3. The evidence of patience 5:12

Swearing is an evidence of impatience.

"What he [James] means is that of all the manifestations of impatience in times of stress and affliction the most frequent is the taking of the Lord's name in vain by the use of explosive utterances and hasty and irreverent oaths."²¹⁵

When we become impatient and lose self-control we tend to say things better left unspoken. These include swearing, abusing the Lord's name, and appealing to heaven, earth, or whatever as confirmation that we are speaking the truth (cf. Matt. 5:33-37).

²¹⁴Hiebert, *James*, p. 278.

²¹⁵Tasker, p. 124. Cf. Mayor, p. 167.

"It should be obvious that what is referred to in Matthew and James is the light, casual use of oaths in informal conversation—not formal oaths in such places as courts of law [cf. Ps. 110:4; 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20]."²¹⁶

"The Jews were wont to split hairs in their use of profanity, and by avoiding God's name imagine that they were not really guilty of this sin, just as professing Christians today use 'pious oaths' which violate the prohibition of Jesus."²¹⁷

What is not in view in this discussion is the use of "dirty" speech.

"James's wisdom amounts to this: we should never need to use an oath to prove that 'this time I really mean it!' Instead we should *always* 'really mean it.'"²¹⁸

"Our mere word should be as utterly trustworthy as a signed document, legally correct and complete."²¹⁹

The root problem with the improper behavior that often characterizes the rich, as James saw it, is an attitude of impatience that results from rejecting or forgetting divine revelation concerning the future. Knowledge of the future as God has revealed it in Scripture has very direct application to everyday living. It should affect the way we think about money, among other things.

C. THE PROPER ACTION 5:13-18

James encouraged his readers to pray, as well as to be patient, to enable them to overcome the temptation to live only for the present and to stop living by faith. James not only begins and ends his epistle with references to trials, but he "also begins (1:5-8) and ends (5:13-18) with prayer as the instrumental means for managing trials."²²⁰

1. The way of release 5:13

Prayer to God, not profanity, is the proper outlet for feelings of sadness caused by suffering as we patiently endure.

"James's emphasis on prayer in this section is especially noteworthy since few things undergird perseverance more effectively than prayer. In the final analysis, a persevering life is also a prayerful life."²²¹

²¹⁶Burdick, p. 203.

²¹⁷Robertson, 6:63.

²¹⁸Hodges, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 115. Cf. Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:3-4; Hos. 4:2; Jer. 5:2; Zech. 5:3-4; Mal. 3:5.

²¹⁹Mitton, p. 193.

²²⁰C. Richard Wells, "The Theology of Prayer in James," *Criswell Theological Review* 1:1 (Fall 1986):86.

²²¹Hodges, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 113.

The right way to express joy is by praising God, not swearing.

2. The prescription for help 5:14-16

It is not surprising to find that James dealt with sickness (Gr. *asthenai*, weakness) in this epistle. He referred to the fact that departure from the will of God sets the Christian on a course that, unless corrected, may result in his or her premature physical death (1:15, 21; 5:20). Spiritual weakness, and sometimes physical sickness, result from sinful living. James gave instructions about how to deal with these maladies in verses 14-20.

5:14 Times of spiritual weakness or physical sickness are usually occasions in which it is especially difficult to be patient (e.g., Job).

Anointing with oil was the equivalent in James' day of applying medication (cf. 1 Tim. 5:23).

". . . oil among the ancients was highly valued for its therapeutic qualities (Isa. 1:16; Luke 10:34)."²²²

The oil provided more refreshment and soothing comfort than it did real relief for serious ailments, but people drank it as well as rubbing it on themselves as a medication. The term translated "anointing him with oil" in Greek refers to medicinal anointing, not religious ceremonial anointing.²²³ James used *aleiphein* ("rub") here rather than *chriein* ("anoint"). The former word is the "mundane and profane" referring to all kinds of rubbing whereas the latter is the "sacred and religious" word used to describe religious ceremonies.²²⁴

James instructed that in times of weakness, spiritual or physical, Christians should ask their church elders to visit them, to pray for them, and to minister to them in Jesus' name (i.e., as His servants).²²⁵

"Prayer is the more significant of the two ministries performed by the elders. 'Pray' is the main verb, while 'anoint' is a participle. Moreover, the overall emphasis of the paragraph is on prayer. So the anointing is a secondary action."²²⁶

The fact that the weary person was to summon the elders gives a clue that this person's sickness connects with some spiritual condition. This proves to be the case in verse 15. Today a skilled physician normally provides the

²²²Merrill F. Unger, "Divine Healing," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128:511 (July-September 1971):236. Cf. Adamson, p. 197. See also Mayor, pp. 170-71, for extrabiblical references.

