

The Book of James – A Detailed Commentary

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Introduction to James

Background of the Book

The Epistle of James is one of the general epistles, including 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. These letters were sent out as circular epistles to be passed around and read in several locations.

Authorship

The writer identifies himself only as “*James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Jam 1:1). Out of the four men named James in the New Testament, only two have ever been suggested as the author—James, the brother of John (sons of Zebedee), and James, the Lord’s half brother. Since the brother of John was martyred very early, about 44 A.D. (Act 12:2), he is ruled out. The other James, the Lord’s half brother, later became the leader of the Jerusalem church (see Act 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). There are parallels in the language of this epistle and the speech of James at the Jerusalem council (compare Jam 1:1 and Act 15:23; Jam 1:16, 19 and Act 15:25; Jam 1:27 and Act 15:14, 29; Jam 2:5 and Act 15:13, 14, 25; Jam 2:7 and Act 15:17; Jam 5:19–20 and Act 15:19). The author speaks with a tone of authority befitting the position of James, the half brother of Jesus. The high spiritual tone of the book fits with the quote of Eusebius that distinguished this James by adding the title, “the Just.”

Date and Destination

This is considered to be the earliest of the New Testament epistles. Nothing in the epistle goes beyond Acts 9. The scattered Jewish believers of the persecution of Act 8:1–4 appear to be the recipients (Jam 1:1). The Church was still meeting in synagogues, as suggested by Jam 2:2, where “*assembly*” is *sunagogen*. These considerations all point to a date as early as 34–35 A.D.

Purpose and Theme

It has long been a common misperception that James has no unified theme and is simply a series of aphorisms or maxims strung together in what was called in the ancient world a “string of pearls.” The epistle, however, clearly indicates the writer’s purpose to develop a primary theme. That theme is that believers should meet trials with faith and wisdom, resulting in joy (Jam 1:2–5). The development of this theme is along three lines suggested in verse 1:19, which become the outline of the book that we will see later. In essence, the letter is that of a sermon in written form. The theme is mentioned at the beginning (1:2–5) and the end (5:7–11) in what might be called grammatical “bookends.” A strong promise is given at the beginning, of the eternal benefit of meeting trials and temptations with faith and wisdom (1:12). This promise is reinforced at the end of the book (5:19–20) by a practical illustration of the intercession of one believer in behalf of another.

Biblical Parallels

There are many parallels between the literature of the New Testament and that of the Old. The book of James is particularly related to the book of Job in the Old Testament. Both are considered the earliest book of each Testament. Both deal with the question of suffering in the lives of believers. It seems significant that God would choose this topic to deal with in the earliest books of both Testaments. This is a problem that every believer has to deal with some time in life. In answer to the age-old question: “Why does God allow His children to suffer?” the book of Job would answer, “because we are part of a spiritual war raging behind the scenes,

in which our faith vindicates God” (Job 42:8b), and James would answer, “because God works through trial to purify and refine our faith in order to bring blessings in time and reward in eternity” (Jam 1:12).

We can also see several parallels between James and the Sermon on the Mount, which James may well have heard. Jesus commends “spiritual poverty” (Mat 5:3) as does James (1:9–10). Jesus commends “meekness” (Mat. 5:5) as does James (1:21). Jesus commends “*the merciful*” (Mat 5:7) as does James (2:13). Jesus commends “*the peacemakers*” (Mat 5:9) as does James (3:18). Jesus warns of the danger of “taking oaths” (Mat 5:34–37), and James warns of the same (5:12)—to the point of quoting the words of Jesus. Jesus warns of the “deception of riches” (Mat 6:19) to which James agrees (5:2). Jesus says, “a tree is known by its fruit” (Mat 7:16) to which James again agrees (3:12). In fact, the more one reads the Sermon on the Mount and the book of James, the more parallels begin to emerge.

Common Misconceptions

We have already seen that many commentators miss the theme that runs through the book of James. We have also noted that to approach the epistle as a series of spiritual sayings (as in the book of Proverbs) is to miss its purpose and unity. But the greatest error, *by far*, is in the idea that the book of James is written to unbelievers, and that it presents to them the way of salvation. Nothing could be further from the stated purpose of the author himself. That he is writing to believers is evident throughout by the use of the word “brethren” or “beloved brethren”—at least 19 times! The erroneous approach seems to come from a misunderstanding of how James uses the word “save.” This word occurs five times in the book. The tone for James’ usage is set in 1:21, where believers are exhorted to receive the Word of God in meekness as the means of delivering their souls in times of trial. Since the Word “implanted” in the meek soul makes one a “*doer of the word, and not a hearer only*” (1:22), James then asks the question in 2:14 “*can faith [without works, or faith that is not working] save him?*” In other words, the “hearer only” kind of believer is not going to find the deliverance that only comes to those who are “doers of the word.” The issue of eternal salvation is not even in view. Then, in 4:12, Jesus is referred to as the “*one Lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy.*” Again, “*save*” here has reference to the believer being delivered from judgment (4:1–4, 11) arising from judging fellow believers. In 5:15 he says, “*the prayer of faith will save the sick,*” the double reference to one “*among you*” (5:13, 14) speaks of a believer, who may be sick due to sin. In this case, his own confession, and the prayer of the elders will “save” him from his sickness. Finally, James closes the book by affirming that when a spiritual believer, by prayer and intervention, is able to turn a sinning brother back from error, he “*will save a soul from death*” (5:19–20). This can mean either deliverance from the death of carnality (Rom 8:6; Eph 5:14; 1Ti 5:6), or could also refer to physical death administered under divine discipline (1Jo 5:16). Not one of the five uses of the word “save” in James is dealing with the issue of eternal salvation or justification.

Outline of the Book

The outline of the book is suggested by James himself in the three-fold exhortation of 1:19. This is the outline we will use, and an example is given below.

The Greeting (1:1)

The book is addressed to Jewish believers scattered by persecution. This most likely refers to those of Act 8:1–4. The epistle was probably written before the Gentile congregations became common. The word “*scattered*” is *diaspora*. This is the noun form of *diaspeiro*, which means “to sow as seed,” and is the word used in Act 8:1, 4 and 11:19. God sows the Church by persecution, and the Church sows the Gospel.

The Theme Introduced (1:2–18)

The theme is that believers should meet trials and temptations with faith and wisdom. If we do this, we will respond to trials by:

1. Counting it “*all joy*” as a divine means toward growth (1:2–4)
2. Asking for wisdom from God to face them (1:5–8)
3. Learning from them the value of humility (1:9–11)
4. Believing that they hold the prospect of eternal reward (1:12)
5. Being vigilant to the deception of sin they occasion (1:13–15)
6. Being thankful that God will use them for good (1:16–18)

The Outline Suggested (1:19–20)

“*Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.*” The “*every man*” here is one among “*my beloved brethren,*” and is parallel to the “*every man*” of Col 1:28.

I. Be Swift to Hear in Trials (1:21–2:26)

- A. Let your hearing lead to doing (1:21–27)
- B. Let your hearing be impartial and merciful (2:1–13)
- C. Let your hearing lead to faithful action (2:13–26)

II. Be Slow to Speak in Trials (3:1–18)

- A. Because no man can tame the tongue (3:1–12)
- B. Because there are two kinds of wisdom (3:13–18)

III. Be Slow to Wrath in Trials (4:1–5:6)

- A. Because wrath is worldly and divisive (4:1–5)
- B. Because the wrath of man requires repentance (4:6–10)
- C. Because the fruit of wrath is judging (4:11–12)
- D. Because the source of wrath is arrogance (4:13–5:6)

The Theme Summarized (5:7–20)

- A. Faithful endurance in trials is rewarded (5:7–12)
- B. Faithful endurance is gained by effective prayer (5:13–18)
- C. Faithful endurance may deliver others who are wavering (5:19–20)

Note: This outline is adapted from that given in “The Epistle of James” by Zane Hodges, which I highly recommend for your further study.

Introduction to the Book of James (1:1–20)

We will try to follow our outline as previously given. In each section we will find there are precious and powerful truths for each of us when we are facing trials and temptations. It is worth noticing that in the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes, Jesus takes situations, which we think to be adverse to us, and declares how they are a source of blessing to the soul that lives by faith. This premise flows through the book of James.

The Greeting (1:1)

I. The Author: James, the Half Brother of Jesus

James identifies himself as “*a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*” This immediately shows his humility as he might well have said, “the earthly brother of Jesus Christ.” But James knew it was his spiritual, not physical, relationship that counted. The few things we can say of James are:

- A. James did not believe in Jesus as his Savior during his earthly life (Joh 7:5).
- B. On at least one occasion, James mocked Jesus’ claims (Joh 7:2–4).
- C. Jesus declared that physical relation had no claim on Him (Mat 12:48–50).
- D. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to James (1Co 15:7).
- E. According to Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, James was martyred by being cast down from the pinnacle of the temple, and afterward—being still alive—was beaten to death, even while he prayed for his persecutors, interceding that “they know not what they do.”

II. The Recipients: “My Brethren”—Fellow Believers

These are of the multitude, which were scattered by persecution after the death of Stephen (Act 8:1-4). The word “*scattered*” in Act 8:1, 4 and Act 11:19 is the same used here. Again, it means “to sow seed.” Consider the “seed” God sows.

- A. Jesus is the “*seed*” that God has sown in the field of this world (Joh.12:24).
 1. He is the “*seed of the woman*” (Gen 3:15).
 2. He is the “*seed*” of Abraham (Gen 22:18; Gal 3:16).
 3. He is the “*seed*” of David (2Sa 7:12; Psa 89:3-4, 29, 36; 2Ti 2:8).
 4. He is the virgin-born seed (Isa.7:14; Mat.1:21–23).
- B. Then, Jesus sows the seed of the Word (Luk 8:11).
- C. In order to sow the Word, God then sows the saints (Act 8:1-4; 11:19).

The Theme Introduced: Endure Suffering by Faith (1:2-18)

The theme as we have seen is that, as believers, we should meet our trials and temptations with faith and wisdom. We might say faith receives the Word of God in humility (1:21), and wisdom applies the Word of God to the situations of our daily life.

What we should do in time of trial (1:2–12):

I. “Count it all joy” (vv. 2–4).

The word “*count*” means “add up the facts and come to a conclusion.”

- A. Based on what we know—the testing of faith produces patience. “*Knowing*” here speaks of the convictions from biblical teaching. We know that testing is a path to development of Christian character (Rom 5:1–5; 1Pe 1:6–9). But this is true only when we meet our trials in faith. Our faith must be flexible, for James says we fall into “*various trials*.” The word suggests something multi-colored, having many facets, varied in form. Our trials are constantly shifting, like a kaleidoscope in motion.
- B. Based on submission—surrender lets God work toward maturity in the believer. When James says “*let patience have its perfect work*,” he is commanding us to submit to the will of God. How amazing it is that the God of the universe stands by waiting for us to give Him permission to work in our lives. It is worth pointing out that Isa 30:18 comes before Isa 40:31! God waits to bless until we wait on Him. The “*perfect work*” is that of bringing us into spiritual maturity (cf. Eph 4:13–16).

II. Ask God for wisdom (1:5–8).

Trials reveal our need for divine guidance and strength.

- A. Trust that God will hear and provide.
Every good and perfect gift comes from God (1:16–18). The promise that He will hear the prayer for wisdom and provide guidance is very ancient (Pro 3:5–6). God will give wisdom graciously and unconditionally. He will not reproach, rebuke, or revile our request.
- B. Do not doubt—the duplicitous soul is always unstable.
When we pray we must ask in faith (Luk 11:9–13). It is an insult to God to ask and doubt at the same time. Faith and doubt are mutually exclusive. Doubt destabilizes the soul like winds do to the sea. The doubter is “*two-souled*” and will receive nothing from God.
- C. Rejoice in humility (1:9–11).
Trials clarify what is valuable in life. One of life’s greatest acquisitions is humility. Generally this is learned only by humiliation. The poor or lowly man may be thankful that his station in life has taught him a degree of humility, and in Christ he has been exalted and seated with the Lord. The rich and powerful is humbled in Christ, in that his social status is of no advantage in the spiritual realm. He should rejoice in his new perspective of life, seeing that power and riches are soon to pass away. His pursuit can now be to “*lay up treasure in heaven*” (Mat 6:20) by spiritual growth and humble service. It is repeatedly stated in the Bible, “*God gives grace to the humble*” (Jam 4:6; 1Pe 5:5; Pro 3:34).
- D. See trials as a path to blessings and reward (1:12).

This is the promise of God. Paul declares, “*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*” (Rom 8:18), and again, “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (2Co 4:17–18).