²²³Robertson, 6:64-65.

²²⁴R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, p. 129. See also Burdick, p. 204.

²²⁵See John Wilkinson, "Healing in the Epistle of James," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 24 (1971):338-40.

²²⁶Burdick, p. 204.

medical attention. The elders need to deal with the spiritual factors affecting the sick person, if any, since they have a responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the flock (Heb. 13:17). In this context James had a sickness with spiritual roots in view. Really all sickness is traceable to the Fall.

It is interesting that James did not tell his readers to call for someone with the gift of healing. Evidently such people were rare even in the very early history of the church when James wrote.

Probably this treatment reminded the sick person of the power of the Holy Spirit that anointing with oil symbolized in the Old Testament.²²⁷

*"Aleiphein . . . may have been chosen over chriein because of standard usage yet still with the intention of conveying the thought that the anointing of oil was symbolic."*²²⁸

This verse is the basis for the Roman Catholic doctrine of extreme unction (i.e., anointing someone with oil at death to gain merit with God for so doing).²²⁹ This practice began in the eighth century.²³⁰

5:15

"Difficulties in deciding what exactly in the preceding verse is meant by anointing should not cause us to overlook the main point of vv 13-18, which is prayer. It is prayer—not the anointing—which leads to the healing of the sick person."²³¹

The elders' prayers offered in faith will restore (lit. save, Gr. *sosei*, "make well"; cf. Matt. 9:21-22; Mark 6:56) the sick and arouse (Gr. *egerei*, raise up) him or her. Offered in faith means presented with confidence in God's power to heal if that is His will in this case (cf. Matt. 8:1-13; Mark 5:35-42). Furthermore the Lord will raise him to health if this is His will (John 14:13; 1 John 5:14).

"The medicine does not heal the sick, but it helps nature (God) do it. The doctor cooperates with God in nature."²³²

Benjamin Franklin reportedly said, "God heals, and the doctor collects the fee."

²²⁷Fanning, p. 433. Cf. Gary S. Shogren, "Will God Heal Us—A Re-examination of James 5:14-16a," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989):99-108.

²²⁸Martin, p. 209.

²²⁹For refutation of this view, see Adamson, pp. 204-5.

²³⁰Blue, p. 834.

²³¹Martin, p. 209.

²³²Robertson, 6:65.

There is no basis in Scripture for the popular idea that praying in faith means praying with confidence that something will happen just because we pray (cf. 1:5-6; 2 Cor. 12:7-10). Faith always must have the person or promise of God as its object to be effective.

"It is a prayer of faith, i.e. the prayer which expresses trust in God and flows out of commitment to him, for only such prayers are effective . . ." ²³³

Some take the faith in view here as a special, God-given assurance that it is His will to heal in this instance (cf. 1 Cor. 12:9).²³⁴ However simple faith in God seems to be in view since James did not qualify it.

If the sufferer has committed some sin that has resulted in his or her debilitated condition, James added, God will forgive this sin. This happens when the sinner confesses it to God (1 John 1:9; cf. Matt. 6:12). Not all sickness is the direct result of some sin (cf. John 9:1-3).

"James's point is simply that both must be dealt with when they are linked." ²³⁵

5:16 In view of the possibility of spiritual and physical sickness following sin, believers should confess their sins (against one another) to one another (normally privately). Furthermore they should pray for one another so God may heal them (spiritually and physically).

"Much is assumed here that is not expressed." ²³⁶

James assumed these facts, I believe, that are consistent with other revelation concerning prayer that the writers of Scripture give elsewhere.²³⁷

"In the ancient mind sin and sickness went together, and so confession of sin was necessary if prayer for the sick was to be effective. The confession is to be not only to the elders (or other ministers) but *to one another*, that is, probably to those they have wronged." ²³⁸

²³³ Davids, *The Epistle . . .*, p. 194. See also Thomas L. Constable, "The Doctrine of Prayer" (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1969), p. 111; and Mayor, p. 173.

²³⁴ E.g., D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James: Tests of a Living Faith*, p. 322; idem, *James*, p. 297; Guy H. King, *A Belief That Behaves: An Expository Study of the Epistle of James*, p. 124; and Motyer, *The Message . . .*, p. 198.

²³⁵ Fanning, p. 434.

²³⁶ Robertson, 6:65.

²³⁷ See Thomas L. Constable, *Talking to God: What the Bible Teaches about Prayer*, pp. 129-30.

²³⁸ Adamson, p. 189.

Husbands and wives need to create an atmosphere in the home that promotes transparency (cf. Col. 3:12-13). We need to demonstrate total acceptance of our mate (cf. 1 John 4:18). We also need to show an attitude of constant forgiveness (Eph. 4:31-32). Spouses should make a commitment to verbalize their emotions without pulling back or quitting. This involves acknowledging our emotions, explaining and describing our feelings, and sharing our feelings regardless of our mate's response.