- E. Be vigilant to the temptation to sin inherent in them (1:13–15).
James uses the same word for trials and for temptations. That is because in any difficult situation faith is tested and the flesh is tempted. God will test our faith (Gen 22:1), but He will never solicit us to evil. The work of temptation falls to the devil (Mat 4:3; 1Th 3:5). The sinful nature within us is the target of temptation. Satan allures our lust like a skillful fisherman baits the hook for the fish. This is the actual meaning of the word “*enticed*.” Like the unsuspecting fish, we see the bait, but not the hook. James changes the figure to childbirth. Lust and temptation conceive to bring forth a child—sin. Sin grows and becomes mature and has a child of its own—death. In every trying condition we must be alert, for the temptation will come; either to blame God for our trouble, or to fall into some sin as we seek consolation for our suffering.
- F. Be thankful that God will use trials and temptations for good (1:16–18).
Suffering situations are filled with opportunities for the enemy of our souls to deceive us. Blaming God and falling into sin are two examples. We need the reminder that God is a gracious heavenly Father who gives only good and perfect gifts to His children (Luk 11:9–13). He has promised that He will work in every situation only for our ultimate good (Gen 50:20; Rom 8:28). His nature and work are consistent, never varying or changing. The one thing we can always be confident of is the faithfulness of God. He who sought us, saved us, and sanctified us with Christ—how can He do other than seek our blessing (Rom 8:31–39)? This is why believers are commanded to “*Give thanks in everything*” (1Th 5:18), and to “*Rejoice in the Lord always*” (Phi 4:4), and to “*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*” (Phi 4:6–7). These exhortations and commands are not empty theory, but are beacons guiding us to what is already ours in Jesus Christ.

The Outline Suggested: Three Ways Faith Meets Trials (1:19-20)

Here is the working outline for the remainder of the book. James uses approved methods of his time in structuring his argument. In Acts 15 we see that he is a powerful orator, and in this book that he understands the craft of rhetoric and the art of persuasion. “*My beloved brethren*” reminds us again that James is addressing fellow believers.

- **Be swift to hear.**
Jesus often said, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*” The implication is that some are spiritually attuned to the Word. The word “*swift*” implies eagerness as illustrated in

Mat 5:6 as “hungering and thirsting” for righteousness, or in 1Th 2:13 as a “welcoming” attitude to the Word of God. Each one of us must determine with what attitude we will receive the teaching of God’s Word.

- **Be slow to speak.**

At first, Job remained silent, and did not sin with his mouth (Job 1:22; 2:13). His statements in 1:21 and 2:10 were brief and restrained. When he began to speak, he charged God with injustice and justified himself. This is what most of us do. How we feel under the stress of trial is often best kept to ourselves.

- **Be slow to wrath.**

Often our response to trials is anger. We strive to serve God, and then say (or think), “look how He treats us!” We often take out our resentment against those around us, becoming self-pitying while judging others. The word “*wrath*” here has a strong connotation of resentment and vengefulness. We often feel “wronged” under our trials, and seek to find someone to blame.

Failure to hear the Word in humility leads to unwise speech. Such careless talk in time of trial blames God, judges others, is full of “worldly wisdom,” and produces strife and division. Have you ever noticed how some people generate strife wherever they go? But James warns, “*The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*” God allows trials with the goal of refining our faith to conform us to the image of Christ. This “*perfect work*” (v. 4) can only be achieved as we receive the Word in humility, restrain the tongue by God’s indwelling Spirit, and overcome the tendency to wrath by submission to the providence of God. This is the thrust of the book of James.

I. Be Swift to Hear in Trials (1:21–2:26)

A. Let your hearing lead to doing (1:21–27).

James is keenly aware of the danger of listening to the Word being taught without living it out in life. He also understands the subtle reasons why our spiritual lives are so anemic and discouraging. Here he commends four steps to a living faith:

1. Make sure the vessel is clean (1:21a).

The body of the believer is compared to the “*temple of the Holy Spirit*” (1Co 3:16; 6:19). This temple is to be kept pure. We are also compared to a vessel to be used by the Master (2Ti 2:20–22). If the vessel is clean it will be a vessel of honor, useful to the Master. Note in this text that the duty of cleansing falls on the individual believer. Cleansing leads to sanctification, which makes one useful. The process is summarized by the word “*prepared*” which speaks of a finished work of readiness. This cleansing comes about by confession of sin (1Jo 1:7–9), surrender to God (Rom 12:1–2; Jam 4:7–8), and dependence on the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom 8:6, 9–11; Gal 5:16). This is what Jesus meant when He said, “*Blessed are the pure in heart*” (Mat 5:8). The phrase “*lay aside*” implies the deliberate removal of a filthy garment.

2. Fill the vessel with the life-changing Word of God (1:21b).

When we receive God's Word "with meekness" we are not acting under our own power. Meekness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23) in the surrendered life. It is a combined reverence for God and submission to His Word and will. Great blessing is attached to this attitude (Mat 5:5; 1Pe 3:4). When we hear the Word of God under the Spirit's control it becomes "implanted" in our souls. It is the opposite of the hearer who "*has no root in himself*" and is unfruitful (Mat 13:21). Although the teacher proclaims the Word, it is the listener who determines the soil on which the seed falls (Mat 13:3-9; 1Co 3:6). Humble reception of God's Word, with the will to obey, is essential (Joh 7:17). Only the Word implanted is able to "save" our souls in times of trial. James uses the Word save in the sense of deliverance from peril. Our peril as believers is that of responding to trials in the flesh rather than in the Spirit. Compare verse 21 with 1Pe 2:1-3.

3. Live out the life of the new man within (1:22-25).

James is like a skillful surgeon operating on the believer's soul. With each cut of the spiritual scalpel he lays bare the hindrances in our spiritual experience. First is the problem of sin in the life, which is removed by honest confession and correction. Next would be the proper attitude of submission to the Spirit in the hearing of the Word. At this point, we need to rest in the power of the Spirit to apply the Word in our life. Just what is a "*doer of the word*" in contrast to a "*hearer only*"? The "*hearer*" is self-deceived into thinking that learning God's Word by itself constitutes growth; the "*doer of the word*" is being changed by what he hears. It is important to note that he does not "change himself." Rather he is being worked upon by God (Eph 2:10).

Both the "hearer" and the "doer" look into the "*mirror*" of the Word of God. Both are able to see who and what they are in Christ as a "*new creature*" (2Co 5:17). The phrase "*natural face*" literally means "birth face," looking back to our spiritual birth in Christ (v. 18). The hearer sees who he is in Christ, then goes his way and lives as one who has forgotten who he is. By contrast, the "doer" is transformed within by what he sees. His mind is renewed (Rom 12:2) and he becomes a reflection of the Lord in whom is his life (2Co 3:18). As he looks into "the perfect law of liberty," which is the "*law of the Spirit of life in Christ*" (Rom 8:2). He not only "hears," but also "continues in it." The word here means to "*abide*," to "make yourself at home." If we "*abide*" in His Word (Joh 8:31), His word will then "*abide*" in us (Joh 15:7) and we are "at home" in Christ. In this way we enter the blessing of a life of spiritual harmony (compare Joh 13:17 with v. 25b).

4. Give no occasion for the flesh to reassert itself (1:26-27).

We all know those who "think" themselves to be mature and spiritual. We all have been guilty of spiritual arrogance. The word "*thinks*" here suggests presumption. The true test is the control of the tongue, which James will deal with in chapter 3. "*Religion*" is used for a life of reverence for God. All too often this may be hypocritical rather than genuine. Self-deception regarding our true status is the great enemy (cf. v. 16, 22, 26). James designates a hypocritical spirit life as "*useless*,"

meaning “empty, unprofitable, dead.” Again, he is setting the stage for 2:14–26, which will amplify this thought.

James gives us an example of “*pure and undefiled religion*”— faith free from presumption and hypocrisy. He uses two infinitives, which set up a purpose leading to a result. The purpose is “*to visit*” the needy, represented by widows and orphans. The word implies going to them not only to visit, but also to provide for their needs. Christ did this when He “visited us” (Luk 2:78). By devoting ourselves to the needs of others we “keep (ourselves) unspotted from the world.” The word “and” in italics is not in the original and implies an additional action. Actually, by removing it we see that purity in this world results from devoting ourselves to a genuine life of faith. This is the equivalent of the command in Gal 5:16, “*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.*”

B. Let your hearing be impartial and merciful (2:1–13).

1. To show partiality is to make yourself a judge (2:1–4).

Judging is one of the great sins of hypocritical religion (Mat 7:1–5; Rom 14:1–10). It stems from an attitude of assumed superiority. The illustration used by James is familiar to us all. We have both seen and done it in showing partiality. Even the Apostle Peter had to learn that God is no respecter of persons (Act 10:34). The Scriptures are full of references to the impartial nature of God (Rom 2:11; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; 1Pe 1:17). We are told that, “*The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” (1Sa 16:7). When we show partiality we assume the position of a judge, but one with evil thoughts. Our motives are self-serving in that we hope to gain something by our partiality. Later, James shows that assuming the role of judge is dangerous indeed (4:12).

2. Showing partiality is inconsistent with our calling (2:5–7).

Once again James addresses them as “*beloved brethren.*” This is much more than just a term of affection. It is a reminder of our standing in Christ. We are “*accepted in the Beloved*” (Eph 1:6). When God looks upon us, He sees His own Son. We are loved with the love of the Father for the Son. Such love should impact our lives. Paul says, “*The love of Christ compels us*” so that “*from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh*” (2Co 5:14–16). God chooses “*the poor of this world, rich in faith.*” The words “*to be*” give a wrong impression of the verse. Those who come to God in faith have all come into the poverty of spirit, leading to the blessing of entrance into the kingdom of God (Mat 5:3). The very mercy of God in our calling demands that we “*judge not according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment*” (Joh 7:24). To make distinctions among believers based on status is to deny our essential unity in Christ (Gal 3:26–29).

3. Showing partiality violates both the old and the new law (2:8–13).

The “royal law” is given in Lev 19:18 and is reaffirmed by Christ in Mat 22:37–40. It is the duty to love our neighbor, based upon our love for God. It is royal because it is

the law of the kingdom, given by the King Himself. It is the essence of all the commandments (Mat 22:40; Rom 13:9–10). James goes on then to show that to violate any commandment is to transgress them all. He very skillfully demonstrates that partiality is contrary to the old law of Moses, then shifts to remind us that we are held to an even higher standard.

The “law of liberty” has been introduced in 1:25. It is called the “*perfect law*” because “*The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death*” (Rom 8:2). The Law of Moses can only condemn, but the law of liberty empowers us by the indwelling Spirit to obey. As believers in Christ, we will be judged by this law. And the central tenet of this law is “*grace and truth*” (Joh 1:14; 2Pe 3:18). When grace and truth combine, we see a wisdom that is “*full of mercy and good fruits*” (Jam 3:17). In grace, God gives us what we do not deserve. In mercy, He withholds from us what we do deserve (Eph 2:1–7). The basis of our judgment before Christ will be the mercy He has shown us. If, in the face of His mercy, we choose to become judges of others, “*judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.*” In other words, “*with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.*” (Luk 6:38). What greater encouragement could we have to be merciful! Those showing mercy will “triumph” at the Bema Seat of Christ.

C. **Let your hearing lead to faithful action (2:14–26).**

James continues to develop the need for us to become “doers” and not only “hearer” (1:22). All of the ideas in this section have already been introduced into the discussion, and James now illustrates both the “hearer only” in contrast to the “doer of the Word.” This section has been one of the most abused passages of Scripture, simply because it has been divorced from its context in the argument of James.

1. **The “hearer only” will not be delivered by his faith when tested (2:14-17).**

The stated goal of hearing God’s Word is that it alone is “able to save (deliver) our souls” (1:21) in time of trial. This deliverance comes about as the Word is “implanted” by the Holy Spirit in such a way that it bears fruit, and we become a “doer of the Word” (1:22). When James speaks of the “*profit*” of faith, he is talking about its ability to “*save*” the believer in time of trial (vv. 14, 16). He has already shown that when the “hearer only” deceives himself (1:22, 26) his “*religion*” is “*useless*” (1:26). The question is, “Useless for what?” The answer from the context is “useless to deliver (save) him from failure in time of trial.”

In one of thirteen examples of testing situations in this book, James now illustrates his point. This illustration, coming after the question “Can faith save him?” should make it clear that James is not talking about eternal salvation. Here the “hearer only” is confronted with a test of his faith. A fellow believer is destitute of food and clothing. The “hearer only” in essence says, “Trust in God. May He provide your needs. I’ll pray for you.” Yet he does nothing to help him. He has violated the example of “*pure and undefiled religion*” (1:27). His faith is unprofitable, both for meeting the

needs of others, and even more so in delivering him from gross spiritual failure. James says his faith is “*dead*” (v. 17), because it is a “hearer only” not a “doer also” kind of faith. “*Dead*” is used here in the sense of “unprofitable, non-functional.” This believer is what we would call a “fleshly” or “carnal” believer (Rom 8:6; 1Co 3:1). He will inevitably fail when his faith is tested, and will not grow from his trials.