Here are some suggestions for improving your ability to express your emotions. Practice sharing your emotions with your mate. Find a model of transparency and study him or her. Read the psalms to see how the psalmists expressed their emotions. Memorize selected proverbs that deal with specific areas in which you have difficulty. Focus on communication as a special subject of study. Share laughter together.²³⁹

"We must never confess sin beyond the circle of that sin's influence. Private sin requires private confession; public sin requires public confession. It is wrong for Christians to 'hang dirty wash in public,' for such 'confessing' might do more harm than the original sin."²⁴⁰

"Perhaps . . . the 'sins' that need to be confessed and remitted are those lapses from faithful endurance that James has written to warn about throughout the course of this hortatory tract."²⁴¹

"Does all this mean that confession to a brother is a divine law? No, confession is not a law, it is an offer of divine help for the sinner. It is possible that a person may by God's grace break through to certainty, new life, the Cross, and fellowship without benefit of confession to a brother. It is possible that a person may never know what it is to doubt his own forgiveness and despair of his own confession of sin, that he may be given everything in his own private confession to God. We have spoken here for those who cannot make this assertion. Luther himself was one of those for whom the Christian life was unthinkable without mutual, brotherly confession. In the *Large Catechism* he said: 'Therefore when I admonish you to confession I am admonishing you to be a Christian'. Those who, despite all their seeking and trying, cannot find the great joy of fellowship, the Cross, the new life, and certainty should be shown the blessing that God offers us in mutual confession.

²³⁹Family Life Conference, pp. 78-79.

²⁴⁰Wiersbe, p. 170. See also John R. W. Stott, *Confess your Sins*, p. 12.

²⁴¹Martin, p. 215.

Confession is within the liberty of the Christian. Who can refuse, without suffering loss, a help that God has deemed it necessary to offer?"²⁴²

"The practice of auricular confession was not made generally obligatory even by the Church of Rome till the Lateran Council of 1215 under Innocent III., which ordered that every adult person should confess to the priest at least once in the year. In all other Churches it is still optional."²⁴³

A righteous man's prayers can accomplish much in the spiritual and physical deliverance of someone else, as Elijah's praying illustrates (vv. 17-18). In this verse the "righteous man" is the person who has confessed his sins and has received forgiveness.

"Prayer is powerful for only one reason. It is the means whereby we avail ourselves of the power of God."²⁴⁴

Evidently James practiced what he preached about prayer. Eusebius, the early church historian, quoted Hegesippus, an earlier commentator, who gave, Eusebius claimed, an accurate account of James.

"He was in the habit of entering the temple alone, and was often found upon his bended knees, and interceding for the forgiveness of the people; so that his knees became as hard as camel's, in consequence of his habitual supplication and kneeling before God."²⁴⁵

"The truth of James 5:13-16 is applicable for believers today. James was not discussing sickness in general, nor necessarily severe illness that doctors cannot heal. Rather he was speaking of sickness that is the result of unrighteous behavior. James did not write to give a definitive statement on the healing of all sickness for Christians. The passage sheds light on God's dealing with those in the early church whose actions were not pleasing to him. This text speaks about individuals who sin against the Lord and, in light of the context for the book, especially those who sin with their tongues. If church members today took this passage seriously, it would bring about significant results, just as did Elijah's prayer. When Christians recognize sinful attitudes and wrongful behavior and turn to the Lord, the result is forgiveness and restoration and, in specific cases in which sickness is the result of a particular sin, there can be physical healing."²⁴⁶

²⁴²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 92.

²⁴³Mayor, p. 176.

²⁴⁴C. Samuel Storms, *Reaching God's Ear*, p. 214.

²⁴⁵*The Ecclesiastical . . .*, p. 76.

²⁴⁶Wendell G. Johnston, "Does James Give Believers a Pattern for Dealing with Sickness and Healing?" in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, p. 174.

"There is no such thing as (so to speak) 'non-spiritual' healing. When the aspirin works, it is the Lord who has made it work; when the surgeon sets the broken limb and the bone knits, it is the Lord who has made it knit. *Every good gift is from above! . . . On no occasion should a Christian approach the doctor without also approaching God . . .*"²⁴⁷

3. The power of prayer 5:17-18

To illustrate the power of prayer James referred to Elijah's experience (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1, 41-45). In view of the remarkable answers Elijah received, James reminded his audience that the prophet was an ordinary man.