2. The accusation and the rebuttal to the “hearer only” (2:18–26).

This is an admittedly difficult passage, using the rhetorical technique called diatribe, in which an imaginary opponent is introduced in the dialogue. I see this passage differently than any commentator I have read, so bear with me, and give it a hearing.

a. The logical accusation against the “hearer only” (2:18–19).

It does not appear to me that the speaker here is opposing James’ argument, but rather is making the logical accusation, which will be brought against the “hearer only” of vv. 14–17 who “*says he has faith but does not have works.*” The believer whose walk does not measure up to his talk is sure to meet this objection in some form. The faith of the “doer of the Word” is easily seen, as illustrated by Abraham and Rahab (vv.21–25). Note that twice James says “*you see*” in regard to faith demonstrated in works (vv. 22, 24). A vibrant, living, active faith is easily seen in one’s conduct. Both Jesus and James insist on this truth (Mat 7:16–20; Jam 2:21–25; 3:10–13, 17–18). So how can the “hearer only” demonstrate his faith? “*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*” (v. 18) is a challenge the “hearer only” is sure to lose. The challenger commends the hearer’s faith in the one true God, but points out that even the demons believe this and tremble (v. 19). James’ point might well be made by John the Baptizer, who said to the Pharisees, “*Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance*” (Mat 3:8).

b. The rebuttal against the claim of the “hearer only” (2:20–26).

The “*you*” to whom this section is addressed is again the “*someone*” of verse 14 who claims that his empty faith can “*save*” or deliver him from failure in time of trial. James identifies him as a “*foolish man.*” To refute him, James takes two notable examples from the Old Testament Scriptures who were each tested in regard to their faith. Note that the point James wants to make is that “*faith without works is dead,*” (v. 20) that is; empty, unprofitable, unable to deliver in time of testing.

Abraham “*our father*” (cf. Rom 4:11–12) was tested when God called him to offer his son Isaac on the altar (Gen 22; Heb 11:17–19). Abraham’s claim to trust God was “justified” by his works. He believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead and acted accordingly. To do otherwise would have been to deny his faith, thus his faith would be “unprofitable, empty, dead.” We even use the phrase “dead orthodoxy” to speak of someone who has right beliefs, but does not act on them. James says, “*Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works his faith was made perfect?*” Note three things here:

- i. The goal of trials in life is to bring our faith to maturity (1:3–4).
- ii. Faith matures as it is exercised through trial (compare 1:12 and Heb 5:14).
- iii. Trials make faith visible to the world as a witness (Jam 3:13, 17–18).

The evidence that Abraham’s faith attained the goal of maturity is that “*He was called the friend of God.*” Jesus offers this same title to those who believe and obey Him (Joh 15:14), that is, the “doers” and not “hearers only.”

Rahab is another example, lest someone says, “But this is the great Abraham! How could I ever measure up to him?” That Rahab made a claim to faith in God is clear from Jos 2:8–11. That faith was made visible as a witness by her deliverance of the spies and the scarlet chord she hung from her window, by which she and her family were spared (Jos 7:22–25). In a very literal way, her faith in action “saved” her life, though she already had eternal life. Her claim to trust in the God of Israel was “*justified*” in the sight of man, and she also (“*likewise*”) became a “friend of God.” James’ conclusion is telling. Works are to faith what breath is to the body. It is the animating force by which faith lives, moves, and acts.

II. Be Slow to Speak in Trials (3:1-18)

Having proven the value and blessing of having the “Word implanted” in such a way that we become “doers of the Word,” James now addresses the need for restraint in speech. The dangers of the tongue have been anticipated by how it can be used to demean a fellow believer (2:1–4), and by using it to make empty profession regarding faith (2:14). Two reasons for caution in the use of the tongue are now presented:

A. Because the untamed tongue is unruly and destructive (3:1–12)

The greatest position for abusing the tongue is in those who are teachers of the Word. Thus James cautions against seeking the position. Teachers of the Word will be held to a greater accountability and will incur stricter judgment for abuses of the tongue. James, who was known as “the Just,” admits that “*we all stumble in many things.*” The word suggests stumbling against an object that is not easily seen. The subtlest of all “stumbling-blocks” is the tongue. If any one does not stumble here, he is a “*perfect man,*” that is, spiritually mature. James says that to bring the tongue under control is to bridle the whole body.

1. Notice the relative insignificance of the tongue (3:3–5a).

Like the bit of a bridle or the rudder of a ship, the tongue is small; yet its power is far from relative to its size. A bit can turn a horse, and a rudder can turn a ship. The question is this, “Who holds the bridle, and who steers the ship?” The potential of the tongue is great, but whether it is used for destruction or blessing depends on the issue of control. The tongue must either be tamed by the Spirit of God, or it will be controlled by the power of hell.

2. Behold the destructive force of the untamed tongue (3:5b–12).

The tongue has the power of a small spark of flame in a great forest. The unruly tongue holds in itself a whole world of unrighteousness. Careless words can defile the whole body and divert the course of nature. This is because, until brought under the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit, the tongue is “*set on fire by hell.*” This simply means that Satan—working through our sinful nature—can influence and manipulate the abuse of the tongue in order to fulfill his ends. Consider how easily he manipulated Peter within moments of Peter’s receiving a great revelation from God (Mat 16:16–23).

God placed man in dominion over nature and every creature has been tamed by man. But no man can tame the tongue. Its deadly poison (Rom 3:13–18) can be restrained only by God. With the same tongue we bless God and curse men who are made in His image. Out of the same fountain comes sweet and bitter water. The tongue unrestrained is contrary to nature. For all these reasons we ought to be “*slow to speak.*”

B. Because the tongue is capable of two kinds of wisdom (3:13–18)

The highest and most blessed use of the tongue is to convey wisdom. We have already seen that true wisdom is a gift of God (Jam 1:5). Wisdom is the ability to see life through God’s eyes and to live in conformity to His Word. However, the devil has his counterfeit wisdom, with which he seeks to supplant the wisdom of God. How can we discern between genuine wisdom from God, and the counterfeit version, which originates with the devil?

1. The nature of true wisdom (3:13, 17–18)

The wisdom that God gives comes through His Word as implanted by His Spirit. It is consistent with His nature and works. The clearest example of the wisdom of God is the earthly life of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the “wisdom” personified in Proverbs 8. Consider the following marks of true wisdom:

- a. True wisdom is visible in honorable conduct.
- b. The works of true wisdom originate in meekness, submission to God.
- c. The wisdom from above is the fruit of the Spirit (compare v. 17 with Gal 5:22–23).
- d. God’s wisdom sows the seed of peace, the Gospel (compare Mat 5:9 with 2Co 5:19–21).
- e. The seed of wisdom bears the fruit of righteousness (faith in Christ).

2. The nature of devilish wisdom (3:14–16)

The counterfeit wisdom that finds its source in the devil is also known by its fruits. We can identify five things that mark demonic wisdom:

- a. It is envious and self-seeking, the true mark of the devil. (consider Isa 14:12–15; Joh 8:44; Mat 27:18; Mar 15:10; Act 13:45).

- b. It is arrogant, always boasting and lying against the truth.
- c. It ascends to earth, through the flesh, originating in the demonic realm.
- d. It loves disorder and confusion, division and strife (1Co 3:1–3, 14:33).
- e. It is a source of every foul motive and deed imaginable.

Truly, the tongue holds great potential for good or evil. We must understand that our tongue is never really under our control. It will either be an “instrument of righteousness” (Rom 6:13) or will unleash the fiery destruction of hell itself. It will either constitute us as a “vessel of honor” or a “vessel of dishonor” (2Ti 2:20–21). In the end it depends on whether we offer our bodies as a “*living sacrifice*” to God (Rom 12:1), and choose to receive the “Word implanted,” or choose to be a “hearer only” (Jam 1:21–22). As Jesus said to the disciples in the Upper Room, “*If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them*” (Joh 13:17). James echoes this truth by saying, “*Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin*” (Jam 4:17). “To know” is to come into the light. To know and not do is to sin against the light given.

III. Be Slow To Wrath in Trials (4:1-5:6)

We now come to the section on dealing with wrath in times of trial. Our two most common responses to hard times actually date back to the Garden of Eden. Immediately after the Fall, we see Adam blaming Eve in an attempt to justify himself. This kind of response in times of trial is sure to generate strife and division. James gives four good reasons to overcome the temptation to wrath:

A. Because wrath is divisive, self-centered, worldly (4:1–5)

This section clearly amplifies the statement of James 3:16. The divisive nature of wrath is seen in the phrase “*wars and fights*.” The first word pictures a chronic state of siege or ongoing campaign; the last word speaks of the many battles and engagements of that war. These fights are “*among you*,” causing strife and division into the body of believers. The source of these squabbles is traced to self-centered pursuit of pleasure. Here the word is the root for our word “hedonism,” which means “the elevation of personal pleasure over all other considerations.” The second verse is very graphic—simple lust advancing to passionate coveting, producing murder and further strife. Based on Jesus’ words (Mat 5:21-22) we can take “*murder*” to include slander and maligning (Jam 4:11–12). All of this, James says, occurs simply because we will not pray effectively. We either do not ask (Mat 7:7–8), or we ask with selfish motives. Such carnal praying will not receive its desired results (Jam 5:16).

Finally, James traces wrath to “*friendship with the world*.” This implies an affinity and accommodation to the Satan-controlled cosmic realm (cf. 1Jo 2:15–17). The very essence of this world is “self” and, as such, is at war with God. The path to harmony with God is always found in the denial of self, followed by surrender to God (Luk 9:23). To develop this submission in our lives is the constant work of the “*Spirit who dwells in us*” (Jam 4:5). He is jealous over our affections, which rightfully belong only to God. James appears to combine many Old Testament passages in his teaching (Deu 4:24; Eze

8:3; and Nah 1:2). These all fit with Eph 4:30, which speaks of the Spirit being grieved by sin in our lives.

In summary: the root of wrath is the desire to have our own way, to gratify our desires—regardless of the spiritual or social cost.

B. Because wrath brings discipline and correction from God (4:6–10)

The “greater grace” of God is His gracious and merciful discipline in the life of the erring believer. Divine discipline is an act of love on God’s part (Heb 11:5–12). He will “wage war” on the arrogant believer, so as to bring an attitude of humility (Pro 3:34). Only humility can lay hold of the grace of God. In verses 7–10 we have a series of commands designed to lead the rebellious believer back into fellowship with God. This is analogous to the journey of recovery made by the prodigal son in Luke 15. Spiritual recovery is a difficult battle, for it is much harder to reclaim lost ground after falling away from grace (Gal 5:1–6). It is implied by verse 5 that this recovery process is accomplished only by full submission and dependence on the indwelling Holy Spirit. This passage is a comprehensive picture of repentance for the erring believer (consider 5:19–20). It begins with submission to God and ends with humility in His presence. In between comes the demand for resistance to the devil, a gradual drawing near to God, cleansing of the hands and heart (both motives and actions), and grief and mourning over those things once delighted in (cf. Mat 5:4)—all working to effect an attitude of humility before God. God will always honor a humble heart by lifting it up in blessing. Passages such as Isa 22:12–13 reveal the arrogance of rebellion against God, and Isa 24:4–11 reveals the corrective discipline leading to humility. Such passages may have been in James’ mind as he wrote.

C. Because the attitude of wrath assumes the place of a judge (4:11–12)

Arrogance is the fountainhead of all sin. When we seek to exalt ourselves we will inevitably degrade others. This “evil speaking” means to “speak down about” another, and continues the destructive power of the tongue from 3:1–12. It is impossible to defame another without assuming the status of a judge. This is, in essence, to set ourselves above the law (both of Moses and of liberty, 1:25; 2:8–12). Such a judge is not a “*doer of the law*,” since both the Old Law and the New Law of life in Christ forbids such actions. But to be a judge one must of necessity have all the facts in the case being judged. There is only “*one Lawgiver*” who knows all the facts about each believer’s life, and He alone “*is able to save and to destroy*.” That Lawgiver is Jesus Christ Himself. Before Him we will each give an account of our life (Rom 14:10–12; 2Co 5:10). Since none of us has the power “*to save and to destroy*,” what right do we have to judge others?

I am convinced that more local churches have been destroyed by judging and maligning than by all other sins combined. We all have more than enough to do in judging ourselves (1Co 11:28, 31). A judgmental attitude is sure to rob us of the mercy we will need at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Jam 2:13)!