"Here the point is not that Elijah put up a particularly fervent prayer but that praying was precisely what he did."²⁴⁸

"Prayed earnestly" is literally "prayed with prayer." This verse is not a call for fervent prayer but a call for prayer (cf. 4:16). A "righteous man" who prays can accomplish much. Therefore answers to prayer are within the reach of any believer (cf. Luke 11:9-13). However, as mentioned previously, James used "righteousness" as Jesus did to refer to right conduct.

Through his praying Elijah influenced God in the outworking of His decree.²⁴⁹ God allows us to influence Him through prayer today as well in certain areas of His will. One of these areas is how He deals with Christians who have departed from His will.

". . . Elijah confidently made his audacious petitions to Jehovah because he was conscious that they were in harmony with the will of God. He could confidently persist in His request for rain (1 Ki 18:42-44) because he knew that God had promised to send the rain he was asking for (1 Ki 18:2 [*sic* 1]). He could persevere in prayer because he knew his petition was in harmony with the expressed will of God.

"Knowing the will of God is the sure foundation for effective prayer [1 John 5:14].

"When the Scriptural teaching that prayer is a definite means of working with God is apprehended, we feel that this is fully in keeping with His gracious character. God yearns to take His sons into His confidence and let them share with Him in the accomplishment of His purposes. He has so arranged this world that there is a definite place for answered prayer in the divine government. He deliberately so constituted things that His believing children may have, and are invited to have, a definite share in the

²⁴⁷Motyer, *The Message* . . . , p. 193.

²⁴⁸Adamson, p. 201.

²⁴⁹See Thomas L. Constable, "What Prayer Will and Will Not Change," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 105-11.

fulfillment of His saving purpose with mankind through intercessory prayer. The Scriptures are replete with illustrations of how the cause of the Lord was furthered as God answered the prayers of His people."²⁵⁰

"So the example of Elijah is used as a counterpoint to stress once again the need for a peaceful solution gained by prayer and submission to the divine will."²⁵¹

In an interesting article one writer argued that James 5:13-18 does not refer to physical healing generally but specifically to discouragement and depression.²⁵² Whereas the Greek words for sick (vv. 14, 15) and healed (v. 16) allow this interpretation, I believe we should prefer their normal meaning here primarily because of the context. There is nothing in the context that would limit the healing to psychological conditions. I believe James used the case of a sick person to show the powerful effect praying can have to encourage his readers to pray for those who are sick because of sin. He also did so to encourage them to exercise patience rather than living for the present.

VII. THE WAY BACK TO LIVING BY FAITH 5:19-20

James concluded this major section and his entire epistle by explaining how a brother who had erred could return to fellowship with God and could resume living by faith. These instructions apply directly to what James just explained in chapter 5. However they also show the way back to any who may have stumbled in the other errors James dealt with in this book.

5:19 This verse also ties in with what James just said about the privilege and duty of prayer. Any believer, not just the elders, can help a brother back into the right way (v. 14; cf. Ezek. 33:1-9).

"It was easy then, and is now, to be led astray from Christ, who is the Truth."²⁵³

5:20 The soul saved from death is that of the backslider to whom also belongs the multitude of sins. We should probably understand the "soul" to represent the whole person here as well as elsewhere in James' epistle (cf. 1:21).²⁵⁴ Death represents the temporal destruction of the person, not his or her eternal damnation (cf. 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 John 5:16). The repentance of the reclaimed sinning believer results in the forgiveness (covering) of his

²⁵⁰D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working With God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession*, pp. 12-13.

²⁵¹Martin, p. 213.

²⁵²Daniel R. Hayden, "Calling the Elders to Pray," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:551 (July-September 1981):258-66. See Wells, pp. 105-6, for a modified version of this view.

²⁵³Robertson, 6:67.

²⁵⁴See Bob Wilkin, "Soul Talk, Soul Food, and 'Soul Salvation,'" *Grace Evangelical Society News* 6:12 (December 1991)2; and idem, "'Soul Salvation,' Part 2; Saving the Soul of a Fellow Christian; James 5:19-20," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 7:1 (January 1992):2.

or her sins. This description of forgiveness harks back to Old Testament usage where the biblical writers described sin as covered when forgiven. Such usage was understandable for James who was a Jewish believer writing to other Jews primarily (1:1; cf. Matt. 7:1-5; Gal. 6:1-5). His description does not contradict other New Testament revelation concerning forgiveness.

This epistle deals with five practical problems that every believer, immature or mature, encounters as he or she seeks to live by faith and the issues underlying these problems. As a skillful physician, James not only identified the problems but uncovered their sources, pointed out complicating factors, and prescribed treatment to overcome them with a view to his readers' becoming more mature spiritually. The problems and James' method of dealing with them account for the popularity of this epistle throughout church history and for its perennial value in ministry.

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