D. Because wrath comes from arrogance and will lead to condemnation (4:13–5:6)

Once we assume an arrogant attitude in life, it will affect our every motive, decision, and action. All of life becomes tainted with the corrupting influence of “self”—the old nature, or the “*old man, which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts*” (Eph 4:22). The imagery here pictures a dead body, which grows increasingly more and more decayed. An attitude of arrogance infuses this putrefying effect into every area of life. Thus, the pursuit of self-gratification and self-promotion is doomed to an ever-diminishing return from the things we pursue. James gives two examples of how this process works out in life:

1. In making plans for success (4:13–17)

It is very easy for us to make plans without a thought of submitting them to God’s approval. James illustrates this thoughtless arrogance by an example of someone’s business plans. The planner has thought of everything, including: time (today or tomorrow), location (such and such a city), duration (spend a year there), purpose (buy and sell), and goal (make a profit). This is a model of careful planning—with one exception. The plan of God has been ignored. Once we become a child of God we are to submit to His plan. At the very least, this plan includes spiritual growth and service. These responsibilities require a local church in which to operate. God’s plan for each and every believer involves three areas:

- a. effective prayer (priesthood—1Pe 2:5–9; 1Ti 2:1–6);
- b. consistent witness (ambassadorship—2Co 5:14–21); and
- c. faithful service in the body (ministry—Rom 12:3–8; 1Co 12:4–11)

Any plans we make that ignore our spiritual responsibilities are contrary to God and doomed to failure. God simply does not give grace and blessing to the proud (Jam 4:6; 1Pe 5:5–6). Since the whole span of our life is “*a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away,*” we would do well to consider how to spend it for eternity. The phrase “*if the Lord wills*” implies a humble attitude willing to submit all plans to His guidance. By seeking His will in prayer and Bible study we can be assured of His leading (Joh 7:17). In fact, Romans 8:14 actually says, in the original, “*As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the mature [adult] sons of God.*” All planning apart from this is arrogant boasting and amounts to a great evil in life. Again, the “*hearer only*” knows what he ought to do, but doesn’t do it. He is therefore accountable for his sin. Don’t plan your life—rather follow the plan of God *for* your life!

2. In accumulating wealth for security (5:1–6)

The phrase “*Come now*” is again an invitation to erring believers to come back to submission and humility. The “*rich*” are called to take the steps commended in 4:7–10. Their self-centered lifestyle is bringing corruption and misery into their lives, compounded by God’s merciful discipline upon them. The very things they trust for

security (rich garments, gold, and silver) have become a curse to them. Let's take note of the steps they have taken:

- a. They chose to trust in the uncertainty of riches for security (cf. 1Ti 6:17–18).
- b. As a result, they “*heaped up treasure*” in the “*last days*.” This phrase speaks of the time following the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the full knowledge of His finished work, we ought to live for eternity, not only for time.
- c. In their pursuit of wealth, they “*kept back [wages] by fraud*” from their workers. How easy it is to justify cheating others when wealth becomes our god! Consider Ananias and Sapphira in Act 5:1–11.
- d. They “lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury,” without concern for others.
- e. They “condemned . . . murdered the just (man),” probably in court actions against the poor who have no legal defense.

Principle: Many object to this interpretation, saying this could only be directed against unbelievers. My response is this: first of all, nothing in the context suggests that James is speaking to anyone other than believers. Secondly, look at how many believers are living just like this today! We justify our greed in the name of “economic security” and “fiscal responsibility.” The truth is we are not spiritually content (1Ti 6:6–10).

In all their careful planning and amassing of wealth, these erring believers have overlooked two very important considerations. Had they been considerate of the plan of God, with a submission to “*if the Lord wills*” (4:15), these truths would not have escaped them.

- The injury we do to others will be noted by God, and the cry of those we abuse will come up to “*the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth*.” This is terrifying, since this is the Old Testament title of “the Lord of Armies” who avenges His people (Rom 12:17–19).
- In their arrogant pursuit of wealth and power, they did not realize they were preparing their hearts—like an animal being fattened for slaughter. In the end, they would not only lose their possessions, but also what they might have gained for eternity (Jam 1:12; 1Jo 2:28).

By not being “doers of the Word,” their faith was not sufficient to overcome the temptation toward riches. Apart from radical repentance, as James has outlined in 4:7–10, and to which he calls them in 5:1, much of their life would be burned like wood, hay, and straw at the Judgment (Bema) Seat of Christ (1Co 3:11–15). We must all remember that “*The Lord will judge His people*” (Heb 10:30), and “*Our God is a consuming fire*” (Heb 12:29). These passages speak not of eternal condemnation, but of severe discipline visited on unrepentant believers.

The Theme Summarized (5:7-20)

James will now bring his argument to a close with a summary of the main thrusts of his exhortations. This summary falls into three areas of benefit and blessing to the “doer of the Word” who faithfully endures in times of trial:

A. Faithful endurance in trials will be rewarded by God (5:7–12).

Six times in these verses James commends “patience” in the face of trials. This is, of course, the theme of the book (1:2–4, 12). The first four times James uses this word, he chooses a strengthened idea, coming from a word that means to “have a long fuse,” or to “bear for a long time.” We need to commit to endurance for the duration of our lives. The prospect that sustains this is “*the coming of the Lord.*” If we live our lives “*looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ*” (Tit. 2:13), it will sustain our endurance. Added to this is the anticipation that our endurance will be rewarded (Jam 1:12). Just as the farmer waits patiently for his crop, we should “*establish [our] hearts.*” The word means to “strengthen” and “stabilize,” and this comes from firm reliance on the promises of God’s Word. We need to remember that “*the coming of the Lord is at hand,*” whether He comes for us all at the Rapture of the Church, or whether He calls us into His presence by death.

James again warns against grumbling, reminding us that “*the Judge is standing at the door.*” In other words, the true Judge of all (4:12) hears and will hold us to account. We should take the example of the prophets on how to suffer patiently. Job is a great illustration of one who endured great affliction with patience. James shifts here to a word meaning to “bear up under the affliction.” In the end he found that “*The Lord is very compassionate and merciful,*” and the implication is that we will find this to be true also. To Job it seemed that the Lord was unfair, or didn’t care about his troubles. I believe this is why Jesus often couched His teachings in settings which portrayed how God often *appears* from our point of view. In Luke 18:1–8, He uses a widow pleading to an unjust and callous judge to teach us to “*always pray and not lose heart.*” In times of trial it may *appear* to us that God is unconcerned with our plight. Yet, if we persevere in prayer and endure our trials, in the end we will come to see His hand in it all, and know His compassions fail not (Lam 3:22–27). With this in mind, we should avoid “swearing” in time of trial. This can include either the taking of a “vow” (bargaining with God), or swearing in anger. Here, he reinforces the need for restraint in the use of the tongue (3:1–12).

B. Faithful endurance in trials is attained by effective prayer (5:13–18).

James now turns to an indispensable aid in time of trial—prayer. He has already touched on this topic (4:2–3), and will now develop it further. Oswald Chambers said, “Prayer is not preparation for the work of God. Prayer *is* the work.” The evangelist D.L. Moody declared that, “Prayer moves the Arm that moves the world.” Throughout the ages notable saints have found prayer to be the mainstay of their spiritual lives. Prayer was the most evident discipline of our Lord during His earthly life (Mar 1:33; Luk 6:12). So impressed were the disciples with Jesus’ devotion to prayer that they asked Him to teach them how to pray (Luk 11:1–13).

Seven times in these verses James urges us to pray. When we are suffering, we should pray for strength to endure. When we are cheerful, our prayer ought to turn into a hymn of praise. If a believer is sick, especially if sin may be the cause (vv. 15–16), he should call for the prayers of the leaders of the church. The anointing with oil was a common medical practice in the ancient world. It was to be accompanied “*in the name of the Lord,*” which is a form of prayer in itself. My understanding of this is that medical help should be taken advantage of, but always under the banner of prayer for God to act in our behalf. We do not put our trust in the doctor, but trust God to guide him and give him wisdom in treating us. In many third world countries where poor believers have no access to medical aid, the practice of anointing with oil along with prayer is a common practice. I always remind them that this is no guarantee of healing, but in keeping with Scripture and ancient practice, we look to the Lord for healing, if it be His will (1Jo 5:14–15). James makes it clear that if sin is involved, confession of that sin in repentance is necessary. When sin brings sickness there will be no healing from the sickness apart from correction of the sin.

Lest we feel our prayers to be insignificant, James reminds us that “*the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*” We might summarize this statement with a few points:

1. The “*righteous man*” is a believer imputed with the righteousness of Christ.
2. Further, he/she is in obedient fellowship with God, thus “practically” righteous.
3. The prayer is “*effective*” not due to some “fervency” on the prayer’s part, but because the prayer is in keeping with the Word and will of God (1Jo 5:14–15).
4. The prayer “*avails much,*” which literally means “works mightily” because it is the power of God that brings the answer.

Elijah is given both as a biblical example of mighty prayer, but also to remind us that his prayers were not answered because of who he was. In reality, he “*was a man with a nature like ours,*” prone to all our weaknesses and failings. Yet his prayers had great power because of the four things listed above. No doubt we all lose much of what God would want us to have because of five things:

1. We do not ask in faith (1:6).
2. We pray in a doubting frame of mind, being “*double-minded*” (1:8).
3. We fail to pray at all (4:2b).
4. We pray selfishly, out of a desire for gratification (4:3).
5. We fail to focus our prayers in behalf of others (5:14-20).

It is worth noting that in the model prayer Jesus taught, all requests are made not for “My, Me, or I,” but for “*Our, Us, We*” (Mat 6:9–13).

C. Faithful endurance in trials may deliver wavering brothers (5:19–20).

This final exhortation of James should not be divorced from the theme of the book—meeting trials and suffering in faith. Neither should we separate it from its immediate

context, which has to do with prayer. In fact, it is essentially an extension of verses 14–16. Here we have a fellow believer who has “*wandered from the truth.*” The word implies an “aimless drifting away.” Only one who knows the way can guide one who is lost. Even so, only a stable, faithful believer can “*turn him back,*” who is off course. The word implies a “reversal” of course, a 180-degree turnabout. I believe this will be achieved by two things in the one doing the delivering. First, there will be an example in his/her life of consistency in the faith. In other words, they will be a “doer of the Word” in the power of God’s Spirit. Thus, their life will stand both as a conviction to the wanderer and a promise of mercy and hope of deliverance. Secondly, they will be actively engaged in prayer for the erring brother. This much is implied by the context. By their private prayers and public example, they will exert a powerful influence in the soul of the wanderer to come home. Thus it was for the prodigal, who was assured both of his father’s unchanging love, and of his merciful reception.

Whenever a sinning believer is rescued from the snares of his/her sin, a life is saved from death. The phrase “*will save a soul from death*” is too often misunderstood as dealing with eternal salvation. However, in the language of the day, the word “*soul*” (*psuche*) meant “*life*” (cf. Rom 11:3). It is true in every case that “*the wages of sin is death*” (Rom 6:23). In Adam’s case, sin brought spiritual death—separation from God (Gen 2:17, 3:8)—followed by physical death. However, the New Testament uses the word “*death*” in a variety of ways. Carnality is seen as the death of fellowship with God and, therefore, of a spiritually productive life (Rom 8:6; 1Ti 5:6). A carnal believer is called to “*Arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light*” (Eph 5:14). Religious deeds that do not originate from faith and humility are called “*dead works*” (Heb 6:1). In connection with this, James has made it clear that “*Faith without works is dead*” (Jam 2:17, 20, 26). Furthermore, Scripture makes it clear that the believer who continues in sin without repentance faces the probability of premature physical death (Act 5:1–11; 1Co 5:5; 1Jo 5:16). Romans 8:13 makes it very clear, “*For if you live according to the flesh you will die.*” So by turning the erring believer back to a life of fellowship and obedience, the “doer of the Word” will surely save a life from death, “*and cover a multitude of sins.*” This is what “*love*” does (1Pe 4:8; 1Co 13:4–8).

The need for Christian rescue-workers is great. There are many who have made a shipwreck of their faith (1Ti 1:19). Others—pursuing a life of self-gratification—have “*pierced themselves through with many sorrows*” (1Ti 6:10b). Still others—exhausted by their wandering way—need help to “*strengthen the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees, and to make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed*” (Heb 12:12–13).

The final appeal of James is for us to see the potential that each of us has in being a rescue-worker in the lives of other believers. Only as we demonstrate the power of faith in our lives, as we face our trials with steady endurance, as we show mercy and compassion—in short—as we are “doers of the Word and not hearers only,” will we be equipped for this much needed ministry.

May God bless us all with the humility and faith to be such believers!